

YOU ARE NOT ALONE HERE:
COLLABORATIVELY EXPLORING LINKS BETWEEN THE THEORY, IDENTITY,
AND PRACTICE OF ACTIVIST TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

ELIZABETH POWERS COSTELLO:

You Are Not Alone Here:

Collaboratively Exploring Links between the Theory, Identity, and Practice of Activist Teachers

(Under the direction of Deborah Eaker-Rich and Dwight L. Rogers)

There is a conspicuous lack of teacher voice in research and the subsequent discussion it generates on social justice and schooling. This study listens to four elementary-level activist teachers. The purpose is to understand how each teacher's situated identity and social justice framework influences their classroom practice and experience in schools. Additionally, this exploration uncovers insights into how teacher-participants sustain themselves in the difficult task of teaching for justice. Although teaching is always challenging, the task becomes even more complicated when one is teaching for social change. At the heart of this dissertation are four case studies that explore the: 1) situated identities, 2) classroom practices, and 3) means of sustenance that support teaching for social justice. Teacher narratives were shared over the course of one school year through in-depth interviews and weekly participation in a critical reflection group aimed at collaboratively exploring the links between theory, identity, and practice of activist teachers. Findings emerged in three areas: 1) influences on intentions to teach and social justice frameworks, 2) specific examples of activist teaching practices, and 3) the central role of human relationships as both obstacle and support to teaching for social justice. Resulting implications relate

directly to teacher education and professional development for both in-service and pre-service teachers.

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Thank you for your insights, support, and for being my Critical Friends.

Also to Matthew
Partner, husband, and best friend
Thanks for your patience, humor, wit,
Proofreading, dog-walking, and endless pots of coffee
All my love always

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There can be no task nobler than giving every child a better future.
UNICEF World Summit for Children, 1990

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The sun has barely broken through the clouds. The gruff librarian begrudgingly opens the door for me, a university instructor. Slurping down my last few drops of tepid coffee, I notice the librarian glaring at me. She hisses, “Don’t forget to tell the student teachers to return overdue books, and make sure they line up the chairs correctly.” I smile thinly and reassure the librarian that the students will respect her rules. Moments later, school children rush to the shelves seeking out *Harry Potter*, *Thomas the Train*, and *Captain Underpants*. Behind them trail twenty student teachers. I survey the scene, keenly aware of the mismatch between my mostly white, middle class, female students and the very diverse group of children in the room. This mismatch mirrors the demographic differences between our nation’s school children and their teachers.

The student teachers assemble themselves at the tiny tables. I toss off a semi-funny joke about how early it is, and attempt to facilitate a dialogue on the achievement gap. A blonde sits with her head in her hand doodling in her notebook. She whispers to her friend, “Why doesn’t she just tell us how to teach?”

Her friend leans over to her and responds, “I know all this social justice stuff is important, but when are we going to talk about classroom management?”

At the end of the class, Ashley Weston approaches me with a furrowed brow. I start to feel a little anxious. Ashley is one of the most engaged students in the class. She asks, “Beth, can we talk for a few minutes?”

Now I am wondering what is up. “Sure.” I speedily review the class and our discussions in my mind. “Is everything okay?”

Ashley’s expression is vaguely perplexed, dissatisfied. “Well. I like the readings in this class, and I want to help kids, but I just do not get how all of this connects. How does it work in real classrooms?”

I realize that this is indeed a great question but I am not sure how to answer it. “Ashley, this is a very good question and...well... as is true in most educational settings, it depends.”

She looks like she is considering my words for a moment before respectfully asking, “On what?”

I take a deep breath and reply, “On your students, who they are, what they need, who you are, what you believe in....”

“Okay, but can you give me some examples?”

“One example might be what Nieto, in her book, *Affirming Diversity*, suggests,” I say. “That you invite parents and families into the classroom.”

“That’s good. What else?”

I send the question back to her. “What do you think?”

“Well,” she answers. “I guess it is good to get to know your students, but I still haven’t seen any of this in action.”

“Maybe I can bring a panel of teachers who are putting these ideas into practice. How does that sound?” I suggest.

Ashley affirms, “That would be great.”

I quickly realize that trying to assemble a panel of what could be considered “activist teachers” is no easy task.

Initially, I approached faculty members and other graduate students and came up short. I asked teachers and the principal intern from my university, but still no luck. Eventually, I ran into an ELL (English as a Second Language) teacher at the annual “Let’s Talk Race Conference.” After a lengthy discussion on No Child Left Behind, I asked him to speak to my students. He agreed, and while he did have a great deal to share, the questions remained: What is social justice? What does it mean for actual practicing teachers? How does it really work in schools? Thus, this study was born out of Ashley’s very insightful question.

Most of my students have particular ideas on what teaching is and how “good teaching” looks. Their perceptions of teaching were formed long before this day. The years they have spent in schools have served as an “apprenticeship” in teaching (Lortie, 1975). For most American students, the occupation of teaching has been more visible than any other. By the time they reach college, students have observed teachers and professors for at least sixteen years, or an estimated 13,000 hours of direct contact (Lortie, 1975). These students typically see schools as unchanging. They expect schools cannot or should not be any different than those in their own experience. This is a sad fact considering that most of the students were enrolled in schools that reinforced oppressive dynamics, those that unfairly disadvantage individuals based upon their identity factors and did not meet the needs of diverse learners (Lortie, 1975).

Background and Overview

As a teacher educator who is committed to training teachers to be capable to meet the needs of diverse learners, I have often been asked to provide examples of how actual teachers frame and implement social justice ideals in their teaching practice. As I have found very few examples in the literature, I was inspired to seek out such teachers and ask them about their ideas, insights, and experiences. However, teachers who express a commitment to social justice are a striking minority (Cochran-Smith, 2004). While schooling and social justice has generated numerous essays, articles, and books, the voices of actual activist teachers are scarce (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Pyne, 2006).

All too often, academics prescribe methods or criticize teachers without actually giving them an opportunity to join conversations on social justice and schooling. Literature on teaching for social justice includes theoretical perspectives, philosophical musings, curriculum models, advice for teachers, and detailed descriptions of the underlying societal issues that affect schools. While all of these areas are useful, discussions with actual teachers have been left out or are limited at best. It is important to listen to the voices of actual practicing teachers who are attempting to work for equity and against oppression in their own classrooms and schools because they have important insights into how theories and models actually play out “on the ground.” They also have first-hand experiences of the obstacles and challenges that arise when one attempts to teach for equity and justice.

This study seeks to listen to the voices of four elementary teachers who express a commitment to teaching for social justice. The point of the study is to understand how these teachers’ own self-understanding of their situated identity and social justice world view affects their classroom practice. Additionally, this exploration uncovers insights into how

these teachers sustain themselves in the challenges of teaching for social justice. Indeed, teaching is challenging, but it becomes even more complicated when one is “teaching against the grain,” or in other words, when one is working against oppression and injustice (Ayers, et al., 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004).

At the heart of this study are four case studies that explore: 1) the biographies and situated identities of four elementary teachers who are teaching for social justice, 2) their social justice framework, 3) their classroom practice, and 4) how they sustain their work. These teachers are Ashley, a first-year teacher who is teaching first grade, Elizabeth, a fifth-year teacher who is teaching fifth grade, Jane, a eighth-year teacher who is teaching exceptional children ages eight to twelve, and Rachel, a twelfth-year teacher who is teaching second grade. For the purposes of this dissertation, the names given are pseudonyms. However, the teachers themselves have agreed that they would like to be identified by name in any and all potential publications.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to listen to the voices of in-service teachers who are working for social justice with the goal of extending and informing conversations on teaching for social justice. This dissertation is the result of an in-depth collaborative inquiry into the work and lives of social justice teachers. The intended audience includes in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators. While I acknowledge the possibility that these narratives could inform the work of administrators, the analysis is not specifically framed toward that end. Additionally, I acknowledge that teacher voice should be considered

in policy research and other such educational endeavors; however this particular study is also not aimed directly at policy implications.

Research Questions

Some of my original questions were: What are the lived experiences of activist teachers? How do such teachers conceptualize social justice? How, if at all, do these two elements influence such teachers' classroom practices? These questions gave me insight into aspects of teacher identity and practice.

Looking at teacher identity and practice provided insight into the following guiding questions:

- 1) How and why did the teacher-participants come to be activist teachers?
- 2) How, if at all, do teacher-participants enact their social justice ideals through their classroom practice?
- 3) What are the obstacles and supports to teaching for social justice?

Each of these questions is addressed specifically in the individual case studies (chapters 4-7) and in the cross-case summary and findings chapter (chapter 8). The first question is addressed in the context sections; the second is described in the sections on classroom practice; and the third is outlined in the sections titled, "Sustenance: Supports and Obstacles to Teaching for Social Justice."

These elements are deeply embedded in teacher identity and practice, which is crucial for student teachers, teacher educators, and in-service teachers to understand. Student teachers need to not only learn about the realities of teaching but also about what is possible in schools. Teacher educators need to stay connected to actual classroom practice. In-service teachers would also benefit from such understanding because while they alone "cannot fix

society's problems" nor can they alone alter children's life circumstances, they do have the potential to contribute to efforts of changing society for the better at a very fundamental level (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 19). Ayers (1989) asserts, "The secret of teaching is in the detail of every day practice, and it is to individual teachers that we must turn in order to best understand teachers" (p. ix). Thus this study provides a space for the voices of actual activist teachers, a group that has been largely neglected in terms of educational research.

Definition of Terms

These terms will be explored in greater depth in the review of the literature. However, they are listed here for your convenience. As you read the study you may want to refer to the following list to clarify how I frame each of these terms:

Social Justice

Although there are heated debates on the actual meaning of social justice, the definition that most closely reflects its meaning for me was established by Bell. Bell (1997) states:

Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors that have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility for and with others and the society as a whole (p. 3).

The key elements to keep in mind in regard to social justice are: 1) equitable distribution of resources, 2) safety and security; 3) self-determination, and 4) interdependency. It is also important to understand that social justice requires not only that

individuals develop a sense of agency, but also a sense of responsibility to others. For the most part, these elements are grounded in the sphere of human rights, an area that will be explored more fully in the section that reviews relevant literature.

Social Justice Education

I utilize Bell's (1997) social justice education framework that defines "social justice education [as] both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in society that is mutually shaped by their needs" (p. 3). The most relevant aspects of this definition are that the desired end result of this process is 1) full and equal participation in society for all groups regardless of their identity factors (race, religion, gender, social class, etc.) and 2) the fact that the society is mutually shaped by all members' needs.

Teaching for Social Justice

There are several common elements across definitions of teaching for social justice: The elements are: 1) fostering dialogic and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers; 2) maintaining a dialectical stance that considers the needs of students and greater societal, historical, and cultural dynamics; 3) encouraging a critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) for both students and teachers; and 4) exposing the hidden curriculum (Ayers et al., 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

For the purposes of this study, I rely upon the model established by Bigelow and others (Bigelow, et al., 1994). I use this model because it is straightforward and "teacher-friendly." They state that: "curriculum and classroom practice must be: "1) grounded in the lives of students; 2) critical; 3) multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice; 4) participatory and

experiential; 5) hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary; 6) activist; 7) academically rigorous; and 8) culturally sensitive” (p. 4-5).

Although I fundamentally agree with the elements of this model, the authors do not make explicit connections to other models. In order to work toward praxis (a marriage of theory and practice), I articulate each element through research in the literature review. I use both this model and the relevant research as a frame of analysis for the teacher-participants’ classroom practice in their individual case studies (chapters 4-7) and cross-case summaries (chapter 8).

Equity

Equity is “the quality of being equal or fair” or a state of “fairness, impartiality; evenhanded dealing” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Educational equity does not mean treating every person exactly the same because different people have different needs (Greene, 1998; Nieto, 1999). On the one hand, every student is entitled to equal access to resources (e.g. books, teacher time, support services); on the other, not all children need the same things. For example, a second language learner may require the support of an ELL resource teacher, while another child might need extra math instruction. Therefore, providing educational experiences that will result in equal opportunities in a child’s future requires that teachers carefully consider the learning needs of each individual child.

Diversity

Most often, diversity is interpreted in the literature in terms of race. However, identity and oppression are complex issues. Just as identity factors cannot be understood in isolation,

so too, their relationship to oppression cannot be extracted from our examination of oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997; Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002). For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term diversity to mean the variety of people and identity factors that are found in schools and school populations. Therefore, when I refer to diversity, I include the full spectrum of identity factors that teachers work with on a daily basis which include but are not limited to age, abilities, gender, race, religious preference, and social class.

Oppression

Like Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997), it is also my belief that “all forms of social injustice are equally important for study and consideration. All forms of oppression are hurtful and limiting to persons or groups who are targets of that oppression and they also limit the full humanity of persons and groups who are agents, who benefit from inequality” (p. 6). Therefore, my use of the term oppression encompasses a wide variety of identity factors. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, oppression is “the action of forcibly putting down or crushing; the repression or suppression of a person or thing” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2003). It involves putting someone down or placing a burden on others. In this case, oppression involves placing a burden on others based upon specific identity factors including age, abilities, gender, race, religious preference, and social class.

Activist Teacher

Activist teachers are educators who engage in social justice issues and incorporate activism into their teaching practice. Activism is “a doctrine or policy of advocating

energetic action” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). A teacher is “one who instructs” or “one whose function is to give instruction especially in a school” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Therefore, the term activist teacher quite literally means an instructor who advocates for energetic action within their classroom or school. While their causes may vary widely, activist teachers are generally accepted as having a progressive worldview (Casey, 1993). Educational progressives believe that the human condition of students can be improved through the efforts of teachers in schools. Being active in school requires engaging in social justice issues that hinder students’ lives (Sachs, 2003). An activist teacher works toward creating a classroom where individuals from various cultures meet and not only learn to cultivate their own sense of agency, but also to learn to respect the needs of others.

Study Limitations

This study is primarily focused on issues surrounding educational equity and social justice within the United States. Specifically, the teacher-participants are located in the same urban district in the Southeastern United States. Additionally, they all have obtained at least one degree from the same large, research intensive, state university in the Southeast. Three earned undergraduate degrees in the same elementary education program, and two earned Masters’ degrees in that same university’s school of education. While this group appears to be homogenous in some ways, it also highlights the variety of interpretations that occur based on personal and biographical influences. It should be noted that all four attended this same university at different points in time. Therefore, their conceptual frameworks were formulated at different times. Additionally, each of these individuals has differing levels of

years of experience, which may have had a particular influence on their perceptions of teaching for social justice.

All four of the teachers are Caucasian and similarly, all four would currently consider themselves middle-class. It is important to note that this group demographically reflects the majority of our teaching force at this point in time. Therefore, this study addresses the demographics that we as teacher educators work with the most. However, both the teacher-participants and I see the great need to honor and illuminate the voices of teachers of color, particularly those who have social justice as a goal. Jay (2006) offers a fine example of this in her dissertation work titled: *Race in Education, Anti-racist Activism and the Role of White Colleagues: Listening to the Voices of African American Educators*.

While I collaborated with four teachers for the purposes of this study, it is vital that we expand such conversations to a wider group. However, I see that for this particular study, limiting my number of teacher-participants enabled me to form collaborative and trusting relationships with them. This was due to my participation in the study group that the teachers themselves formed and invited me to join. I realized that the opportunity to collaborate with teachers working for social justice over the course of an entire school year was a unique opportunity that should not be denied.

Another limitation had to do with conducting research in the midst of group participation. While I was an active participant in the Critical Friends' Group, I was also researching the teachers' identities, theories, and practices. I experienced the tension between wanting to illuminate teacher voice in research and at the same time to present a fair and balanced representation of what they shared. Admittedly, I shied away from overly critiquing the teachers' ideas in writing. This tension is one that most researchers who collaborate with

teachers must contend. While I have no easy answers, I do recommend that researchers have the courage to critically analyze data and to collaborate closely with teachers to ensure fair and respectful representation of their voices. I also encourage extensive member-checking—not only of what is recorded, but also of the resulting analysis.

Need and Significance

A review of the literature has revealed the unique tie between teacher development and the struggle to work for social change. It is imperative that researchers make teacher development, learning, and empowerment priorities in the effort to understand society and effect social change (Zeichner, 1991). However, such discussions are often held without the input of teachers themselves (Ayers, 1989; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Lund, 2003; Zeichner, 1991). Zeichner (1991) asserts, “Even today with all of the talk of teacher empowerment and teacher development, we see a general disregard for the craft knowledge of good teachers in the education research establishment which has attempted to articulate a ‘knowledge base’ for teaching minus the voices of teachers” (p. 1). The topic of teacher identity and practice is significant because it directly relates to the efforts to improve our society at the most basic level. Such discussions could inform areas such as policy reform efforts, curricular implications, and the area that I address specifically: teacher education and development.

Activist teachers are uniquely positioned to work consciously for social change because of their location in schools (Lund, 2003). Yet among the myriad research materials on social justice education, there is a conspicuous lack of teacher voice. Teaching against the

grain needs to be investigated by listening to actual teachers who are engaged in social justice work in schools. Cochran-Smith (2004) asserts:

Teaching against the grain is embedded in the culture and history of teaching at individual schools and in the biographies of teachers and their collaborative efforts to alter curricula, raise questions about common practices, and resist inappropriate decisions. These relationships must be explored in schools in the company of experienced teachers who are themselves engaged in complex, situation-specific, and sometimes losing struggles to work against the grain. (pp. 24-25)

It is essential that we listen to teachers who “teach against the grain” because it is vital to understand the complexity of an activist identity. Their biographies are intertwined with how they approach their students and their work in classrooms. Both can serve to inform the lives and work of teacher educators and student teachers.

Researcher’s Perspective

As is the case in Ayers’ work, *The Good Preschool Teacher*, this study rests on the same assumptions that: 1) “teachers are a rich and worthy source of knowledge about teaching;” 2) “teachers are the chief instruments of their own practice” meaning they are continually “thrust back upon their own teaching practice” so that they are “the creators of their own teaching text;” and 3) “teachers are interactive professionals” in that “they draw on training, skill, a growing body of experience, habit, personal values, art, science, and native wit to do their work (Ayers, 1989, p. 1; see also Schon, 1983). These three assumptions highlight the potential for teacher educators to listen to the voices of actual teachers in the field. Clearly, there is a need for engagement between teachers and teacher educators. These collaborations offer great possibilities for learning by both groups. Given the current political and social climate, the need is particularly great for teacher educators to listen to the voices of teacher activists.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 has presented the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, definitions of terms, and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 includes a literature review and other relevant research. Chapter 3 contains an extensive description of the research methodology. Chapters 4 through 7 consist of extensive case studies that detail the context, social justice frameworks, classroom practice, and the ways in which each teacher-participant sustains her teaching practice. Chapter 8 consists of cross-case summaries and findings that emerged through analysis. A summary of the study, conclusions drawn, and recommendations for future study are contained in chapter 9.

The following chapter provides a review of relevant research and expands upon key terms and concepts to further describe this study's conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

*Oppression, you pray on us when we sleep
Oppression, you chase after the tired, the poor, the weak
Oppression, you know you mean only harm
Oppression you reach out with your long arm
But Oppression I will not let you near me, oh no
Oppression you shall learn to fear me, yes you will*
-from "Oppression" by Ben Harper, 1995

Introduction

This chapter represents an overview of the literature that helps to situate this study. The chapter will be divided into six sections: 1) social justice and education: a human rights perspective; 2) oppression; 3) a historical overview of social justice education; 4) a current conception of social justice education; 5) teaching for social justice; and 6) activist teachers. These topics relate to the theoretical frameworks that guided my initial thinking. Throughout the research process, I refined my ideas and the conceptual framework that represented my analytical lens.

Despite the fact that the literature on social justice is extensive, there is little agreement on what the term "social justice" means. Few researchers are explicit about their social justice framework in their work. While authors often assume that the reader is interpreting the meaning of social justice the same way, there is little guarantee that they do. It is important that we are clear about how we frame our work (Zeichner, 2005). Articulating the theoretical basis for our approach to social justice enables us to be conscious about our

intentions, critically reflective on our own research and teaching practices, and aware of historical, social, and cultural dynamics (Bell, 1997).

In the interest of clarity, I will outline the specific philosophies and theories of social justice that I draw on to frame this study. My purpose is not to explore the countless ideas, theories, and discourses that exist, but simply to give you a point of reference in which to read this study. It is also my hope that whether you agree with some or all of the ideas presented here, this review might inspire you to engage in further conversations on the nature of social justice and how we can work for a more equitable future for all children through educational means.

Social Justice and Education: A Human Rights Perspective

Current conversations on social justice in education mainly focus on the idea of distributive justice, or in other words “who gets what” or of “getting what one deserves” (Connell, R.W., 1993; p. 16-19; Rawls, 1971). The term “what” refers to economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974, 1980). This view of justice includes who gets access to luxury time, social services, and educational services. On the other hand, distributive justice also applies to the idea that people get what they deserve in terms of punishment. For example, in the area of criminal justice, this translates to the idea that the punishment should fit the crime. Connell (1993) asserts that the risk of using a distributive model for educational purposes is that, “It is difficult to see how a whole social group can deserve either more or less education than another social group” (p. 16). This raises the question of equality. Connell (1993) cautions us not to view equality as giving “each person his due,” but to consider a more Platonic view of justice that has “social balance and harmony” at its core.

Thus the “quality of our collective life” is central to a “just social order” (Connell, 1993, p. 16). This reflects an idea that is fundamental to my current conception of social justice: our humanity is bound up in the humanity of others.

Desmond Tutu, Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, South Africa, explains this idea through an African concept called *ubuntu* (oo-boon-too). Tutu (2000) declares, “We believe that a person is a person through another person, that my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I inexorably dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms” (“Ubuntu”).

Tutu (2000) asserts that our shared humanity is at the very heart of social justice. He further explains that “the essence of being human” has to do with embracing others, caring about them, and being willing to work on their behalf. These ideals are based in the realm of human rights. Therefore, individual human rights are inextricably connected to the rights of others and our responsibility to uphold those rights. These ideas are articulated in international treaties on human rights, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The most well known and widely accepted declaration of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was crafted and ratified by the United Nations in 1948. This document begins with the statement, “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world....” From this perspective, recognition of human rights for all people is fundamental to peace, justice, and freedom. In other words, human rights relate to the interconnection of the needs of individuals and the welfare of society as a whole. While it could be argued that all thirty articles of the UDHR could be applied to

education and specifically to this study, I focus on the first three. I list them as they are recorded in the original document:

Article 1:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2:

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3:

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person. (United Nations, 1998, p. 1)

The UDHR declares that every person regardless of their race, creed, religion, class or status is entitled to equal rights, pursuing freedom, and to having a sense of physical and psychological safety. Moreover, we all are duty bound to protect not only our own rights but also the rights of others. Clearly, these ideas reflect the link between individuals and society as a whole. Because children represent the future of our global society, advocating for their rights becomes even more vital.

In 1989, the United Nations International Children's Education Fund (UNICEF) hosted a Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which was "the first international legally binding instrument to incorporate the full range of human rights—civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights—" for children. World leaders and UNICEF organized this convention in acknowledgement that 1) children deserve human rights as well as adults; and 2) that often "children need protection and special care that adults do not" (UNICEF, 1990, p. 2). They conceptualized this instrument based on the following:

The basic human rights that children everywhere have are the rights to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse, and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination; devotion to the best interests of the child; the right to life, survival and development; and respect for the views of the child. Every right spelled out in the Convention is inherent to the human dignity and harmonious development of every child. (UNICEF)

These ideals support my vision of social justice in that they override the idea of distributive justice because they include basic human rights that are universal to all human beings. Children's rights are not only bound to all human rights but also need special attention because children are vulnerable. Human rights speak to both overt and covert forms of violence. While overt forms of oppression such as rape and physical abuse must be eradicated, covert forms of violence such as oppression must also be addressed.

Oppression

Bell (1997) asserts that in order to work for social justice, "we must have a theory of oppression" (p. 4). In six elements, she conceptualizes oppression as: 1) pervasive, in that is "woven throughout societal structures" and "embedded in individual consciousness" both of which frame our thinking; 2) restrictive to both self-development and self-determination (Young, 1990); 3) hierarchical, in that it elevates dominant groups such as whites or the wealthy above others such as people of color or those of little economic means; 4) complex, in that identity factors are layered because people hold "cross-cutting social group membership" (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Sleeter & Grant, 1988); 5) internalized, in that it is not only do social structures reinforce it, but they also exist within a person's own mind (Bell, 1997; Cose, 1993; Dill & Zinn, 1990; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; West, 1993); and 6) similar across forms of oppressions (Bell, 1997, p. 4-5). Bell explains that each form of

oppression involves an agent (the enactor of the oppression) and a target (the victim of the oppression). Because identity factors are complex, a person could be both agent and target at the same time. For example, a white woman could be a target of sexism, but an agent of classism, racism, or ableism (oppression of those with physical or mental limitations). One form of oppression doesn't supercede another. Likewise, it is impossible to find one definition to encapsulate all forms of oppression. However, eradicating oppression requires "struggling against all of its forms," believing in individuals' abilities as agents of change, and building "coalitions among diverse peoples" (Bell, 1997, p. 9-15). Coalition building needs to occur between and among both subordinate (target) and dominate (agent) groups.

While both dominant and subordinate groups suffer because of oppression, they also play a role in maintaining the status quo (Bell, 1997; Freire, 1970, 2000). Obviously, targeted group members suffer because of oppressive structures. They are victims of both actual and symbolic violence. Additionally, subordinated group members may also suffer from "internalized oppression" or negative images that are instilled by dominant society (Bell, 1997; Fannon, 1968; Freire, 1970, 2000). Internalized oppression supports the status quo in that it hinders subordinated people to act to change oppressive structures. It may also cause targeted groups to resent others from both agent and target groups who aim to change oppressive structures.

Dominant group members, also referred to as "agents," tend to experience the world through a distorted lens through which their culture is seen as "the norm" (Bell, 1997; Nieto, 1999). Most people in dominant groups perceive that their way is the "right way" and that those who are different from them are "wrong" or "less than." Likewise, members of the dominant group who seek to change oppressive structures are seen as "troublemakers." Bell

(1997) offers the example of whites that challenge racism. Pressure from other dominant group members to “not make trouble” often persuades dominants to do nothing. In this case, “doing nothing” contributes to oppressive structures. Because both groups are complicit in and suffer from oppressive dynamics, both can play a key role in working against them.

Subordinate group members, also known as “targets,” are more likely to speak out against oppression because they most directly suffer from it. However, dominant group members also can make steps toward eradicating oppression. Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) assert that “both dominant and subordinate groups have a role to play in dismantling oppression and generating visions for a more socially just future” (p. 12-13). Each group has a particular standpoint and experience base that can contribute to such work. Listening to the experiences and understandings of subordinate groups offers a fuller picture of not only how oppressive structures work, but also of how society might be organized to more fully reflect all people’s culture and needs. On the other hand, dominant group members have the unique opportunity to explore the costs of maintaining the status quo for dominant groups. This emphasizes the potential for both dominants and subordinates to form cross-group alliances.

Cross-group alliances have a long history in the United States. Examples include whites who were active in the Civil Rights movement and men who worked for women’s suffrage, and wealthy antipoverty crusaders (Zinn, 1980, 2003). These actions suggest that hegemony is not total and that people can act as change agents with the potential to change the world (Bell, Adams, & Griffin, 1997). Education is one such arena where positive social moves can be made.

Moments in Time: A Historical Overview of Social Justice in Education

The following is a historical overview of educational activism. This is not so much a chronological exploration as the illumination of sites of large-scale transformation in schools, communities, and society as discussed by 19th century women activists and progressive educators. More recent work from the civil rights, critical pedagogy, and culturally relevant pedagogy movements are influential as well. What follows is a simplified view. It does not pick up on all of the threads, but it does represent the ideas that influenced my initial understanding of the topic of activist teachers.

The School as Site of Possibility

The term activist is derived from the philosophy of pragmatism, which refers to a response to a situation or problem that is practical (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). The Progressive Education Movement, stretching back to the 1800's, reflected one of the first manifestations of educational activism in the United States. The idea that schools can be used to improve the lives of people is at the heart of progressive education (Cremin, 1964; Kohl, 1982). In terms of progressive education, Dewey is considered primary.

Dewey saw schooling as a vehicle for transforming society to become more democratic and egalitarian. He argued that communities should want the same things for all children that individual parents do. For him, the success of the individual was directly linked to the health of society as a whole. Dewey (2001) said, "What the best and the wisest parent wants for his child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely (and if) acted upon...destroys our democracy" (p. 5).

Instead of being focused on producing an adult that fits the existing social order, Dewey thought that the curriculum should meet the child. Dewey's curriculum transformed the role of teacher and student. Teachers should be facilitators of meaningful experiences for children. Children should be collaborators jointly planning content and experiences with the teacher rather than being passive recipients of knowledge. Dewey believed that this could be accomplished through content integration. Instead of merely consisting of discreet skills, all parts of the curriculum should complement one another. Dewey's values of experience, equality, and reflection are central to my idea of activist teaching. While Dewey saw schools as the primary site for social justice efforts, others saw the community as being more vital.

The Community as Site of Possibility

Women educator activists of the nineteenth century fought for social reform. They were interested in furthering the causes of labor reform, women's rights, and civil rights. The number of female educator activists increased due to their experiences as teachers. They had gained a sense of autonomy and financial independence through these experiences. Their skills in leading, speaking, and organizing increased. Their presence in schools gave them the opportunity to create supportive social networks with one another (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999).

Outside of the classroom walls, educator activists Jane Addams (1860-1935) and Ida B. Wells (1862-1931) were founders of the Settlement House Movement, The Women's Club Movement, and the NAACP. At the center of these movements were educational endeavors that helped to establish community networks working for gender and racial equity. These endeavors helped to challenge prevailing educational methods that reinforced

compartmentalization and social efficiency in lieu of democratic practices (Crocco, Munro, & Weiler, 1999, p. 3). Addams and Wells' combined efforts had a profound effect on the shaping of a more democratic and socially just American society. Both believed in social change through educational endeavors. But their definition of education was more broadly defined. They created community-based initiatives that were extended to women, immigrants, African-Americans, and other marginalized groups.

Crocco, Munro, and Weiler (1999) summarize:

In extending educational sites to settlement houses and women's clubs (Addams and Wells) sought to promote a vision of education that was community based, lifelong, and directed toward social equality. In effect these women progressives rejected schools as primary sites of democratic education. They believed that education should be pluralistic and particularistic as well as responsive to the social contexts of diverse communities. This necessitated the development of a variety of educational institutions to address the specific needs of diverse groups. (p. 24)

Addams' and Wells' commitments to social justice for marginalized groups inspire and inform my conception of activist education. It is clear that social change can occur through educational endeavors in community organizations. On the other hand, Dewey's assertion that change is possible in public schools is also relevant. Although schools should not be expected to be a panacea for all the issues we face in society (Ayers, 1989), they do have the potential to serve as "spaces of possibility" (Weis & Fine, 2004).

The Society as Site of Possibility

In his essay *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Counts (1932) charged that "practical men" of his era "bungled" things up for the common man because of their ignorance and greed. He firmly believed in the equality of all races, that children should be given the "vision of possibilities," and that societal structures should be critically examined.

Counts asserted that teachers should lead the way to a new social order and saw them as possible change agents. Counts (1997) stated, “I should say that teachers, if they could increase sufficiently their stock of courage, intelligence and vision, might become a social force of some magnitude” (p. 24).

Counts asserted that teachers should claim power and assert their influence over schools, curriculum, and the students. While I agree with Counts that teachers can serve as change agents, I disagree that their intention should be imposed on their students or society. I do not advocate dogma even if it is based on a conception of social justice and equity. My vision is more in line with Freire (1970, 2000) in that education and social change should occur in a dialogic manner not in an imposing one. These early 19th and 20th century thinkers laid the groundwork for what would become the Civil Rights Movement.

Educational Implications of the Civil Rights Movement

The Highlander School Movement

The Highlander School, founded in 1932 by Myles Horton and Don West in Tennessee, became a strong force for the Civil Rights Movement. Its original aims were to support the labor movement for poor whites in the Appalachian Mountains. Eventually, their mission extended to teaching leadership skills to those who would challenge other oppressive aspects of society. In the 1950's, they established Citizenship Schools, which supported an effective literacy campaign that emphasized the rights of African Americans to participate in a democratic society. Through this program, summer institutes were annually held on the grounds of the Highlander School. Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Andrew Young

were among participants (Horton, 2003). Thus, Highlander School participants became pivotal leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

Horton's commitment to social justice through educational endeavors was also influenced by his friendship with Paulo Freire. His view of himself as teacher and student was informed by Freire's idea of the dialogic role of the educator. The book *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990) was based upon the transcripts of a dialogue between them. This book, presented in the form of a well-written dialogue, reflects their shared value of participatory education. Their idea of good education includes three basic elements: 1) love for other people; 2) belief in their ability to shape their own lives; and 3) the value of others' ideas and experiences (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990). These ideas also relate to elements of multicultural education, critical pedagogy, and feminist pedagogy.

Multicultural, Critical, Culturally Relevant, & Feminist Pedagogy

Multicultural education grew out of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. During this time, marginalized groups in the United States and across the globe began standing up for their rights. These groups included women, people of color, and people involved in gay rights. The ideal here was of a pluralistic society, a utopian "melting pot," in which there was social harmony. Multicultural education was criticized for not being critical in that there was no acknowledgement of oppression and no analysis of societal structures that reified oppressive dynamics in society. In response, Banks (1997) and others called for critical multicultural education. Critical multicultural education meets these critiques by

incorporating self and social critique into their practices. Critical multicultural education stems from the marriage of multicultural education and critical pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy is based upon the Neo-Marxist idea of critical theory. Critical theory is aimed at self-reflection that enables one to question the status quo. It encourages people to examine power relations in connection to race, class, gender, and other factors of identity. According to critical theorists, education often serves to stratify society. In many instances it does so with the partial consent of marginalized groups. “Conscientization,” or critical consciousness, is the process of critiquing society and self in order to improve the conditions and experiences for the disempowered (Freire, 1970, 2000). This process changes the role of the teacher from dictator to dialogic facilitator. The teacher moves from being a banker to a problem poser. Problem posing education involves asking questions and reinventing knowledge with students. Children and teachers become allies and co-creators rather than adversaries (Freire, 1970, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987). In order for schools to overcome traditional banking models, teachers must become “transformative intellectuals.” Rather than reinforcing the status quo, they refuse traditional banking models and favor new modes of thinking in classrooms. Teacher transformation can be a significant tool in transforming schools to become more equitable. Often, large-scale transformation is seen as happening from the top-down; teacher self-transformation can send a ripple of change from the classroom out.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is dedicated to improving the conditions of schooling and ensuring the long-term success of all students—particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized. Expectations have a deep impact on student successes and failures. A student’s ethnic background and poverty are often cited as reasons for poor

performance in school. Culturally relevant teaching encourages teachers to capitalize on student's individual, group, language, and cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995).

Like multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy, feminist pedagogy assumes that education is never politically neutral. Additionally, it embraces the idea that identity is situated and that education should be imbued with an ethic of care. While multiculturalism has focused on identity factors such as race and culture, feminist educators have addressed issues of power and gender as well as how other forms of oppression are affected by patriarchy (Sparks & Park, 2000). Feminist pedagogy embodies several components: "1) involves power sharing in the classroom and participatory democratic learning environments; 2) incorporates holistic learning that values students' subjective experience; 3) embraces diversity by embracing and exploring oppression and the unfair privileges that arise from it; and 4) encourages social change" (Enns & Sinacore, 2005, pp. 10-15). Feminist pedagogies extend conversations on social justice to include the situated identities and personal experiences of individuals with a goal of creating a caring and just society.

A Current Conception of Social Justice Education

As stated earlier, I primarily rely on the social justice education framework that Bell (1997) establishes:

Social justice education is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in society that is mutually shaped by their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure. We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors that have

a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of social responsibility toward and with others and the society as a whole. (p. 3)

This definition is based in the realm of human rights. Specifically, it involves 1) full and equal participation of all groups; 2) equitable distribution of resources; 3) safety; 4) self-determination; and 5) interdependency. At the core of definition is the goal of balancing a personal sense of agency with social responsibility. These elements are based in the sphere of human rights as outlined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Specifically, both call for equal participation regardless of group membership (Article 2, UDHR; CRC), ensuring safety (Article 2, UDHR; CRC), sense of agency (CRC), as well as interdependency and social responsibility (Article 1, UDHR). These components are also connected with the goals and activities of teaching for social justice.

