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Pedagogy for Justice: An Intersectional Dialogue
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Presentation

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PEDAGOGY FOR JUSTICE: AN INTERSECTIONAL DIALOGUE

EXPLORING CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS INVOLVING PRE-SERVICE

TEACHERS AND YOUTH SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISTS

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Two duoethnographic research projects come together to explore critically conscious education; one resides within the context of teacher education programs, and the other mainly within school-based youth activist groups. The authors fashion a dialogue between these interrelated studies in order to inform the work of teacher and teacher educators around a pedagogy for social justice in schools.

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on two independent duoethnographic studies that explore social justice from different angles; one study delves into the perspective of student social justice activists, while the other approaches the topic within a teacher-education context. We will focus here on some emerging themes around the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship, and how teacher education programs might foster critical consciousness for teachers to be strong advocates and allies for student social justice activists in schools.

PROJECT A: ENGAGING STUDENT LEADERS IN RESEARCH ON SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

**Jodi and Shashi:** This SSHRC-funded project, under the direction of Dr. Darren Lund at the University of Calgary, examines how student activists understand their collaborative work to address racism and discrimination in schools across Canada. Discrimination is a common and destructive experience in schools (Henry & Tator, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Pruegger & Kiely, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2003). The need for respect in schools is well recognized; however, little research exists that seeks to understand the anti-oppression work already going on in educational settings. Guiding research questions for this study include: 1) the various forms and models of social justice activism; 2) the specific ways actual activists conceptualize their collaborative work; and 3) best practices that can inform pedagogy and advance theory and policy development in this field.

PROJECT B: FOSTERING CULTURAL HUMILITY AMONG PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: CONNECTING WITH CHILDREN AND YOUTH OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES THROUGH SERVICE LEARNING

**Darren:** This study examines an approach to teacher education that moves away from “cultural competency training” and towards an approach that strengthens “cultural humility” among pre-service teachers. In collaboration with a number of community partners\(^1\), the Werklund School of Education and the University of Calgary’s Centre for Community-Engaged Learning developed a program entitled, “Service-Learning Program for Pre-service Teachers.”

**Lianne:** This community-initiated program is included in a Bachelor of Education course, “Diversity in Learning,” and uses a social justice framework to counter deficit-model thinking and foster a sense of humility in how pre-service teachers bring into check the power imbalances that exist in education,

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\(^1\) *c.a.r.e.* for Ethno-cultural Children & Youth (an initiative of the Immigrant Sector Council of Calgary), eight community organizations, and two public school boards.
classrooms, and in the broader community (see also Lund, Bragg, Kaipainen, & Lee, 2014). Guiding research questions for this study include: 1) How do pre-service teachers understand the needs of immigrant youth and their families? 2) How might their experiences in service-learning placements inform their own critical understandings of the role of the teacher and schools?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Lianne and Darren:** These research projects are informed by critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) to examine the complex structures surrounding privilege and power that underlie these educational approaches and projects. Informed by Freire’s (1970) emancipatory educational framework, these research projects strive to honour the experiences of pre-service teachers, community partners, practicing teachers, and former youth activists as active agents in their collaborative pursuit of equity and social change. We seek to foreground critical conversations that consider:

Under what conditions and by whom are concepts of equity and excellence constructed? What do they look like for different groups and in different circumstances? How can equity and excellence be achieved in a society in which historically the dominant culture has determined their meaning? (Jenks, Lee, & Kanpol, 2001, p. 93)

**Shashi:** According to Gorski (2009), it is the job of critical multicultural educators to “uncover power relationships,” “understand their work in larger geopolitical contexts,” and to “expose these relationships and reconstruct schooling in ways that dismantle, rather than reify, social stratification” (p. 311).

**METHODOLOGY**

**Jodi:** Following the protocols of a relatively new methodology articulated by Norris and Sawyer (2013), duoethnographic interviews for both studies have been conducted with the personal identities
and experiences of the researcher and participants forming a basis upon which to mutually construct new understandings (Norris & Sawyer, 2013). As a dialectic form of inquiry that regards participants as co-researchers, duoethnography has generally been employed between peer researchers (Norris, Sawyer, & Lund, 2012); conducting this type of research with youth has provided benefits and also presented new challenges.