Teaching for Social Justice

The concept of teaching for social justice has multiple meanings. Statements on social justice are both specific and profound. Ayers (1998) states:

Teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive them to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world. (p. xix)

Teaching for social justice requires that teachers balance both individual children's needs and wider issues such as economic and historical context, cultural influences, and economic realities. Including these contextual issues can encourage individuals to identify blocks to their own humanity, which in turn might enable them to change the wider world.

As stated in the introduction, I utilize the model of teaching for social justice established by Bigelow (1994) and others. The elements require that social justice teaching and curriculum are: “1) grounded in the lives of students; 2) critical; 3) multicultural, anti-racist, and pro-justice; 4) participatory; 5) hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary; 6) activist; 7) academically rigorous; and 8) culturally sensitive” (p. 4-5). I articulate each component in relation to this model and the work of other theorists and practitioners.

Grounded in the Lives of Students

Social justice practitioners believe that all of their students can succeed. They recognize that all children can learn and deserve the opportunity to grow and thrive (Dewey, 1990). They refute the idea that failure is inevitable for some. They believe that all children deserve and are capable of higher level classes. They also believe that all people have the ability to shape their own lives (Shor & Freire, 1987). Curriculum is shaped by students’ identities and individual learning needs. Activist teachers view knowledge as a process and as being co-created with students. Knowledge should be shared and reflected upon (Dewey, 1990; Friere, 1970, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The content of curriculum emerges from students’ interests, culture, and learning needs. Teachers build skills and capacities by supporting their students in creating bridges between themselves and local, cultural, national, local, and global identities. Teaching for social justice is rooted in a dialogic relationship with students in that the teacher is a facilitator of the co-creation of knowledge. At the same time, teaching for social justice requires that teachers become conscious of historical, cultural, and economic influences and encourages their students to do the same (Ayers, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004). This requires a critical stance toward teaching and learning.

Critical

Teachers should help students to “talk back” to the world and to pose “critical questions” (Bigelow et al., 1994). Critical questions are those that involve students questioning the societal structures (e.g. schooling) and cultural messages (e.g. advertising). They involve asking questions such as: “Who makes decisions?” “Who benefits from those decisions?” and “Who gets left out?” Critical questions also involve exploring possible alternatives and creative ways to work for social change. A critical stance also involves connecting learning to real world issues and problems. Teaching for social justice requires that teachers encourage students to think critically about the information to which they are exposed. Shor (1992) states:

As long as existing knowledge is not presented as facts and doctrines to be absorbed without question, as long as existing bodies of knowledge are critiqued and balanced from a multicultural perspective, and as long as students’ own themes and idioms are valued along with standard usage, existing canons are part of critical education. (p. 35)

Shor supports the idea that not only should students learn to be critical, but they should also be provided with a “balanced multicultural perspective,” meaning that dominant culture is exposed and replaced with a more culturally inclusive view. This means that the teacher creates curriculum that is multicultural, anti-racist, and pro-justice.

Multicultural, Anti-Racist, Pro-Justice

Because the concepts of multicultural education and anti-racist education overlap, scholars have criticized the confusion that results from multiple interpretations of terms. My goal here is not to settle these debates or to explore the complexity of these terms, but simply

to highlight some of the main tenets and goals of multicultural and anti-racist education that relate to my interpretation of teaching for social justice.

Multicultural education arose out of the 1960's Civil Rights movement. It is a perspective that is inclusive of all groups in our society, particularly those that have been marginalized (Banks, 1997; Bigelow, et al., 1994; Hanley, 1999). It is based on the idea that although our society has elevated white culture and values as the norm, it is actually enriched by embracing the plurality of cultures that are found in it (Hanley, 1999). Therefore, multicultural education is seen as a resistance to dominant modes of schooling and white supremacy in particular (Sleeter, 1996).

While critics argue that multicultural education is divisive, its goal is the inclusion and fair representation of all cultural groups. However, even the most well-intentioned educators can miss the mark by making superficial rather than making meaningful moves toward that end. Hanley (1999) asserts:

Multicultural education is more than holidays and food. It requires critical thinking with attention paid to complexity. It requires research and learning about the multiple perspectives involved in any historical or contemporary experience in order to understand the rich meaning therein. (p.1)

Clearly, teachers must strive to provide curriculum that not only includes cultural artifacts but encourages students to critically reflect on the values and power relationships that shape our society. Critical multicultural education and anti-racist education have emerged as a response to the critique of superficiality (Miner, 1994). Critical multicultural education supports interrogating inequitable dynamics that shape hiring policies, curricular implications, and testing practices (Giroux, 1993; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Lund, 2006; Nieto, 2003; Sleeter, 1996).

Likewise, anti-racist education aims to confront inequality. However, anti-racist education specifically addresses racism, which is commonly considered to be a system of oppression that privileges whites over people of color (Blum, 1999). Through anti-racist education, educators look at those things in school and society that have prevented people of marginalized racial groups from being valued and having equal access to resources and opportunities (Miner, 1994). While anti-racist education builds on the multicultural idea of celebrating cultural difference, it also focuses on issues of justice and power that help students to understand and work against racism, prejudice, and oppression. Students explore how personal prejudices are formed, how they affect both their own and other communities, and how they are reinforced by societal and institutional structures. In this way, anti-racist education seeks to challenge racism at personal, societal, and institutional levels.

The combined end result desired by multicultural education and anti-racist education is to value difference, ensure equal opportunities, and to work for full participation in our classrooms and society for all group members. This idea is linked with participatory and experiential philosophies of education.

Participatory and Experiential

The terms participation and experience imply that students actively engage in the learning process. Bigelow, et al. (1994) state:

Participatory classrooms require room for student involvement and initiative. Our classrooms also must provoke students to develop their democratic capacities; to question and to challenge; to make real decisions; to collectively solve problems. (p. 4-5)

In a participatory classroom, teachers and students share authority and responsibility regarding decision-making. Additionally, teachers facilitate students' active participation

rather than acting as a dictator (Hartman, 2002). Therefore, participatory education is very closely connected with the concept of experiential learning, which is a process through which the learner engages in dialogic meaning-making experiences with both teachers and peers. John Dewey is perhaps one of the most well-known advocates of such child-centered and active educational processes.

Dewey saw the school as an extension of civil society and thought that classrooms should be organized as democratic communities. However, he rejected the idea that school should be a mere preparation to be a citizen through memorizing rote facts. Instead, he saw schools as places where students learn how to actively engage in collaborative decision-making and self-directed learning that is facilitated by teachers (Dewey, 1944, 2001; Tanner, 1997). Clearly, there is a difference between “instilling democratic ideals” and enacting them through teaching. Chomsky (2000) explains:

Any school that has to impose the teaching of democracy is already suspect. The less democratic schools are, the more they need to teach about democratic ideals. If schools really were democratic, in the sense of providing opportunities for children to experience democracy through practice, they wouldn't feel the need to indoctrinate them with platitudes about democracy. (p. 11)

Thus, a true participatory democracy involves students actively experiencing democratic principals. Participatory democracy brings a sense of community and communal responsibility with it (Macpherson, 1973; Torres, 1998). The role of this form of democracy is an educative one in that children learn to come to their own sense of agency and to respect others. This is also connected to an ethic of care.

Hopeful, Joyful, Kind, and Visionary

Although some might argue that the basis of successful schooling can be measured by test results, others contend that a better aim of schooling should be to teaching “themes of care” because children cannot achieve success without “feeling cared for and learning to care for others” (Noddings, 1995). While caring may appear to be a “warm fuzzy” feeling, in truth it has to do with doing one’s best and playing to the strengths of all children. Noddings (1995) asserts:

Caring implies a continuous search for competence. When we care, we want to do our very best for the objects of our care. To have as our educational goal the production of caring, competent, loving, and lovable people is not anti-intellectual. Rather it represents the full range of human talents. Not all human beings are good at or interested in mathematics, science, or literature. But all humans can be helped to lead lives of deep concern for others, for the natural world and its creatures, and for the preservation of the human-made world. (p. 677)

While Noddings supports the call to include caring in schools, she also asserts that schools are not structured to support the teaching of caring at this point in time. An overemphasis on testing and academic achievement has overshadowed the importance of “teaching children to care” (Noddings, 1992, 1995). However, she asserts that it should be “legitimate” for teachers to spend time developing trust with students, discussing issues and situations that are important for them, and facilitating students’ sensitivity and tendencies to care.

When teachers and students collaboratively create a conscious classroom, children not only children feel cared for, but they also learn that it is important to care for others (Hilliard & Pine, cited in Bigelow, et al., 1994). When teachers see themselves as part of a community, they can structure relationships in their classrooms that encourage equity but are not fixed. They encourage students to value their own and other people’s experiences and demonstrate connectedness with all students (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Children will not share

real thoughts and feelings if they do not feel both psychologically and physically safe.

Providing experiences where children learn to trust and care for one another contributes to the wider possibility of a kind and just society. Of course, caring for others also involves actions and not just feelings.

Activist

Activism is “a doctrine or policy of advocating energetic action” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). While it is not the teacher’s role to encourage children to become members of certain organizations or advocates for particular causes, it is essential for them to encourage students to not just think but to take conscious action about the things they care about. One way to encourage this is by providing examples for a “rainbow of resistance, reflecting the diversity of people from all cultures who acted to make a difference” (Bigelow, et al., 1994). Students should be able to learn about people who resisted oppression even though they may have suffered greatly because of their actions. Students should have the opportunity to learn about people who acted on behalf of themselves and others. Activism in light of a participatory democracy dictates that children explore issues and come to their own solutions in collaboration with others. It is not up to the teacher to tell the child what must be done, but for the individual and the group as a whole to come to what is needed.

Academically Rigorous

Social justice teachers aim to help children not achieve success in their classroom but also to successfully navigate the wider world. Of course, children need to pass tests in order to be “successful,” but they must learn other skills as well. In other words, “they should not

just learn to change the world but also to maneuver in the world that exists” (Bigelow, et. al, 1994). This means they should expect more from their teachers, and their teachers should expect more of them. Thus, social justice educators provide challenging learning experiences that push children to work hard, learn much, and to transform as learners. While many educators declare “all children can learn” few actually provide meaningful experiences that meet diverse learners’ skills and interests (Delpit, 1994, 1995). One way to provide instruction that meets children is by putting in the effort to get to know children, their family life, and their personal background. These actions relate to being culturally sensitive.

Culturally Sensitive

Our public school student population is growing ever more diverse while our teaching pool is remaining relatively mono-cultural (Hope-King, 2001). Eighty percent of our K-12 teaching force is Caucasian and female. By the year 2040, students of color will be the majority in schools, but our teaching force will remain primarily white, middle-class, and female. This “demographic imperative” requires us to recruit teachers who are aware of social issues and are willing to make schools places where all children can succeed (Banks, 1997). Delpit (1994) asserts, “When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are” (p. 132).

This requires that teachers admit that they “don’t know it all” and are open to learning from parents and children (Bigelow, et al., 1994). When teachers are courageous enough to solicit the insights of diverse children, parents, and colleagues, they stand to learn a great deal (Delpit cited in Bigelow, 1994). In her book *White Teacher*, Vivian Gussin Paley shares

some examples of how this worked in her classroom. Paley met with parents and colleagues of color to discuss their ideas on culture and the needs of students. Delpit (1994) relates that Mrs. Hawkins, an African American mother, told Paley, “My children are black. They know they’re black, and we want it recognized. It’s a comfortable natural difference. At least it could be so, if you teachers learned to value differences more. What you value, you talk about” (p. 130). Mrs. Hawkins’ statement highlights how damaging “color-blindness” can be. When teachers ignore difference, in essence they are saying that it is “bad.” Difference is often actively denied in classrooms even when teachers have the best intentions.

Being culturally sensitive is closely connected to teaching in “culturally relevant ways.” Expectations have a deep impact on student successes and failures. A student’s ethnic background and poverty are often cited as reasons for poor performance in school. Culturally relevant teaching encourages teachers to capitalize on student’s individual, group, language, and cultural differences.

Teachers who are effectively engaged in culturally relevant teaching can be recognized by three things--how they define knowledge in their classroom, how they view themselves and their students, and how they facilitate relationships (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999).

Ladson-Billings (1994) outlined the habits and behaviors of culturally relevant teachers:

- 1) Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others. They see their teaching as an art rather than as a technical skill. They believe that all of their students can succeed rather than that failure is inevitable for some. They see themselves as part of the community and they see teaching as giving back to the community. They help students make connections between their local, national, radical, cultural, and global identities.

- 2) Such teachers can also be identified by the ways in which they structure social interactions. Their relationships with students are fluid and equitable and extend beyond the classroom. They demonstrate connectedness with all of their students and encourage the same connectedness between the students. They encourage a community of learners; they encourage students to learn collaboratively.
- 3) Finally, such teachers are identified by their notions of knowledge: They believe that knowledge is continuously re-created, recycled, and shared by teachers and students alike. They view the content of curriculum critically and are passionate about it. Rather than expecting students to demonstrate prior knowledge and skills they help students develop that knowledge by building bridges and scaffolding for learning. (p. 25)

Ladson-Billings' parameters of culturally relevant teaching overlap and intersect with notions of teaching for social justice, also referred to as activist teaching throughout this study. They will be revisited in the cross-case analysis in the section on classroom practice. They also heavily influence my conception of activist teachers.

Activist Teachers

Activist identity and actions have historically been interconnected. Although they manifest in different ways, the impulses came from a deep commitment to improve the conditions of oppressed people. For an activist teacher, identity, intention, and practice are deeply linked. Who they are is not separate from what they do. This is reflected in how they define knowledge in the classroom, view themselves and students, and facilitate relationships.

Defining Knowledge in the Classroom

Activist teachers view knowledge as in process and as being co-created with students. Knowledge should be shared and reflected upon (Dewey, 1990; Freire, 1970, 2000; Ladson-

Billings, 1994). The content of curriculum emerges from students' interests, culture, and learning needs. Teachers build skills and capacities by supporting their student in creating bridges between themselves and local, cultural, national, local, and global identities. Activist teachers help children to critique society and themselves so that equity and power issues are explicit (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992). Likewise, activist teachers understand that knowledge is not static. It is co-created in collaboration with students and emerges out of the interests and needs of individuals and the class.

A View of Self and Students

Activist teachers believe that all of their students can succeed. They refute the idea that failure is inevitable for some. They believe that all children deserve and are capable of higher level classes. They also believe that all people have the ability to shape their own lives (Shor, 1992; Shor & Freire, 1987). Such teachers recognize that all children can learn and deserve the opportunity to grow and thrive (Dewey, 1990). The cultural and language resources that children bring with them to school are affirmed and integrated into the curriculum. Curriculum is shaped by student's identities and individual learning needs.

Facilitating Relationships

Activist teachers see themselves as part of a community and strive to create communities within their classrooms. They structure relationships in their classrooms that encourage equity but are not fixed. They encourage students to value their own and other people's experience and demonstrate connectedness with all students (Ladson-Billings,

1994). Activist teachers engage in dialogue instead of “teacher talk” in that they co-create knowledge with students rather than act as authoritarian dictators (Shor, 1992).

Activist teachers’ view of relationship extends to parents and families (Delpit, 1994; Paley, 2000). They see families as allies. Parents are integrally connected to their children. Children need to feel connected to both their parents and teacher. When children feel that teachers and parents feel connected and collaborative, children feel supported. This represents “an ethic of care” where teachers and administrators don’t assume what parents and children need but instead engage in a dialogue about their needs (Noddings, 1995; Oakes & Lipton, 2003). While these ideals provide for meaningful relationships, they also complicate the role of activist teachers in schools.

Tensions and Contradictions of Activist Teaching

Cochran-Smith (2004) said that teachers who “work against the grain” are rare in schools. Their work is complex and difficult. These teachers not only struggle with society but also with their own doubts. While teaching is a potentially rewarding and challenging task, teaching for social justice (“teaching against the grain”) can be even more challenging and difficult to enact (Ayers, 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004). Thus, it is important for us to understand the successes, failures, struggles, and triumphs of activist teachers.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework is founded on the idea that activist teachers are uniquely positioned to work for social justice through their relationships and experiences in schools. Such teachers can serve as a rich resource for research and teacher education (Lund, 2003;

Zeichner, 1991). This framework includes a postmodern feminist view that identity is situated and that in order to understand the identity and practices of activist teachers, we must engage them in dialogue on such topics (Ayers, 1989; Delpit, 1994).

The conception of social justice that this study utilizes is based upon human rights in that the goal of social justice is ensuring 1) equitable access to resources, 2) equal participation in shaping society regardless of identity factors (Dewey, 2001). This is an important undertaking because each person's humanity is bound up in the humanity of others (Noddings, 1995; Sleeter, 1996; Tutu, 2007). The specific model of social justice that study relies on involves: 1) full and equal participation of all groups; 2) equitable distribution of resources; 3) safety; 4) self-determination; and 5) interdependency (Bell, 1997). These elements, primarily based in the sphere of human rights, inform teaching for social justice.

Teaching for social justice is teaching toward what is possible through a dialogic relationship with all stakeholders: children, parents, colleagues, and administrators (Ayers, 1998; Bigelow, et al., 1994; Cochran-Smith, 2004) It is: 1) grounded in the lives of students; 2) critical; 3) multicultural, anti-racist, and pro-justice; 4) participatory and experiential; 5) hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary; 6) activist; 7) academically rigorous; 8) culturally sensitive; and 9) concerned with issues beyond the classroom walls (Bigelow, et al., 1994, p. 4-5). These elements gave me insight into how to begin to conceptualize what teaching for justice entails

In the next chapter, I describe the methods that I utilized to collect and record the teacher-participants' narratives. Additionally, I describe data analysis and the resulting case studies.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative Theoretical Framework

Research studies are framed by research epistemologies and the researcher's own world view; therefore it is important for researchers to make both of these frameworks explicit in their work (Hatt, 2004). As Glesne (1999) states, "The research methods you choose say something about your view of what qualifies as valuable knowledge and on your perspective of reality" (p. 4). I see myself as "a living, contradictory, vulnerable, evolving multiple self who speaks in a partial, subjective, culture bound voice" (Foley, 2002). I believe that knowledge produced through research is created in a particular time and place and is also influenced through the identities of participants and the researcher herself (Brown, 2004; Charmaz, 1990, 2000; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996, Eaker, 1999; 2001; Hatt, 2004). Therefore, I ground this study in constructivist principles that are based on the idea that reality is socially constructed (Bruner, 1986; Dewey, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962). I also draw on postmodern feminist methodology in that I aim to foster "non-hierarchical, non-manipulative research relationships" (Cotterill, 1992). This view resulted in a "participatory model" of research which involves ensuring that the research process is interactive (Cotterill, 1992; Reinharz, 1983). While I served as the primary research instrument, both data collection and analysis were based on a process of collaboration between teacher-participants and me (Charmaz, 1990; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1996, 2001).

This research focuses on the lived experiences of elementary teachers who express a commitment to social justice (also referred to as “activist teachers” in this body of work). This study is aimed at understanding how these teachers perceive, interpret, and establish their social justice framework and how that framework influences their classroom practice. This research also uncovers aspects of how the teacher-participants support and sustain themselves as educators who are teaching for social justice.

My particular methodology blends several methods. These are Ayer’s (1989) method of biographical inquiry and Seidman’s three-part interview process. I also draw on emancipatory action research (Lather, 1986) and compositional studies (Weis & Fine, 2004). Ayers (1989) created a model of inquiry with pre-school teachers that he named “co-biography” in that he and the teacher-participants in his study co-constructed “life-narratives” using ethnographic methods that emerged as portraits of the teacher-participants themselves. Seidman (1998) suggests a three-part interviewing process is referred to extensively in the section on interviewing. Lather (1991) offers insights into how to engage in research that does not sublate participants. I elaborate on this in the sections on working collaboratively with participants and data analysis. Weis and Fine (2004) engage in “quasi-life histories” in that they conduct multiple in-depth interviews and seek out insider knowledge. Their book *Working Method: Research and Social Justice* (2004), explores the possibilities, strengths, and weaknesses of participatory action research. I utilize elements of these designs in this study. As stated earlier, all of these methods could be considered constructivist and feminist in that they contribute to a research process that is non-hierarchical and results in the co-construction of knowledge. Therefore, the teacher-

participants in this study are not just “subjects,” but could be considered co-researchers or co-creators of the study.

Teacher-Participants

Originally, I assumed that I would create a set of selection criteria and then would solicit recommendations from professors, teachers, and administrators. However, as I was creating my elaborate and far too complicated plan, Ashley Weston, a former student, mentioned a critical reflection group that she and three other teachers were planning. Their primary goal was to collaboratively explore issues of race, class, and gender in regard to their teaching practice.

Ashley and I discussed her potential group and my proposed project. We quickly realized that our goals were similar and that we could combine our efforts to create a potentially more meaningful project. Ashley consulted with the other teachers, Elizabeth, Jane, and Rachel, who agreed to meet with me to discuss the possibility of my joining them. After our first meeting, they each agreed that I could participate in the group and that they would serve as teacher-participants in my dissertation work. Thus, the teacher-participants in essence were self-selected into my study. While the teacher-participants were all white, middle-class, and female, they did vary in teaching assignments and years of experience. Please see the following table:

TABLE 1. Participant Teaching Experience

Name	Grade	Years of Experience
Ashley	1st	0 years
Elizabeth	5th	5 years
Jane	Exceptional Children 1 st -5 th	7 years
Rachel	2nd	11 years

All four of the teacher-participants are public school elementary level teachers and have been teaching in the same diverse urban district in the Southeastern United States. Rachel is teaching in a large neighborhood school. Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane are teaching in the same urban, arts and humanities, magnet, public school.

Data Collection

Data for this study was collected through two primary means: 1) weekly participation in the Critical Friends' Group, a reflective study group; and 2) a series of three in-depth interviews with each participant. The following section describes both of these in detail. The narratives generated through the interviews provided the primary data source for this study. I used the data generated through the Critical Friends' Group process as a means to triangulate the primary data source and to support and inform data analysis. Additionally, while I had the opportunity to extensively observe all of the teacher-participants' teaching—with the exception of Rachel who thinks that outside observers distract her students—I did not use classroom observation as a primary data source but as an additional means of triangulating the data.

I chose to approach the data this way for several reasons. First, the large amount of data generated by both processes resulted in too much information to contain in one study. Second, the interview data was more specifically focused on the research questions. Third, observations can often be deceptive unless one conducts several observations over time and has the opportunity to consult with teachers on their interpretations of the events observed. Finally, using the Critical Friends' Group data as a the secondary data source enabled me to actively participate in the Critical Friends' Group without being overly distracted by trying to record, capture, and analyze data during group meetings. While I did not overly rely on the Critical Friends' Group narratives, I did find my participation in this group enabled the teacher-participants and I to have a much more personal and rich exchange. It also helped me to understand how vital such groups are in supporting activist teachers' efforts to transform their practice and to sustain themselves in their very challenging work.

Critical Friends' Group

The group, we collectively referred to as the "Critical Friends' Group," was initially conceived of by Ashley. During the summer before her first year of teaching, Ashley began reading research on race, class, gender, and teaching. In particular, Ashley was interested in how she (a white, middle-class, female teacher) could meet the needs of her new class, which was very diverse in terms of race and class. It became evident to Ashley that she would benefit from working with other teachers who were interested in the same issues. She was inspired by Nieto (1999), who wrote "What is needed is not simply peers who support one another...but also peers who debate, critique, and challenge one another to go beyond their current ideas and practices. Developing a community of critical friends is one more step in

the journey of transformation” (p. 160). After reading this brief passage, Ashley quickly realized that she needed to establish a group that not only supported her work, but who could also potentially push her to critically reflect on her own ideas and teaching practice.

Ashley consulted with several professors in the School of Education from which she recently graduated. One of these professors was Don Richmond, head of the Elementary Education Program, who recommended that she speak with several people, including two educators of color who were former teachers and current graduate students and one white teacher whom he considered to be an activist and master teacher. Ashley did meet with the two educators of color, one African-American and one Latina. They shared their experiences as teachers and students and insights into culturally relevant pedagogy. Their ideas will be shared in the section on how Ashley prepared for her first year of teaching. First, we will return to the story of the founding of the Critical Friends’ Group.

Ashley and Rachel met and decided that they would like to meet and study together. They also thought that it would be helpful to solicit additional participants. They invited Elizabeth and Jane, both of whom were teaching at the school where Ashley did her student teaching and would be teaching in the coming school year. Ashley invited me to join the group shortly after Elizabeth and Jane committed to participating in the group.

Our first meeting was in a coffee shop in the city where all four teacher-participants live and work. Jane, Ashley, and Elizabeth all greeted me warmly and introduced me to Rachel. We settled our seats and began sharing why we were interested in joining the group. Ashley shared that she was looking for support during her first year of teaching. Rachel shared that she and Ashley also agreed that they would like to study and work with other committed teachers to learn about how race, class, and gender relate to teaching. Jennifer

shared that she first met Rachel when they were both in the same Masters' program three years prior to our meeting, and she was eager to study with her again. Elizabeth said that she wanted to learn more about social justice and teaching. I also shared my interest in participating, which was mostly consistent with the primary goals of the group.

The primary goals of the reflection group were to: 1) challenge each other; 2) write reflectively; 3) question ourselves and one another critically yet supportively; and 4) develop abilities to work with our students. The group's goals were in-line with my own with one exception: I had the additional aim of focusing my research on both the topics we would jointly explore and the teachers themselves. I was explicit that I wanted to actively participate in the group and to conduct a research study based upon the participants and their work. Each of the four teachers agreed to this arrangement.

We developed a structure for meeting and collaboratively reflecting. The process involved the following steps: 1) journal writing; 2) reading journal entries; 3) critical questioning; 4) discussing relevant topics; and 5) determining the writing assignment for the next session. The key element was the process of critical questioning. The critical questions were aimed at keeping the focus on one person at a time. We enforced a strict rule to not make suggestions, personal comments, or talk about ourselves when it was another participant's turn. This helped us to avoid making judgments or interrupting. We modified the process to include sharing what we found to be positive after someone finished reading their journal entry. Such positive comments included: "I liked the way you described your student and his efforts to learn," and "I appreciate how courageous you were about seeing your own preconceived ideas about that parent." Rachel also suggested a hand signal that we could use when someone read something that another person could relate to. This helped

individuals in the group to avoid interrupting the reader and for each participant to feel mutual support.

While we credit Nieto as one of the primary inspirations for setting the mission and naming the group, The Coalition of Essential Schools has also created a reflection program called the Critical Friends. Although their philosophy and reflection process is almost exactly the same, the reflection group members described here were unaware of their work until six months after we had started to meet and collaboratively reflect together. While the Coalition's established set of practices could prove useful for teachers and educational practitioners, this project is not based upon their work. However, we did learn a great deal through our shared experiences.

Ashley (2007) reflects:

Ultimately, I learned that I have so much to learn and that teaching well will always be a challenge and a continual process of growth, development, frustration, and change. Being around teachers with more experience and comfort in the classroom, I was validated in my questions and worries and felt reassured as excellent teachers questioned themselves and expressed their insecurities and challenges.

Clearly Ashley's participation in this group was profound and meaningful. This was true for all five of us. I will elaborate on these experiences in the individual case studies. My participation in the Critical Friends' Group was also useful and profound. It was particularly beneficial for me because I was given the opportunity to learn directly from practicing teachers. This experience confirmed my belief in the power and possibility of academic and practitioner collaborations. While my participation in the Critical Friends' Group greatly informed this study, the interviews served as the primary data source.

Interviews

The primary form of data collection involved interviewing, which was dialogic in nature. There were multiple interviews that allowed for disclosure on the part of the researcher and participant (Lather 1986; Weis & Fine, 2004). Weis and Fine (2004) encourage researchers to share aspects of their life and identity with participants in order to create a space for dialogue and trust. Multiple interviews encourage a positive relationship between participant and researcher. The implications for this type of interviewing process are many. It bears asking the question: How do we explore the lives of others without imposing our own reality on them? The answer to this is complex. It requires that we honor “insider knowledge,” which can only be known by people who have experienced a certain event or environment firsthand (Weis & Fine, 2004). Participants have understandings of social networks, discourse, codes of behavior, expectations of other insiders, and systems in place that researchers cannot fully comprehend without their input. By opening a space for insider knowledge we do several things: we honor the participant’s position as an expert, encourage dialectical theory building with them, provide for member checks (triangulation that supports validity), and encourage catalytic validity (Lather, 1986). Catalytic validity is reached when a researcher values participant voice to the point that they are willing to include contradictory stories, even those stories that may contradict the researcher’s perceptions and beliefs. In this way, insights from the researcher no longer dominate the study but are woven together with those of participants’ so that both parties can serve as co-constructors of knowledge that arises.

In order to facilitate this in-depth process, I followed a three-interview series (Seidman, 1998). Each interview lasted approximately one hour to ninety minutes, depending

upon the participant's availability. This series enabled the teacher-participants and me to collaboratively explore teacher-participant experiences and to place those experiences into the context of the study. The three steps involved focusing on: 1) life history, which helped to identify the context of participants' experience; 2) the details of their experience, which enabled participants to reconstruct their experiences in light of the research topic; and 3) the meaning that each narrative held for each participant, which encouraged participants to reflect on the meaning that particular experiences held for them (Seidman, 1998).

The first interview served several purposes. It enabled the participants and me to explore their experience in context. The focus of this interview was the teacher-participants' life history in light of the topic of teaching for social justice (Seidman, 1998). In the first interview, participants were asked to reconstruct their early experiences at home, in school, at work, with friends, and in their communities. Because one focus of this study was their experiences as teachers with an expressed commitment to social justice, I emphasized what led them to choose teaching as a career and how they came to their own social justice framework. In other words, the primary inquiry was: How did participants come to be teachers with a social justice worldview? It also involved asking teachers how they describe their own social justice framework and how they self-identify in relation to that framework.

The purpose of the second interview was to give focused attention to the concrete details of the participants' experiences in relation to the topic of teaching for social justice (Seidman, 1998). During the second interview, I asked the teacher-participants to expand on their social justice framework and discuss how they think that their worldview as an "activist teacher" or a "teacher for social justice" affects their classroom practice. I was also interested in discovering actual examples of how teacher-participants implement their ideas in their

own classrooms. Additionally, I asked the teacher-participants to share how, if at all, their social justice worldview affected their experiences in schools. This interview also gave insights into how each teacher supports and sustains her work. The primary inquiry for the second interview was: How, if at all, does a social justice worldview affect classroom practice and experience?

The third interview enabled participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience. Making meaning involves exploring intellectual and emotional connections between the participant's work and life. The focus was how teacher-participants make meaning of the experiences discussed throughout the research process. While the third step was focused on the participants making meaning, they were in essence making meaning throughout the three interviews. This meaning-making process entailed that they: 1) looked at the factors that brought them to a career in teaching and a social justice framework; 2) explored how this viewpoint influenced their classroom practice and identity both in school and out; and 3) reflected on making meaning of their experiences and actions. It is important to note that while I was guiding the interview process as the researcher, I made every effort to create a safe environment and to avoid imposing my own opinions on them (Cotterill, 1992; Lather, 1986; Margulies, 1989; Reinhartz, 1983). Our shared work resulted in a collaborative process of discovery.

Like the pre-school teachers in Ayers' study, the teacher-participants in my study gained insight through our collaboration. Ayers (1989) relates:

With the telling of each story, these teachers became more consciously writers of their own script and readers of their own lives. This process (led) to an awareness of aspects of their own practices that had been obscure or unavailable to them before. (p. 8)

The telling of one's stories to a receptive listener can help teachers to learn more about their own ideas and their teaching practice. Likewise, by working with teacher-participants I not only learned about how elementary teachers view social justice and how to work toward that in actual classrooms, but also about how to encourage pre-service teachers to consider these issues as well. Of course, working collaboratively with participants requires that the researcher be aware of power dynamics and how to deal respectfully as well as effectively with issues that surround these dynamics. The following section outlines some of the issues that arose through working collaboratively with participants.

Working Collaboratively with Participants

There are issues of power in any research relationship. Clearly, there are issues that needed to be considered for this project. Initially, I became interested in participating in the Critical Friends' Group for three primary reasons: 1) to encourage collaborative endeavors between researchers and teachers; 2) to deepen my understanding of social justice issues in classrooms; and 3) to support my dissertation research. My role as participant was layered by my roles as graduate student and former teacher. While I touch on my positionality here, I elaborate on this in Appendix A. Because this research includes an element of autobiography, I see that it is important for me to be explicit about my own. Additionally, because I served as the primary research instrument, making decisions at every juncture that ultimately influenced the final product, I see that it is important for me to be explicit about my own frame of reference (Ayers, 1989). In this section, I simply relate elements of my positionality that I think are most closely connected to my relationship with the teacher-participants. Two of the

most obvious connections are my roles as former elementary teacher and academic with a commitment to honoring teachers' voices.

Having served as a classroom teacher myself, I have been somewhat disappointed to see that teachers are often talked about but not included in academic conversations on teaching, diversity, and social justice. Thus, I thought that focusing this project on the life stories and teaching practices of activist teachers was one move I could make toward including teachers' voices in academic research. However, I did have to reflect on my relationships with each of the teachers and the group as a whole. Although I will not speculate here on each of the teacher participants' feelings on the matter of my joining their group, I will mention the reactions I observed and the shifts that I perceived over time.

Ashley and I first met three years before the Critical Friends' Group was formed when I served as an instructor in a course that she was enrolled in titled "Culture, Society, and Teaching." Ashley clearly stood out among her peers as a person who not only cared about children, but was also interested in understanding wider issues of schooling in relation to social justice issues. After Ashley completed the course, she adopted me as an informal mentor. She e-mailed me frequently asking for advice and information. We met several times during her senior year to discuss her growing doubts about becoming a teacher. Although some of her concerns were typical (such as money and professional respect), most revolved around the fact that Ashley wasn't sure if "she could make a difference being a teacher." She also realized that this worry was intensified by a significant lack of like-minded teachers. You will learn more about Ashley and her road to teaching in her case study. As has been discussed, she did choose teaching and created the Critical Friends' Group to support her work.

Our relationship has evolved as well. We recently presented our shared work at the Annual American Education Research Association, where Ashley shared that “If Beth wasn’t committed to working towards the same ideals and to working on herself to reach them, we wouldn’t have trusted her enough to work with her in this way.” I was honored by Ashley’s comment and hope that both our friendship and our collaborations will continue.

Elizabeth also expressed eagerness for me to join the group because we had established a friendly rapport when I supervised two university students who were placed in her class two years before. I was equally enthusiastic about working with her again. However, I was also concerned that my friendship with Elizabeth would be unequal if I was doing all the taking and she was doing all the giving. We discussed my concerns and Elizabeth pointed out that if she didn’t want to work with me, she would have not committed to doing so. She assured me that she was benefiting from the process as well. Our shared work proved to be useful in many ways. For example, Elizabeth was able to use elements of her case study to support her application for National Boards. She relates “I didn’t realize the specific ways that I met the criteria for boards.” This was an unexpected benefit of the study. I appreciated the opportunity to help Elizabeth in this way.

At our first meeting, Rachel seemed open but cautious. Later she expressed a wariness and frustration with academics. She related that her mother, a former academic, and several other professors had disappointed her by their intellectualism and false sense of pride. She resented the sense of entitlement, opposition, and aggressiveness that she had experienced from some academics. While I didn’t feel that she saw me in this light, I did believe that as time progressed, Rachel became more comfortable with me. She seemed to be

more open and did invite the other teacher-participants and me to two social gatherings that she hosted.

Initially, Jane said that she thought that I “validated” the group because of my role as an academic. Conversely, I thought that the teachers validated my work because of their intentions and their role as practicing teachers in the field. I was also concerned that Jane’s feeling of validation by having me, an “academic” in the group, would later serve to disappoint her and potentially to make her feel that I was taking advantage of her. Later, Jane told me that she viewed me more as a peer than as an “academic.” She said that while she originally saw me as a “researcher,” she now considered me as describes “one of us” (meaning a member of the writing group and a fellow educator).

The more time that I spent with the teacher-participants, the more I began to seriously consider going back into the classroom. Some researchers call this “going native,” meaning that the more a researcher engages with participants the more they begin to take on the culture and belief systems of the group. This was an interesting conundrum for me. As I progressed in the research process, growing ever closer to the attainment of my advanced degree, I became less interested in pursuing a career in academia. I found the teachers’ ideas and commitments to be inspiring me toward stepping back from the classroom and away from university career. I realized that I had found teachers who were enacting teaching the way that I had always aspired toward. I engaged in frank discussions with them about the pros and cons of such a decision. Eventually, I began to understand that while classroom teaching is indeed a powerful vocation, it could be equally powerful for me to work toward including teacher voice in research on teacher education and to share these insights with pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators. The key event that cemented my

commitment to teacher education was being assigned as a student teaching supervisor for eight pre-service teachers at the school where Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane were working. Incidentally, one of my student teachers was placed with Elizabeth and one with Jane. Working with Jane and Elizabeth in this capacity helped me to learn how important it is for student teaching supervisors to support such teachers in their mentoring process with new teachers.

Being at the school where Ashley, Jane, and Elizabeth worked also enabled me to meet frequently with Ashley. As a result, Ashley and I were able to collaborate on two conference presentations and to discuss aspects of her pedagogy. It also enabled me to coordinate with Ashley to present her ideas on preparing for the first year of teaching to my student teachers. Although I would have liked to work this closely with Rachel, I didn't have the opportunity to do so because of our busy schedules and lack of proximity. Clearly, this shows how vital it is for researchers and teacher educators to spend time working closely with teachers while at the same time we also must respect their busy schedules. I was very fortunate to work so closely with the teacher-participants in a variety of capacities.

Researcher's Role

Because all four of the teachers attended the same university where I was studying at the time of data collection, there was a sense of empathy and support from the group. All four expressed a desire to help me as a student because they understood the role of a student at a large research-based university. My role as a teacher also encouraged a sense of commonality, as I could relate to the teacher-participants and had many experiences in common. Although each of these identity factors had differing influences on our relationship,

I found that our growing sense of familiarity served to support our shared work. Two participants told me that our interviews supported their reflective process. Specifically, Jane mentioned at the end of our first interview that she didn't realize how her working class background affected her views of teaching until we spoke about that in our interview. Ashley told me at the end of our second interview that each time we met, she thought of more things to write about and reflect upon. I am still unsure how, if at all, Rachel might have benefited from working with me. I do hope to have that conversation with her. I do know that Rachel, Jane, Ashley, and Elizabeth taught me a great deal, and I am hopeful that I also supported their learning process and their teaching practices. Ultimately, our work represented a collaborative and reciprocal effort.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was ongoing and done in collaboration with my participants. Theory emerged out of their ideas and opinions. While I needed to create a theoretical framework through which to frame the study, I was eager to learn how actual teachers' frameworks compared to my own. While participants did discuss ideas and theories with me, we also collaboratively came to new understanding. The process described pertains mainly to interview data. As stated in the section on data collection, the interview data served as the primary data source. Likewise, the resulting case studies are mainly based upon the data generated by the interviewing and member checking process. The insights I gained through my participation in the Critical Friends' Group and through observing Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane teach served to triangulate the data and to flesh out my background knowledge of each.

Technical Aspects of Methodology

Note-taking

I did not record the initial Critical Friends writing group because I did not want to overly influence the nature of the conversations. However, after several sessions Jane said that she wished that we were recording each of the sessions so that she could review our conversations. I offered to record the sessions and share any transcripts that I completed. Rachel said, “I wish we thought of that sooner.” Thus, I recorded the last five sessions of the Critical Friends’ Group.

I digitally recorded each interview and took notes throughout. While I often found it helpful to take extensive notes, it also was a bit distracting. I mainly used my notes as an outline to help me keep track of the interview and recording. I jotted down important quotations. I also wrote my notes in a notebook leaving the opposite page blank, allowing me to write notes, reflections, and comments on the second page for use in data analysis.

The Interview Log

Data analysis began during the interview process. First, I attempted to gain a sense of the data as a whole (Hatch, 2002). Interpretations that arose gave insight into the interpretation of data. I returned to my data many times during analysis in order to make meaning of my data. Initially, I listened to the interviews directly after each meeting. As I listened to the interviews, I tried to identify themes that emerged throughout or relevant quotes that I revisited with participants.

When I returned from my interviews, I used my notes and recordings to create an interview log. Throughout this log, I paraphrased the interviews and transcribed significant

quotations verbatim enabling me to get a sense of how the conversation unfolded. Second, I was able to identify relevant quotations and themes. Paraphrasing interviews and identifying themes was the first step into making meaning of the data. This process enabled me to ascertain meaning rather than getting bogged down in the data itself.

Within the log, I included my own thoughts while listening to the audiotape or reviewing verbatim quotations. I typed these in italics, which helped me to identify my own thoughts and assumptions. I compared these thoughts with the actual narratives of teachers. I decided to create an interview log rather than to use verbatim reports for several reasons. First, logs enabled me to easily keep track of relevant data. Another main benefit of this method was time effectiveness. Using full transcripts is time consuming for participants and researchers alike. Using an interview log enabled participants to review relevant interview data without having to read extensive transcripts. It also allowed me to focus on relevant information and to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

Member Checking

I shared my notes, comments, and log entries with participants to get their feedback, which enabled us both to prepare for subsequent interviews. Because these were short and concise, this simple log helped teacher-participants to review our conversations and my reactions in a timely and effective manner. In this way I could respect their busy schedules while honoring their opinions and input. This method also enabled teachers to share themes that they saw as emerging from the interviews. Thus, the teachers were co-researchers in the study rather than subjects to be studied. Lather (1991) refers to this dynamic as “dialectical practice.” She explains that dialectical practice “invites reflexivity and critique, both of which guard against imposition and reification on the part of the researcher” (p. 59).

Memos

As I reviewed interview transcripts, logs, and participant comments, I wrote memos that described what each code was about (Hatch, 2002). Memos also helped to tie together different pieces of data and were a powerful tool in helping me make sense of data (Huberman & Miles, 1984). The first step in creating memos entailed re-reading the data and initial research questions. These memos consisted of a topic sentence that discussed themes or insights about the data. I also wrote a brief paragraph that elaborated on this theme, explained its meaning or expanded on why I believe a certain point was relevant. I then organized these memos according to themes, how they connected to with one another, and how they related to the topic of teaching for social justice (Hatch, 2002).

Coding

Throughout this process, I developed codes that I wrote on my memos, interview logs, and full transcription of relevant quotes. I also included the interview date and log page numbers to help me stay organized. This helped me to identify how, if at all, my inferences were supported or contradicted by the interview data (Hatch, 2002; Wolcott, 1994). Different qualitative researchers identify a varied number of levels of coding (Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For the purposes of this study, I used two primary levels of coding: initial and focused coding (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). In the first phase, initial coding, researchers look for what they can define and discover in the data (Charmaz, 1990). This is where I as researcher became the lens through which analysis was conducted. The lens of my analysis was my personal knowledge and my knowledge of teaching and social justice (Charmaz, 1990; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). While I tried to avoid it, inevitably my personal biases did

come into this process. However, I did work toward identifying and learning about my biases and did my utmost to transform them through this research process.

The second type of coding is called focus coding (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). As data accumulated and codes multiplied, I engaged in a second level of coding. I looked through the data and codes. Some codes occurred at a higher frequency. This required the creation of sub-codes. In addition to this, some codes were too limited, which required collapsing or consolidating of codes. I discussed these codes with the teacher-participants whenever it was possible. For the majority of the time, this process remained solely my responsibility, mainly due to the teachers' busy schedules. The most convenient means for collaborating on the data was through sharing brief summary reports via email and at the beginning of each interview.

Initial Summary Reports

After I completed all three interviews with each of the participants, I wrote a draft summary for each that depicted the data in a way that a reader who has no special training or prior knowledge of the study could understand (Hatch, 2002). I shared draft summaries with my participants. For the most part, I shared each of these reports verbally because the majority of the teacher-participants found this method to be most convenient.

Of course, my participants were not always in agreement with me; I included their interpretations in all levels of analysis and reporting. It is important to note that I did not necessarily eliminate my original interpretations; I did try to document how engaging in this study helped to reveal my own assumptions and where they might have been different from the perceptions of my participants. This also provided the opportunity to reach catalytic validity, which entails presenting contradictory stories to reach a fuller understanding (Lather, 1986). People and their stories do not fit into neat little boxes. The “messiness” of

life should be embraced, not swept under the analytical carpet. This helps us to come to a fuller understanding of an idea or experience.

Case Studies: Themes

As I analyzed the data, four major themes became evident. These were: 1) context, which highlighted autobiographical events, 2) social justice frameworks and self-identification, 3) classroom practice, and 4) sustenance: obstacles and supports to teaching for social justice. Each of the following four case studies is organized around these themes. The case studies are derived primarily from the interview process but are supported by what I learned through my extensive observations of Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane as well as my participation in the Critical Friends' Group. The case studies largely reflect the teacher-participants' own beliefs and understandings of their own inspirations to teach, commitments to social justice, and how they sustained their work. While I did incorporate direct quotes, the majority of the case studies also reflect what each teacher shared with me. Therefore, the cases reflect the first level of analysis, which was based on sorting the data, answering the research questions, and finding other emergent themes—specifically the area of sustenance or supports for and obstacles to activist teaching. A deeper level of analysis resulted in the cross-case analysis as well as the findings and implications sections that directly follow the case studies. The cross-case analysis entailed analyzing for themes within each of the broader areas. The findings and implications resulted from making meaning of the data in light of teacher education and professional development.

CHAPTER 4

RACHEL

It is important that I continue to choose to be in public schools because the kids don't have a choice to be there or not. Especially in struggling public schools, it is important to be there and to continue to ensure that it will be a place of change and a place of hope.
Rachel, 2006

A Portrait of Rachel

As we look around Rachel's classroom, we see only two white faces among her 26 second-grade students. The children are mostly African-American and Latino. Some of their families are large and a few are small. Some of the students are being raised by a single parent, some by their grandmothers, some by same-sex parents, and a few are in foster care. The class is as diverse as the community surrounding this urban neighborhood school. Rachel understands that each child brings their own particular life experiences, cultural contexts, skills, and interests with them to school every day. Rachel builds on their prior knowledge, the contexts of who they are, and the content of what they already know. These aspects of Rachel's practice will be described extensively in the section on classroom practice.

As you listen to the stories of her life, you will hear that Rachel has been sensitive to injustices around her, and she has carefully crafted her life to work toward equity and justice. In her over thirteen years of serving as an elementary school teacher, she has dedicated herself to that goal. While Rachel has been particularly focused on issues of

race and class, her as a teacher has been aimed at ensuring the success of all her students and at working toward incremental societal change.

Context

Personal History

Rachel is a sensitive person. She describes herself as someone whose “emotional volume is turned up.” Even as a young child, she was keenly aware that certain people were not treated well based on their race, class, or abilities. An empathetic child, she suffered a great deal when others were mistreated. When she was in elementary school, unjust treatment of her classmates resulted in regular stomachaches.

Outside of school, her mother took her to visit her Head Start clients in rural north Georgia. She visited many “trailers full of poor people.” These visits had a profound effect on Rachel. Her awareness grew regarding the connections between race and class. She understood very early in her life that she had certain privileges that others did not. She became keenly aware that the majority of people who were living in such harsh conditions were of color. She saw that most of the Head Start students suffered from poverty, not from a lack of ability. Rachel began to understand the power of education to transform the plight of children through building on their personal strengths.

As Rachel entered college, she focused on her goals of serving others and of working toward equity. She attended an elite progressive women’s college in the Northeast, where she double majored in psychology and education. She apprenticed with a master pre-school teacher who inspired her to become a teacher. Rachel spent many hours “behind the glass” watching the teacher work with her pre-school students in a loving but firm manner. She

began to see that each child was an individual, and yet the teacher balanced their individual needs while at the same time supporting the welfare of the group. She reflected on social aspects of children's development. She found that social skills and learning to work with others were a key element for success in school. She began to understand the power of possibility in classrooms. She gained both a deep sense of respect for the teaching profession and a deep desire to work with children.

She was impressed by the dean of her college whose eloquent speeches on equity and social justice kindled her interest in working to improve society. She appreciated the dean's social justice framework "as a way to name things" and for giving her a language to articulate these issues. The influence of these two mentors encouraged her to marry her desires to work for justice and to nurture young children. Since that time, Rachel has consistently sought out mentors who could teach her and help her to evolve as a practitioner.

Her teaching career began in a Quaker school in a large Southern city. This job called her back to her Southern roots. While she does not embrace some of the ways that Quakers in history have treated minorities, she does appreciate the Quaker ideals of honoring the sacred in each individual. This value is evident in her teaching philosophy, which will be discussed in the section describing Rachel's classroom practice. This value also was at the heart of her decision to leave a position in a private school and begin her long commitment to public schooling.

Self-Identification

Although Rachel embraces many activist causes, she does not self-identify as an activist. She explains, "I am very much a part of activist culture and at the same time very critical of

it.” Activism for Rachel is about identifying with certain ideas or certain groups. She says that there is a certain “fashion of activism” that dictates how one should dress, speak, and with whom they should affiliate themselves. In particular, being an activist means being in opposition to something and Rachel clearly states that she is “not a person who is in opposition.” She explains: “I’m a person who very much sees me as connected to all the messiness of everything. I don’t see myself as having an identity that is in opposition. I am very much part of dominant culture and there are things that I don’t like about it but I am a part of it.” Rachel sees herself as part of mainstream culture. Therefore, she is both a product of that culture and understands that her world-view is influenced by mainstream values. However, Rachel also is conscious of the ways in which mainstream culture works against fairness. She works to change this both in herself and through her work in classrooms. Despite the fact that she is connected to mainstream culture, she also is separate from it. She refers to this tension as being “a part of it and apart from it.” Similarly, she sees herself as being a part of the culture of teaching and apart from it as well.

Rachel explains, “Information that is in our culture about activism is about me and it is not. Just like being a teacher, I am a regular teacher and I am different from a regular schoolteacher. When I think about being a schoolteacher, there is sort of this acceptability about being a teacher, like ‘you must be okay if you are a teacher...sort of blessed as doing a good thing in the world.’ It has institutional acceptability.” These statements reveal the complexity of being an activist and a teacher. On some level, most people perceive teachers as being good people. They assume that someone who chooses teaching as a career, particularly in urban diverse school settings, must be a “good” person. For some, teachers are perceived as being moral, noble, and self-sacrificing. She sees herself as a “typical teacher”

and in many ways not like that. Rachel's comments reflect the important idea of "intersectionality," that identity is complex and not fixed (Crenshaw, 1991). Additionally, aspects of identity overlap and influence one another. The complexity of one's identity can't be understood by simply looking at one aspect of that person, for example being a teacher, and assuming that we automatically know all there is to know about that person.

Rachel explains that because she is "very much connected to the messiness of everyday life," she is very much a part of the "status quo." Rachel says, "I don't know how anyone could work in public schools and not contribute to it. In fact, public schools are reproducers of the status quo. Despite the fact that Rachel sees herself as part of the status quo, she still has a vision for justice and has faith that things can become fairer. While her statements may seem contradictory, they reflect her belief that incremental gains can be achieved by working within societal structures. Rachel's choice to work in public schools is linked to this idea.

Social Justice Framework

Rachel's social justice framework is based on several key concepts: 1) the power of public spaces; 2) fairness; 3) an assets-based approach that values incremental change; and 4) a need for new ways of working.

The Power of Public Schools

Rachel believes that it is important for her to work in public schools. It is important because "the kids don't have a choice to be there or not." It is particularly important to choose to work in struggling public schools to ensure that they will be places of change and

places of hope. She believes that one is already part of change if they are there. For Rachel, a public school is a very powerful place because they provide a first-hand view of injustice.

Rachel states:

When I see that children are not getting what they need, I can't really put my resources toward other causes. Because I am in a public school classroom, race and class define what children have access to, and that has a serious impact on what I am attending to. It is not that I don't care that we are bombing Iraq. I do send my emails (to support various political causes), but I feel that I have a very different view of social justice. I care very deeply about children who suffer very much because of big structural issues. Because it is so personal, witnessing their pain, it is very real to me. My world is a world that includes children who don't have coats.

Rachel makes it clear that while she does care about broader social issues such as women's rights and the war in Iraq, she has seen children's suffering first-hand and therefore must focus her efforts to make schools and society more equitable for children. Rachel's primary focus is directly linked to her belief in fairness. For her, fairness links with access to resources and opportunities.

Fairness

Rachel describes fairness both from a societal perspective and how she enacts it in her everyday life. Rachel's concept of fairness doesn't mean everyone is treated exactly the same way. She doesn't believe in prescriptive style justice. This complicates discussions on justice and fairness. It necessitates consideration of every aspect of a particular place and the people living in it. The stories that follow depict Rachel's perception of how this works in a variety of settings.

Rachel described a meeting of the National Coalition of Education Activists where a African-American woman from Alabama asserted at that meeting that while the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was not ideal, it did mandate that "Black children should be

taught.” Many of the other meeting attendees, mostly white and middle class northerners, could not understand this educator’s point of view. Rachel was frustrated by the other attendees’ lack of ability to understand the woman’s perspective.

Rachel also thought that while NCLB did not solve all of her district’s educational problems, the fact that it forced her state’s schools to look at disaggregated data had a profound impact. Before test data was disaggregated low-scoring children, mostly of-color, were masked by typically high scoring white middle class students. We can learn a great deal from this account. We learn that equity and fairness look different, not only for different individuals but also for different groups based on local history, politics, and student demographics. Additionally, this story also encourages us to see that incremental change must not be ignored and that we must think critically about the situations that surround us. When one mentions NCLB to a group of teachers, we often become instantly negative. However, we cannot afford to think of things in absolute terms. It is important to look for the ways that things work as well as the way that they don’t. Rachel encourages us to not only think critically about the structures of schooling, but also to notice how things may be improving so that we can build on them.

Assets-Based Approach

Rachel doesn’t have a sense of grand sweeping change. She doesn’t think that things are all of a sudden going to be different. She envisions more gradual change. She says, “I don’t have this sense that there is going to be a big huge change, I don’t have a sense of a big revolution or that everything is going to be totally different. I have a sense of incremental change.” She explains that she has observed change on two fronts, one of which is the

resources and types of schools that poor children have access to (as opposed to the environments that her mother worked in). The other front is in the increased amount of skills and knowledge that her current students demonstrate. Rachel observes:

I remember as a child that when my mother taught Head Start in north Georgia, I was not able to walk into the centers because people were so poor. I was terrified. The centers were mostly falling down trailers smelling like ammonia. We drove in a little car and my mom did all the staff development. Those were my images of teaching poor children. When I told my mom about my current school and she saw it, she said ‘this is amazing.’ She said you have to know that this wasn’t how the world was when she was teaching second grade in Georgia over 40 years ago.

Rachel sees that change doesn’t always occur in “grand sweeping gestures” but sometimes occurs in small steps. She has also observed significant gains in students’ capabilities.

Rachel says, “I have been working at the same urban elementary school for the last ten years. I see kids knowing more, I see things getting better, and I see our standards moving up.” Rachel’s assets-based view encourages educators to build on what is working and to value positive gains. This is counter to Rachel’s critique of having a “critical” view that encourages being overly focused on what is wrong. Rachel says that she does value honest reflection on what isn’t working; conversely, it is also important to pay attention to positive gains that have been made to ensure that we build upon them. Moreover, it is essential that we acknowledge the potential for change.

New Ways of Working

Although Rachel believes that things are getting better, she still believes that there is a need to create new ways of working together. We have to learn from our old ways, but we “have to come up with new ways to make things more just.” While she doesn’t believe in dismantling societal structures entirely, she encourages teachers as social change agents to be

creative. She declares that we need “new revolutionary forms.” Things that were important for change in the past such as teacher unions are not working anymore. New means for bringing people together are needed. We must ask ourselves “what are the things that really include people and help us to create something new?” Rachel is a visionary. She believes that new ways of collaborating are needed to bring about change. She calls us to build on our successes and what we have learned from the past, but we must be careful not to be stuck in old ways of operating. She thinks that there may need to be challenging of the old ways so that we will no longer be clinging to them. She says, “I don’t think it has to necessarily be young people who lead the way to make change, but it will take people who are courageous enough to break open the old forms and be willing and courageous enough to look at things in new ways. I think it builds on what we know from before. It builds on our experiences and knowledge of what went before.” Rachel encourages educators to create new paradigms to enact social change. The Critical Friends’ study group that Rachel and I were a part of represents one example of a new form of collaboration between classroom teachers and educational researchers. Additionally, the reflective process represented a new means to critically reflect as a group. This will be elaborated on in the section on how Rachel sustains herself and her work as a socially just teacher.

Classroom Practice

While Rachel thinks structural change and the ways that policies are enacted are important to consider, her work for justice is enacted in her everyday work with children. She asserts: “I definitely think that what happens in schools is very much related to wider societal and cultural change, but I don’t think about it every day.” Rachel’s primary focus is on the

individuals in her classroom. There she strives to create a safe environment where all children and their families feel welcome. She balances this with attention to each facet of a child's development, which is not limited to intellectual capacities, but also extends to physical, social, and emotional development. It is clear that Rachel chooses to work within existing structures to transform the lives of children. The ideas of working within societal structures, not against them, and changing things from the inside out, are points that should not be missed. The very fact that Rachel chooses to devote herself to work in public schools illustrates her belief that change can and should occur within established societal structures. She believes that "there are things that can happen to make things more fair and school systems are a place that that can happen." Therefore, Rachel's choice to work in a public school affirms her belief that it is a "place of possibility," a place where incremental positive social changes can be made at a very basic level.

Basic Skills

Influenced by Delpit (1994), Rachel says, "My kids need to be successful in school according to dominant culture so that they can have economic sources and choices. They need to be successful in the system that is in place, and I need to give them the tools to do that." For example, Rachel sees that she is becoming extremely effective at teaching reading. She believes that this is important because children do need to know how to read in order to be successful, to have choices, and to have opportunities. Having the specific technical skills to teach reading is important for Rachel. She sees that children in first and second grade need to learn basic skills in order to be successful. This is also connected to critical thinking for Rachel because she wants her students to become great thinkers and questioners. She doesn't

believe that is possible without being able to read. She believes that in order to accomplish this, the children have to know some words and sounds. Lisa, Rachel's co-teacher and colleague, jokes with her another about how "crazy they are for phonics." Rachel says "we are totally nuttier about how to teach phonics well." While she does value understanding connections and understanding what a child is reading, she reports that she also teaches phonics daily. She explains, "I want them to know how to read the words." She knows that if children cannot decode words, they cannot begin to understand what those words mean. She also believes that it is important for children to know how to read so that they will be successful in life.

Encouraging Students to Recognize Their Own Power

Rachel believes that all children can learn and be successful. She helps them to help themselves. She says "I tell my students to realize their power so all the time I am telling them that they are a powerful person in the world and that they have choices. I ask them what they think about that and what are they going to do about that." Rachel's statements reflect her desire for her students to recognize their own agency and personal power. This is certainly counter to messages that the children hear that they are powerless and destined for failure. She says that she achieves this by "valuing where they live, visiting them, getting to know them, and loving the local community." Rachel believes that teachers need to be caring and accepting of children as human beings. This requires that teachers get to know their children, their culture, and their communities. She says, "You don't need any great theory. It takes skills. It takes skills to create an environment where the children can be their great selves and you can be your great self."

Rachel knows that teaching involves a reciprocal relationship. If children and families feel more valued, teachers also will feel valued. She doesn't think that this requires more resources but would necessitate changing where resources are allocated. Some of this has to do with creating curriculum and some has to do with revamping classroom procedures. Rachel declares, "I believe that there are ways to create change on a more basic level that includes more people. Schools can figure out ways that are more creative and innovative ways to use the resources that they already have to make schools more inviting." Making classrooms more welcoming to children and families is one means to do this.

Welcoming Classroom Environment

One way to show children and families that they are valued is by creating a welcoming classroom environment. Rachel believes that there are many ways that schools can be more open and inviting. One way Rachel does this is by seeing parents and families as resources. Rachel knows that because many of her class parents have had negative experiences in schools, she believes that they can help her to understand how she can improve things for their children. Rachel views parents as resources, not burdens. She values their expertise and their advice. She meets with them regularly, and she listens carefully to them about what they want for their children and about what issues they might be concerned.

Working Against White Supremacy Culture

In a recent speech at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Cornel West declared we don't have a racial problem; we have a "white supremacy problem." According

to West, white supremacy is closely related to the fact that whites have been lacking in their interest and ability in accepting the full humanity of blacks (West, 1993). West (1993) states:

To talk about race is to talk about "degraded otherness" (to use the jargon of the day), about those who have been cast as different and denigrated because of their difference—in this case, racial difference. And, of course, to talk about race in America is to talk about poverty and paranoia, is to talk about despair and distrust. Why? Because we know the history of black people in America has as much to do with the degree to which there's always been too many black poor people, too many poor people in general, but—disproportionately speaking—too many black poor people. And the degree to which black people are often viewed as exotic objects—transgressive objects that generate levels of fear and anxiety in the larger population and, hence, distrust—exotic objects that keep reinforced, thick lines of demarcation in place. (p. 34)

West's description of race and oppression are directly linked to the concept of Ubuntu and the UDHR's notion that one person's humanity is inextricably linked to another's. From this perspective, not only is white supremacy damaging to its primary target group, African-Americans and other people of color, but it also dehumanizes Whites who are the so-called beneficiaries of this oppressive dynamic. Similarly, Rachel sees white supremacy culture as being damaging not only to her students of color but also to herself.

Rachel's understanding of white supremacy culture is informed by the work of Andrea Avayzian, Tema Okum, and to DR Works (Dismantling Racism Works), a group of collaborative trainers who facilitate "dismantling racism" workshops. Okum (1999) summarizes elements of white supremacy culture based on the work of Daniel Buford with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. According to Okum (1999) white supremacy culture reinforces perfectionism, a sense of urgency, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, only one right way, paternalism, and either/or thinking (p. 1-5). These dynamics operate in such a way that people become intolerant of others. They are incapable of reaching out to others and to working and relating respectfully with them.

Rachel believes that what white supremacists want to be is elite. She says they have an issue of “aggressive perfectionism,” or a reluctance to tolerate one’s own or other’s mistakes. She says that this is rooted in being unwilling to accept your worthiness. She says “I don’t have to be perfect. I am good enough. I want my students to feel that way and to see that in themselves. They are already good now. I tell them they are good everyday. While they do have to make choices and pay the consequences for those choices, they are still good no matter what.” Rachel knows that children need to be assured that they are good and worthy. In many cases, the children that she works with are told that they are not “good enough” by the media, teachers, and even their peers. She works to change children’s negative views of themselves and sees this as vital to their future happiness and success. She calls this “creating a counter-narrative for children.” Through her reflection on white supremacy culture, Rachel has come to ask herself, “How would you be if you were not trying to prove that you are perfect anymore?” Rachel’s question is a good one for all educators to keep in mind. In a culture where children, teachers, and parents are held to standards that are based on ideas of success through the lens of white supremacy culture, how can we support children, parents, and teachers to strive to do their best without succumbing to those standards? In other words, how do we as educators encourage new ways of viewing success and new ways of building upon an individual’s strengths?

Creating a Counter-Narrative

Rachel knows that many people have a negative view of who her children are and from where they come. She knows that most people do not believe in their power or in the possibility for their future successes. Rachel knows that valuing whom the children are is the

first step in helping them to create a counter-narrative to dominant culture's view of low-income students of color.

Rachel creates curriculum that incorporates writing about what happens outside school (e.g. what a child and their family does in their neighborhood) to what they do in school. She creates curriculum that builds on children's lived experiences. For example, she creates writing experiences that are centered on family traditions or community activities that the children are involved in.

Rachel co-created a curriculum that was called "The Neighborhood Project." This project involved creating curriculum based upon the deep belief in valuing children and where they come from and the belief that children should go to their neighborhoods and learn about them. Given the fact that most teachers don't come from the communities where the children are from, this kind of study becomes even more important. The first activity involves asking the children to draw what they see outside their window. They go home and draw what they can see out their own window or out their own front door. In this way, children's homes and families are valued. They become proud to share facts about where they live and ideas of who they are.

Rachel is a responsive teacher who builds curriculum on who her children are and what they are interested in. She explains, "Tons of inspiration comes from the children. I am big on hearing a connection when kids mention an idea, when they share spontaneously, when they pose a question, or share a problem that they have. I am very responsive in my teaching." For example, Rachel's student Marcella had a difficult time figuring out how to call each child for their appropriate bus. In response to this, Rachel asked the class, "What can we do to help Marcella figure out an interesting problem. How can we sort this data and

help Marcella to call bus riders?” Rachel and the class created a survey and a chart which facilitated a discussion on ways to make the process go more smoothly. Using their lives outside of school as the content helps. Rachel plans lessons that are culturally relevant and interesting to her students. She does this by getting to know each student and building upon their prior knowledge.

Socio-Emotional Development

Rachel believes that she is preparing her students not only to succeed in school but also to succeed in life. Therefore, she also attends to how the children relate to one another in the classroom. For Rachel, social and emotional development in early childhood is about learning how to be friends. “I think if you don’t have friends, your life will suck, if you don’t know how to be good to people, your life will be sad. (The children) have to learn that you have to work that out.” Therefore, Rachel doesn’t only think about the student’s academic needs, but also how they form and maintain healthy relationships. This idea influences Rachel’s classroom management style. She tells her children, “You are not alone here. You are not the only one here.” This means that children must not only think of themselves and their own needs but they also must think about the needs and feelings of their peers. By valuing both the emotional needs of each child and the welfare of the group, Rachel is modeling how to nurture healthy relationships. Rachel sees that honing relational skills is crucial to the children’s continued sense of well-being.

Becoming a Life-Long Learner

There is an interesting parallel between what is being taught in the classroom and what Rachel is striving toward for herself. For example, she stands as a role model of having an ethic of self-care, striving to be a life-long learner, and cultivating healthy relationships in her own life. Just as Rachel believes that she must model healthy behaviors, she also thinks that she has grown personally as a result of her work with children.

Rachel appreciates the fact that she must break down complex ideas into simple components so that the children can understand them. Rachel explains, “There are a lot of things that we do in the classroom that force us to break things down to basic or simple elements, which in turn helps us to understand these things more deeply ourselves. In this way, we grow personally through our teaching.” For example, Rachel and her co-teacher Lisa taught their students about conflict. They read about handling conflict and then tried the techniques with one another and with others so that they could learn what works. Rachel thought that it wasn’t fair to ask kids to do things or try things that she hadn’t tried herself. She believes that it is important to try things out which have helped her in her own development. Another payoff of teaching is to continue to learn about how things work. Rachel says, “It is fun that you get to learn new ways to figure out math problems. It is hard to stay engaged if you have to do things the same old way. It is really deep. I am still interested in first grade, and I have done it twelve times now.” Rachel’s joy in learning new ways of working out problems is but one thing that sustains her in her work as a social justice educator.

Sustenance: Obstacles to and Supports for Teaching for Social Justice

Rachel has sustained herself over twelve years of teaching for social justice. She has learned not only how to protect her energies, but how to replenish in order to continue to work tirelessly for social change in her classroom and school. Rachel knows that it is important for teachers to take care of themselves and to be mindful of their own self-care. She shares:

You have to know yourself. You have to reflect on yourself. You have to give yourself breaks. You have to let yourself make mistakes. You have to be brave. All that stuff you do, you set limits, you go to bed at night, you do what you need to do to be there for kids and make it be joyful, that is your job.

Rachel understands that if she is going to continue to be successful in her work with children, she needs to take care of herself. She must be mindful of her health, both physical and emotional. Therefore, she cannot afford to surround herself with negative people or to engage in activities that are not healthy for her. She shares insights about self-care, study, mentors and role models, administrative support, relationships with colleagues, and the Critical Friends' reflection group. In each section, she describes how each aspect helps her to continue her work as a social justice teacher. This information could prove useful for both in-service and pre-service teachers.

Self-Care and Sense of Personal Fulfillment

Rachel believes that people should do what they enjoy, what they are good at, and what feeds their passion. Building on an image from Palmer (1998), she says:

If you imagine yourself as a tree, you have to think about what are the things that feed your roots and whatever you have to give away in life are your fruits. If you give away the root, that will be damaging to you. It doesn't mean that you become self-absorbed, but you have to think about what you do well and have to do what builds strong roots. I want to be there for my family, my friends, and my community, and that is a lot. So, you think about what fruits can you re-grow and give away and what

things do you need to do to feed your roots. I have a lot of love to give, but I need to re-grow my roots.

Through using Palmer's image of a tree, Rachel helps us to understand that while it is important for teachers to share their energy, they must also replenish it. She has a close friend who is a director of a Head Start program in her community and other friends who work in public health. She observes that the ones who are most successful also consider their own health and sense of well being. Those who did not burned out quickly. She is careful to concentrate her efforts in ways that are both useful to others but also health giving to herself. She enjoys teaching, knows that she is effective at it, and is fed by working.

Rachel explains, "There are so many choices that I have to make because I have to be together for my students, and I can't allow someone to mess with me because I have to be there for kids." These choices have to do with how Rachel organizes her life. She asserts that she has to be careful about who she spends time with. She says, "The people that I am around have to be pretty stable, pretty drama-free, and responsible. They have to be people who do what they say they are going to do. They cannot be really needy because I have something important to do in the world." She has to have relationships with people who are stable and reliable. She is well aware that she has to be with people who don't drain her but who support her "emotional resources." She states, "My emotional resources have to be reserved for my students. I am saving it up because there are kids who need it."

Rachel sees that self-care is intricately linked with caring for her students. "I just have to have this really strong reserve so that I can have emotional control. I feel a strong sense of weightiness and responsibility for what I do. I feel responsible to be constantly reflecting and getting better at it." Rachel knows that if she doesn't take care of herself, she cannot do her

job well. She has to get enough sleep, exercise, and eat well. She says, “I cannot be as patient as I have to be without a full tank.”

Others observe Rachel as a patient and effective practitioner. For example, an assistant at Rachel’s school told her that she was “the most patient” person in the school. The assistant shared that Rachel patiently reminds children, enacts fair consequences, and that she never yells. Rachel says that she can’t escalate because that just makes the children “bonkers.” In order to remain patient and calm, Rachel must attend to her own needs. She also must take time to rest and recreate.

Rachel thinks that it is necessary for teachers to take breaks. She thinks that some teachers might be more effective if they took a year off. However, she believes that the way that the public school system is set up makes it impossible not to become embittered and burned out. There is nothing in place to support sabbaticals, intellectual stimulation, or even simple rest. She says, “I think there needs to be some respect for the fact that if you (teach) really well, it takes a lot: physically and emotionally.” Rachel knows that teaching requires a great deal of energy and focus. It can feed people, but it can also drain them if they don’t consider their emotional and physical health. Moreover, structural supports need to be put in place to support teachers to continue to do their work effectively.

Mentors

Rachel aspires to be with people who inspire her. She mentioned Jocelyn, the math curriculum coordinator for her district. Rachel describes Jocelyn, who is in her fifties, as a woman who continues to study and learn. Jocelyn reads avidly, is patient with teachers, and gets passionately angry about injustice. Rachel appreciates Jocelyn’s support of teachers and

her desire to continue to learn. As mentioned in the section on classroom practice, Rachel has these same characteristics.

Rachel has also appreciated a long relationship with Don Richmond, a professor who taught in her master's degree program at a local university. She says that while the books and articles that she read taught her a great deal, Dr. Richmond's practice of curious interest influenced her most. She said that he respectfully asked her probing questions about her writing. She explained, "Actually being in the M.Ed. and working with Don helped me to reflect insightfully about my teaching. It helped me to think about my own development as an adult and what I thought achievement was." Dr. Richmond continues to work with Rachel as a colleague and a mentor. Rachel values this relationship as a means to learn and grow as a professional.

Administrative Support

Rachel reports that early in her teaching career, she was very involved in whole school change. In her first teaching placement, Rachel had a very supportive principal who was interested in supporting social justice and equity in her school. Rachel trusted this woman very much. She felt supported and inspired by her. Rachel actively worked on diversity initiatives and school-wide committees. She met with her colleagues and studied with them. She actively pursued learning and collaboration. She was considered a leader in the school. She says that she might have been "arrogant in her assumption" that she knew how things should change. It was much "murkier" than she ever thought. She said that she could not have been as involved in such whole school activities if there wasn't a strong leader where collaboration was valued and where the leadership represented diverse groups.

She says, “I am not wise by myself, and I don’t learn anything from just being a star on my own.”

After eight years of working tirelessly for social justice ideals both inside her classroom and throughout her entire school, her trusted principal retired. The new principal is someone that Rachel describes as being difficult for her to trust. Despite the fact that the new principal has offered Rachel leadership roles, she feels that she no longer can extend her efforts to the entire school. At the time of these interviews, Rachel is considering leaving and teaching at another school in the same city. She is frustrated and doesn’t feel a sense of connection with the leadership and the majority of her colleagues. She elaborates, “I have a need to feel passionate about something and feel effective in some ways. Rachel says, “There is so much murkiness when I don’t have a leader who is trusted.”