**Shashi:** I have found that duoethnography is a more democratic way to engage youth in authentic conversations, although the power dynamic between researcher and participant necessarily continues to have an influence.

**Participants:** Jodi: Thus far, eight youth social justice activists have been selected through a process of “convenience sampling” (Creswell, 2007), drawing on the professional networks of the researchers. The participants must have held leadership roles in social justice activities for at least one full year; most have undertaken these roles within a school-based context, although two were active in community-based settings.²

Lianne and Darren: Of the 380 of pre-service teachers required to take the course, “Diversity in Learning,” 27 pre-service teachers were accepted into the service-learning option. Of these, a total of 10 pre-service teachers participated in the research.³

**Data Collection:** In both studies, research participants completed in-depth interviews: the pre-service teachers participated in one initial-placement interview and one post-placement interview, while the youth social justice activists completed one interview with the option for follow-up communication.

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² All research participants were female and were between the ages of 18-26. Of the 8 participants, 8 identified as White. One participant identified as Métis and one participant immigrated to Canada at age 12. One identified as a member of an LGBTQ minority group.
³ All research participants were female and all had a previous undergraduate degree. Of the 10 participants, 9 identified as White and noted that English is their first language. One participant identified as an immigrant that moved to Canada as a teenager. One identified as a member of an LGBTQ minority group. Ages of participants ranged from 23 to 49 years old. The term “White” is capitalized here to denote its description of a social category of racialization and to differentiate it from the colour or other meanings.
Data Analysis: The data for both studies is derived from recorded interviews and transcripts. Themes were coded and clustered along meaningful recurrent topics based on protocols of critical ethnography, following Madison (2010), with the principal researcher and a research assistant providing a form of data triangulation on the eventual key emergent themes.

EMERGENT THEME 1: THE RIPPLE EFFECT: HOW MIGHT CRITICAL MULTICULTURAL TEACHER EDUCATION CULTIVATE THE CONDITIONS FOR EMPOWERING STUDENT LEADERS?

Darren: Pre-service teachers expressed a variety of reasons for enrolling in a diversity-focused course, and spoke about the various life experiences that influenced their understandings of diversity. For example, one pre-service teacher joined the Service-Learning Program because of her personal experience as an immigrant and her desire to “help [children and youth of immigrant families] through their transition.”

Lianne: Other pre-service teachers shared that they had limited exposure to diversity. For example, one pre-service teacher said she “grew up in a small town where there was no diversity” and joined the Service-Learning Program because she wanted to “be a better teacher” and “take care of the more diverse needs of the students.” Our analysis of the data suggests that there is not an “ideal” or “typical” teacher candidate to engage in social justice work.

Jodi: We also noticed that students expressed a “spark” of recognition that “something was not quite right,” without necessarily being aware of the broader issues. For example, one student stated that: “We weren’t experts right… as sixteen year olds… it was more just like ‘this is awful. We need to do something…’”

Shashi: A responsive teacher education course that builds on the diverse backgrounds of teachers cultivates a readiness in those same teachers to recognize what students bring to social justice work,
thus creating spaces for dialogic and trusting relationships in schools. These “problem posing educators,” as Freire describes them, can then seek to create a consciousness within their students, and move them from listeners to co-investigators (Freire, 1970).

**Jodi:** Entries into topics through critically relevant curriculum offered safe and trusting spaces for students to confront and explore their own identity questions and challenges, as shown in the following exchange:

Student leader: “I had [a teacher] for media studies where we kind of looked at gays and lesbians in the media.”
Researcher: “In what scenario were you able to tell her about your sexuality?”
Student leader: “We were doing a written assignment on different groups and how they are portrayed in the media and I mentioned it.”

**Sashi:** Those who were encouraged by teachers in classroom settings to engage in conversations around social justice would often be inspired to delve more deeply into activism.