Rachel says that teachers need to be a part of something that create together, and that they can’t do that if there is not a collaborative tone set by leadership. She says that because of the change in leadership, she is “mainly just hanging out in my class. For a while, I was really heartbroken about it and now I really am not. There are still so many lessons to learn just about what I am doing now.” Rachel is making the best of her current situation. She is focusing her efforts in her own classroom but her comments on administration reveal that leadership has a significant effect upon the efforts of teachers. Effective principals enable teachers to become more effective themselves. Ineffective leaders have damaging effects on classroom teachers. Rachel described a principal who she thought was particularly good. Rachel’s favorite principal, Arlene Zimmerman, is in Rachel’s opinion “so wise and open.” Rachel believes that part of Dr. Zimmerman’s strength is grounded in the fact that while she is a very privileged person, she also gains strength from her deep faith. This principal is

Jewish, and Rachel believes that there is no way the principal could do what she does, work as hard as she does, and be as courageous as she is without some faith to support her. Dr. Zimmerman grew up in England in a very Christian environment. There, she learned what it was like to be different. Rachel appreciates that Dr. Zimmerman draws strength from her faith and empathy from her childhood experiences. Both of these characteristics help Dr. Zimmerman to support teachers and children.

Rachel asserts, “Leadership is really important, and it is important for leaders to find ways to have parents stay connected.” She says that her current school has failed at serving the needs of diverse learners. There is a culture of believing in kid’s deficits at Rachel’s school, and she believes that the staff is filled with “divas that need some shaking up.” Rachel’s view of her current colleagues has disheartened her. She is frustrated by their lack of belief in the children and in their lack of dedication to the children’s success.

Relationships with Colleagues

Rachel has had many positive and supportive relationships with colleagues. For example, she has co-taught with Lisa for over ten years. Lisa is also a self-reflective practitioner who is dedicated to equity and justice. However, Rachel has also been sorely disappointed by some of her colleagues. She says:

So many teachers are so messed up. You have to be a together self-reflective person and you have to have some skills. You have to have yourself in control of the situation because the kids deserve it. There are only about one third of the teachers that I work with who are focused on being healthy and dedicated to supporting children that I work with who are like that. It is something that has to do with the set up of how we are trained and the environment we work in.

Rachel’s comments give us insight into how schools are structured in ways that don’t support teachers who are committed to social justice. They encourage reflection not only on the

structure of schooling but also on how teachers are recruited and trained. Are we recruiting and training pre-service teachers to support children and their needs, or are we setting up potential teachers to fail? There is a definite need for teacher educators to look to practicing teachers who are working effectively with diversity in their classrooms to help us understand how we can support them. Teachers, like Rachel, who are doing this have a great deal to teach student teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators. In particular it is vital to engage student teachers in dialogues about the complexity of teaching while at the same time being careful not to destroy their belief that change is possible. Rachel's narrative provides an example of how one such teacher who is dedicated to justice critically reflects on herself and her teaching practice. While she is well aware of the challenges and potential pitfalls, Rachel is still hopeful.

CHAPTER 5

JANE

I want to inspire children to want to make change and learn that they can make it happen.
Jane, 2006

A Portrait of Jane

If you are looking for Jane and her students, you will not find them in the main school building. You have to go out back to a small trailer behind the school. This year, Jane is teaching the group referred to as E.C. or exceptional children. In other words, Jane is working with children who have been labeled as having special needs such as learning disabilities and behavior challenges. Although her students' grade levels range from first through fifth grade, the majority of them are in third and fourth grade.

As we enter her small, dark-paneled, classroom we see Jane working with three African American boys. They don't even look up as we enter the room. They know that it is time to work. Jane asks Jamal to count a stack of pennies. He whispers under his breath "thirteen, fourteen, fifteen," as he pulls each one carefully toward himself. He looks up at Jane, smiles widely and replies, "Fifteen."

She smiles back at him. "That's right! Now show me in nickels. How many nickels is that?"

Jamal lowers his head and responds, "I don't know."

Jane doesn't settle on that answer because she knows that Jamal is capable of accomplishing this task. She says, "Come on, Jamal. You can do this."

Jamal peers up at her skeptically. After Jamal realizes that she is not giving up, he says, "Alright, let me think....Well, I know that five pennies are a nickel. Right, Teach?"

"What do you think?"

Jamal affirms, "I know it's five."

Jane smiles. "Yes, that's right! Jamal you got it. You don't need me to tell you that."

Jamal smiles and turns back to his pennies. He starts separating the pennies into piles of five and then pulls three nickels out of another the pile. "I've got it! Fifteen pennies is equal to three nickels! I got it!" Jane smiles with the knowledge that Jamal is making steady progress—not only in his math skills, but also in his growing confidence. This is no small thing for him.

This glimpse into Jane's classroom reveals but one example of Jane's belief that children need teachers who don't give up on them. For her, teaching for social justice entails not only caring for children, but also holding them to high standards. Jane learned from a young age that care is relentless because it doesn't just mean being nice to children but also requires that teachers demand excellence. Moreover, Jane feels that responsibility to others is interconnected with demanding excellence. As you hear the details of Jane's life and teaching practice, you will find that these ideas come up again and again. Her life and her work are interconnected with the ideas of helping people and encouraging them to help themselves.

Despite the fact that Jane is a white, middle-class female, her commitments to educational excellence and community responsibility echo the commitments of African-American teachers in pre-desegregation schools (Anderson, 1988; Cecelski, 1994, Leloudis,

1996). This parallel became evident to me through a conversation Dr. Mary Hanley, an African-American Multicultural Educator and one of my committee members. It was also confirmed through my recollection of interviews I had previously conducted with two other African-American women who shared that their experiences in “all-black, neighborhood schools” encouraged them toward excellence and community responsibility. One woman I interviewed, eloquently described this idea when she shared (2004):

When I was in elementary school, we had amazing teachers...teachers who now would be professors and doctors and lawyers, but because they were barred from such professions, we benefited from having them. They instilled in us a sense of pride and the idea that we can and should do well. Along with that sense of pride, we also learned that we should work together to support each other and our community.

Jane, like many pre-desegregation African-American teachers who came before her, refuses to give up on her students. Therefore, she encourages them to own their own responsibility, and instills a sense of responsibility for the community in them. While her inspirations and life circumstances vary greatly from such teachers, her commitments may stem from her experiences growing up in a rural, working class community and as being from a “family of immigrants.”

Context

Jane was born into a working class family in West Virginia. While her family was not well off financially, they were rich in their care for one another. This close-knit family was supported through a network of relatives that stretched back to Jane’s grandparents and great grandparents, some of whom had immigrated from Eastern Europe, Sweden, and Ireland to the coal mining town where Jane’s family lived.

Jane spent many of her childhood afternoons making her “sister attend pretend school in their basement.” She relates that she wanted to be a teacher from a very young age because

she was “good at school and liked helping people learn things.” In third grade, Jane was paired with a learning disabled student named Melissa, who was struggling to learn the alphabet. Jane worked very hard to help Melissa master her letters and sounds. Eventually Melissa could identify letters and many of their corresponding sounds. Jane says, “even though I was only eight, somehow I had this little tiny hand in helping someone.” Jane was so thrilled that she could “help make a change” for Melissa and was inspired to help others through teaching.

Although Jane loved the idea of teaching, her coal miner grandfather cautioned her against it. He explained that each generation of their family “did better than the last.” He thought that if Jane was going to be the first family member to earn a college degree, she should pursue a career that would “make more money than teaching.” Jane knew that coming from a family of immigrants who were not wealthy meant that she should not only aspire to do well for herself but also for her family. This ethic eventually extended not only to her family but to her ideas about supporting those who are less fortunate than her.

When Jane was ten years old, her family moved from West Virginia to an affluent town in North Carolina. She says that her new suburban environment changed her thinking about her life and goals. She began viewing college as essential. All of her new friends were planning to go to college, and therefore she should too. It is important to understand that until she was ten, Jane lived in a working class neighborhood; likewise Jane attended a “working class” school. Few of her friends there aspired to attend college. On the other hand, the majority of her new classmates had parents who were doctors, lawyers, and college professors and therefore viewed attending college as non-negotiable. These two very different settings spurred her to integrate cultural norms from both. Given the fact that her

new friends were all going to college and her grandfather wanted her to “do better,” Jane began to consider what her life should be like.

With her new goal of attending college and her grandfather’s advice in mind, Jane aspired to be an architect. When she was a junior in high school, she took an aptitude test that would reveal which careers were best suited for her. Jane recalls that a counselor she “detested” reported that she would most likely enjoy a career as a “social worker or an art teacher.” She thought that his advice was “terribly sexist” considering the fact that she had excellent grades and was at the top of her class.

As she entered college in a highly competitive large southern state university, Jane considered a career in research. She was very interested in exploring “socio-economic disparities and trying to figure out how to bring about social change.” She decided that despite the advice of her dreaded high school counselor, she would major in Education, teach for a few years, and then go back to graduate school to learn how to research issues of poverty and schooling. She says that she liked the idea of teaching because she could have “summers off” and she could gain experiences that could support her aspiration to do the “real work of research.” Little did she know that teaching would become her chosen occupation. She no longer cares to have summers off; in fact, she spends the majority of her summers now working with children and preparing them for the subsequent school year. Her dedication came quickly during her student teaching experience.

In her senior year of college, Jane was placed in an arts humanities magnet school in an urban district. Her cooperating teacher, an experienced and talented woman, was well known as a mentor in the school. Jane shares that after the first day, she realized that this school was where she “wanted to be.” The children were a big part of her draw here. In

particular, she loved their energy, their street sense, the potential difference that she could make in their lives, and that she had to prove herself to them. She says that because she had to work hard to earn the children's trust, she came to appreciate them a great deal. That trust was not easy to gain at first.

Jane humorously relates that on her second day of student teaching, the class "voted her out of the classroom." While other student teachers might have been daunted by this, Jane rose to the challenge and eventually earned the students' trust and respect. She shares that this experience helped her to understand how much she enjoyed working with these students. She began to push her students to work hard and achieve. She showed her caring in various ways both inside and outside the classroom. She began showing up at student's houses to bring them to school and tutoring them after school. She put all her energy toward ensuring her students' success in school. After that year, she realized that she wanted to be a teacher and that she wanted to teach in this same school that she student taught in. She says, "Now here I am teaching and I don't see myself doing anything else." Her commitment to teaching is very connected to her social justice framework. She says "I definitely went into teaching with the goal of helping people." The idea of helping others to help themselves is at the heart of her social justice framework. This is an ethic that she learned from her father.

Self-identification

Although Jane seeks to inspire her students to effect change in their community, she does not consider herself to be an activist. She shares that while she would definitely "speak her mind," she does not see herself "out there beating the streets." She adds that although she

is not afraid to stand her ground, even in big school district meetings, she is more focused on a smaller group of people: her class. She relates:

As I get older, my world gets smaller. I have decided to focus on that small group of kids that I have. In that way, I think of myself as a teacher, not as an activist. The important thing is that I am their teacher and for the year that I work with them, I am theirs.

The term “activist” seems less personal to Jane than what she views her role as a teacher to be. For her, the term denotes a broad idea and she “wants to focus in a small, more personal way” In other words, she wants to do what she can “to help her students every day.” In terms of her daily work, she relates that she is definitely looking at her individual students and what they need. Although she often feels overwhelmed with trying to meet each of their needs, she feels fulfilled by doing that work and believes that this is the best way for her to make change. Jane has dedicated her professional life to helping young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to “do better.” As you will learn, Jane has worked hard to create a learning environment where not only can all children learn, they can succeed. Remember that by the term “success,” Jane means that not only can all children learn, they can go beyond even their own expectations and contribute to their community. These ideals are the basis for her social justice framework.

Social Justice Framework

Jane relates that while her father was “not into giving money to people in need,” he was still very dedicated to volunteering his time and energy to help them. He father volunteered in soup kitchens and spent time building houses with Habitat for Humanity. She says that while he is a quiet man, he is a “man of action and that he is always willing to actively help anyone who needs it.” Jane adds that both of her parents continue to be very

active in their church community in that they volunteer for community service activities regularly. Additionally, Jane thinks that because her family is a “family of immigrants” she has inherited a moral principal that dictates that she help others who are less fortunate than she. The fact that Jane is not just drawn to teaching but to teaching in a diverse urban public school is evidence of her commitment to this ideal that has been handed down to her from earlier generations. She relates that she grew up with the idea that because she came from immigrants and was the first member of her family to finish college, she was therefore responsible for helping others.

It is important to understand that for Jane the definition of helping others is not just about being nice to them. It is about pushing them to do their best and giving them the tools to succeed in their lives and contribute to their community. These ideals, which are similar to those of pre-desegregation African-American teachers, are at the heart of a social justice framework.

Jane believes that in America everyone can achieve some form of success. Although she does not believe in the “myth of meritocracy,” the idea that hard work will ensure financial wealth, she does believe that all children are capable of success. She asserts that she defines success differently than the average American. She definitely doesn’t think making a million dollars equates to being successful. She believes that success comes down to the choice of being an active part of a community and helping in some way. She wants her students to find the issues that are important to them. In that way, she sees their importance to society. She believes that if she could encourage everyone who cared about some aspect of a society or community to do one small thing, powerful change could occur. However, as much as Jane would like to change the wider world, she focuses her efforts in her classroom.

Jane aims to help her students gain skill in questioning, thinking, and making change within themselves as well as their community. She says that she tries to help her students to “think, question, and wonder about things in the world.” While Jane understands that she “doesn’t have all the answers.” She does hope that by encouraging her students to be thoughtful people, they will in turn be inspired to make change. She explains:

I want to inspire children to want to make change and learn then they can be the ones to make the changes. They can identify their questions and the needs of their own neighborhoods and communities.

This statement beautifully illustrates Jane’s view that she does not view herself as a “benevolent great white hope,” but as simply fulfilling her responsibility to give back to others. It is important to note that because of her working class background, Jane feels an affinity with the children she is teaching. While she doesn’t claim to understand every aspect of their identities, for example their racial identities, she does understand the value of supporting children’s needs in the hope that they in turn will help others. She says:

I don’t think that I have a lot of the answers because I haven’t been there. I am not from (the students’) neighborhood. For example, African American neighborhoods and especially the poorest neighborhoods, while I am trying to understand more, I will never be able to understand completely because I did not grow up there. But I hope that I can teach those kids and give them the tools they need so that hopefully they can make the changes they believe they need to make for themselves and others.

Initially, Jane’s goal was to make big changes in children’s lives; now she sees herself more as a person who facilitates many small changes over a long period of time. She says that while she originally envisioned herself to be “like Michelle Pfeiffer in the movie *Dangerous Minds*,” transforming the lives of underprivileged children, she now she sees herself as planting “little seeds” that may bear fruit later in life. This point will become evident in the section on her classroom practice. You will also see that while Jane does have

the hope of impacting the wider community, she primarily focuses her efforts and her attention on the individual children in her classroom.

Classroom Practice

This year, however, she has chosen to devote herself to a group who needs her even more than her former mainstreamed students. This year, Jane is classified as a teacher of “exceptional children,” which means that she is working with children with behavioral and learning difficulties. While her current students have challenged her, they have also reaffirmed her reasons for becoming a teacher and have given her the opportunity to work with issues of race, class, poverty, inequity, and schooling in an even deeper way. Over the course of this year, she has learned that truly caring about children necessitates being relentless in that care—in other words, never giving up on them.

Relentless Care

Jane says that the longer she is in teaching, the less she wants to be the “nice teacher.” She says that she would rather have her students leave her class saying that she was the “meanest strictest teacher (they) ever had” rather than letting them graduate without learning something. She relates that she can’t tell you how many times she hears “I hate you” or “you are mean” but admits that those children who say those types of things to her are the same children who send later send her letters saying “thank you so much for making me do it, for helping me learn.” Jane is not truly a “mean” person; she simply cares enough for the children to push them in their thinking and to not accept less than their best efforts. She says that she wants to be the person who gives her students “that extra push” because those were

the kinds of teachers who changed her for the better. She recalls that she “hated” one of the best teachers that she had in elementary school. She explains that her teacher “wasn’t a nice person and that she hated this teacher’s class more than any other teacher that she had.

However, Jane appreciated the things she learned in that class and remembers those lessons more vividly than any other. She says that tells her that her responsibility is that “these kids learn the most that they can learn in a school year” not necessarily for them to like her. Jane cares enough to push her children in every way.

Jane is “not willing to let her children fall through the cracks.” This is particularly important when you consider that many of the children that Jane teaches are precisely those children who others would let slip by. She explains that the children she works with on a daily basis never fail to amaze her. She relates that she often thinks that she has “heard everything,” and then a child will come in and tell her about a home situation or something they witnessed in their neighborhood that tops the last story. But Jane stands as a person who unfailingly believes in them, and she shows this by “not letting them get away with under-achieving.” So we can ascertain that when Jane says she is “mean,” what she is really saying is that she cares enough devote her energy and time to ensuring their success. She doesn’t believe that just because her students are poor, of color, or in difficult home situations that they are not capable of achieving their potential. She explains:

I love being that person who the children trust and who inspires them to take that leap. Most of my E.C. kids are afraid to make a mistake. It is so wonderful to be there at the moment that they take that leap even if they don’t succeed. When they take that leap, I love it, I want to be there. They all have the capability to learn and grow and I will not give up on that possibility. I will never give up on them.

Jane understands that just because a child comes from a disadvantaged background does not mean that they are not capable or intelligent. She knows this because despite the fact

that she came from a “poor” neighborhood, her teachers were “not willing to give up on her.” Like her teachers before her, Jane refuses to accept less than excellence from her students. She says that her students deserve her energy and attention. She relates that most of her students come from impoverished backgrounds, are of a minority race, and are mostly boys. She says that despite their being placed in E.C. classes, their disability issues have a great deal to do with where they came from and what they are dealing with in their families now. However, she asserts that despite their obstacles, she shouldn’t just allow them to “slide by.” She says:

You have to go back and say what am I going to do to make it better? I better make this meaningful interesting, relevant and applicable. I have to ask myself is this something that I need to make them do? Is it useful and meaningful for them?

Jane understands that all children, regardless of their difficulties, need and deserve to have schooling experiences that are meaningful and useful. She also knows that her students—particularly those that have struggled in school—are tentative about making mistakes and that in order for them to learn, they must be willing to risk the possibility of making errors. She appreciates that in order to build enough trust so that children will be able to take those risks, it will take a great deal of effort on her part. She carefully observes her children and takes the time to get to know each one. Once she does that, she can focus on their individual needs and their needs as a group. This is related to how she shows care for her students. She has learned a great deal about this process through working with her exceptional students during this school year.

Working with Exceptional Children

Jane shares that being a teacher for exceptional children has been one of the biggest challenges of her teaching career. She shares that three weeks into the school year, she visited the school principal and told him that if things didn't change within the next week, she would quit. She said that her biggest difficulty was that many of her students had behavioral issues not just learning challenges. This meant that Jane had to work hard to manage their behaviors and not just work to meet their learning needs. She also confesses that although many of her students did have learning challenges, many of them were simply in E.C. because they were of a certain demographic: poor, of-color, and male. She began to realize that while this was a difficult group to work with, they could grow and develop with her support. She dug her heels in and decided not to give up on this very challenging group.

Jane did see improvements, but not until she worked hard to revamp the program and transform some basic elements of her teaching. She reports that she gave up a planning period so that she could teach smaller groups. This also helped her to create groups that were more cohesive and compatible. Additionally, she read *Teaching Children to Care*, by Ruth Charney (2002), a book on behavior and classroom management that helped her to set limits and to create a positive classroom environment. She reports that little by little, class time started getting better in that the children actually started learning and getting along with their classmates. This was no easy process. Jane has had to focus a great deal of effort on behavior management.

Behavior Management

Initially, even the smaller groups were aggressive and distracted. She implemented a behavior management plan that had three key elements: 1) identifying and rewarding positive behavior; 2) punishing negative behaviors consistently; and 3) making class activities something that the children did not want to miss. At first, Jane was eager to emphasize even the smallest demonstrations of positive behavior. She created a chart that had a car for each child. Every time someone did something that was helpful or kind, Jane moved the car and wrote the positive behavior on the board. She would highlight even the slightest of gestures. For example, if one child hit another with a pencil and the other didn't retaliate, she would thank the child and say "Great work, Devante! Thank you for not hitting Ezekial back." She laughs that although this was a "pretty hokey" system for a group that identified themselves as "gangstas," it worked. She said that although the process did take a few minutes away from instruction, it was worth it.

Jane adds that while she had to work to notice and reward good behavior, she also had to consistently provide meaningful consequences for negative behavior. She said that she learned that there could be "no second chances." If a child slipped up in his behavior, then they would have to have consequences no matter how hard they would plead or complain. Jane explains that most children care about things "being fair," and that this group in particular needed boundaries. In fact, they craved them. If one child would misbehave, the others would be quick to point out that they should have a consequence. They began to police one another and themselves. She says:

I had to have the approach that this is the law and there are no second chances. This is what is expected of you and if you cross that line this is what will happen to you. If that happened, I couldn't just say well OK I understand and then let them talk their way out of it. The kids would hold me to that standard and if I started to bend for one

kid, the others would remind me and I would stand firm. They wanted it and they needed it. They wanted me to say, “This is the line and this is the boundary.” They knew when they were misbehaving and they were into fairness. So we set ground rules and stuck by them.

This staunch approach caused many of her students to report that “Ms. T don’t play!” meaning that she is a tough teacher. However, this statement comes with a great deal of respect and care from the students. They know that Jane cares enough about them to make sure that they are safe and learning. Additionally, she knows that one other element of her plan is necessary to ensure that kids want to learn and be a part of class activities. She says that in order to do this she has to “make class too much fun to miss.”

One way to “make class activities too much fun to miss” was to eliminate worksheets “because they are not fun!” If she relies on worksheets, she knows that a kid will sit in the back of the room feeling bored. As a result, he will misbehave and then when told to leave, he will do so gladly. She had to learn this lesson the hard way. When she began teaching the E.C. students, her frustration led her to ask her colleagues what she could do to transform their behavior and ensure their learning. Many of her colleagues suggested that she give the group worksheets and then spend time working individually with each student. She said that although this was counter to her pedagogical style, she was willing to try anything. She did try this approach and for her “it just didn’t feel right.” She says that she came back to her understanding of the important role of relationships and creating community so that children can work together and learn from each other. She was amazed to see how much her E.C. kids latched onto this idea of working together in community and how much they wanted it like any other group of kids does. She began to incorporate group activities such as cooking and making crafts while integrating writing or math instruction with such activities. In this way, Jane not only taught the children academic skills but also extended their learning to how to

relate to others. It made her class so much fun that the students did not want to be left out of any part of it. Leaving class became a consequence worse than working hard and behaving well.

Jane was happy to report that the last lesson of the year showed the fruits of her labor. She said that initially there was chaos and craziness in the room, which evolved to the harmonious hum of active collaborative work. Jane shares that her students progressed from “being mean to each other to saying ‘excuse me’ when they bumped into each other, to saying ‘I don’t like the way you speak to me when you are angry,’ to ‘it is okay when you make mistakes.’” Jane was so thrilled that not only did her students start to accept each other’s mistakes, but they became able to accept their own as an integral part of the learning process. They learned to move through their frustration and to be able to learn from their mistakes. By the end of the year, the group was able to follow recipes independently. The lesson she referred to involved cooking. She said that while the recipe, rice crispy treats, was easy, the group impressed her. She simply put the recipe down on the table and the group divided the tasks and took turns. They knew how to read the recipe, how to share, and how to follow the steps. She said that it was a great reminder of how important it is to set up routines and structures for students. She knows that like any other group of students, these children could not learn to be self-regulating without being taught how to do so. While it was not easy, this process was well worth her efforts. Because Jane did not give up on her students, she could by the end of year stand back and watch them be self-directed and collaborative with their peers. Again, remember that this took a great deal of time, energy, and effort. There are no magic bullets here. It took Jane’s unrelenting efforts to teach her children how to care for themselves and others.

In direct contrast, Jane says that she understands that teachers do get frustrated with “how do I do this job of teaching?” She says that she while most teachers say that they do want a caring and compassionate community in their classroom, they can’t just go in and tell the students to be nice to each other. She says it takes a great deal of effort and energy to put these structures into place. These efforts did not just apply to gains in behavior regulation but also to academic achievement. Simply put, Jane never gave up on her students. Because Jane believed in her students, she saw them achieve many things.

Never Giving Up on Children

Jane describes Viktor, who as a fifth grader couldn’t even read his own name. She said that she diligently supported Viktor to work on his reading skills. She shares they would start off with short words, and then move to reading an entire line of text. Eventually, Viktor could read long passages and infer the meanings of difficult words. Jane exclaims that she could see the pride in his face and that he had exceeded both of their expectations. Initially, he was resistant to write in his journal and then hesitant to share what he wrote. Eventually, he began writing in his journal and sharing. However, Jane began noticing that what Viktor was writing was horribly graphic, violent, and sexual. For example, one of his stories was about a girl who cheats on her boyfriend and the boyfriend shoots her. While Jane was thrilled that Viktor “really found his voice in writing” she also was concerned because it “wasn’t a voice she was particularly thrilled with.” She was concerned that what he was writing about was disturbing to her other students. She relates that by the end of the year, he got really into it. He was not worried about spelling and grammar; he just had to get these stories out. For him, it was a meaningful experience. So while Jane was happy that Viktor

learned writing as a way to express his ideas she worried about how his stories were affecting the rest of the class. She explained that when it was time for class to end, Viktor would still be sitting at his desk writing. While it was exciting to have a child who originally couldn't even write his own name enthused to write, it was also disconcerting to ascertain how to encourage more “appropriate” topics. It is important to note here that Jane understood that for Viktor, it was an incredible achievement to learn to write and express his ideas. On the other hand, she was concerned that Viktor was disturbing the other children with his violent and graphic accounts. While she didn't want to discourage him, she did want to protect her other students.

Eventually Angelo, a quiet student plagued with speech, language, and processing difficulties, intervened. For his first five months in school, Angelo didn't ask questions and was very hesitant to speak in class. Angelo quietly observed the class and seemed to be processing what others said. As Viktor began sharing his stories, Angelo seemed to be processing his dark messages. In the end, Angelo spoke up. He raised his hand and said “You know, we were just talking about stories that have lessons and teach you things. Viktor, have you thought about what your story is teaching kids?” Jane was impressed that a kid who was having such difficulty with processing issues could make such a connection. She said that while Viktor was a “big intimidating kid,” Angelo still felt comfortable making this statement in reference to his stories. Jane told Angelo's mother about his declaration. His mother was proud not only that Angelo made the connection, but also that he was confident enough to speak his truth to the entire group.

Although Viktor did not change his stories very much, the other students started to realize that Viktor's stories were not the kind of stories they wanted to portray and inasmuch

their stories started to change. Jane observed them slowly improving the quality and content of their stories. She was proud of Angelo for having the confidence to speak to the group and the courage to share his ideas on the other's stories. Eventually, Jane did work with Viktor to transform his stories as well. But it was Angelo who helped her to frame her thinking on how to approach the situation. This is an important idea. Jane observes her students to determine what they need. However, she still sees herself as the bottom line in the classroom in terms of facilitating learning. This is something that evolved over time.

Teacher as Facilitator-Teacher as Expert

Jane says that she now believes in Nancy Atwell's idea of "teacher as expert," meaning that she sees that she is responsible not only for pushing students' thinking but also for "teaching them something." Cochran-Smith (2004) extends this notion:

The teacher is an intellectual and a knowledge-generator. Teaching is a process of co-constructing knowledge and curriculum with students (p. 64).

Jane sees her role as a teacher as one who is actively engaged in co-creating knowledge with her students. On the one hand, it requires that she do the work of preparing her lessons and conducting background research. On the other hand, it requires that she is open to her students' interests and ideas. She knows that while this type of teaching and learning process is what she originally aimed for, in her first years of teaching, she naively instituted a system of "creative chaos."

Jane recalls that in her first year of teaching she was very "touchy feely" and didn't want anything coming from her. She adds, "I didn't want to be top-down and squelch the children." She wanted everything that occurred in the classroom to originate with the children. But this was not ideal. She relates that she can remember her students reading the

stories that they wrote to her and she remembered thinking that she knew where they could improve their writing, but she would say nothing. She said she wanted them “to improve in their writing” but didn’t want to discourage them; yet she couldn’t help feeling that they were capable of doing better. Subsequently, she began to experiment with giving her students tips and ideas. She realized that it was important to balance the freedom to experiment with the structure of her guidance. She says that now she wants her children to read and be reflective. She wants them to think about what they are reading or writing, and if it doesn’t make sense, then she wants to help them gain the skills to make sense, to “make meaning” of what they read and write.

Jane hopes that through her efforts, her children will become capable readers and writers. She also hopes that they will gain skill in problem solving in math and even in life situations. She wants them to have flexibility in their thinking but also to be confident in the questions that they pose. She wants them to “go out there and find things they care about.” What is most interesting is that not only does Jane strive to instill these things in her students, but she also stands as a role model of these qualities herself. These attributes are directly related to how Jane sustains herself and her work of teaching for social justice.

Sustenance: Obstacles to and Supports for Teaching for Social Justice

It is important to know that while Jane has dedicated her life to teaching, she did spend a year away from her classroom. She left the classroom and spent part of last year serving as a principal in a school in Burma. She said that part of why she left was that she got “caught up in the complications of implementing what the district refers to as ‘best practices’ and testing.” She said that she had leave to remind herself about what she enjoys about

teaching.” She shares: “I love being a teacher and I didn’t see myself just leaving the profession altogether, but I needed that sabbatical year to help remind myself of the things I love about teaching.” That year helped Jane to learn and grow in many ways. She says that she needs to keep growing and learning in order to continue in her profession. This relates to her idea of caring for self and others.

Caring for Self and Others

When Jane sets up her classroom she asks herself, “How do we work in our little world called the classroom?” and “How do we not step on any toes?” but she says that she gets very focused on each child’s need. She loves that while she can focus on the greater good, she can also that she focus on one child and their one need. For example, if one child’s parents are getting divorced, she may decide to take that child out for pizza or she may decide that it is important to sit with one child and read a story that they wrote. She says:

I am definitely in it for the individual kids. That is what keeps me in teaching. If I was in there for some big picture, it wouldn’t be as fulfilling. It is in knowing them and letting them know you.

Jane believes that in many ways it is a “selfish thing” to be in teaching simply because she is gratified by the work that she does with children. She greatly enjoys her work and her time with her students. On the days when children learn something new or get excited about an idea, she says that it fascinates her that she was a part of it. Recently, Jane found a big hat box full of letters from her former students. She remembers each student and what they went through while they were in her care. She appreciates that “these kids took the time to write” and that in some way, she has affected them enough for them to tell her about it in writing. Still she wonders if her kids are “still making it, still wondering and

questioning, and are they safe?” Jane understands that while not all of her students will “make it,” she does have a profound effect on them and hopes for their continued success in both in school and in their future lives. However, she also knows that despite all of her efforts, some of her kids will face stark futures. Because of this, she hopes to extend her efforts beyond her students to their families.

Building Community

Jane would love to see her school become a neighborhood school that would have its doors open on the weekend. She sees that the school has a potential to become a community center and in that way, it could support the needs not just of her individual students but of their families as well. She fantasizes about having potlucks where each student could share their poetry or their favorite book. Each student could invite their family to share in the event and have the sense of pride that comes with relationships that include parents and teachers. Jane wishes that her school could feel like a community center, with the teacher as a partner, almost a friend. Although she does say, “There is a fine line between knowing enough about parents and knowing too much,” she relates that having social events for families could “go a long way to supporting students.” She says that like her students, the parents “don’t have to love everybody else in the class,” but that it would mean a great deal to the children if parents could come together to share a meal and create a share sense of community. She shares that because some of her parents are doctors, lawyers, and professors at the local elite university and some of her parents are on welfare, the idea of coming together becomes even more important. She says that it is ultimately important that parents see the school as not just their child’s school, but as their school as well.

Transformation

Jane relates that she is always changing. She jokes that if she could talk to her first-year-teacher self of six years ago, she would laugh at all the naïve ideas that she had. She muses that it will be funny to read this case study in the future but she will appreciate learning how her thinking has evolved over time. At the same time, she enjoys the fact that teaching is an ever-evolving field and for this reason, Jane realizes regardless of how much she grows, there will always be more to learn. She says:

The day that I think I have all the answers is the day I quit teaching. It is very freeing to know that you will never be the expert and you will always be changing. That is one of the things I love about teaching.

Jane appreciates that effective teaching requires that she grow and change. Part of this is due to the difference of each group from one year to the next. She says every year she “gets a new group of kids,” and even if she has done something that worked in the past, it doesn’t mean that it will work again. She says that you have to tap into the mood and tenor of the group that you are teaching. For example, while she taught the topic of heroes with two different third grade classes, she approached it very differently for both groups. The first group was interested in Greek myths and epic tales of great feats. On the other hand, another group was interested in learning about local heroes who were working for the environment and local activists who campaigned for the rights of immigrants. Remember that Jane did say that she was now comfortable with taking the stance of “teacher as expert,” but at the same time she does want to encourage her students to “find their passions.” Through providing structure and simultaneously making space for children’s interests to be considered, Jane brings the balance between form and freedom. This means that not only does Jane instill good work and learning

habits, but she also encourages children to develop a strong sense of self. She models this both for herself and her students.

On the other hand, some teachers seem to believe that once you have your set of lesson plans, you are set. She relates that during her first year of teaching, her principal showed her a notebook that another teacher created with all of her lesson plans from the previous year. The principal explained that “now the teacher was ready to teach next year.” Jane thought it was ridiculous that someone would be able to know what she would be teaching “on October 15th next year.” Jane says she realizes that if this job of teaching didn’t give her the option to learn new things and to change things then she couldn’t continue doing it. She thrives on the challenge of changing and growing and she knows that many of her children do as well. This is directly related to her ideas on cultivating the love of learning both in her students and in herself.

Love of Learning

Jane confesses that she continues to think about how important it is to cultivate a love of learning. She says that this can come from learning not only about ideas but also skills such as knitting, rock climbing, or baking. She says that learning new things is invigorating and motivating. She says even if a teacher doesn’t know anything about dinosaurs but has a student who is eager to learn something about them that you can both learn and be excited about the topic. Such excitement for learning can be communicated through a teacher modeling her enjoyment of reading an interesting book or learning a new skill as well. For example, after she read the book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* by Putnam (2000), which is about the lack of community in Western Society, she told her class that she

was reading an interesting new book and that she wondered if they had read any new books lately. She told her students “Let’s find out what you are interested in!” She says that no matter what the children are interested in, the important thing is that they find passions. This is key to their becoming life-long learners and questioners. Jane says that the hope is that when you tell them something, they will start thinking about questions and wondering about a topic. She certainly does so herself.

She contrasts this picture of her teaching with a classroom she observed. She says that she walked into a classroom to take some children to their bus. She relates that “the teacher looked bored and so did the children.” She adds that they didn’t want to be there and it appeared that neither did anyone else. She asserts “If you do not love learning, then how do you think the kids will feel about it? You have to be excited and passionate about learning with (the students).” She adds that people of all ages need to become inspired to learn. She asserts “We need to remember why we love learning.” Jane recalls a teacher who she did not like but who she appreciated because she embodied this love of learning. She says that even though she “hated” this teacher, the teacher was passionate about books and because of this, Jane learned a great deal from her. She says that even though she and her classmates didn’t love this teacher, her passion stood out and she picked books and stories that she did love. Thus, this teacher’s passion spilled out of her and it was excited Jane and her classmates. Having this teacher was a significant experience for Jane. She says that she even remembers the poems that she taught and they did stay with her. Jane says that she “doesn’t think that you can be a mean and awful and still be a good teacher but you can’t be a good teacher if you don’t have passion.” Here Jane is using the word “mean” in a very different way than she was earlier. Before, when she

uses the word “mean” when she refers to herself, she means that she loves her students enough to push them toward excellence.

Inspiration

Jane knows that in order for teachers to thrive, not merely survive, they need to find ways to become inspired. Jane says that so much of the first year of teaching is about asking one’s self “How am I going to get through the year? What am I going to do? What is my classroom going to look like?” Jane suggests in order for teachers to figure these things out, teachers need resources. Jane draws on the work of other educators to inspire and inform her work. In terms of literacy instruction she cites Lucy Calkins at Teachers’ College and the Literacy through Photography Program at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. She also mentions Jonathan Kozol, Herbert Kohl, and Nancy Atwell. Additionally, she says that she recommends the book *Setting Limits*, a book that describes responsive classroom management and *Teaching Children to Care* by Ruth Charney (2002), a book that highlights ideas on how to create responsive classrooms.

Overall, Jane sees being responsive and gently pushing children toward excellence as primary to her teaching for social justice. She has learned about these topics through closely collaborating with supportive and knowledgeable colleagues. In particular, she has transformed her teaching practice by engaging in collaborative reflection with the Critical Friends’ Group.

CHAPTER 6

ELIZABETH

Teaching for social justice has been all about getting my students to read and respond to the world, getting them to think about it, react to it, and learn about it.

It is not just about read this, answer the questions, and fill in the bubbles. It is about read this, think about it, analyze it, reflect upon it, and then choose do something about it or not. I am trying to get them to think for themselves.

Elizabeth, 2006

A Portrait of Elizabeth

There is a hum of excitement in Elizabeth's fifth grade classroom. The day has finally arrived that the children have been working toward for over three months. Their classroom is no longer a classroom but a wildlife sanctuary complete with lions, tropical fish, and even polar bears. The children are busy arranging chairs and making sure that each blade of grass on the savannah and each sea shell on their beach is in place. Let's take a moment to look around. By the door three girls, two African-American and one Caucasian, are arranging the blades of grass and flowers in their exhibit. Their backdrop is a painted scene of an African landscape. As they collaboratively work, they discuss who will speak first and what interesting facts are most important to share with the students who will visit from the other classes. They carefully place their paper-maché giraffe, zebra, and snake in their habitat, stand back, and smile with pride. Other students are preparing their displays on the rainforest, the ocean, the polar region, and a redwood forest.

Jakwan is putting the finishing touches on his sign that declares "Save Our Trees!" Another member of his group, Tanesha, refers to the field guide that they created together.

She asks the others “Do you think that the first graders would be interested to know that trees make oxygen so that we can breathe?”

Her two group partners, Jakwan and Roy, consider her question. Roy replies, “I think you should tell them that but I don’t think we should add the part about us all dying if the trees die. That might scare them.” Tanesha and Jakwan look pensive. They pause for a moment to consider this possibility.

Jakwan interjects, “Yeah, but they need to know that trees are that important, and the fact is that our trees are dying. They need to know that so they can do something about it. After all, the first graders are our future!” All three of the fifth graders seem to be in agreement that the first graders need to be aware of the dangers of deforestation, particularly in their habitat: the rainforest.

There is a great sense of pride in this room and quite a bit of excitement. This sanctuary is the culmination of three months of study, research, and collaboration. When one look around this room, one can see Elizabeth’s pedagogical ideals put into practice. Elizabeth is committed to helping her students learn to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, to care about themselves and the world around them, to think critically, to work hard in all of their endeavors, and ultimately, to have a passion for learning. In other words, her work as a teacher has been aimed at empowering her students and at the same time encouraging them to strive toward excellence. She is focused on helping them learn to discover their passions and to read both words and the world.

Context

Elizabeth is a passionate and engaged person. She is both strong and gentle. Although she is driven by her passion for excellence for both herself and her students, she balances this with a deep sense of compassion. A charismatic person, Elizabeth's enthusiasm for life and learning draw people, particularly children, to her. But above all, Elizabeth is a reflective thinker and an insightful observer.

From a very young age, Elizabeth knew that she would dedicate her life to helping children. She relates that even as a young child, she saw schools as a place where "every child, no matter who, no matter how much money they have, would be there, and this could provide an avenue where you could potentially reach everyone." In other words, she saw schools as places where every child could "learn and become self-actualized."

On the other hand, she also knew that not all teachers were equally effective. "I grew up in a white middle class community that was very traditional, and I can remember my learning in certain classes and the things I didn't like and the ways that I wish things could or should be." Even as an elementary student, Elizabeth astutely observed teachers and insightfully assessed their practices. Elizabeth knew the differences between her teachers' philosophies. She relates, "Because I have always been a reflective person, I knew which teachers were doing things that worked and those who were not." She recalled her first grade teacher who often facilitated readers' and writers' workshops, which are interactive small group experiences aimed at teaching children skills and pushing their thinking. Elizabeth enjoyed this type of instruction and thought it taught her a great deal. On the other hand, her fifth grade teacher relied on math workbooks, and she knew "that wasn't working." Additionally, she recounts that when she was in elementary school, she "got really into the

environment.” Inspired by the book *Fifty Ways that Kids Can Save the Environment*, she looked for ways that she could help. She remembers “really caring about the environment and not having an outlet for that. She explains “I felt cheated that I didn’t have certain kinds of experiences as a child and felt like I could provide them for others.”

This might lead you to wonder why and how she became a “reflective practitioner” by the age of ten. Elizabeth will tell you it is because teaching is “in her blood.” Elizabeth explains that in her family “If you are not a doctor, then you are a teacher.” Her father currently is director of student health services at a large northeastern university; he also served as the director of a well-known residential school for special-needs students. Elizabeth’s mother is a middle school special needs teacher. Her paternal grandfather served as dean of pediatrics at a major southern medical school and later at the same university that Elizabeth’s father works. Her other grandfather was a principal and math teacher, and one of her grandmothers was a science teacher. An uncle is an active school board member. Thus, it is not surprising that Elizabeth jokingly says, “Teaching is in my blood.”

Her commitment to work with “underprivileged children” was confirmed at age 17 through her experiences working at a camp in Canada that was founded to serve “underprivileged youth.” The children were labeled “at-risk or as having behavioral and emotional problems” which Elizabeth attributes to “the cycle of poverty,” meaning that the campers were suffering from “experience and resource deficits” as opposed to being “problem children.” Elizabeth firmly believes that all children can learn and deserve to be taught in supportive ways.

At the heart of the camp program was a center for the studies of children at risk. The director of the program, who we will call Dr. D, was a significant role model for Elizabeth.

Working with him and some of the other teachers and psychologists there inspired her to become a teacher herself, leading her to major in education and psychology. She remembers wondering, “Which was the best way to help children?” She felt unsure whether it would be to “be with them every day or to support them in short term therapeutic programs.” She considered running an after-school tutoring program, child psychology, and wilderness therapy as possible careers. While she was not sure what profession was best suited for her, there were two things she was certain of: 1) her commitment to helping children and 2) her inclination to go above and beyond what is expected.

When Elizabeth entered college, she was disappointed because the elementary education major was taught through a two-year program. Therefore, she could not officially begin her elementary education studies until her third year. She spent her first two years filling pre-requisite courses. She recalls that it was difficult for her to be in what she classified as a “selfish environment” because she says she was taking classes to “better” herself but was not learning how to “help people.” She was eager to begin her first steps on the path to teaching. Elizabeth’s passion to learn and develop as a teacher continues today. This will be evident throughout this case study.

In her sophomore year, Elizabeth attempted to volunteer as a tutor but was discouraged by her advisor because she already had “enough service hours to be admitted to the School of Education.” Her advisor counseled her to “just focus on her grades and have fun.” She felt very frustrated that, despite her keen desire to work with children, she was discouraged by her mentors to pursue such activities. This is yet another example of Elizabeth’s desire to not only work beyond what is expected of her, but also of her strong

desire to support children. These are elements that are consistent with her current work in her classroom.

Initially, Elizabeth was disappointed in many of her pre-service teaching peers. She explains that she was “excited to learn and teach” and that many of her classmates were “just there to make a grade.” It troubled her that while she was eager to learn and push her thinking, her peers were more concerned with due dates and page lengths for papers. She longed for intellectual debates and ideas that would challenge her intellect. Likewise, she felt let down by several of her instructors and professors who didn’t seem to encourage these young teachers to challenge their pre-conceived notions about teaching and learning. She declares it ridiculous that many education professors “stand there and lecture you not to lecture.” She often asked for additional reading materials on such subjects as democratic schooling, social justice, and progressive methodology. However, she was cautioned that “these are the kinds of things for graduate school, not for now.” She asserts that she wanted to be the best teacher she could be, but that people kept holding her back. This is yet another example of Elizabeth’s passion for learning and her commitment to go above and beyond what is expected of her.

Elizabeth remembers that her critique of teacher education caused her father to tease her that she should “start her own school of education.” She recalls that she constantly suggested that “they need to do this and this and this differently.” Although she now however she realizes that she did gain a great deal in her teacher education program, it is not surprising that she continued to reflect on and critique curriculum and teaching methods in her teacher education program. Elizabeth is a consummate reflective practitioner. She understands the difference between effective practice and ineffectual methods. Moreover,

Elizabeth is a person who sees the potential in herself and others to excel and is disappointed when that potential is not met. At the same time, she appreciates others who are striving and who are willing to support others in their growth.

Elizabeth eventually found two professors who inspired and encouraged her, Dwight Rogers and Paula Lane. She said that these two professors gave her “great books” such as Deborah Meier’s *The Power of Their Ideas* (2002), a book which outlines Meier’s ideas and experiences working in her small elementary school in Harlem called Central Park East. Meier’s innovations inspired the founding of several other schools including Central Park East Secondary School. Elizabeth shares that she was also “really into Herbert Kohl.” She read his *36 Children* (1988), which confirmed her belief that there should be “more to teaching and learning.”

Over the course of junior year, Elizabeth had the opportunity to observe a in a variety of schools and settings. She relates that up to that time, she still “wasn’t exposed to a place where she felt comfortable teaching.” She did not find such a place until she observed at an arts and humanities magnet school in a diverse urban neighborhood (which is also the school she is currently teaching in now). This visit was one that would as she says, “change her life.” Elizabeth explains that as she walked into Mr. Matlock’s classroom, she had an “ah ha” moment. Mr. Matlock was facilitating a hands-on science experiment in which the children were working with suction cups to determine which surfaces they might stick to. Elizabeth immediately recognized “good teaching” and was inspired to do the same. She said that she stayed for the morning meeting, the time when the class met to discuss their plans for the day and any other relevant matters, and she realized that this experience was going “to change her life.” She knew that this was the way that “she wanted to teach,” and she wanted to not only

intern at that school but also to eventually serve as a full-time teacher there, which is exactly what she did. Here we see Elizabeth's keen understanding of pedagogy and her passion for learning unite to inspire to her work as a teacher.

Elizabeth says being at that school helped her to see that there were other people who had the "same vision" as her and "were putting those ideals into practice." These elements helped Elizabeth's enthusiasm for teaching to grow and cemented her commitment to pursue it as a career. She attributes this partially to Mr. Matlock's dynamic teaching style but also to the general philosophy of the school itself. The school where Elizabeth student-taught and currently teaches is an arts humanities magnet school in the heart of a diverse southeastern urban school district. The pedagogical philosophies embraced by the school are very much in line with Elizabeth's. Therefore, she feels affirmed by what occurs there. Additionally, not only did Elizabeth student teach with Mr. Matlock, but he now serves as principal of the school itself. With Mr. Matlock's support as principal and the school's overall focus, Elizabeth feels empowered to do her work as she sees fit. Elizabeth's school and its progressive social justice focus are very much in line with her identity as an activist teacher who is working for equity and justice in her classroom.

Self Identification

While Elizabeth asserts that she does not like to label herself, she does claim the titles of activist and teacher. She explains "I have a big thing with labels, and I don't like them. But I will take on those labels of activist and teacher because I am there (in school) trying to make things better. I am trying to make a difference for people." She elaborates: "I do

consider myself an activist working for social justice.” However she qualifies this statement by saying “I am not doing as much as other people.” This point could be debated.

Outside of school, Elizabeth contributes in what she refers to as “small ways.” For example, she regularly participates in a “neighborhood clean up” and tries to be active in political groups as well as supporting causes she feels strongly about. She recalls that when she was in college, she participated in several protest marches for women’s rights and other causes in Washington, D.C. Elizabeth sees her identity as an activist as directly connected to her work and to her life in school. She says, “For me, it is about living my life and trying to make sure that I am true to my ideals, living them out, trying to be involved with political groups, and leading by example.” While Elizabeth has “never been a person for letter writing” she explains that the most important thing for her is to “make one person think.” This reflects Elizabeth’s belief that the world can be changed for the better one person at a time. The people that she is most focused on helping to transform are her students.

Although Elizabeth has little time to initiate grand-scale activist campaigns, she does work tirelessly in her classroom to promote equity and social justice. Her work is deeply connected to social change through supporting her children’s needs. She declares:

I do consider myself an activist teacher because I am there trying to make a change, I am doing something about the things that I care about and about the things that make me mad in the world. That links to social justice because I want to work to make sure that our country stays a democracy and to make sure that our kids learn how to think.

This statement reflects several key components of Elizabeth’s social justice framework which include: 1) wanting to make change; 2) caring about issues; 3) working hard; 4) supporting democratic ideals; and 5) fostering critical thinking.

Social Justice Framework

Making Change

One of the primary ways that Elizabeth is working for social change is by choosing to work in an urban public school. She asserts that it is important to work in public schools because they are places where “everyone can be there, and it is open to everyone from the community.” In particular, she sees her school as being a place where social change can happen because of its location and focus. Her school, an urban arts and humanities magnet school, draws children from all over the city. She explains “The nice thing about being in a magnet school means that we do have diversity in our classroom and that the children get to be with others who are from all over the city.” Elizabeth has students who are being raised by their grandparents, some who are in foster care, and some whose parents are professors in a local elite private college. She believes that is meaningful for her students to “have experiences with different kinds of people” so that they can learn how to relate to people who have things in common with them and those who do not. Not only will this benefit the students themselves, but it could also have a positive impact on the wider community. This is particularly important in Elizabeth’s community because it has long been troubled with racial tensions and issues surrounding the wide gap between wealthy and impoverished community members. This is connected to her ideal of caring about issues.

Caring about Issues

Fundamentally, caring about issues translates to caring about people. Elizabeth cares very much about her students and the people in her community. Recently, racial tensions have erupted in her city because of conflicts between the local university and local

community members. While I must be vague about the specific details of the conflicts to respect Elizabeth's confidentiality, I can describe her reactions to some of the dynamics surrounding these events.

Recent letters to the editor, in the local newspaper, reflect comments that enrage Elizabeth. She says that some people in the wider community don't understand other people in it. She relates that some people have been sending letters to the newspaper that declare, "This city has no culture." Elizabeth is outraged by these sentiments. She declares "There are thousands and thousands of diverse people in this community, and there are other members of the community that are saying that they have no culture!" It is evident that Elizabeth cares about her community and the people in it. She works in many ways to encourage her students to appreciate their culture and their community. However, the recent events have made this goal a difficult one to achieve.

Just two days after the news broke in the media, Elizabeth found herself and her class on a campus visit "to learn about campus life." While Elizabeth considered not taking the tour, she felt obligated to the parent who arranged it. As she and her class filed past news media and through dorm rooms filled with Playboy pin ups, Elizabeth found herself rethinking her decision to take the tour. She says that "A lot of media were around, the kids were acting up, and I felt I had to be naggy and grouchy." I just didn't feel comfortable there and neither did my kids." She wondered to herself why the children were acting so differently from the way that they behaved in other situations. While she realized that recent events contributed to the student's sense of unease, some of the university students' comments also affected them. For example, one campus tour guide implored "Promise me you will go to college, promise me!" Elizabeth reports that the children gaped at her.

Elizabeth was offended by the girl's comments for several reasons. First, she was upset that the girl took the idea of a promise so lightly. She relates that for her "a promise is not something that you mess around with." Beyond that, she was more upset that the girl's message implied that the children should go to college or that they would "not amount to anything." She explains "It emphasized the huge class divide in the city and the idea that you can't be someone and you can't even be yourself if you don't go to college." Knowing that most of their parents didn't go to college, she does not think that her students can't or shouldn't go to college. However, she believes that "if a student's life ambition is to be a landscaper, a carpenter, or a hairdresser, no one should tell them that they can't be that." She believes in her students, who they are, and the aspirations they have for themselves. For her, it is more important that her students find their passions and live fully into who they are rather than what others expect them to be. For her, this requires hard work and a belief in the democratic ideal that everyone has a voice and the power to determine their own destiny.

Hard Work and Democratic Ideals

Elizabeth believes that working hard to achieve one's goals is very important. She tirelessly works to support her students and to improve her community. Hard work and going beyond what is expected not only relates to her social justice philosophy, but also to the way she approaches her time in the wilderness. For example, Elizabeth enjoys hard work and doesn't shirk the opportunity to meet challenges. Whether she is climbing a mountain, addressing issues of inequity, or teaching her students, she tirelessly dedicates herself to overcoming obstacles. She knows that most things that are worth doing require a great deal of effort. Elizabeth knows that addressing social justice issues is not easy, but it is worth

doing and doing well. Working for democratic ideals both in her classroom and her community is one area into which she directs a great deal of her efforts.

For Elizabeth, democracy has to do with being respectful while at the same time ensuring that each person's voice is heard. It involves listening but not necessarily believing everything you hear. It means that one respectfully gives one's attention to another, considers what they say, reflects upon it, and whether they agree or not, they continue to respect that person. Additionally, she tries to encourage her students to do what she aspires to do: "care enough about the things that are going on around you to do something about them." For Elizabeth, democracy involves a commitment to care, listen, reflect, and act. She cautions that if people "do not reflect and continue to be active," our democracy "cannot survive." This is why she is committed to encouraging critical thinking for both her students and herself. In encouraging her children to find their own sense of agency, Elizabeth hopes that is also supporting the health of the communities that those children will find themselves living in. These ideas live at the heart of her classroom practice.

Classroom Practice

Elizabeth's conception of social justice permeates her classroom and her work. As you may recall, her social justice ideals include: 1) wanting to make change; 2) caring about issues; 3) working hard; 4) supporting democratic ideals; and 5) fostering critical thinking. These ideals not only reflect her commitments to social justice, but they are also enacted in and through her pedagogical knowledge of experiential education. This comes through in that she lovingly pushes children toward exceeding their own expectations through skill building

that supports confidence. At the same time, she balances this with community building in her classroom.

Elizabeth says, “All I can hope for is that my students will find their passion. I want them to find something they are passionate about because if they are struggling with something and they have something they are passionate about, then they have something to live for and something that they want to do. If that happens, nothing will be as big a burden as it might seem. It will help to make them want to go to school, learn, and grow.” Elizabeth cares about her children and works hard not only to support them but also to encourage them to care about the world around them. She believes that helping children “find their passions” will support them to make positive changes in themselves and in the world around them.

Wanting to Make a Change

Elizabeth understands that every child has ideals that they care about; in other words, each child has things that they are passionate about. She strives to help children to find those things that make them “angry, happy, or excited.” She has been working with some children who have anger issues. She discussed the idea that anger can be “a good thing,” but that children need to learn to control it and to use it to work for positive ends “rather than letting anger control you.” This has proven to be a valuable lesson for her students. One such student started reading about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. He saw them people as people who were angry but channeled their anger toward social causes. Learning from these two civil rights leaders, the boy wrote daily about how he could use his anger to try to change things that were unjust in the world. Elizabeth believes in her children and their power to change the world. She says, “People so often look at kids as not having power and not having

deep thoughts, but they do and they can make changes even if they are small ones.” She knows that children can make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others.

Elizabeth describes another child’s efforts to make a difference. In the beginning of the current school year, Elizabeth was facilitating a morning meeting. Each child was sharing something that they had accomplished and something that they were proud of. One of her students related that last year he was so upset about the soldiers being in Iraq that he convinced his class to write letters to soldiers so that they would get letters during the winter holidays. The boy’s idea sparked an entire school movement. His idea caught on and spread to other classes. Soon announcements were made daily and the entire school wrote letters to troops in Iraq. Elizabeth was extremely proud of this child’s accomplishments and encourages all of her students to enact their ideals.

Anti-Standardization

Elizabeth believes that schooling has the potential to be different than it is. For her, this means that teachers don’t have to overly rely on text books and work books. Additionally, she thinks that curriculum should be taught in a more “interdisciplinary” manner. Through these and other progressive methodologies she seeks to counteract “mind-numbing standardized methods.” She is concerned that such methods are detrimental to students and teachers.

Recently, Elizabeth was in a workshop for teachers to experience inquiry-based science, which is focused on student constructed learning rather than teacher-transmitted knowledge. She describes an “interesting force of motion experiment” when a local science teacher said “this is why we really need to get more back to the text books, that will help our

kids pass the end of grade tests.” Elizabeth is troubled by the fact that there is a problem when a child has to “read something in a book, take a test on it, or have it told to them in order to know it.” She charges that she despises the idea that when the going gets tough, teachers cling to textbooks rather than pulling together and working to find better methods. She says “it scares me because teachers are beginning to standardize their teaching more and more. How can we grow as educators if we have to teach rote lessons that are handed down from the district?” Elizabeth wonders as teaching becomes more standardized “how will anything ever change?” She believes that scripted lessons are counter to the whole point of education which is to look at what kids need and create curriculum that meets those needs. She fears that education will get “stuck in a rut.”

On the other hand, Elizabeth continues in her efforts to challenge standardized methods. In fact, she has been so successful in these efforts that her students have become keenly aware of the differences between the way that she teaches them and the way that their other teachers have instructed them. Recently, one of her students named Paul was reading a passage included in a standardized test. He stopped reading abruptly and said “I don’t really understand this. The story said that the teacher really wants children to learn to read, but she gave them a worksheet?” She asked him “Why do you think that teacher gave them the worksheet.” The student replied “I don’t know. But, I had a third grade teacher who always gave us reading worksheets, and I always wondered if she wanted me to be a better reader, then shouldn’t I be reading?” Elizabeth asked him if there were things in the worksheets that helped them to read. He replied, “Yes...well, I just didn’t agree with her methods.” It is interesting that this young student, like Elizabeth as a youth, wondered about his teacher’s methods and was disappointed by those that he thought were not effective.

On standardized testing, she says that she despises how much is directed by the district to teach writing in order that the children can pass the tests. She says “You must teach narrative writing. There are six ways to begin a narrative piece and there are three ways you must conclude a narrative piece... and you must have these three specific elements. It is tough to know that standardization and tests are these kids’ realities.” She hates the fact that she feels that if she doesn’t teach the children in this way, she might be “failing the children.” She knows that she has to “do the best for them” because the children are going on to sixth grade. At the same time, she relates, “(she) would never want someone to write a newspaper article using a narrative prompt.” She muses, “What would have happened if e. e. cummings listened to a teacher who mandated “use your capital letters! Use your capitals!”

Teaching the Skills for Success

While Elizabeth abhors standardized methods, she also understands that children do need to perform well on tests in order to be successful in school. She explains how she approached this dilemma: “We actually pulled out the science text books last week because I know that the students will have to confront them next year.” The class had a discussion on questions such as “What your fears about having text books, and how do you conquer your fears around this? What are those big words that you don’t know and how do you approach them when you don’t know what those words are and what they mean?” Elizabeth is also trying to teach her students that even though they will have textbooks, they will still need to analyze what they are reading. She helps her children to see that they can answer the questions correctly and still think, “Wait, is this right? Is there another perspective? Or is there another side to the story? You can be a conscious reader even though it is in a book and

that is the law.” Elizabeth is giving her students the tools not only to navigate middle school but also to “think for themselves.” She makes it explicit that while the “correct” answer—in other words, the answer that will be deemed appropriate by the test writer—could be one thing, they might not personally agree with it. In this way, she is ensuring that her students understand how to navigate standardized tests while at the same time encouraging them to be critical thinkers.

Critical Thinking

One of Elizabeth’s primary goals is make sure that “our country remains a democracy and that our kids learn how to think.” For her, it is not just important that her students can do fractions and multiply but also that they can think critically about not only the things that people say and do but also the things that they see on TV. She thinks that it is important for children to learn to think about what other people say but also to actually think about what is said and why. It is important for them to listen to others, learn to analyze what is said, and then give feedback in a positive way. Additionally, it is important for children to learn to be critical analyzers of text, newspapers, items on the Internet, or even television commercials. It is important for them to learn the process of thinking things through and to ascertain the effects on them personally and even on the wider world. It is important for them to learn how to solve problems and learn to love doing so.

Elizabeth says that she is not just teaching the Civil War and the weather, but beyond that there are big ideas and big questions the students are thinking about and struggling with. It stretches them to think more about the greater world around them. She says, “I am not preaching to my kids, saying this is how you should live your life. I am trying to get them to

think for themselves. If that means that they believe we should be at war with Iraq, and they can think it through and logically assert why they think that is so, then I have accomplished my goal.” However, Elizabeth discloses that one of the hardest things about that for her is “sleeping in the bed she makes.” By this, she means that if she wants her students to question and not just do things because someone in authority tells them to do it, then she has to deal with the times when she tells them to do something and they ask her: “but why?” She has to be willing to listen to her students when they have something to say. She has to acknowledge them and she can’t say, “No, you must raise your hand only during this time.” Being able to structure an effective classroom where children have a voice and can learn necessitates an environment where “they have a time and place for expressing their views.” This is easier said than done. Structuring a schedule and a physical space for discussion takes a great deal of time and effort.

Listening to Children

Elizabeth relates that some of her “social justice world view” comes from her parents because they treated her as though she was “a person who deserved respect.” This relates directly to her understanding the value of listening to children. She also attributes this to her experiences at the camp in Canada, where she first began honing this skill. She says that when a camp counselor first arrives, they work for a week to learn how to “really listen to children.” She shares that she had to work diligently to learn how to do this and that it was “one of the most meaningful lessons in the whole experience.” She adds “It was helpful to listen and talk with children and hear their ideas.”

For Elizabeth, the most exciting experience is observing her students get excited about ideas and hearing them listen to each other and question other people and knowing the difference that it is making for them and other people. For example, Elizabeth mentions a student who wrote a beautiful letter to the Mattel toy company that related his ideas on why they should not have gender specific toys. In other words, he thought that producing toys that were exclusively designed for girls or solely for boys was wrong. He ended his letter with the statement “when you do this, please understand how it affects children and their views of others.” Elizabeth enjoys watching her children grow and appreciates that they, with her support, learn to express themselves. She realizes that fifth grade is a time when the children are beginning to move out of ego-centrism. She says that they “start to see things from other people’s perspectives.” She relates that her students have raised money for the humane society and have written letters to troops. Currently, some of her former students who are now in middle school are currently making a movie that depicts historical figures doing things to help people. Many of their parents have visited or phoned her to tell her that if they had not had Elizabeth, they would never be doing things such as this. She affirms that it is good to know that she is “spawning future thinking.” She also sees that these dynamics ultimately result in a group of well informed, caring students. Their lessons in care begin in her classroom.

Classroom Community

Elizabeth understands that not only do children need to be listened to they need to learn to listen to others. Combining principles from *Teaching Children to Care* by Charney (2002) and her own ideas, she consciously teaches her students to listen and respect one

another. She shares: “I teach my kids to be civil and respectful, to question them and not just laugh and turn a blind eye and not be rude.” Elizabeth knows that her students need to learn how to communicate with one another. However, teaching children, or any person, to communicate is no easy task. She teaches these skills throughout the school day, but the foundation is built in morning meeting, or the time when Elizabeth meets with her students to discuss everything from classroom logistics to interpersonal issues that arise between students. Her colleagues appropriately have deemed her “the master of morning meeting.”

From the very beginning of the school year, Elizabeth effectively uses the morning meeting time to model effective communication skills including listening and responding respectfully. One way that she does this is by brainstorming basic ground rules with her students. As issues arise between children, she utilizes these as “teachable moments.” She also incorporates events that are depicted in stories and novels. If you look around her classroom now, you will see lists posted that depict the rules and skills that they have explored over the course of this school year. Let me share a few with you. The first poster shows the class’s main communication principal: PROPS (People Respecting Other People Speaking). The rule here is that if someone else is speaking, the other children respect that person and listen to him or her, provided that they don’t dominate the conversation. Throughout the day and during morning meeting in particular, you can hear both Elizabeth and her students calling out “PROPS” if anyone speaks out of turn. In this way each, each student and Elizabeth share responsibility and ownership in creating an environment where respecting one’s voice and the voices of others prevails. This idea is supported by another outlined on her wall. It shows how a person’s demeanor influences how others view him or her.

The second poster lists three modes in which one might communicate and the results of operating out of those modes of communication. These modes are passive, aggressive, and assertive. First, under the category of passive, Elizabeth and her children observe that a passive person was nervous, avoided direct eye contact, didn't really talk, mumbled, and as a result didn't get what he wanted. Second the aggressive person is angry, demonstrates angry body language, throws things, stomps, is mean, and as a result this person also does not get what they want. Last, the assertive person doesn't yell, is not aggressive, uses an even tone of voice, and as a result typically gets what they want.

Likewise a third list shows a model called the CNR (complaint, need, and request) model shows children how they can handle conflict or anger. First, under the title "complaint" are the questions "What is your complaint?" and "What is upsetting you?" Second, under the heading "need" are the questions "What do you need?" and "How do you feel?" The third heading, "request," is followed by the questions "What is your request?" and "What do you want them to do now?" Elizabeth hopes that teaching children to communicate will positively impact their community and their future communities. She sees a direct correlation between clear communication and being able to mediate conflict. If children grow up to become skillful communicators, they potentially can reduce the potential for violence and increase the possibility of harmony in their families and communities.

Elizabeth does not only encourage her children to communicate well orally, she is also accomplished at teaching writing. She draws on the work of the Literacy through Photography Project at Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies and the theories of the Teachers' College Reading and Writing Project at Columbia University.

The Literacy through Photography Program is an arts education program created by Wendy Weald that encourages children to “explore their world as they photograph scenes from their lives, and then use these images as catalysts for verbal and written expression.” This project helps children to have the opportunity to link the forms of photography and narrative writing. Through this project, children gain skills in writing and increase their creativity. They can also potentially gain an increased sense of self worth and pride in their families and communities. Elizabeth’s school is a “model school” for this project, and Elizabeth appreciates many aspects of the program. She embraces the ideas that art and writing can be combined to teach children essential skills and help students gain self-confidence.

Elizabeth commonly refers to one of her main teaching resources as “Lucy Calkins’ stuff.” Lucy Calkins, founding director of the Reading and Writing Program at Teachers’ College at Columbia University, has written several books that Elizabeth uses in her writing instruction including, *Lessons from a Child* (1983), *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994), and *The Writing Workshop: A World of Difference* (1987) with Shelley Harwane, founding principal of the Manhattan New School. Elizabeth finds Calkin’s ideas on writing particularly useful in not only teaching children to effectively communicate in writing, but also in helping them develop critical thinking skills. For example, Elizabeth uses these ideas in teaching children to develop skills in writing non-fiction. She outlined the following prompts on a big poster titled “Pushing Our Thinking”:

1. For example....
2. Another example is.....
3. In addition.....
4. This makes me realize.....
5. This is important because.....
6. This is giving me the idea that.....

7. The reason for this is.....
8. This connects with.....
9. I partly disagree because.....
10. This is similar to.....
11. This is different from.....
12. I used to think ...but now I realize.....
13. What I think this says about me is.....

Each of these ideas is directly related to Elizabeth's goals of pushing her children to critically think, to express themselves, and to value their own voice. It only makes sense that in order for a child's voice to be honored, they must be able to find their voice in the first place.

Elizabeth not only helps the children to ensure that their voices are heard, but also that they can ascertain what they truly believe and communicate those ideals clearly.

The goal of learning to work well with others extends not only to writing but also to science lessons. For example, Elizabeth and her class created the following rules for working together:

How will we work together well as engineers?

- Talk to your group first (plan)
- Take turns everyone does they're part
- Agree or disagree assertively
- Everyone talks and listens
- Negotiate
- Respect others
- Don't laugh at mistakes
- Ask people to stop nicely if you don't like what they are doing
- WORK HARD, PLAY HARD
- Be responsible

As you can see, these rules translate to not only being successful as a team but also to how children can learn to respect one another and themselves. The students learn content, but they also learn skills and capacities that will help them to successfully navigate their lives.

Elizabeth has a great deal to teach her students about science; the way she approaches her

teaching practice and sustains her work holds a great deal of lessons for other teachers as well.

Sustenance: Obstacles to and Supports for Teaching for Social Justice

It is interesting to note that although Elizabeth is now firmly committed to teaching, last year, she wasn't teaching in a classroom. She spent the year working with adjudicated youth in an Outward Bound Program in Florida. She relates that part of what drove her out of the classroom was standardized testing and other constraints of public school classroom teaching. She yearned for the opportunity to escape testing, canned curriculum, and mandates from the state. Initially relieved, she spent several months enjoying her interactions with her new students and living outdoors. However, she soon started longing to return to her students in her urban school. She relates, "As I was paddling down a river, I started thinking of all the ways that I could incorporate experiential education into my classroom and all the neat things we could do and then was so disappointed to remember that I didn't have a classroom to teach those things in." Elizabeth's love of teaching drew her back to the same urban Southern school that she had taught in for the first three years of her career. However, her experiences with Outward Bound renewed her devotion to teaching and inspired her to bring things in a new way to her students. These two elements relate directly to Elizabeth's approach to sustaining her work. As you will see, she thrives on her work and the way that she has set up supportive networks of colleagues and friends who share in her passion for teaching and learning. On the other hand, she is saddened when others don't share in this passion.

Passion for Teaching and Learning

Elizabeth relates that it is often frustrating when other teachers think that their students “can’t learn” or that teaching is “just a job.” For instance, one third grade teacher we’ll call her Ms. S viewed her class as falling into two categories: “the good kids” and “the bad kids.” One afternoon, Ms. S was so frustrated with the struggling children in her class that she divided the room in half. She designated the right side of the room the “Good Ship Lollipop” and the other “The Titanic.” She directed the “good children” to sit on the “Good Ship Lollipop” and the “bad children” to board “The Titanic.” She shouted “The Titanic is going down” and it was up to those passengers to “shape up” or they would “go down with the ship.” This is but one example of the stark contrast between Elizabeth’s caring approach and that of some, but thankfully not all, of her teaching colleagues. While this example is extreme, sometimes the contrast manifests more subtly.

Elizabeth shares that she was at a dinner party hosted by a close friend and colleague. She and Ashley enthusiastically discussed an idea for a new educational program for which they were considering writing a grant. As Elizabeth and her friend chatted, their voices grew in volume. They wrote down their plans and became increasingly animated as their plan developed. Another teacher, Emily, peered over their shoulder looking quizzically at the dynamic twosome. Emily asked, “Are you two planning a vacation?” Elizabeth explained that they were planning a new program for students at their school. Emily replied, “You two are just too into teaching.” Elizabeth was taken aback not because she needed Emily’s approval, but simply because she couldn’t understand why Emily was not enthusiastic about teaching and education in general. In other words, she saw that Emily considered teaching as “just a job.”

Elizabeth sees teaching as a calling and therefore as something to dedicate one's time, energy, and attention to. She relates that one of her Education professors in college stated to her and her classmates that "you are all going to be good teachers because you are women and you like to share." Elizabeth's ideals of teaching are counter to this idea that teaching is simply about "sharing and caring." Elizabeth is a dedicated professional and she therefore approaches teaching as a vocation, not just a mere job. She has difficulty in understanding why others are in the field if they don't have similar commitments.

She feels deeply aggravated when she sees other teachers complaining about students in front of them or making derogatory comments about them. In particular, Elizabeth expresses disappointment when she sees students that she has had in other people's classroom and they are "bored." She is equally disheartened when she observes students that she will have in the future sitting in classrooms where the children are being "conditioned for school." In other words, the children are not being taught how to critically think but simply to answer questions and pass tests. She relates:

It is frustrating when other teachers are doing things that directly counteract what I am doing in my room. There are people who aren't teaching the kids to think. They say things that are disrespectful to themselves and the students. I know that I will get their students down the road and it is tough to work against those dynamics in children that have had bad experiences when they were younger. It is also tough to know that there are some children who will not have other kinds of experiences later.

Elizabeth is committed to providing children with positive learning experiences in their classrooms. For her, this includes engaging students in active ways and challenging them to excel. Yet she doesn't believe that her way is the only way. She says that while she agrees, "there will never be a school where all the teachers are wonderful and perfect," she also understands that not all teachers teach the same way. She says that there are some teachers at her school who teach "traditionally" and that some children thrive in that environment. She

believes that these teachers likely have some skills that she does not and it is good that children have “different kinds of experiences.” Elizabeth’s critique doesn’t necessarily stand on methods (traditional vs. progressive); her concern lies with whether a teacher is dedicated to the profession and to making sure that children have a positive schooling experience.

Supportive Colleagues

Elizabeth says that she has “Always had a vision of how it could be in schools, for example how things could be more inter-disciplinary.” Being at her current elementary school, which espouses arts and humanities pedagogies, helped her to see that there were other people who had the same vision she has. In other words, she has colleagues who are putting their shared ideals into practice. Working with such people helps her to sustain herself as a teacher who is working for social justice.

Elizabeth has created a strong support network of like-minded teachers and friends. She knows that these people can help her to grow as a person and a teacher. She knows that she cannot do these things alone. She is clear that with the support of others, she can learn and grow. She describes the people who she seeks out by sharing:

I surround myself with people who I respect and who respect me, are encouraging and positive, and who help me take my practice further. They all have their own individual things that they are passionate about and things that inspire them. But if I didn’t have these relationships, I wouldn’t be able to keep going.