Student leader: “In IB English we had to study different international authors’ works, Nobel Prize winners. In all these phenomenal books, the authors used very subtle literary devices to somehow send their political interests or political views to their readers.”

**Jodi:** Through dialogue with critically conscious teachers, students’ emerging understandings of identity and anti-oppression were kindled through curriculum connections across the disciplines, enlivening the classroom space and invoking passionate responses.
EMERGENT THEME 2: TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY: HOW MIGHT TEACHERS’ CRITICAL REFLECTION CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS AND DEMOCRATIC SPACES THAT FOSTER SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM?

Lianne: Prior to the start of the service-learning placements, several teachers expressed the challenges that they anticipated in working in the community, several of which were based on negative assumptions. One pre-service teacher expressed her anxiety as follows:

Pre-service teacher: If you take, let’s say East Indian or Arabic, those are two good examples... Hispanics are generally agreeable... but you know where a kind of White-looking woman is going to be telling you how to do math, by “telling” I mean “teaching” but they are going to see it as telling… I feel like I will always have to know what I am doing and I would always have to be right because if I am wrong, then that will be an excuse for [the children and youth] to be like “ah, a woman,” because it is a mentality that I know a lot of people have in those cultures. Being stereotypical, again stereotypes exist for a reason, I know people hate hearing that but it’s true.

This pre-service teacher’s comments align with Montgomery’s (2005) description of the ways that racializations are represented through “division or separation” of humanity into groups; “naturalization” of groups by assuming these groups are inescapable facts of Nature; and “essentialization” of people by reducing people in these groups to a set of static characteristics (p. 319).

Darren: During the same pre-service teacher’s post-interview, she said, “I learned that I am slightly racist. I use my racist predisposition for knowing the stereotype and knowing that you can exploit a child’s weakness.” This pre-service teacher’s self-critique at the end of the Service-Learning Program illuminates her willingness to confront her assumptions and apprehensions about children and youth of immigrant families. This pre-service teacher may not have experienced a transformation in her “racist
predispositions” but did comment on her newfound ability to be “more self-aware” (see Lund, Bragg, Kaipainen, & Lee, 2014).

**Shashi:** When teachers become more self-aware of their prejudices, they are then more capable of leveraging their power as authorities in the school to create and model democratic decision-making processes, which empower students to explore equitable interactions in a safe space (Sammel & Martin, 2008, pp. 96-97). Teachers gain the ability to be allies for students, offering resources and support for student-led initiatives. As one student noted: “We need rights and responsibilities… it’s very simple and non-bureaucratic when you’re working with a relatively consensus-based model.” Another student commented: “I would go to [the teacher] and say this is my plan, this is my vision and this is what I want to do and she’d [say], ‘these are the resources I can give you so I can be helpful to you,’ and she was there step-by-step with me.”

**EMERGENT UNDERSTANDINGS**

**Darren:** Just as cultural humility education requires a willingness to negotiate mutually acceptable alternatives to communication, engagement, and education (Chang, Simon, & Dong, 2012), teachers need to approach students with a humility that recognizes the dynamic and reciprocal nature of teaching and learning.

**Lianne:** Yes, a reciprocal process that reconciles the “teacher-student contradiction,” as Freire (1970) might describe it (p. 72). For example, one pre-service teacher speaks of feeling unprepared for an activity, but the children were so kind and understanding that she felt comfortable and supported in her vulnerability.

**Shashi:** We had a similar example, when a group of students were campaigning for healthy food in the cafeteria. They had a teacher ally, who was told by the principal that he must stop the campaign or face disciplinary action. The students recognized the position they had put the teacher in and chose to end
the campaign. The trusting relationship that they had built with that teacher motivated them to put his needs before their own agenda.

**Jodi:** The work that pre-service teachers do in reflecting critically on their role in schools and the community is crucial to developing a self-awareness that recognizes the need for a dialogical relationship with students (Sammel & Martin, 2008). This is a transformative and reciprocal process which not only provides teachers with the agency to engage in critically conscious conversations with students, and it also empowers students to become agents for social change.

**References**


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