Elizabeth believes that it is important to find other teachers who can listen, share joys and frustrations with, plan with, and who will push her practice through questioning and guiding. She says that “No one should have to do this on their own. Teaching is not a one-person thing.” Therefore, she encourages teachers to get other people to work with them. One such group that Elizabeth has found support in is the Critical Friends’ Group.

Critical Friends' Group

Elizabeth describes the Critical Friends' Group as people who "want to make change" and who are caring and passionate." The Critical Friends' Group has given her the opportunity to reflect in a structured way but also it went "one step past that" in which her colleagues helped "her to reflect even more." It brought her the knowledge that there are people doing the same work and going through the same process of trying to think about teaching and learning more deeply. She says, "It has really been nice to know that there are people who are interested in trying to push me further in my practice."

Although Elizabeth greatly enjoyed her work with this group, she thinks that the group would have benefited from included members with varying ideals. She explains:

I wish that we did have someone in the Critical Friends' Group who has different value system than the rest of us, as we are all the same politically, it would be nice to have a staunch conservative to discuss things with. I do think you can have an activist teacher with conservative views, and it would be interesting to learn what their point of view is.

Elizabeth comments reflect her interest in learning not just from like-minded individuals but also those that have opinions that are different from her own. While she is open to learning from others with differing world-views, she does prefer to have a supportive and like-minded principal.

Supportive Administration

Elizabeth believes that it is up to principals to know and understand their faculty and staff. They should know their strengths and so it should be their responsibility to provide resources to teachers but not to enforce scripted lessons. She thinks that enforcing such curriculum is not right. She says, "I will not teach that way, and I will not work in a school

that makes you do it.” Elizabeth is adamantly opposed to scripted lessons and rote learning. She has chosen to work in a school that has a “supportive administration.”

She relates: “For me, being in an environment where the principal is supportive of progressive methods is important.” She is thankful that Mr. Matlock appreciates what the teachers do in the classroom and understands what it takes to be a good teacher. She says that it is important that he doesn’t force teachers to “teach to the test” or teach the standardized lessons from the district.” It empowers her to become even stronger and to learn more about teaching. Moreover, because Elizabeth student taught with Mr. Matlock, she knows that he supports progressive pedagogy and “spent many hours at kids’ houses when social services visited.” Elizabeth feels supported by Mr. Matlock personally and professionally. Without his efforts, she sees that her job would be much more difficult.

Dealing with Feelings

She says it is hard for her to know where to put her “feelings if students don’t do well on the tests.” It is hard because while there are challenges to the way that she teaches, she doesn’t think there are any cons. However, she does say that she is “not overly concerned about what others think about her.” Elizabeth is remarkable in that she “doesn’t need anyone’s approval.” She adds, “I don’t need everyone to love me.” She explains that when others disagree with her, this disagreement proves to her that she is different than the majority of others. She explains “being different isn’t necessarily better,” but it does prove to her that she is “thinking for myself” and not just doing things the way she is “supposed to do them.” She adds:

I spend every weekend planning and thinking about teaching. Not everyone has to do that. I don’t want to say that everyone in teaching needs to think the same way that I

do, and I don't want to say that they have to teach the same things I teach and they don't have to spend as many hours as I do thinking about teaching. Different people need different things. But if I want to do that, by God, get out of the way and let me do it!

Elizabeth is a dedicated and caring teacher. She knows that being the kind of teacher she strives to be takes dedication, time, and energy. She remains eager to dedicate herself to this work. While she knows she is "not perfect," she does know her students deserve this dedication.

CHAPTER 7

ASHLEY

Teaching is not about what you think you are going to do and what you have practiced to do. It is about your kids and what they need.
Ashley, 2006

A Portrait of Ashley

If you listen very closely, you will hear the sound of marching feet coming down the halls of this urban elementary school. As you turn your attention to the group, you will see a smiling but focused group of second graders who are chanting, “we shall overcome.” They are holding signs that call for ending hate, listening to children, and a working for a better world for all the people living in it.

Look around at these radiant faces, Latino, African-American, Caucasian, poor, middle-class, wealthy, learning disabled, gifted, and all united in their hope that they are marching for what their hero Martin Luther King Jr. would have called for today: peace, non-violent solutions to problems, love of learning, and most importantly, for their young voices to be heard. Striding next to this orderly group of young protestors is a very proud young teacher named Ashley Weston. Although she didn’t originally plan to hold a rally and lead a march, her approach to working with children did inspire it.

The march was conceived when Ashley read a story about King’s life, how he grew up in a segregated world, and what he did to change that. After Ashley finished reading, Chelsea, a young white girl, was shocked to realize that if she lived in King’s era, she would

not be able to associate with her best friend, Lovely, an African-American female. Soon, other children began to share their thoughts on how unfair it would be and how sad they would feel if they were not allowed to be friends with one another solely based upon the color of their skin. As Ashley facilitated a discussion on racism and prejudice with the children, one child wondered aloud what King would fight for today. Ashley helped the group to brainstorm around current events and issues that King would care about if he were alive in the twenty-first century. The children thought that he would speak out against the Iraq War. They also thought that King would encourage them to have hope and to work against hate and violence. As the discussion unfolded, the group decided that a march would be the best way for them to foster King's ideals.

Ashley spent several weeks planning the march with her students. They wrote in their literacy journals about how they envisioned it. They created slogans based upon the topics that they thought King would be most interested. Ashley asked each one to think of a slogan for his or her own individual protest sign. Each carefully wrote their slogan on a piece of theme paper and then used dictionaries, peer support, and Ashley's help to check for spelling and grammar accuracy. One child's slogan read "hate doesn't overcome hate" and another's read "love is stronger than hate." The group message reflected a call for peace and non-violent means to solve problems.

On the day of the march, the children each collected their signs and marched from their room throughout each of the three wings of the school. They concluded with a rally in the cafeteria where the principal awaited them with open arms. As this event occurred during the lunch period, the cafeteria was filled with children from other classes, some of whom were curious, some interested, and some oppositional. Some of the other children teased

Ashley's students. Although Ashley was disappointed in the other children who made fun of her students, she used this situation as a teachable moment.

When Ashley and her students returned to their classroom, they were tired. Some were still excited about their march, and some felt ashamed by the teasing. Ashley facilitated a closure discussion during which the children recalled that the people who marched with Martin Luther King were also tired and that people also made fun of them. The children expressed their disappointment at their mixed reception, their recognition of their role model's similar experiences, and their conviction to—as one of them so eloquently said—“keep standing up for what is right even when others are mean.”

Three days after this momentous event, a picture of the children's March appeared in the local newspaper under the caption “Dream-Catchers.” Ashley took this opportunity to reinforce the importance of making sure one's voice is heard, standing up for ideals, and realizing the power of a group united for a common cause. She reinforced these ideas by stating clearly to the group that they indeed were “dream-catchers” in that they “caught” Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream. As you read about Ashley's life and teaching practice, you will see that she does indeed support the visions and dreams of both King and those of her young students. This is but one example of Ashley's commitment to enacting social change through democratic means.

Context

Ashley grew up in a small, very conservative Southern city. She describes it as being a “place where difference was not tolerated.” She recalls that “people of color lived on one side of town and white people lived on the other.” She understood that her identity as a

white, middle-class, female kept her apart from people “who were not like her.” The culture of this place not only reinforced prejudicial stereotypes but also reinforced traditional expectations of who Ashley was and what she would become. However, she did benefit from a family who did not fully embrace the culture of the place that surrounded them.

Ashley’s father, a progressive lawyer, had a profound impact on her political world-view. Although her father doesn’t view himself as a “liberal,” he did set up a storefront office for the Kerry and Edward’s presidential campaign and contributed greatly to other progressive campaigns. This was a bold move considering that the area that they live in is not only predominantly Republican, but is also extremely conservative. Both of Ashley’s parents are critical of the political climate in their community. They have encouraged Ashley and her sister to see the possibility of encouraging positive social change through political means. Because of this, Ashley envisioned herself following in her father’s footsteps to become a lawyer. She also attributes her interests in both education and law to the goal of “helping people,” a quality that she attributes to her parents’ influence.

Ashley’s father is very active in their church community and teaches Sunday school. Likewise, Ashley’s mother, a former guidance counselor at a local school, often visited her students’ homes and invited them to her home. She showed Ashley that education doesn’t just happen inside the school walls. Ashley reflects:

My mom, who was a very highly esteemed guidance counselor, cared about kids in a way that I had never seen before and rarely since probably. Sometimes my mom would bring kids home when they couldn’t go home because of some difficult family situation. Sometimes we would go Christmas shopping for other families because they couldn’t afford it. What she did went way, way, way above what her job required. What she did for kids was not limited to what was happening in school. She believed in the power of education but also in serving the community.

Ashley learned the value of going above and beyond what is expected and the importance of helping other people. Although she does respect her parent's efforts to help others, she is also critical of the way that their help is offered. While Ashley believes that her parents' intentions are good, her view of helping "marginalized youth" has evolved from what she sees as a "benevolent helper" model to the idea that in order to help others, one must teach them to help themselves. Moreover, it is linked to her belief in the possibilities of others to shape their own destiny. This idea began when she was in high school when she volunteered to tutor a boy who had been diagnosed with leukemia. She recalls:

I think that the actual experience that called me to be a teacher happened in my junior year in high school. I started working with a ninth grader who I'll call George. He had leukemia and therefore had been out of school for an entire year. I worked with him for two hours per week. I think watching him and seeing how much school kept him going made all the difference.

This experience marks the first time in Ashley's young life that she experienced herself as a mentor and teacher. Ashley was inspired by her work with George. In fact, she found working with him to be one of the most memorable and influential events in her high school years. Although Ashley was at the top of her class in terms of grades and quite popular with her friends, working with this student had the most lasting effect on her. Ashley recalls:

In February, they had an awards assembly for students that earned all A's and were on honor roll. As George walked across the stage, I was sobbing and thought that although I had done a lot of things to get recognition for, nothing compared to this because I played a big part in his success.

This event helped to cement Ashley's choice to become a teacher. As she mentions, all of the accolades and honors that she earned in high school paled in comparison to this one achievement. She felt fulfilled by helping another person and continues to thrive on facilitating her students' achievements today. While tutoring George had a strong influence

on her choice to teach, traveling and working overseas also helped her to choose teaching as a career.

In college, Ashley worked for several nonprofit organizations and volunteered in an international development program. She visited Tanzania with this group, a trip that had a profound influence on her. She learned that many people are denied basic life sustaining resources and rights that we consider fundamental. She became increasingly aware of economic aspects of social justice. She said that this experience, along with her father being a lawyer, encouraged her to consider international law as a career. It also helped her learn about the power and potential of education to positively impact people's lives and society as a whole. Ashley comments:

In Tanzania, it was all about giving people what they need through education and through economic development. I got really into international perspectives and different needs of different nations. I saw that providing education and then building an intellectually strong group can further the needs of a country, which helps to build a nation. And obviously we are not doing it everywhere, and we are not doing it here. But at least I learned about that possibility.

The tension between the power and possibilities for education and the reality of how it actually occurs in schools is evident throughout her narrative. Likewise, this tension made it difficult for her to commit to teaching even as late as the spring semester of her senior year in college.

Ashley wondered if she really could "make a difference." She was concerned about many aspects of how public schools are administered and whether she would be happy in an institutionalized environment. She shared that she had a great deal of respect for many teachers but that she had not seen many who she considered to be effective in teaching diverse learners. She was worried that she would be "alone in a sea of traditional

practitioners.” Part of this worry began in with her experiences in her teacher-training program.

Ashley did not find her teacher training experiences to be positive. She says, “I went to the school of education and did not have a great experience there, so I signed up for the LSAT (Law School Admission Test) thinking that law might provide a better option for helping others.” However, once she began student teaching, she realized that teaching was the field for her. She shares:

I was planning to go to law school. But, when I started student teaching and being with the kids, I started remembering why I really wanted to teach and how much power is in teaching. I recalled why I was originally drawn to it. I interned in a supportive school that had a high at-risk population and just being in that classroom every day, brought it all back to me.

The primary elements that inspired Ashley to become a teacher include: 1) enjoyment of working with children, 2) belief in the power in teaching, and 3) a desire to help children.

After Ashley became recommitted to teaching, she applied to the Teach for America program. She hoped to be placed in a school where she could serve a diverse population in terms of race, class, socio-economic status, culture, and ethnicity. She also wanted to seek out social justice teaching in action. She states:

I realized that I had not met like-minded teachers who felt the way I did about the power and possibilities for education. I was looking at education as a way to further democracy but I hadn’t met anyone who seemed to agree with me.

Ashley was accepted by the Teach for America program, and was assigned to an inner city school in Baltimore, Maryland. She was eager to serve there. Life however, had a different plan in store for her. In April of her senior year, Ashley’s father was diagnosed with cancer. Because her family needed her, Ashley realized that she could not move out of the state. Concurrently, the teacher with whom Ashley student taught decided to leave her post as a

first grade teacher to enter graduate school. Ashley applied for and was offered this first grade position. For her, this was a fine consolation. She was thrilled to be able to stay and teach at this school. She was drawn to working with the diverse student population and appreciated the school's arts and humanities philosophy. These elements supported Ashley to work toward her conception of social justice.

Ashley's belief in the power and possibility of public schooling was at the heart of her choice to teach. She says:

I think the reasons why I went into teaching and my passions for it is that public education is the best chance and hope that every kid can make it in the United States and the world. Every child, regardless of who they are, can come into this place and—of course this is in theory—can come into a school that is free (no financial cost) and open to them and potentially become something good for themselves and someone who can contribute to society.

Ashley's comments reflect both her realistic and idealistic perceptions of public schooling.

While she is hopeful, she is not naive. On the one hand, she believes that public schools could be a place where all children "have an equal chance to succeed." She also understands that schools don't always live up to that potential. Although she sees this goal as difficult, she still works toward fulfilling that potential every day. Moreover, Ashley consciously chooses to work in a public school in a diverse urban setting because she firmly believes that working there provides her the opportunity to support a diverse group of learners. She believes that supporting individual children can have a positive impact upon an entire community. These ideas are connected with how Ashley self-identifies as a teacher for social justice as well as to her social justice framework.

Self-Identification

Ashley does consider herself to be an activist, but she eschews what she perceives to be a stereotypical activist identity. She says:

I am an activist, but I am not the stereotypical activist with a shaved head. I believe in protest activities, but fundamentally activism is about what you are saying and how you are saying it.

It is interesting to note that Ashley's perception of a stereotypical activist is one who has "a shaved head." This is very different than the stereotypical image of activists from earlier generations. Truly, activists' tactics, identities, and even their stereotypes have evolved over the years. Likewise, activists of the current generation most likely don't look or act like any of those from earlier generations. Gitlin (2007) asserts, "Today's left-leaning activists don't look like yesterday's and that's okay. Some skeptics miss the abundant signs of citizen activism because when they look around, they don't see replicas of past protests, and so they conclude that everyone is drowning in apathy." He adds that, "Much of today's activism is invisible or operates (in the words of a 60's curse) "inside the system" (Gitlin, 2007, p. 71). This is certainly true of Ashley and the other teacher-participants in that their activism is expressed "within schools" instead of "outside of them."

Ashley's view of activism is complex. On the one hand, she does not embrace what she sees as "the stereotype of activism," but on the other, she does embrace what she considers to be activist endeavors. She explains:

For me, activism is about doing something with your life that promotes making a connection. Teaching is a site for that because it is connecting your experience with the children that you have with this great idea of democracy and social change. It is using your life to do that and using your work to do that.

Ashley sees her identity as an activist teacher as directly connected to her work in her classroom. Her social justice framework is based on the ideas of working with children to

support their needs while at the same time fostering democracy and social change. She appreciates her position as a teacher and the opportunity to work for justice through her profession. She shares:

I think you are lucky if you can use your life and work to further social justice because a lot of people don't do that. Their activism is outside of their work. I think that using what you do to further that and to connect people to this idea of social change is activism. I think this directly ties in to teaching and how teaching is related to democracy.

Ashley chose teaching because she saw it as a career where she could help children. She also wanted the opportunity to enact her social justice ideals through her work. She appreciates the opportunity to express her activism through her profession, not outside of it.

Social Justice Framework

Ashley's view of social justice is linked to her vision of the power and possibility of public schooling. She also connects this to the idea of democratic schooling. She says:

In a democracy, school has a huge role to play. To be truly democratic, all kids have to have an equal chance to succeed, and of course that is not happening in the vast majority of situations. But it is possible, and that possibility is what makes me want to teach and what fulfills me.

The idea that every child should have "an equal chance" is at the heart of her social justice framework. She strives to align these ideals through who she is and what she does in the classroom. This requires making sure that each child's voice is heard which Ashley ensures through democratic classroom practices.

Classroom Practice

Ensuring students' future success necessitates attention to both their individual needs and their potential to contribute to their community. It starts with helping children to

experience school as a positive place where they can achieve success, even if those successes are very small. This is also closely linked with her ideals of fostering a democratic classroom community.

Democratic Classroom Community

Ashley believes that it is important for her to set up a community where “students’ voices are heard.” She said that it is important that students know she is listening to them and that “they do not perceive her as a dictator.” Ashley is dedicated to providing a classroom experience where all children feel honored and heard. One example of how she models this is reflected in the way decisions are made in her classroom on a daily basis. She explains:

One example of the way to show children how a democracy works is to make their classroom community a place where they feel heard. When we make a decision that affects the whole class, we hear the different choices and we vote on them. Everyone gets to vote on the options we talked about. Once we’ve voted, the majority wins. That means sometimes your choice doesn’t win, but that is the fairest way to do that. It makes it so that everyone has a voice, and hopefully they will want that later in life.

While voting may seem to be a superficial means of working toward a democratic classroom, Ashley explains that young children need to start learning about democratic principles on a very basic level before they can begin to understand the complexities of ensuring that their voices are heard. In fact, Ashley believes that the most important message that she conveys to her students is that “their opinions count and that students’ voices should be heard.”

As the children learned this, Ashley began to encourage them to participate in classroom planning more actively. Because Ashley plans to loop—in other words to continue teaching the same group in second grade—she asked the class to help her decide what the first day of second grade would look like next year. The children chose a chapter book and a picture book to read on the first day. They also thought that they would like to write poems

about their summers and put them in a shared book at the beginning of the new school year so that each child could share what they did over the summer. Ashley believes that because the children are actively participating in the planning of the first school days that they will be more likely to look forward to returning to school and will be more likely to engage more fully in the learning process. Ashley relates:

Education has a big role to play in establishing democratic ideals for children and people of all ages. I have a role in that by hearing my students and making sure that their voices are heard. I am teaching them to be thoughtful, critical, contributing people in the world and to help them to know what a community is and what it means to be a part of community.

Developing critical thinking skills is an important step in helping children to engage in democratic processes.

Critical Thinking

Ashley asserts that although critical thinking is a very important skill to teach her students, she admits that it is not easy to do so. She says:

I think this is where I have needed to regroup my teaching some because I really do think that is the most important thing to teach students: to reflect and be critical, to wonder, to question, to be aware of everything that is going on around them. I think it is hard because in our society, kids are taught to do what they are told and to do and exactly how they are told to do it. I think they really need to just wonder and figure things out for themselves.

Ashley relates that many of her students are not used to being asked critical questions by their parents or teachers, meaning that they are not asked questions that encourage their capacity to problem solve or reflect more deeply on the complexities of an idea. She adds that most of her students are asked questions that adults would consider to have a “right” or “wrong” answer. She sees that the majority of her students were originally “only able to think about ideas in ways that others told them to think about them.” Ashley shares that she is very

concerned that if children don't learn to think for themselves, they will be more susceptible to negative influences such as gangs and the media. Ashley relates:

It is important for them (children) to understand how do they know that something is okay or not okay? And not because someone tells you that it is okay or not okay. Why is it truly okay? It is important just to be thinking about who you are and what feels right to you.

Ashley explains that not only is it important for kids to know if something is "okay" or not, but also why is it okay. Take note of how she connects this to a child knowing who they are and what is right for them. This is in direct contrast to a banking model of schooling where the teacher tells the student what is right or wrong and the student must mindlessly agree because the teacher says it is so (Freire, 1977, 2000).

Ashley teaches critical thinking using a variety of approaches from art to reading. For example, she models effective questioning strategies during reading circles. Such questions might include: I wonder why the main character chose to help the other characters? And, I wonder what would happen if the character made a different choice. Such questions encourage children to think more deeply about characters' motives and actions as well as to make predictions of what might happen next.

When her students are conversing, Ashley makes a point to ask the children why and/or how they think something. She encourages her students not only to share their opinions, thoughts, and ideas, but also to explore why and how they came to those ideas. She believes that it is important for her students to think about why they think something or why they make a certain choice. She also attempts to give the children the tools to encourage one another to critically reflect in their every day conversations. Her encouragement to teach her children critical thinking skills also enables her to explore issues of oppression.

The children learn to apply critical thinking skills to historical events and societal structures. One example of this was the discussion on Martin Luther King Jr. outlined in the beginning of this section. Through this conversation, we can see that Ashley's students have learned to think and discuss ideas beyond a superficial level. This conversation also helped students to value and honor differences.

Valuing Difference

Ashley knows that her conception of valuing difference is expressed in a variety of ways in her classroom. Ashley believes that all of her children benefit from learning that everyone, regardless of their identity factors, should be respected and appreciated. Therefore, she teaches her students to respect themselves and one another. She says, "I think for me one of the biggest ideas in education is getting to know the "other" and being okay with the "other" no matter what the "other" is. This is true for children and adults."

Ashley is working on helping her students respect one another regardless of their race, class, or gender. She also sees that it is important for her to work on these ideals herself. Because of this belief, she has moved to the diverse urban community that surrounds her school. She has also undertaken a process of interrogating the beliefs that were instilled in her from a very young age. She says:

I am living somewhere that is very different than anywhere that I have ever lived. I am hanging out with people that are very different from who I've ever hung out with before. I am in the process (of being okay with the other) myself. I grew up in a place that was very much about the idea that there is one way to be and there is a right way and a wrong way to be in life. I grew up with the traditional idea that many people are not equal. Then there came this understanding of the oppression of people who are not part of the "right way" to be, and that included minorities as well as lesbian and gay couples. Even people of a middle class and definitely lower socioeconomic status, are not part of this idea of what's acceptable, and these ideas are very much outside of the idea of what an operational democracy truly is.

Ashley links the idea of valuing others to her conception of democracy. She believes that respecting all individuals, regardless of their identity factors, is key to supporting social justice. Moreover, she is working on these elements both inside and outside of her classroom. Ashley's choice to live and work in a diverse urban school district is particularly interesting in that she grew up in an upper-middle class, predominantly white, and majority politically conservative community. Ashley appreciates the opportunity to work in a community where she can encourage children of all backgrounds to work against oppressive structures and to excel regardless of their identity factors. She explains:

I really feel good about teaching where I do because I really believe we can provide an environment where children learn that the other is okay. I think that if we can teach kids that "the other", whatever that other is, is okay then there will be a lot less oppression in society. I think we can do a lot more with children around these issues when they are six and they do see that other people may be different than them but they are still open to that being okay.

Ashley wants her students to see differences not as negative but as interesting. She believes that "differences should not be ignored in a 'color-blind' manner, but be honored because they are what make us who we are." Additionally, she believes that differences should be valued and that "the earlier in a child's life that we work with that, the more children will internalize the belief that difference should be celebrated not ignored or refuted." By supporting young children to value others, Ashley believes that she can have a positive impact not only on the child him or herself, but also the community in which the child lives. One way she does this is through supporting the diverse group of parents and families that she works with.

Working with Parents

Ashley believes that supporting families is one of the most important aspects of her job because she sees the potential to have a long-lasting positive impact on her students. She consciously tries to create situations where parents and families feel supported and heard. She believes that although she may only have her students for one or two years, supporting a parent can positively affect children's lives for a long time. Two of the main ways that she supports parents is by making school a welcoming and safe place for them and by teaching them how to support their child's learning.

Ashley understands that many of her class parents did not have positive experiences in school when they were children. Therefore, they are hesitant to trust her as a teacher. In fact, one of her class parents told her that "it seems that teachers have some secret that they are not telling me." After meeting with educators of color and reading Paley (2000) and Delpit (1994), Ashley realized that she should engage parents in conversations about their cultural understandings and about what they want for their children. She mentions working with Tyrie and his mother. Ashley's was Tyrie's seventh teacher, and inasmuch his mother was "turned off" by their experiences in schools. Ashley worked hard to encourage Tyrie and his mother to feel welcome and supported in school. Through perseverance and patience, Ashley did encourage both Tyrie and his mother to come to see school as an inviting and supportive place. Making school a welcoming environment is part of any teachers' practice. However, Ashley brought a deeper awareness of how oppressive structures of schooling negatively affect students and families of "marginalized backgrounds." This awareness inspired and informed her work with this family. She doesn't see Tyrie's behavior as "his fault;" instead, she understood that it is a result of the culmination of years of negative

schooling experiences (Delpit, 1994). This understanding also enabled her to see Tyrie's potential. She admits that she would not be able to have this insight without the support of the Critical Friends' Group, insights of educators of color, and her own reading. I will elaborate on these areas in the next section.

Sustenance: Obstacles to and Supports for Teaching for Social Justice

Because Ashley is a first year teacher, the obstacles to and supports for her teaching for social justice are different from the other teacher-participants. Research shows that new teachers are leaving the profession at a significant rate. Ingersoll (2004) found that 39% of teachers leave the field by the end of five years and 29% leave within the first three years of teaching. A study by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) revealed that newer teachers tend to be more open to new ideas and to have high levels of job satisfaction, which is probably due to the fact that "they come to their work with a clean slate" (NCES, 1997; Watkins, 1995). However, they can quickly become disheartened if they do not have clear expectations and proper guidance. They also need empowerment and the freedom to determine how they will fulfill those expectations (Berliner, 1986; NCES, 1997; Voke, 2003; Watkins, 1995). Moreover, it is important for new teachers to become actively engaged with other teachers and other people in the school. Watkins (1995) states:

New teachers can quickly become disconnected from schools and isolated from school goals and isolated from discussions about teaching and learning if they are relegated to the role of passive observer until they gain experience. (p. 83)

As Watkins points out, new teachers need to be included in conversations on teaching and learning. He adds, "new teachers cannot be left to figure things out in a vacuum" (Watkins, 1995, 83). Sergiovanni (1996) found that participating in a learning community can help new teachers to become effective practitioners. Likewise, it is important for new teachers to be a

part of community that is willing to value their ideas and to be open to their perspectives (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Fullman & Hargraves, 1996; Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1999; Sergiovanni, 1996; Watkins, 1995). Including new teachers in professional learning communities could have a significant impact on the numbers of new teachers who opt to stay in the field.

Watkins (1995) asserts that there are three significant activities that are necessary for a “strong recruitment and retention program” (p. 84). These are: 1) “assigning a strong coaching mentor who can grow professionally as much as those they mentor;” 2) “supporting and extending innovative practice through active research;” and 3) “supporting collegial discussion and learning among experienced staff, new staff, and the principal through rigorous study groups” (p. 84). Although Ashley has been assigned a mentor through the district and has had ample opportunity to participate in professional development provided by the district and her principal, the things that she has reported as being most supportive to her practice as a new teacher are self-generated rather than provided by the district or her principal. The Critical Friends’ Group is one specific example of such a self-created, self-sustaining activity.

Critical Friends’ Group

As stated earlier, Ashley initially formed the Critical Friends’ Group with Rachel. On the recommendation of Don Richmond, Ashley approached Rachel to learn more about how to teach for social justice. During their first meeting, both agreed that they would like to meet and study regularly. They invited Elizabeth to participate, and all four later agreed to my participation.

Ashley hoped that this group would not only support her during her first year of teaching but also to “push her in her practice.” Despite the fact that Ashley was new to teaching, she was still willing to be open to constructive criticism. It took courage and confidence for her to engage more established teachers in such a process. Yet, she did so without hesitation because she understood that it would help her to better serve her new class. Such experiences could be beneficial to all teachers, but is vital for new teachers’ success.

Watkins (1995) states:

Establishing a learning community that values the ideas and experiences of all its members will sustain new teachers in their early years. Without a strong learning community that supports new teachers, the principal faces attrition rates that jeopardize student achievement and curriculum continuity. (p. 83)

Clearly, learning communities are needed to support new teachers. Yet such experiences are not widely available to them. Although Ashley inspired the Critical Friends’ Group, most new teachers may not have the access to or confidence in themselves to engage such teachers in collaborative reflection groups. It is incumbent upon principals, districts, and teacher educators to provide such experiences for new and experienced teachers. The Critical Friends’ Group that Ashley inspired stands as one strong example of what is possible for such groups. Ashley states:

This group has helped me to take time to change lately and value critical thinking, and understand how to incorporate it in the classroom. I am making changes now instead of waiting to implement them next year in the curriculum.

Critical thinking and reflection are two skills that Ashley has cultivated through her participation in the Critical Friends’ Group. She says that these are relatively new skills for her. Ashley believes that her father’s illness was also part of what inspired her to become a more conscious person. She shares that her dad being sick made her not want to “just go through life but to think what am I really saying and doing?” Ashley explains:

I don't want to be the person who just goes through life. I want to be the person who is aware of what is happening and trying to understand what is happening and make sense of it all.

Ashley confides that for most of her youth, she spent a great deal of time saying things that she knew “sounded good” but that she didn't necessarily understand. Now she wants to reflect authentically both in her personal life and in her professional practice. She asserts that she wants to be “real and authentic” in everything that she does because a person can “always get better at anything they do.”

Ashley's desire to critically reflect on her practice increased when she started teaching and she received compliments on her teaching practice. She says that as soon as she realized she was a good teacher, it made her want to be better. She no longer wanted to go through her days “unaware.” But she adds that she “couldn't have done it until (she) knew (she) was a good teacher.” Ashley shares a very important point with us here. She helps those of us in teacher education understand that a key element in supporting reflective practitioners is supporting teachers to feel confident in themselves and their potential as future teachers. Critical reflection is only possible when one feels a baseline of confidence in themselves and their potential. It is equally important for teacher educators to help new teachers develop an understanding of how to create a supportive social network as well as how to approach other educators who can help to inform their teaching practice. Moreover, it would be particularly helpful for teacher educators to encourage students to connect with teachers, parents, and educators of color who can help to inform their teaching practice (Delpit, 1994; Paley, 2000).

Consulting with Educators and Parents of Color

It is important for teachers to “learn from adults who are like the children (they) teach” (Delpit, 1994, 132). With this understanding in mind, Ashley began to seek out the counsel of willing educators of color. She met individually with two African-American women and one Latina, all three of whom were Ph.D. students specializing in multicultural education and former classroom teachers. Dee, an African-American educational activist, is a former high school teacher. Melissa, an African-American qualitative researcher and teacher educator, is a former high school history teacher. Martina, a Latina actively engaged in Hispanic community initiatives, is a former elementary teacher. Their suggestions included the following:

- 1) *Incorporate images in the classroom that depict successful people of color and that challenge racial stereotypes.* For example, Dee visited a bookstore with Ashley, where she encouraged Ashley to purchase *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise* magazines. She helped Ashley to identify pictures that depicted African-Americans in a positive light such as those in which an African-American is a boss, a doctor, a lawyer, or a teacher. Dee also pointed out several books that Ashley should consider for her classroom library. These included books authors such as Nikki Giovanni, a world-renowned author, poet, and educator. Some of her books include: *Rosa* (2005), *The Girl in the Circle*, *Just for You* (2004), *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971), and *Ego Tripping and Other Poems for Young People* (1973).
- 2) *Make the classroom a place where children experience equality on a daily basis.* Melissa shared, “It is important for all children, not just those of color, to gain an understanding of how racism and sexism work and how to work against both.”

Encouraging critical thinking about oppression and inequality is the first step for children to begin to learn how to dismantle such dynamics.

3) *Care for children and their learning*: Martina says that children, especially those from marginalized groups, need to feel safe, secure, and cared for. Additionally, teachers need to not only foster critical thinking and basic skills, but they also need to understand how their students' learning style is partially related to their culture. One way to learn about this is to work closely with parents.

4) *Respect parents as experts*: All three educators of color encouraged Ashley to ask parent's what they want for their children and to inform teaching of their children.

Delpit (1995) states:

When teachers are teaching children who are different from themselves, they must call upon parents in a collaborative fashion if they are to learn who their students really are. (p.132)

The educators who generously shared their insights with Ashley have outlined several useful suggestions for teachers who are interested in effectively working with students of color.

Clearly, not only do we need to work toward recruiting and retaining more teachers of color, there is also a need to listen more to the voices of parents and educators of color. Ashley's willingness to consult with both master teachers and educators of color in particular offers two examples of the significant role that others play in supporting activist teachers' work. However, working with others also stands as the greatest challenge to her work as well.

Difficult Colleagues

Ashley has a difficult time working with colleagues who she considers to be unsupportive not only of her but also of children in general. She says that it is "difficult when

you are around a group of people who don't believe in empowering children." She explains that because she believes in the power of education as a force for positive social change, it is very difficult to be surrounded by people who do not have the same ideals. She reports that it is difficult to be surrounded by "people who don't appreciate the power of their role and their job." It is even more difficult for her to "watch children suffering" because of other teachers' lack of commitment or belief in their students. She says that it is difficult to see children "falling by the wayside, feeling badly about themselves, and not having positive experiences in school."

Ashley feels a personal responsibility to encourage such colleagues to transform their negative beliefs about children and families. She says, "I feel like I have to be an activist with other teachers because some teachers do not have positive views of children. I really feel like I have a role in doing something about that." This situation presents Ashley, a first year teacher, with an interesting challenge. On one hand, she would like her new colleagues to like and respect her; on the other hand, she feels responsible to encourage some of those same teachers to change their attitudes about children. She says that while she is currently a "people-pleaser," she also "does things differently." She is currently working with a grade level team that she doesn't feel personally supported by either. She says:

I think that the team that I am working with is very insecure. It is not a group who sees another team member's success as a good thing but rather as a negative mark against them. In many ways I am turned off and don't care what they think, and at the same time part of me wishes that they were more open so that we could talk about how our school could be. I wish that there could be more potential for mutual growth and development.

While Ashley is disappointed about her colleague's lack of support for her, she is more concerned about some of their attitudes towards children. She says that this mainly relates to a general negative atmosphere. She describes one kindergarten teacher who has "put up the

quit flag” on one of her students, meaning that the teacher gave up on her student by saying “I am done with him.” Ashley also describes a fourth grade teacher who said “I am done dealing with my kids today. They are not listening to me, so I will not listen to them.” This teacher ignored her students for the remainder of the school day refusing to speak or listen to them unless it was absolutely necessary.

Ultimately, Ashley is most disappointed in teachers who exhibit the attitude that nothing is going on in the classroom that is worth being there for. She is frustrated with teachers who joke that they “can’t wait until 3:30 when the children finally go home.” She is disappointed in the general attitude that “nothing that is going on in the classroom is important because (the teacher) can’t wait to leave it.” Ashley is very frustrated that for the most part, other teachers expect her to think these comments and attitudes are not only acceptable but also humorous. She believes that a school should be a “community demanding excellence and should not be a place that validates teachers to be negative about school and even worse the children themselves.” Further, she says that she doesn’t respect people who are not capable of critically reflecting on their own teaching practice.

Ashley’s dedication to reflecting and improving upon her practice is clearly exemplary. She has had the courage to actively seek out more experienced teachers and educators of color to help her to improve her teaching practice. Further, she encourages her students to embody these same practices as well by engaging in democratic classroom practices and through supporting their learning needs. She stands as a role model not only for other new teachers but also for experienced teachers who are faced with incredible challenges on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 8

CROSS-CASE SUMMARIES

Teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive them to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for social justice is: You can change the world.
Ayers, 1998

The situated identities, social justice frameworks, examples of classroom practice, and means of sustenance shared by each teacher-participant hold great insight for educators at every level. While educators at every level could learn a great deal from such narratives, the main point of this analysis is to inform the areas of teacher education and professional development. Specifically, teacher educators can draw on teacher-participants' ideas to inform their teaching practice with student teachers because the case studies provide specific examples of how teachers in the field conceptualize social justice and how their particular worldviews influence their classroom practice. Additionally, the reported means of teacher sustenance address the issue of teacher retention, an issue that has become critical in terms of maintaining and supporting an effective teaching force.

In the interest of clarity, this chapter is organized in the same structure as each of the case studies. The sections are: 1) context, 2) social justice frameworks, 3) classroom implications, and 4) sustenance: obstacles and supports to teaching for social justice. Each of these sections includes cross-case similarities and differences as well as findings that arose from my analysis.

As you read each section, you may want to refer to my conceptual framework (found in chapter two) to refresh your understanding of how I situate this study. As you may recall, my conceptual framework is based on the Bell definition of social justice (1997), the Bigelow model of teaching for social justice (1994), and the assertion that teachers are a virtually untapped but vital resource for understanding their practice (Ayers, 1989; Lund, 2003).

Context

The Influence of Culture and Place

All four of the teacher-participants were born in the Southeastern United States. Ashley was born and grew up in North Carolina. Elizabeth was born in Florida and moved to Pennsylvania when she was a young child. Jane was born in West Virginia and moved to North Carolina when she was ten years old. Rachel was born and reared in Georgia.

The following table depicts geographic origins of each teacher-participant:

TABLE 2. Participant Demographics

Teacher-Participant	Race, Class, Gender	U.S. State Birthplace	U.S. State Raised
Ashley	White, Middle-class, Female	NC	NC
Elizabeth	White, Middle-class, Female	FL	PA
Jane	White, Middle-class, Female	WV	WV & NC
Rachel	White, Middle-class, Female	GA	GA

Three of the teacher-participants (Ashley, Jane, and Rachel) specifically mention the influence of culture and place on their social justice frameworks. They are each aware that the place where they grew up shaped who they are and how they think. Both Ashley and Rachel are critical of the expectations and preconceived notions that have been projected upon them and are working toward eschewing such notions to form new conceptions of self and means of relating to others.

Jane believes her West Virginia working-class roots are a big influence on her worldview. She shares that her West Virginia cultural influences are in direct contrast to the culture of her suburban childhood experiences in North Carolina. These two influences converge to give her an expanded picture of who she is and what she aspires to: making things better for others. Jane also sees that her background has given her an understanding of the need to “code switch,” or in other words, to modify one’s speech, language, and codes of behavior to fit each situation. While she is less critical of her background than Ashley and Rachel, she does draw a connection between how she sees the world and the influence of her the culture of her childhood hometown.

Ashley relates that the culture of her small Southern hometown is “close-minded” about varying identity factors. Currently, she has been in a process of interrogating her own prejudices and preconceived notions that she attributes to her Southern hometown. She believes that while her parents are more liberal than their friends and neighbors, they still are “not as evolved” as she wishes they could be in terms of dealing with issues of race, class, and gender. She is working to expand her understanding of her own preconceived notions.

Rachel addresses her identity specifically as a Southern female. She explains that being a white, Southern, female dictates specific ways that people view her as a “gendered”

being. She states that there are certain expectations for Southern women to be both demure and attractive in a stereotypical way. This complicates the role of gender from a cultural perspective. She adds that she is working toward investigating the ways that “white supremacy culture hurts (her).” She specifically mentions the problematic idea of perfectionism that has been projected upon her by white supremacy culture. She believes this hurts her because no one can live up to an expectation of perfection. Conversely, it hurts people of color because they are judged by “white supremacist” values that target them as “inferior.” Rachel is acutely aware of the fact that white supremacy hurts those who are targets and also those who are potential beneficiaries of this dynamic.

Significant Experience

Each of the four teacher-participants mentions one or more moments when a significant event occurred that inspired their commitment to helping others and/or teaching. Ashley mentions two: 1) tutoring “George,” the boy who was diagnosed with leukemia; and 2) traveling to Tanzania. Elizabeth says that working at Camp Crystal Lake was very influential in her aspiration to become a teacher and a social justice advocate. Jane states that helping a girl in third grade to learn her alphabet inspired her to become a teacher. Rachel recalls that her visits to Head Start clients’ homes inspired her to serve the needs of impoverished children.

Each teacher-participant realized that there were certain moments of significance in their lives when they were deeply inspired to either become a teacher and/or to work toward equity and social justice. Additionally, at least three of them said that they had not realized the great influence that these events had on them until they engaged in our interview process.

Clearly, moments of significance have a profound effect on people's choices and intentions; yet these key moments are often buried in our subconscious until someone asks us directly about them. Exploring these areas with pre-service teachers could serve to be a powerful tool for encouraging student-teachers to understand their own inspirations and commitments. Although some may come to see that teaching is not for them, many more may become affirmed in their commitment to become a teacher who is focused on social justice ideals.

Family Influence

All four teachers agree that their parents and family members have had a significant influence on them and their worldviews. Jane's parents—and her father in particular—served as role models for volunteering in church and for helping others who “are less fortunate.” Their ethic of care and goal of helping others springs from their religious beliefs. Jane also has been influenced by her grandfather's sense of “making things better for the new generation,” which she believes stems from their experience as immigrants.

Although Elizabeth has similar intentions of care, her family influenced her more from a vocational standpoint. Elizabeth shares that in her family “you are either a doctor or a teacher.” Thus, her family has influenced her to choose a career in a “helping” profession which represents a vocational influence. They also encouraged her to work at Camp Crystal Lake, a camp for “at risk” youth in Canada. Therefore, her intentions of care are directly related to vocational role modeling.

Rachel's parents expressed a commitment to activist goals such as creating a better community and society for all people, particularly through educational means. This represents her parents' politically progressive intentions. Her parents also stood as vocational

role models by choosing to enact their care through their work as teachers. Specifically, Rachel was influenced by her mother's work as a Head Start caseworker. Additionally, she was inspired by the philosophies she learned while attending Quaker camps. Therefore, Rachel has had political, vocational, and to some extent religious influences on her commitment to teach as well as her intentions of care.

Ashley attributes both her democratic political ideals and her goal of helping people to her parents. She attributes her liberal political ideals to her father being active in democratic campaigns. Ashley's parents also enacted their goal of serving others through their work. She also shares that her goal of helping others is connected to her parents' "care for the less fortunate" and "community service." These goals are related to their religious convictions. Thus, Ashley's family has had a politically progressive influence, a vocational influence, and an "ethic of care" based on a religious orientation.

The following table visually represents how each teacher-participant reported which familial influences, in term of religion, political frames, and vocational choices were most influential. It shows how, if at all, each factor influences each teacher-participant's commitments and social justice framework:

Table 3. Influences of Care

Teacher-Participant	Religious Influences	Political Influences	Vocational Influences
Ashley	-Teaching Sunday School -Volunteering in the community	-Father's work in progressive political campaigns	-Mother's work as a school counselor -Education doesn't just happen in schools
Elizabeth	*N/R	*N/R	-Family inclination to become doctors and teachers
Jane	-Family's volunteer work in church and community	*N/R	*N/R
Rachel	-Quaker camps	-Activist parents	-Father and mother both educators

*N/R=Not reported

All four participants believe that their parents and families have had a great influence on their commitment to teaching for social justice. In reviewing the primary details, it is clear that the goal of helping others is directly linked to politically progressive worldviews, religious beliefs, and/or vocational choices. A second aspect of this finding is that the two teacher-participants who were engaged in a process of self-critique in relation to prejudice and identity factors were also the ones who shared that their parents had “politically progressive views.”

Influences of Student Teaching

All four teacher-participants considered various fields before committing to teaching. Ashley considered a career in law, Elizabeth thought about wilderness therapy, Jane thought about becoming an architect or a “researcher,” and Jane considered becoming a minister. Despite their other considerations, all four were inclined toward fields that involved helping others. However, each one reported that they were “not fully committed” to an educational

career until they engaged in student teaching. Therefore, student teaching became integral in each teacher-participant's commitment to teaching.

There is a growing body of evidence that student teaching plays a key role not only in recruiting but also in retaining teachers. Henke, Chen, and Guise (2000) found that only 15% of teachers who had student teaching as part of their teacher education experience left teaching in the first five years as compared with the 29% for those who did not. Likewise, Ashley, Elizabeth, Jane, and Rachel all stated that their student teaching experience was a primary influence on their decision to choose teaching as a career. Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane all stated that they were not committed to becoming a teacher until they began their student teaching placement in the same urban arts and humanities magnet school in which they are currently teaching. Rachel attributes observing her cooperating teacher "from behind the glass" as inspiring her to become a teacher. Thus, student teaching became pivotal in their decisions to become teachers.

Each of the four teacher-participants asserts that they were inspired to teach for social justice because their student teaching placement was with a particularly inspiring teacher, was in a school with a progressive philosophy, and/or allowed them to work with a diverse group of students. Thus, we can infer that student teaching is potentially one of the most empowering and informative experiences for student teachers. Likewise, student teaching can have a profound impact on teachers' social justice frameworks.

Social Justice Frameworks

Teachers and researchers all have their own definitions of social justice. Each teacher-participant's social justice framework is shaped by their context and situated identity.

In order to be clear, it is important for them to be explicit about their own conceptions of social justice. While these shades of difference may yield a broader understanding of the issues, educators who wish to engage in such conversations do need to understand each other's perspectives. Although each of the four teacher-participants all express a commitment to teaching for social justice, they do not all define it exactly the same way. Ashley's social justice framework is based on the idea of participatory democracy specifically that "everyone's voice is heard." Elizabeth's social justice framework involves caring about issues, making change, and fostering a democratic society. Jane's is about supporting the needs of individuals, which will in effect create a more harmonious and hopeful society. Fairness is at the heart of Rachel's social justice framework.

While none of the teacher-participant's conceptions of social justice refutes Bell's (1997) definition, in essence they all connect to a piece of it. The elements that overlap with Bell's conception are: 1) the goal of full and equal participation of all groups in society shaped by their needs (Ashley, Elizabeth, and Jane) and 2) equitable distribution of resources (Ashley and Rachel).

Taken together, the individual social justice frameworks of each teacher-participant weave together to form a model that closely resembles Bell's (1997) model described earlier. Rachel's vision of social justice is mainly based upon the idea of fairness, the power of public spaces, and acknowledgement of incremental change. Ashley is committed to "ensuring that all children's voices are heard in the hopes that all kids will have an equal chance." She believes that by cultivating her students' potential, she will foster social change. This directly connects to Elizabeth's commitments to "keeping our society a democracy." It also relates to both Elizabeth and Jane's shared goal of teaching children to critically think

about such things as society, the media, and friends' actions with discernment so that they can become more aware and "make the changes they see fit." Likewise, Jane asserts, "I am committed to inspiring children not only to make change, but also to helping them to decide for themselves what changes should be made in their own communities."

These elements directly relate Bell's (1997) definition, which was referenced earlier. The elements of both models that align are: 1) equitable distribution of resources, 2) self-determination, and 3) interdependency. They also directly connect to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on the Rights of the Child treaties on human rights in the belief that children deserve human rights as well as adults. But they also add to the conversation by showing that children need to learn the skills to protect their own and other's rights. This is reflected in how the teachers' social justice frameworks influence their teaching practice.

Self-identification

Conflicting points of view are an intrinsic aspect of teachers' identities (Britzman, 2003). Britzman (1992) elaborates:

There is the centripetal, or the tendency toward the norm which is embodied in authoritative discourse, and the centrifugal force, or the push against authority, the refusals, the breaks—the imaginative space—that constitute internally persuasive discourse . . . Authoritative discourse demands our allegiance and is embodied in 'the word of the father, parent, teacher' . . . Internally persuasive discourse is tentative, suggesting something about one's own subjectivity and something about the subjectivities and conditions one confronts. (p. 32)

Conflicting discourses create a tension through which identity develops. Thus identity is complicated and potentially contradictory. Pyne (2006) asserts, "The tension between conflicting discourses evokes a vision of identity that is also complicated and contradictory,

where aspects of self collide, are questioned, discarded and even eventually reasserted.”

Britzman (1992) adds, “The capacity for contradiction . . . can serve as the departure for a dialogic understanding that theorizes about how one understands the given realities of teaching as well as the realities that teaching makes possible” (p. 37). Thus the complexity of identity is a vital topic for teacher educators to explore with their pre-service teaching students. Additionally, it is vital for educational researchers to consider the complexity of identity in relation to their work with teachers, particularly those that have expressed commitments to teaching for diversity and social justice.

Just as each teacher-participant has a different conception of what social justice is, they also self-identify in a variety of ways. While Ashley considers herself to be an activist, she does not see herself as a “stereotypical activist with the shaved head.” Although Elizabeth doesn’t like to label herself, she does agree that she is an activist. On the other hand, Jane says that she is not an activist because she is focused on the “little world of or her classroom.” Likewise, Rachel says that she does not consider herself an activist because she sees activism as being “oppositional.” She sees herself as “very much a part of the status quo” and therefore “a part of the messiness of everyday life.” Subsequently, Rachel asserts that being a public school teacher makes her “complicit in reproducing the status quo” and at the same time gives her the possibility of overcoming it. The variety of social justice frameworks and means of self-identification represent a heteroglossia or a “confluence of discourses” wherein each aspect of one’s identity may conflict with another (Bakhtin, 1981).

Pyne (2006) asserts:

Identity development is heteroglossic, existing within a multiplicity of social voices and points of interrelation. Because discourses are ideologically-laden, they do not always interact peaceably, but may clash, compete, and conflict even within a single individual. (p. 8)

This “confluence of discourses” is further complicated when we consider that schools are multi-layered environments where discourses collide and conflict with one another. It is the very nature of being in a public space that is open to all children that gives teacher-participants the opportunity to support a diverse group of learners. At the same time, public schools are “sites of contestation” because they are places where different regimes of truth or essential structures conflict with one another. Whether we conceptualize these ideas as heteroglossic or as “sites of contestation,” there is increasing recognition that across cultures and throughout history social actors have been exposed to multiple and conflicting points of view (Bakhtin, 1981; Rowland, 2002; Strauss, 1990; Weis & Fine, 2004). Regardless of how they self-identify, all four teacher-participants agree that because public schools are in theory open to all children, they are “spaces of possibility. In other words, they see their work as being directly linked to working for social justice. The way that teacher-participants self-identify in regards to activism is directly linked to the way that they conceptualize teaching for social justice.

Classroom Practice: Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice

There are many teaching for social justice models that are worth exploring. Some of these include: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Gay, 2000), Empowering Education (Shor, 1992), Teaching for Equity and Justice (Bigelow et al., 1994), and Teaching for Social Justice (Cochran-Smith, 2004). I created a model of teaching for social justice by considering the elements of classroom practice that the teacher-participants shared. This process entailed several steps. First, I conducted a second level of qualitative analysis on the narratives of classroom practice that the teacher participants shared. I looked for commonalities and

differences across each narrative. Second, I generated codes and themes that emerged through analysis. I grouped each of the elements according to the themes. Third, I returned to the relevant research, particularly the Bigelow, et al (1994) model that I articulated through relevant research in the literature review. Fourth, I reviewed this model with other educators and the teacher-participants.

While elements of our model align with aspects of the others, they also reflect a particular set of practices that came together in a particular context. Our model is the product of collaboration between practicing activist teachers and one teacher educator. While this model is not intended to supercede other models, it can add to ongoing conversations about teaching and social justice. The elements of this model are: 1) commitment to democratic social change; 2) anti-oppressive multicultural praxis; 3) critical rigor; and 4) dialogic, relational, caring relationships. These areas are influenced by each teacher's individual social justice framework and are shaped by a shared process of collaborative reflection. As is true with other models of teaching for justice, each element overlaps, interconnects, builds upon, and extends the others. The first element is a commitment to democratic social change.

Commitment to Democratic Social Change

Rachel asserts that although "schools can't solve all our nation's problems, they are places of possibility because they can do some things to make things more fair." Ashley believes that educational activism should be enacted "within school walls." She does this by fostering a participatory democratic classroom. This idea is extended by Elizabeth and Jane's goals of fostering critical thinking so that children can't only be personally successful but also critically conscious and socially aware. These ideas reflect Counts' (1932) notion that

teachers can be “a social force of some magnitude.” To some degree, all four see their work in schools as positively impacting wider society, which also supports Dewey’s assertion that schooling could be a vehicle to transforming society to become more democratic and egalitarian. Dewey believed that by meeting the needs of the individual, one could positively impact society as a whole. Dewey (1990) asserts, “Only by being true to the full growth of all the individuals who make it up, can society by any chance be true to itself” (p. 7). Meeting individual student’s needs requires the understanding that children have different needs than adults. Instead of being focused on producing an adult that fit the existing social order, Dewey thought that the curriculum should meet the child, thus opening the possibility for social progress.

Dewey’s curriculum transformed the role of teacher and student. He saw the teacher as a facilitator and the child as a collaborator jointly planning content and experiences with the teacher rather than being a passive recipient of knowledge. This idea is supported by all four teacher-participants and has directly influenced their teaching practice, particularly in their commitment to democratic social change.

Activist teachers see themselves as part of a community and create communities within their classrooms. They structure relationships in their classrooms that encourage equity but are not fixed. They encourage students to value their own and other people’s experiences and “demonstrate connectedness with all students” (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

Ashley believes that “every person’s voice should be heard.” She shares that one way she facilitates this in her class is by “voting on everything,” which helps children understand that not only should their opinions be heard, but also that “they will not always get their way.” At first glance, this practice may seem to be a more superficial means of implementing

democratic ideals, but in truth it is the first step in giving children practice in expressing their opinions and working in a democratic community. Of course, her democratic practices extend well beyond this simple method. She aims to facilitate a more participatory form of democracy in her classroom. Activism in light of a participatory democracy dictates that children explore issues and come to their own solutions in collaboration with others. One way she enacts this is to give her students the opportunity to learn about, as Bigelow (1994) and others suggest, “historical and contemporary efforts of people who struggled for justice” and “people from cultures who acted to make a difference, many of whom did so at great sacrifice” (p. 5). The Martin Luther King Jr. march that her students created is one example of this concept in action.

As stated in the review of relevant literature, “participatory classrooms require room for student involvement and initiative” (Bigelow, et al. 1994, p.4). They also encourage students to “develop their democratic capacities; to question and to challenge, to make real decisions, to collectively solve problems” (Bigelow, et al., 1994, p. 4). Elizabeth believes in her students’ power to change the world. She encourages them to “find their passion” with the goal of serving their needs, which will in turn support the greater good. She says, “Our kids learn how to think so our country can remain a democracy.” She asserts, “In order for children to have their voice heard, they need to find their voice in the first place.” Therefore, Elizabeth sees a direct connection between democratic ideals and critical thinking skills. Additionally, she embodies Freire’s ideas of “conscientization,” or critical consciousness, the process of critiquing society and self in order to improve the conditions and experiences of the disempowered (Freire, 1970, 2000). Through this process, the teacher moves from being a “banker,” someone who sees children as bank accounts to be filled with teacher driven

content, to a problem-poser. Problem-posing education involves asking questions and reinventing knowledge collaboratively with students. In this way, children and teachers become allies and co-creators rather than adversaries (Freire, 1970, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987). Participatory democracy brings a sense of community and communal responsibility with it (Macpherson, 1973; Torres, 1998). This idea connects with Freire's and Horton's ideas of participatory education.

Freire and Horton's shared model of "participatory education," as described in Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990, applies to the teacher-participant's democratic practices by including the elements of: "love for people, respect for people's abilities to shape their own lives, and the capacity to value others' experiences" (Bell, Gaventa, & Peters, 1990). Jane's expressed intentions apply directly to these ideas. Like Elizabeth, she believes that success involves "making the choice to be an active part of a community and helping in some way." Therefore, she aims to help her students gain skills in questioning, thinking, and making change within themselves as well as the wider society. She doesn't assume that she has "all the answers" but hopes that "by encouraging her students to be thoughtful people, they will be "moved to make the changes they see fit." Jane asserts:

I want to inspire children to want to make change and to learn that they can be the ones to make change. They can identify their own questions and the needs of their own communities.

Jane sees her students as individuals who are "capable of shaping their own futures."

Therefore, she works to encourage them to understand that fact and to hone the skills that they need to identify problems and find innovative solutions. These ideals also link to elements of feminist pedagogy.

The teacher-participants' conception of democratic social change also include the following elements of feminist pedagogy: 1) power sharing in the classroom and participatory democratic learning; 2) holistic learning that values students' subjective experiences; 3) embracing diversity by embracing and exploring oppression and the unfair privileges that arise from it; and 4) encouraging social change (Enns & Sinacore, 2005). Feminist pedagogies extend conversations on social justice to include the situated identities and personal experiences of individuals with a goal of creating a caring and just society. This also involves valuing children's homes and communities.

Rachel values students' home lives and community environments. She builds on both by making them central to her curriculum. For example, through the curriculum she co-created, The Children's Neighborhood Project, she encourages children to observe, research, and write about their home environments. She also encourages them to draw "what they see out their front door." In this way, she integrates academic content with a true celebration of students' subjective experience. She calls this helping the children to "create a counter-narrative" for themselves. Because most of her children are from "marginalized" backgrounds, she understands that she needs to work against oppressive messages that children receive based on their race and class. Making students' "subjective experience" central to the curriculum is one way to achieve this. This idea is closely related to the teacher-participant's concept of anti-oppressive multicultural praxis.

Anti-Oppressive Multicultural Praxis

An anti-oppressive multicultural praxis involves resistance to dominant modes of schooling and white supremacy in particular (Sleeter, 1996). These ideas connect to how activist teachers engage in their classroom practices by questioning the status quo, exposing

the hidden curriculum, and speaking out against oppression. Additionally, activist teachers also encourage their children to do the same. Activist teachers build skills and capacities by supporting their students in creating bridges between themselves and local, cultural, national, and global identities. Activist teachers also help children constructively critique society and themselves so that equity and power issues are explicit (Freire, 1970, 2000; Shor & Freire, 1987).

Rachel engages in anti-oppressive reflection by working against “white supremacy culture,” specifically “aggressive perfectionism,” by refusing to accept the idea that she or her students are “not good enough.” She does so by co-creating a “counter-narrative” with her students about who they are and what they are capable of achieving. She says, “I teach children who other people think can’t learn, can’t be kind to one another, and can’t be successful. So...I teach them to learn, to be kind, and to be successful.” One of the means that she does this is by making children’s homes and neighborhoods a central part of the curriculum. Another way that Elizabeth facilitates this is by providing opportunities for students to learn about how others have resisted oppression.

Elizabeth thought that her class of African American, Latino, Caucasian students would benefit from learning about another ethnic group’s struggle and the ways that they overcame oppression. One way that her class learned about oppression was by researching and writing on the Trail of Tears. By investigating the historical, political, and personal events surrounding the oppression of Native Americans, the whole class learned about how one ethnic group not only suffered but also resisted oppression. She found that many of her students from “marginalized backgrounds” were simultaneously surprised that there were other oppressed groups besides their own and inspired to work against oppression. She also

found that her students from “agent” groups were equally inspired to work against oppression.

Ashley adds that even though some of her students could be viewed as “rough” and that her whole class was seen as “a very difficult group,” they all have the potential to be “successful in school.” Engaging in “who the students are and what they need” helped her to reframe a mainstream view of her children. She says that exploring the ideas of the “culture of power” and both “internalized and externalized oppression” with her students helped them not only to understand how to succeed but also to care about other’s ideas and feelings. One way she did this was to “engaging in critical dialogue about Martin Luther King Jr. and Ruby Payne with students” and by responding to students’ ideas about having a march.

Critical Rigor

Activist teachers believe that all children can learn, and they dispute the idea that some children are destined for failure (Dewey, 1990; Shor & Freire, 1987). They believe that people have the ability to shape their own lives and aim to help children not only to be successful in school but also to “navigate the culture of power” (Bigelow, 1994; Delpit, 1995). Expectations have a deep impact on student successes and failures. A student’s ethnic background and poverty are often cited as reasons for poor performance in school. Culturally relevant teaching encourages teachers to capitalize on students’ individual, group, language, and cultural differences (Ladson-Billings, 1994).

One way that the teacher-participants enact this is through the idea that the group collectively refers to as “the gentle nudge toward excellence.” The gentle nudge toward excellence occurs when teachers, assuming that all children can learn and succeed,

effectively challenge students and push them toward exceeding even their own expectations. This is an interesting concept because the word “gentle” implies softness, whereas the word “nudge” implies force. In practice, this requires a balance between being nurturing while at the same time maintaining a relentless commitment to push student learning. Jane most definitely embodies this idea in her teaching practice. She asserts that many teachers have “written off” her students who are mostly “low-income African-American boys.” However, she says she believes all of her students, regardless of who they are, can learn and thrive in school. Additionally, she is not content to “let any of her children fall through the cracks.” One way she does this is by “having high expectations for all of her students.” She believes that all students should be pushed to learn and grow. “The gentle nudge toward excellence” also implies care for students and their future success.

Rachel asserts, “My kids need to be successful in school according to dominant culture so that they can have access to economic resources and have choices.” She sees the need to give students the tools to be “successful in the system.” She adds, young children need to learn “basic skills” in order to be successful, but they also need to have a “love of learning.”

Similarly, Jane aspires to be the person who gives her students “that extra push” because those were the kinds of teachers who “changed her life for the better.” She believes that it is her responsibility to ensure that students learn the most that they can in a school year. She is not content to let her students “fall through the cracks,” or as she says, “letting them get away with not learning.” She doesn’t believe children from “disadvantaged” backgrounds are less capable of success.

Elizabeth says. “All I can hope for is that my students will find their passion.” She adds, “It’s not about read this, answer the questions, and take the test. It is about read this think about it, and deciding for one’s self if something is wrong or right.” While she abhors standardized tests, Elizabeth also understands that children need to do well on the tests. Therefore, she asks them, “What are your fears around tests?” and at the same time encourages them to continue to critically reflect on the tests. She asserts, “I am not preaching to my kids on how they should live their lives. I am trying to get them to think for themselves.” By encouraging students to critically reflect on things like standardized test questions, what they see on television, what their friends say, and what it is happening around them, she is encouraging them to be “critical analyzers.” This goal relates directly to the first and second elements of this model in that they encourage a critical socially minded approach that encourages social change. Similarly, Ashley says, “My goal is to encourage my students to critically reflect, to wonder, to question, and to be aware of everything that is going on around them. I think they really just need to wonder and figure it out for themselves.” Ashley’s statement reflects not only her facilitation of “critical rigor,” but also reflects her “ethic of care” and the dialogic nature of her pedagogical philosophy.

Caring, Relational, Dialogic Practice

Teaching involves a reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. Fostering such dialogic and reciprocal relationships involves: 1) maintaining a dialectical stance that considers the needs of students and greater societal, historical, and cultural dynamics; 2) encouraging a critical consciousness for both students and teachers; and 3) exposing the hidden curriculum (Ayers, et al., 1998; Cochran-Smith; 2004; Darling-Hammond et al.,

2002). Additionally, curriculum is based upon students' culture, interests, and real life problems to solve. Therefore, activist teachers engage in dialogue instead of "teacher talk" in that they co-create knowledge with students rather than acting as "authoritarian dictators" (Shor, 1992). Freire (1970, 2000) suggests that education and social change should occur in a dialogic manner instead of an imposing one. This involves not just showing care by listening but also by demanding excellence from students.

Noddings (1993) asserts:

Caring implies a continuous search for competence. When we care, we want to do our very best for the objects of our care. To have as our educational goal the production of caring, competent, loving, and lovable people is not anti-intellectual. Rather, it represents the full range of human talents. (p. 24)

Noddings' sentiments on care are reflected in Jane's description of how she shows care for her students. Jane expresses her care for her students in many ways. One of the most visible is how she structures her classroom. She says that most teachers "want a caring" classroom, but they don't understand that it takes work. Jane offers the example of the steps she took to create a "caring classroom dynamic." Although her E.C. students were seen as extremely challenging, she made a priority of teaching them "how to respectfully communicate" with one another. While others saw her students as "the bad kids," she saw them as children who "had not learned the value of care in school." This required that Jane start with a behavioral model of discipline which may seem counter to a social justice model of teaching. However, the fact that Jane emphasized positive behaviors reflects a move toward care and away from punishment. She experienced first hand the power of praise for children who were used to being shamed. Jane understands that her positive system, which appealed to the children's sense of fairness, enabled them to eventually move to a more self-regulated method.

Jane demonstrates care through her dedication and determination. She remarks that “care is relentless” and adds that “she will never give up on her students.” She doesn’t mind if students call her the “mean teacher” because she understands that care doesn’t only involve “warm fuzzy” feelings, it also requires that teachers “refuse to accept less than students’ best.” Over the past year, she has seen how her students have benefited from her “fierce belief” in them. She reports that not only have they grown in their intellectual capacities, but also in their interpersonal skills. They have learned about being cared for and how to care for each other. Ashley reports similar sentiments.

Ashley’s care is evident in the way that she works to create a welcoming and caring classroom environment. She understands that many of her students and their parents have had negative experiences in schools. She strives to make both feel welcome and see school as a positive place. Like Jane, she emphasizes positive behaviors to both students and parents. She gives children “phrases and tools” to help them express their feelings. Here again we see how social justice teaching builds on other teaching methods. While most teachers just want to have a harmonious class, Ashley’s goal of teaching children to care is linked to her social justice ideals. She teaches children to care for themselves and one another in the hope that they will in turn care about wider society. Additionally, she sees that ensuring that all of her children’s voices are heard requires not only that they learn how to express themselves but also that they learn how to listen. Elizabeth also incorporates this principal in her teaching practice.

Elizabeth also teaches her children about caring for themselves and others. Drawing on Charney’s *Teaching Children to Care: Classroom Management for Ethical and Academic Growth* (2002), Elizabeth teaches children how to care for themselves, others, their

environment, and their work. The way she runs morning meeting, a time where the class comes together to discuss shared concerns, is a prime example of how she does this. During this time, Elizabeth facilitates discussion on topics such as what they will be studying to personal concerns that students have. It is truly remarkable to observe the level of maturity that her students exhibit in these meetings. Students share their frustrations with each other and their anxieties. For example, one student expressed his concern for a classmate who was absent due to a death in the family. Another student shared that she wanted the class to “shape up” because she was worried that they “wouldn’t finish their research projects” if they didn’t. During Elizabeth’s morning meeting, the students learn to listen and be heard. This idea is embodied in Rachel’s idea of “you are not alone here.”

Rachel’s management style of “you are not alone here” speaks to her ethic of care. She explains to her children “you are not alone here, you are not the only one here”, meaning that children need to be concerned about the welfare of others. This is connected to the African idea of *ubuntu*, mentioned in relation to human rights, that a person’s humanity is bound to the humanity of others (Tutu, 2000). It also relates to the ideas of interdependency and agency that stems from a shared sense of social responsibility (Bell, 1997). Rachel’s “you are not alone here” idea reflects an ethic of care and a commitment to social justice.

All of the aspects of this model and the others mentioned overlap and intersect. This model of teaching for social justice represents one example that was created at a particular moment in time with a particular group of people (a group that consisted of practicing teachers and one teacher educator). It draws on the work of social justice educators and adds another layer to conversations on teaching for social justice. Through our work, we realize that we “are not alone here” and hope that our shared work will serve to inform and extend

conversations on teaching on for social justice. The idea of “you are not alone here” also applies to how teachers sustain their work. Because teaching involves relationships with a variety of individuals, the obstacles teachers confront and the supports to teaching for justice involve relationships with others.

Sustenance: Obstacles to and Supports for Teaching for Social Justice

The topic of sustenance emerged through the research process. This area is particularly relevant to the critical topic of teacher attrition and retention. It is no secret that we as a nation are facing a critical teaching shortage. The problem does not necessarily lie in a shortage of trained teachers, but in the high number of qualified professionals who both leave the field or who move to “less challenging” schools (Darling-Hammond, 2003). In fact, the number of teachers leaving their schools has now surpassed the number of teachers trained per year in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2003). While one might assume that retirement significantly contributes to steep attrition rates, in truth the highest school-leaving rates are among first year teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Henke, et al., 2000; Ingersoll, 2001). Moreover, attrition rates are even steeper in high-poverty and urban schools (Darling Hammond, 2003; Haycock, 1998; Henke, et al., 2000; Ingersoll, 2001). In general, leaving rates can be attributed to lower salaries, fewer resources, the stress of working with “high need” populations, harsh working conditions, and lack of mentoring and/or personal support (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Nieto (2003) found that “good” teachers, or those that are committed to social justice ideals, stay in the field for a variety of reasons including: “1) previous membership in social movements; 2) love for their students and the subject matter that they teach; 3) anger at the

inequitable conditions that their marginalized students face; 4) collaborative intellectual work with trusted colleagues; 5) a strong commitment to social justice and democratic schooling; 6) and the ability to shape the future” (p. 14).

Both Ladson-Billings (2003) and Nieto’s (2003) findings support the primacy of relationships as a key factor in teacher sustenance and retention. Similarly, my findings also reveal the importance of relationships. In fact, all of the obstacles to and supports for activist teaching have to do with relationships with others, both negative and positive. Each of the teachers mentions “negative colleagues,” specifically those that “don’t treat children well” as the primary obstacles to their teaching practices. On the other hand, all four list healthy personal relationships, particularly supportive colleagues (e.g. the Critical Friends’ Group), and principals who are either supportive or at least “not oppositional” to their teaching practices as supports to sustaining them in their jobs as activist teachers.

It is important to note that each of the reported means of support also reflects teacher-generated means of support (e.g. maintaining healthy relationships with friends and family, creating the Critical Friends’ Group, and seeking out schools that have supportive administrators). This raises an important question. Given the fact that all teachers are required to engage in district-led professional development, why were these experiences not mentioned by teacher-participants? This question points to the need to investigate ways in which schools can provide more teacher-responsive professional development experiences. Rachel asserts, “School administrators need to create school environments that encourage teachers to collaborate.” This finding also highlights the importance of pre-service and new teachers learning about how to sustain their teaching practice. The narratives on sustenance

in this study provide several examples that could prove to be useful in conversations on teacher sustenance.

Self-Care

As mentioned earlier, all of the sustaining activities that the teachers engaged in were self-directed and mainly based upon relationships. This idea is also reflected in educational research. Gay (2000) states “the heart of educational process is the interactions that occur between teachers and students.” Brown (2004) asserts that the “heart of the educational process” extends to teachers’ and students’ relationships with others that are “caring.”

Because Elizabeth continues to work for Outward Bound during summers, she has an extensive group of friends with whom she regularly plans expeditions. Although she has a full schedule with her teaching duties, she schedules after-school hikes and weekend camping trips. Elizabeth’s love of learning also supports her self-care. She has taken courses in filmmaking and African dance. She shares that it is important for her to “have outside [of school] interests” and friends so that she can come to school “refreshed.” She also consciously seeks out supportive friends both inside and outside of school. She says, “I constantly seek out people who I respect and who respect me....if I didn’t have these relationships, I wouldn’t be able to keep going.”

Ashley also enjoys spending time with friends and family. She has cultivated a network of close friends who she spends a great deal of time with. She states that “she will never live far from home” because of the support she receives from both. Her process of self-reflection is what she says fuels her the most. She cares for herself through her sustained efforts to grow and develop as a person. Because she is a new teacher, she is still “learning

about ways to sustain and support her teaching.” However, one of her biggest strengths is seeking the advice of experienced colleagues, relationships with like-minded colleagues, and her continued support from former instructors and advisors from her university experience.

Rachel also believes that healthy relationships are fundamental to her self-care. She shares that she is careful to choose “drama-free” friends. She surrounds herself with people who are “reliable, trustworthy, and who have good boundaries.” Conversely, she avoids “needy” people because she has to “save her energy for her students.” Because she considers herself a sensitive person, she is careful to avoid being overly stimulated by certain movies and television programs. She adds that she needs to make sure that she gets enough rest and eats healthy food.

Jane has also become more “mindful of maintaining a healthy lifestyle” because she has been dealing with “some health issues.” She “exercises daily” and is conscious of “eating healthy foods.” Likewise, she understands that a key part of a healthy lifestyle is maintaining healthy relationships both inside and outside of school. She maintains a “close-knit” circle of friends who she met in college. She shares that “although (they) are all in different fields, (they) all share a commitment to social justice issues and celebrate each other’s little victories.” She explains that one friend, a lawyer, is working toward human rights, another, a doctor is investigating ways to support children’s health. Moreover, these friends view Jane’s work as a teacher as “just as important as theirs.” Jane’s participation in the Critical Friends’ Group provides another example of how she consciously seeks relationships that support her personally and professionally.

Colleagues

Supportive Colleagues: The Critical Friends' Group

Because dialogue has the potential to foster both personal growth and create community, many educational scholars have expressed the value of “dialogic communities” where teachers can explore dilemmas and come to innovative solutions to problems (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Meyer, 1999; Harris, 1995; Hollingsworth, 1993; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). Yet both cultural and physical structures of schools make opportunities for dialogue among teachers very rare (Lortie, 1975; Rogers & Babinski, 2002). The teacher-participants in this study created their Critical Friends' Group as a way to not only “gain support” but also to “push their practice to the next level.”

As was stated in the methods chapter, Ashley and Rachel originally founded the critical friends' group as a means to glean support and to collaboratively reflect on their teaching practice in light of social justice ideals. The group was inspired by Nieto (1999), who asserts the importance of “creating a community of critical friends....but, what is needed is not simply peers who support one another...but also peers who debate, critique, and challenge one another to go beyond their current ideas and practices”(p. 160). Thus, Ashley and Rachel began to create a collaborative reflection structure. After Jane, Elizabeth, and I joined the group we finalized our process and began meeting regularly. Our process included several steps: 1) writing on a specific topic, 2) reading journals entries, 3) providing positive feedback, 4) asking critical questions, and 5) discussing what was shared.

Ashley found that being in the group helped to diminish feelings of isolation that new teachers often experience, helped her understand the “power of intentional listening,” and allowed her to see the potential for “a group of dedicated, passionate, questioning public

school teachers to create change and develop themselves and thus more effectively teach their students.”

Jane appreciated having a place to discuss both positive and negative situations that occur during her school days. For example, she recalls sharing her progress of working with Luther, a boy who struggled with writing. At the beginning of the school year, Luther refused to write in his journal. Jane discovered that at best Luther could only write a few, three-word sentences. She diligently supported his writing process and when he did begin to write, he wrote “some very disturbing things.” Because the class read their journals out loud regularly, Jane she was faced with a dilemma. While she was thrilled to see Luther make progress, she was very concerned about how his writing was influencing the other students. Jane often discussed this matter with the Critical Friends’ Group. She recalls that the most useful part of the Critical Friends’ process, in regard to this situation, was that the group listened to her and gently asked her critical questions. This gave Jane the opportunity to “process the situation verbally.” Not only did she glean support, she didn’t feel judged because she “got to speak and be questioned without judgment or advice.” She did come up with some simple solutions, but it was Henry, a shy student who eventually resolved the issue. One day Luther was reading a story he wrote about “a man who shoots his girlfriend for cheating on him.” As he was going over one graphic detail after another, Henry spoke up to the class. He softly, but firmly asserted, “I think that people need to think about what they write and what it is saying to others.” As was described in Chapter 5, Jane realized that although she didn’t come to a “grand solution” for this particular situation, having the Critical Friends’ Group to share this process with gave her the support and reassurance she needed to persevere through this difficult situation.

Elizabeth reflects, “In my mind I look at all of us and I see passionate and caring people who want to make change.” She adds:

The Critical Friends’ Group has given me the opportunity to reflect in a structured way but also goes one step past that in which people help me reflect on an even deeper level. What it has brought me is that there are other people doing the same thing and going through the same process and trying to thinking about all of this more than just going to work and coming home. It has been really nice to know that there are people who are interested in trying to push me further.

She also shared that she was inspired to read based on what was discussed each week. For example, Elizabeth recalls that she was “having some problems in (her) relationships with families.” She followed Rachel’s suggestion to read materials on “responsive classrooms” published by Ruth Charney and the Northeast Foundation for Children, which provide useful suggestions as to how to solve classroom management problems and relationships issues with parents. She also began reading about expeditionary learning and planning thematic units, at Rachel’s suggestion, to find ways to make connections between her classroom and her Outward Bound training. Although Elizabeth found her work with the Critical Friends’ Group to be useful, she did have one suggestion to improve it. She recommended that we “invite someone into the group who had a different value system than the rest of us, as we are all on the same page politically. It would be nice to have a staunch conservative to discuss ideas with.”

While the other three participants appreciated having like-minded colleagues to study and reflect with, Rachel thought that it was useful for her because the other participants were “different from her.” Rachel found working with a group of teachers who “were in a different place” and had “a different point of view” required her to learn how to “think about things and explain things in a different way.” This helped her to “understand her teaching more deeply.”

Rachel relates that while this group was partially inspired by activist ideas, it is also different from “activist culture.” She shares:

In activist culture you call people on things and question things that you don’t just support. It’s all about being oppositional. It is not something that I have always felt really comfortable with for me. I think when someone is defensive they are not really able to learn something. When someone is challenging another in an abrasive way, I think that they are really just showing off to me and just being nasty.....If you really are genuinely meeting someone with curiosity, then you are genuinely asking why they believe something or asking them to make a connections. It is much different. Instead, you are supporting each other to think more deeply about where we are and who we are as teachers. In this way you can be a critical friend. To me that’s different. A real friend listens, supports, deeply cares about, questions, holds up, reflects back, and supports someone to come to a new way of thinking and speaking.

She thinks that being a critical friend is about “supporting people in deepening their understandings.” She sees this as directly connected to the Quaker idea of seeing “the sacred in every person” meaning that every person, regardless of who they are, deserves respect. This less oppositional viewpoint contributed to the group’s process. The Critical Friends’ Group is yet another example where the idea of “you are not alone here” works to support teachers and to help them to transform their teaching practices. Conversely, the idea of “you are not alone here” also applies to dealing with negative colleagues.

Dealing with Negative Colleagues

While all four teacher-participants agree that being in the Critical Friends’ Study Group was an incredibly positive experience, they also assert that negative colleagues are one of the “biggest obstacles to their activist teaching practice.” It is interesting to note that rather than being focused on how colleagues treat the teachers themselves the teacher-participants mostly view “negative colleagues” as those who “don’t treat children well.”

Ashley relates, “It is difficult when you are around a group of people who don’t believe in empowering children. I feel like I have to be an activist with other teachers because some teachers do not have positive views of children.” She also says that the grade level team that she has been working with is “insecure.” While she wishes that they could be “more open” to the “potential for mutual growth and development” she is less concerned about how her colleagues treat her and more frustrated with the “negative way” that they view children.

Elizabeth shares Ashley’s concern about negative colleagues. For example, in Chapter 6, she shares the story a colleague who deemed half of her class as being on “the Titanic” and half being on the “Good Ship Lollipop.” While the “bad” children had to remain on one side of the room, the “good” children were given a spot on the other side of the classroom. This is but one of example of colleague’s actions that disappoint Elizabeth. Elizabeth is “deeply aggravated” by colleagues who “complain about children in front of them” and who see “teaching as just a job.” She shares “it is frustrating when other teachers do things that directly counteract what (she) is doing in (her) room.” For example, she says that some teachers “are not teaching children to think” and are “conditioning children for school.” She clarifies that she is not opposed to other educators teaching “traditionally;” rather, she is worried about children having negative experiences in school.

Jane is equally concerned about teachers who “just don’t care about kids.” She says that one way teachers can show care is through providing interesting and interactive lessons. She is disappointed to see other teachers “using the same lesson plans, year after year.” She also is discouraged when she sees children “sitting in desks, with their hands folded, not learning anything.” She aims to teach her students to “question with interest” so that they can

“come up with their own solutions to problems,” and is frustrated by her peers who do not aim to do the same. She wonders “how can teachers instill a love of learning if they don’t have it themselves?” Jane believes that people of all ages “need to become inspired to learn” and wishes that her colleagues would help children to do that.

Rachel is also concerned about negative colleagues and the way that they negatively affect children’s experiences in schools. She shares “there is a culture of believing in kids’ deficits” at her school and believes that the staff is filled with “divas who need some shaking up.” Her colleagues’ negative views of children have discouraged her. She speculates that some of this negativity is due to teacher burnout. She says that there are “so many teachers that are so messed up.” She asserts, “You have to be a together and self-reflective person” and “have some skills because the kids deserve it.” However she laments, “There are only about one third of the teachers [at my school] who are focused on being healthy and dedicated to supporting children.” She believes that it has to do with how “teachers are trained” and the environments in which they work. This idea points to the importance of teachers finding an environment that is “healthy” and “conducive” for them to do their work (Kohl, 2000). Administration has a great influence on whether a school is “healthy” and “conducive” to an activist teacher’s practice.

Administration

All four teacher-participants shared that they have carefully selected schools that have both a diverse student body and that is either conducive or at least “not oppositional” to their pedagogical philosophy. Because of this, all four teacher-participants agree that supportive administration is essential to sustain their activist teaching practice. For example, when

Ashley facilitated her class's Martin Luther King Day march, her principal attended the march and strongly supported it. Likewise, he was willing to listen to her students when they came to complain about a substitute teacher that was not treating the class well. She also shares that both she and her students feel comfortable to bring issues and concerns to Mr. Matlock, her principal.

Elizabeth, who also works with Mr. Matlock, believes that "principals should know and understand their faculty." They should also "provide resources but not enforce scripted lessons." She has chosen to be in a school that has a "supportive administration." She shares "being in a school where the principal supports progressive methods is important." She adds that because her principal is a former teacher, "he understands what teachers deal with on a daily basis" and is therefore "extremely supportive and understanding."

Jane, who also works with Mr. Matlock, often comments that she appreciates his support. She knows him well, as she "co-taught third grade" with him. Jane says that because Mr. Matlock had been a teacher, he "understands what teachers need" and he doesn't "get in our way." She knows that while she doesn't overly rely on Mr. Matlock, she can count on his support should she need it.

On the other hand, Rachel is contemplating leaving the school where she has been teaching for over ten years, because "she can't trust the principal." She says, "Leadership is really important" and thinks that it is crucial for leaders to "find ways to help parents stay connected." She is disappointed in the pervasive belief in children's shortcomings or what she calls the "culture of deficit" at her school. While this was not always the case, Rachel says that she has observed a steady decline in attitudes "since the new principal took over."

Rachel's former principal was "supportive and inspiring" and encouraged all manner of "diversity initiatives in the school." Her charismatic leadership inspired Rachel to become very involved in working for justice both inside and outside of school. While she admits that she was originally "heartbroken" at the change, now she is resigned to the fact that she will likely leave the school in search of a "more collaborative one." She shares "there is so much murkiness when I don't have a leader that is trusted." All four-teacher participants understand the fundamental role of administration in supporting their shared goal of teaching for justice.

Is There a Difference between Activist Teaching and "Good" Teaching?

The question of how, if at all, activist teaching is different from "good teaching" is a complex one for many reasons. First, teaching is a complex task that is situation-specific and embedded in the context of schools and classrooms. Therefore, it is difficult to make definitive statements on teaching. Second, terms like "activist" and "good teacher" are ambiguous and inasmuch can insight a great deal of controversy. While debate does have the potential to inform practice, it also has the potential to be divisive, particularly when discussion revolves around ambiguous terms. For the purposes of this discussion, I utilize the definition of "good" teacher established by Ayers in *The Good Preschool Teacher* (1989) and the definition of activist teacher established in the review of relevant research. Although his work focuses on good preschool teachers, the qualities and characteristics he describes are among those that many educators would consider to be attributable to "good teachers" at all developmental levels. Ayers (1989) shares:

Who then is the good preschool teacher? Certainly (the teachers in his study) highlight for us the qualities that we should look for that we would look for in good

teachers, qualities like a commitment to dialogue and to interaction with children; an attitude of relatedness and receptivity, concern and compassion for the ways and lives of children; an active investment in and passion for the world, or a piece of it, and for meaningful knowledge and information that allow human beings to function fully and freely. (p. 140)

Ayers adds that his description of the “good teacher” is “heavy and quite general and only begins to answer our question”: “Who is the good teacher?” He understands that different people have different understandings of terms such as dialogue and relatedness. He also cautions educators that there are no prescriptions or formulas that make up “good teaching.”

Ayers (1989) explains:

Teaching is often discussed as discrete behaviors or universal practices. Teaching is often discussed, counted, and subjected to detailed analysis. While some of this effort brings knowledge and insight, much of it does violence to something fundamental in teaching, that is that teaching cannot exist outside of a person, and people cannot exist outside of situations.....Teachers have intentions, desires, motives, and goals. Teachers exist and make choices in contexts. Teaching requires a subject. Understanding teaching, then demands, relationships with people, and invites openness to feelings, ideals, aspirations, failures, successes, and more. (p. 140-141)

As Ayers explains, teaching is not a set of discreet skills or a designated set of behaviors. He asserts that not only is it impossible to describe teaching in such simplistic ways, but that doing so “does violence” to what is fundamental to teaching. Yet researching teaching is fundamental to understanding to what “good teaching” entails. Although Ayers cautions us not to make absolute statements on teaching, he does agree that exploring such teachers’ practices is a worthy endeavor. This brings us to the question of how, if at all, is activist teaching different than “good teaching.”

As was stated in the review of relevant literature, activist teachers are “educators who engage social justice issues that hinder student’s lives and incorporate activism in their teaching practice.” Generally accepted as “progressive” in their orientation, these teachers seek to improve the human condition through their work in schools (Casey, 1993; Oxford

English Dictionary, 2004; Sachs, 2003). They strive to create classrooms where children of varying backgrounds not only meet but develop their own sense of agency and cultivate a sense of respect for the needs of others.

As you may recall, activist teachers engage in such behaviors as: 1) fostering dialogic and reciprocal relationships between students and teachers; 2) maintaining a dialectical stance that considers the needs of students and greater societal, historical, and cultural dynamics; 3) encouraging critical consciousness for both student and teacher; and 4) exposing the hidden curriculum (Ayers et al., 1998; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Darling-Hammond et al., 2002).

Models, frames, and constructs are artificial lenses that we use to understand teaching practice. However, I can infer from these ideas and my extensive interactions with the teacher-participants that most teachers' practices simultaneously operate on a variety of levels. For example, although Ashley did facilitate the MLK march, she still needed to manage her class. There were many times during the planning process that Ashley had to enforce codes of appropriate behavior while they were sharing their innovative ideas. Likewise, Elizabeth shows care through creating a "responsive classroom" (Charney, 2002). While this care builds upon Charney's ideas of being "responsive," Elizabeth incorporates her goal of empowering students to enact social change. This translates into not only empowering students to feel honored, respected, and willing to share their ideas; it also requires that she encourage critical thinking skills and that students take definite action to make change when possible.

Like any other teacher, how one classifies a particular teachers' practice could vary given the particular moment you walk into their classroom. For example, the interaction

between Jane and her students that is described in the beginning of Jane's case study could be perceived as just "good teaching" because she appears to be engaged and to not let her student give up. However, it is only when we consider her expressed intentions that we understand her refusal to give up on her students, her belief in their ability to shape their own lives, and her hope that by empowering them, they will in turn work toward positive social change in their community are at the heart of her activist teaching practice. It is difficult to understand the difference between "good teaching" versus activist teaching. Teachers make thousands of decisions per day, many of which are invisible to observers. Clearly, it is impossible to understand a teachers intentions and decision-making processes without engaging teachers in dialogue on such issues.

What we can ascertain from the narratives documented in this study is that while activist teaching builds upon "good teaching" and therefore does have a great deal in common with it, it extends such notions through its commitments to viewing the school as a vehicle for social change, fostering agency and interdependency between and among students, encouraging critical thinking, and facilitating active moves against oppression and for student empowerment. The relevance of these ideas and implications for teacher education and development will be discussed in the following chapter on implications.

CHAPTER 9 IMPLICATIONS

Much can be gained by looking systematically at the words and lives of these activist teachers. In this chapter, I will focus first upon implications for teacher education that can be derived from the findings presented in Chapter 8. Following this discussion, I will present potential research directions for myself and for the wider field of teacher education.

Activist Teachers as Exemplars

Although public schools are spaces of possibility, they are also sites of contestation. Despite teachers' best intentions, the confluence of discourses and contexts serve to complicate the process of teaching for social justice. Teaching is situated in daily practice and multiple contexts. Thus, teacher educators and researchers need to help student teachers understand the complexity of the task of teaching *before* they enter the field. This brings up the challenge of exploring the contentions, contradictions, and possibilities of teaching without squelching the hope and belief in the possibility of social change. One way to address this conundrum is to incorporate the voices of activist teachers who can shed light on the possibilities and pitfalls of teaching for social justice. By doing so, pre-service teachers can learn that they are part of a larger struggle. Cochran-Smith (2004) asserts, "Prospective teachers need to know from the start that they are part of a larger struggle and that they have a responsibility to reform not just replicate, standard school practices" (p. 24).

We also have to consider what resources are available to us to facilitate this process. Activist teachers can serve as role models because they can give student teachers insights into “situation specific” aspects of daily practice (Ayers, 1989).

Ideally, student teachers would have the opportunity to work individually with activist teachers because it is important for student teachers to “work and talk regularly with experienced teachers who share the goal of teaching differently and for them to experience (activist teachers’) ways of knowing and reforming teaching” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 29). However, because “teachers who work against the grain are in a minority,” activist teachers’ narratives, such as the case studies generated by this study, may serve as a possible alternative to face-to-face contact (Cochran-Smith, 2004).

Autobiographical Exploration and Cultural Competence

A person’s worldview and identity are both influenced by culture. Therefore, particularities affect the way that individuals view the world (Eaker, 1999; Noblit, 1999). This also relates to the ways in which individuals have to interrogate and deconstruct both externalized and internalized oppression. Throughout the teacher-participants’ narratives, it becomes evident that modes of communication, codes of behavior, and the way that people perceive the world are deeply influenced by their environment. Darling-Hammond (2002) declares:

Learning to teach for social justice is a life-long undertaking. It involves coming to understand one’s self in relation to others; examining how society constructs privilege and inequality and how this affects one’s own opportunities as well as those of different people; exploring experiences of others and appreciating how those inform their worldviews; perspectives and opportunities; and evaluating how schools and classrooms operate and can be structured to value diverse human experiences and to enable learning for all students. (p. 201)

By telling their stories, each of the teacher-participants in this study came to new understandings of themselves and gained deeper insight into their intentions, commitments, and teaching practices. This underscores the importance of exploring one's own moments of significance in order to become, as Ayers (1989) stated, "more consciously writers of their own scripts and readers of their own lives" (p. 8). Therefore, engaging pre-service teachers in autobiographical exploration can help them to come to understand themselves and their intentions in a deeper way (Abbs, 1974; Grumet, 1978). It also may provide them with the opportunity to learn about how their identity factors (e.g. gender, race, class, sexual preference) have shaped how they view the world. As they begin to understand how these elements interact, they may gain skill in both reflection on themselves and empathetically investigating the ways that culture influences learning and school experience. Darling-Hammond (2002) asserts, "Examining one's own experiences and their contribution to identity can be a powerful experience. Hearing about those of others and coming to understand how these experiences shape very different realities is equally powerful" (p. 203).

While many teacher education programs start their multicultural education classes with autobiographical explorations, such practices are powerful enough to consider incorporating into other parts of teacher education curriculum. This may be one way to engage in social justice conversations throughout the program rather than only including them in multicultural education courses.

Cochran-Smith (1995) offers that:

We need generative ways for student teachers and teacher educators to reconsider their assumptions, understand the values and practices of families and cultures different from their own, and construct pedagogy that not only takes these into account in locally appropriate ways but also makes issues of diversity an explicit part of the curriculum. (p. 140)

In order to understand other peoples' cultures, we must first endeavor to understand our own. This begs the question: How can we expect pre-service teachers to become culturally responsive if we as teacher educators do not strive to be culturally competent with them? Likewise, we cannot assume that just because our pre-service students look as if they have similar identity factors, they share the same cultural background and therefore the same worldview. The first step in understanding our pre-service teachers' cultures is to engage in activities with them that explore what culture is and how the elements of their own culture influence their own worldviews. Therefore, if we want pre-service teachers to learn how to be culturally relevant, then a good starting point would be to help them to explore their own culture. This will also help us to teach them in culturally congruent ways. However, exploring culture and teaching with our mostly white, middle-class, and female pre-service teachers is a complicated and potentially contentious endeavor. We cannot hope to work against oppression simply by understanding our own culture. We must take the next step to exploring the ways that our identity factors make us both agent and target in terms of oppression (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997).

This raises two issues: 1) the need for culturally sensitive practices in teacher education and 2) the need for pre-service teachers to learn about agent-target dynamics. The fact that teacher-participants see elements of their worldview as environmentally and culturally bound suggests a need for culturally relevant pedagogy in teacher education. It is obvious that teacher educators must work toward culturally relevant instruction with pre-service teachers from marginalized groups and that teacher education on the whole is most definitely shaped by white cultural norms. While it is important to critically reflect on these aspects of teacher education, we must also work against "essentializing" our student teachers.

Given the fact that the majority of our teaching force and our teacher candidate pool is predominantly white, middle-class, and female, it is easy for teacher educators to assume that this group is homogenous. However, this assumption is detrimental to both pre-service teachers and to their students as well. When white teachers assume that they are “culturally neutral,” they are at a greater risk of reproducing “color-blindness” (Banks & Banks, 2004; Brown, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gay, 2000; Jay, 2006).

As stated earlier, agents are members of a “dominant social group privileged by birth whom knowingly or unknowingly” benefit from being a member of that group (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). Targets are people who are stigmatized or exploited based on their membership of a marginalized social group. However, identity is layered and therefore a person can be a member of both agent and target groups. For example, the teacher-participants are all white, middle-class, female and are therefore members of the racial agent group of whites and simultaneously are members of the gendered target group of women. By exploring the concepts of agent and target, the study of culture, culturally relevant pedagogy, and overcoming oppression becomes more meaningful and more possible for pre-service teachers.

The Power of Student Teaching

Given the fact that student teaching had such a profound influence on teacher-participants, it behooves teacher-educators to investigate ways in which we can make this experience meaningful. Perhaps one of the most meaningful components of the student teaching experience involves working in learning communities with a mentor teacher and student teaching peers. Cochran-Smith (2004) states, “Student teachers also need to learn

about the power of collaboration in learning communities where other teachers are struggling to understand and ultimately to improve the social relations of schools and the classroom” (p. 63).

Cochran-Smith’s comments reveal the importance of student teachers learning to collaborate and create social networks. She declares that the days of the “lone teacher” are over. Given the fact that the collaborations that student teachers have with their peers and their cooperating teacher are among the most valuable in their pre-service career, it is important that teacher educators consciously discuss the importance of relationship and networking with student teachers. Cochran-Smith (2004) continues:

An explicit part of the pre-service curriculum also needs to be preparing student teachers to find and work in existing networks of reform-minded teachers in their own schools or across schools and school systems as they begin their careers as teachers. If such networks do not exist, student teachers need to know how to build their own and find colleagues with whom to collaborate. (p. 63)

The importance of collaboration is supported by the fact that all four of the teacher-participants shared that “having a supportive network of friends” was key to sustaining their work. Clearly, if student teaching drew them to teaching and supportive networks help them to remain, capitalizing on these two elements could significantly address issues of recruitment and retention.

Additionally, this finding suggests that teacher educators should not shy away from placing their student teachers in urban schools with highly diverse populations. “Good” teachers might choose to teach in such schools given the opportunity to work in them as student teachers. Regardless of where they eventually teach, each student teacher would benefit from working with diverse populations and activist teachers. These experiences could serve to inform student teachers’ educational practices.

Tapping into Intentions of Care

Each of the teacher-participants was inspired to teach through vocational modeling, political leanings, and/or religious intent. Often, liberal politics and religious belief seem to be in opposition. On one hand, I have often heard liberal teacher-educators dismissing the religious right as being close-minded and simplistic. On the other hand, I have heard students, particularly those that consider themselves conservative Christians, say that they experience “prejudice against them in the academy,” meaning that their religious beliefs are not respected. Yet, most pre-service teachers state that one of the major factors in their choice to pursue teaching as a career is that “they care about children” and that their ethic of care is closely connected to their “religious belief.” Whether a pre-service teacher’s “ethic of care” was inspired by political conviction, religious belief, or vocational role modeling, teacher educators can potentially tap into that “ethic of care” as a starting point for understanding and working for social justice (Noddings, 1993, 1995). In other words, the realm of care can appeal to pre-service teachers irrespective of their religious or political beliefs. One way to tap into the “ethic of care” is to begin a pre-service experience by engaging in autobiographical explorations with student teachers and then moving to exploring biographies and educational experiences of marginalized individuals. In this way, student teachers not only feel cared for but also can cultivate a sense of empathy and understanding for others. While I believe that teacher educators do need to rely on conceptual models and a variety of research, I also see that stories are a powerful means to inspire young teachers. It could be potentially powerful for in-service and pre-service teachers alike to hear stories from both people from “marginalized backgrounds” as well as activist teachers, both of

whom could help them to understand both oppressive structures in society and how to work against them.

Although hearing stories first-hand can be inspiring, activist teachers are few in number. Those who are in the field tend to be incredibly busy individuals, which limits their availability. Activist teachers such as the teacher-participants in this study, are continually called upon by university faculty to speak to their students and/or to have student teachers. Such teachers are often overextended simply due to the nature of their job and the quality of their work. Narratives such as those found in this study are potentially useful alternatives to meeting with an activist teacher if needed.

Research Directions

Personal Research Directions

This dissertation is a call for engaging activist teachers in research and teacher-education activities. As is true in any learning endeavor, it raises more questions than provides answers. Like a conversation with a good friend, this dissertation only served to peak my interest in the topic of the experiences and insights of practicing teachers specifically those who are striving to serve the needs of diverse learners. If we want to improve teacher education and teaching practices, then we need to listen to both the “wisdom of practice” (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and “recognize the multiple conflicting voices that exist therein” (Pyne, 2006). While educational researchers have mainly focused on framing structural problems, theoretical frames, and prescriptive models, teacher voice has largely been ignored in the research. Indeed, the teacher-participants who engaged in this study offer a great deal to consider and share with pre-service teachers.

Although this study inevitably must come to a close, total closure is difficult. First, I enjoy a continued friendship with all four teacher-participants, and thus I continue to learn from them and collaborate with them. Second, the study raised many questions and therefore instead of providing me with a desired moment of pause, it has inspired me to move ahead with related areas of inquiry. My issue is not as much to find interesting questions as to limit myself to the most meaningful and relevant areas of exploration. Fundamentally, I plan to continue my work with in-service and pre-service teachers who are committed to teaching for social justice. Additionally, I am interested in fostering collaborative, mutually beneficial, and meaningful collaborations between practicing teachers and teacher educators with the goal of transforming my own practice and supporting teacher education on the whole. Ultimately, I hope to facilitate more positive educational experiences for both teachers and students. While I agree that this is a lofty goal, it is a worthwhile one. I realize that I may not make big moves toward social justice, but I still see that even the smallest gains are vital.

Some of the questions I would like to explore with teachers include: 1) autobiographical explorations that explore teachers' pathways to teaching and influences on their world view; 2) investigations into teaching practices that support the needs of marginalized learners; and 3) insight into the various ways we can support effective recruitment, training, and retention of highly qualified social justice educators. This third area is strongly recommended by the American Education Research Association Panel on Research and Teacher Education, relating to the more general implications of this particular study.

Wider Research Recommendations

Given the shifting demographics of our nation's school population and the cultural mismatch of our teaching force, continued work needs to be done in both recruiting and retaining teachers from "marginalized" groups. Additionally, we must also address ways to prepare the teacher candidates we do have. Fundamentally, both of these areas relate to teacher education. Zeichner (2005) states, it is imperative that educational researchers "conduct research on preparing teachers for cultural diversity and on recruiting a more diverse teaching force" (p. 746). Both of these goals are essential to meeting the needs of diverse learners in our schools today. I would assert studies such as this should continue, because we need to continue to engage teachers and listen to their stories, particularly those from "marginalized" backgrounds.

A Final Note: We Are Not Alone Here

Rachel's declaration "you are not alone here," which originated with her approach to behavior management, applies to many aspects of this research project. First, it applies to my interaction with Ashley when this study was conceived. Ashley, interested in serving all her future students, asked me, her instructor, to share specific examples of teaching for justice. So it began with me the "teacher" and Ashley, my "student." Thus, the question that inspired this study arose from a conversation between student and teacher. Indeed, I was not alone in formulating this study.

I consulted with my advisor, Deborah Eaker-Rich, and my chair, Dwight Rogers, on various issues such as how to frame my study, how to clarify the question, and the nature of

the field of teacher education. Thus, I was not alone in shaping my primary questions and thinking through how to begin the research process.

As I pondered this potentially overwhelming study, I was not alone. Family, friends, grad school peers, my esteemed committee members, and teaching colleagues assured me that at some point it would “all come together.”

However, I am most indebted to Ashley, who had the courage and the energy to invite an incredible group of teachers to work and study with her. Our relationship both professional and personal confirms my belief that our students are our best teachers. The Critical Friends’ Group truly was an example of the power of a safe space and honest but gentle colleagues who push one’s thinking. Truly, Ashley, Elizabeth, Jane, and Rachel have given me gifts beyond measure. I particularly appreciate their giving me the opportunity to see the realities not only of daily life in schools, but also of what is possible.

The idea of “we are not alone” ultimately points toward the fact that teachers are not “islands.” Ayers (1989) declares:

No teacher is an island, or a perfectly free agent, in common with the rest of us, are shaped by powerful social and economic forces, which coerce and constrain, prod and bombard, push and pull. Teachers particularly are formed by their relationships to power and their role in a bureaucracy geared to reproducing the societal relations in general.

But it is also true that teachers finally decide what goes on in classrooms. When the door is closed and the noise from outside and inside has settled, the teacher chooses. She can decide whether to satisfy distant demands or not, accommodate established expectations or not, embrace her narrowest self-interest or not. She can decide to merely survive another day of inexhaustible demands and limited energy, or she can decide for example, to interpret an event and resist and rebel where necessary. She can decide to link up with others in order to create something different. There are all kinds of ways to choose. (p. 5)

Thus, Rachel’s declaration of “you are not alone here” resonates throughout this project and the insights that it revealed. Indeed, we are not alone for many reasons. First, we are not

alone in our struggles against oppression. Unfortunately, we also are not alone, or dare I say “left alone,” to do what we feel is right. We are in this educational mix burdened with standards, legislation, and negative colleagues. Although few in number, we have activist teachers, such as the ones who graced me with their time and stories, to stand as role models. We also have a good number of talented scholars to support our work, such as those cited in the body of this work. Ultimately, we are not alone because we have our students, from Kindergarten through graduate school, who don’t settle for less than our best and therefore:

We are not alone here. We are not the only ones here.

APPENDIX

Autobiography & Positonicity

As is true in every qualitative study, the researcher was the instrument of study. At every step of this inquiry process, I was making choices. These choices included: 1) who and what to study; 2) how and what was important to focus on; 3) what to leave in and what to leave out; and 4) how to arrange and structure this dissertation (Ayers, 1989). Therefore, it is fair for readers to wonder what is my theoretical lens, who am I, and because this study includes an element of autobiography, what elements of my life led me to this project. How do these experiences influence this particular project? I offer now a brief autobiographical account in light of the topic of teaching toward social justice that informs my positionality.

Context

Similar to all four teacher-participants, my family and schooling experiences had great influences on my life, goals, and worldview. To begin with, I was born in Pittsfield, Massachusetts in what is affectionately referred to as the “summer of love.” At that point in time, the nation was heating up in the throws of a cultural revolution, the civil rights movement, and the Viet Nam War. My parents, both of whom experienced poverty and family tragedies in their youth, were scrambling to cobble together a good future for their new family. My mother was juggling my impending birth and the completion of her nursing degree. My father, a first generation college graduate, had just secured a job in Texas as the head of a school for the deaf. Suffice to say our little family was almost in as much upheaval as the nation itself.

Shortly after my premature birth, we packed up and moved to Texas, where my extremely culture-shocked parents first began to notice overt racism. Rather, I should say that they had no other choice but to see racism at work because it was so overt in their new Texas home. In truth, racism was as pervasive as it is now, but it was easier to ignore in my parents' predominantly white New England hometown, where racism was enacted in more subtle ways.

My mother landed a position as the head nurse on a hospital floor where she was informed that the white nurses aides would not be cleaning bed pans as "that was the 'blacks' duty," and whites would be the first to go on break during the shifts. My mother, who previously lived in a fairly segregated but liberal neighborhood, started to feel uncomfortable. Despite the fact that she was only twenty-one years old, and the aides were all at least a decade older, my mother stood up and declared that all aides would share the duties and breaks equally. Similarly, my father, as a newly minted administrator, hired the first African-American teacher at the state school for the deaf, a move he knew that was not popular with his faculty and staff. While admittedly neither of my parents are or were perfect, they do stand as role models for me to stand up for what is right, even if it compromises your popularity or even personal security.

My father earned a doctoral degree in special education, and we found ourselves headed to rural Pennsylvania, where he took up a post as a professor in a town where we were in the minority as a politically liberal, Catholic family with New England roots. Little did we know that we were about to move to a town that was even more conservative than the rural area of Texas in which we had been living. My parents received a cold shoulder from locals who were suspicious of "Papists" (Catholics) and liberals. It was quite a shock for my

parents to move from Texas only to find the darker side of prejudice in the Northeast. While they realized that they were in the minority, they also understood all too well that the few families of color who lived in there were truly at a disadvantage.

At the same time, our church was sponsoring Vietnamese refugees to relocate to our town. My parents worked toward helping these families and supporting others in our community who were struggling financially. Often, I would overhear my parents having discussions about how frustrated and concerned they were with the “political climate” in our little town. These are but a few windows into my familial influence on my social justice ideals. As I look back at my own biography, I see that my intentions of care and inspirations toward social justice are directly related to my parents’ model of community service, vocational commitments, political commitments, and religious beliefs. Therefore, similar to Ashley and Rachel, I was influenced by all three areas of the “intentions to care” outlined in the implications section of this dissertation.

My schooling experiences also influenced my social justice framework and my commitment to education. I started school Preschool in Texas. While I don’t remember much of that time, I do know that my teacher was nurturing and dedicated. She lovingly but firmly shepherded me through my first schooling experiences. Likewise, my pre-school teacher in Pennsylvania taught me about art and how to explore creativity. On the other hand, I attended public kindergarten, where I learned that “asking too many questions” is problematic and that “if you sit nicely, you get to have your snack first.” Needless to say, my early school experiences were varied and influential.

I entered Catholic school and attended it for first through eighth grades. While I did have a few good teachers, for the most part I learned about authoritarian and limiting

teaching practices. At one point, I had a teacher who intimidated children and parents alike. She tormented my classmates and me. For example, one day she was reviewing cursive writing with our class. She shouted, “Who can write the letter ‘O’ in cursive?” I looked around the room, seeing blank stares and open mouths, thinking I wanted to fix this situation for the class and to appease our teacher.

She chided us, “You should all know this!” While we all did know how to write the letter and in fact could see the letters written boldly above the chalkboard, we were too scared to move. I elected to act, thinking that I might relieve tension for the class and may at last ingratiate myself with a teacher who clearly didn’t like me. However, as I approached the board, with her chiding me on, I literally froze. I remember standing in front of the chalkboard, gripping my chalk with my tight, white fingers only inches from the board. My teacher taunted me, “It looks like Miss Powers doesn’t know even what a kindergartner should.” She brought my friend’s younger, kindergarten-aged sister to our class. This little girl, of course, did write the letter on the board, and my teacher informed me that I would be sent back to kindergarten because “I didn’t even know what a kindergartener should know.”

This is but one example of the oppositional tactics that were imposed upon my classmates and me in Catholic school. While this teacher was particularly aggressive toward all children, it seemed that I, who was inquisitive, energetic, and always annoying my teacher by trying to appease her, was her most favorite target. Other parents phoned my mother on a regular basis to ask, “How is Beth doing? Is she okay?” However, none would explain why they were concerned.

Eventually, my mother approached me and asked me to tell her what was occurring in school. Like the parents in my class, I was afraid to “tell on my teacher.” However, my

mother did at last encourage me to tell her about the situation in school. The next day at school, my mother interrupted our morning lesson, telling my teacher that she needed to speak with her. Slumping down in my seat, I began to worry about my mother, my class, and mostly myself. When my teacher returned, her face was red but she seemed somewhat composed. She told me that my mother wanted to speak with me in the hall.

In the hallway, my extremely calm and composed mother greeted me and told me that my teacher would “never treat me in a bad way again,” but I should “still respect her because she was my teacher.” This experience stands as the most significant in my inspiration to become a teacher. Not only did I learn from my teacher how I didn’t want to teach, but I also learned from my mother that children do need advocates. Later, I was moved to consider systemic and societal oppression as another inspiration toward teaching.

In high school, I became friends with Tina, who was one of two African-American students in our rural school. Of course, I assumed that because Tina (a pseudonym) lived in the Northeast, made good grades, and had a college professor father that she was “just like me.” At the same time I viewed her ethnicity as a handicap and “felt sorry” for her having to navigate a “racist” world, a view that I am not particularly proud of. However, I am thankful for Tina’s patience and insight as her as her friendship was yet another inspiration toward teaching.

I became a teacher with a goal of “making the world a better place.” I did believe that if I could support children to be caring and thoughtful individuals, that they would in turn do good work in the world. While my intentions were good, and I know that I did have some positive influences on children, I was still naïve in my understanding of oppression and the

way it is enacted in schools. Later, in my early twenties, I had the opportunity to understand racial prejudice from another perspective.

I had the good fortune to travel and teach overseas in places such as Costa Rica, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. It was not until I experienced how whiteness unfairly advantaged others and me in these foreign settings that I began to understand how this worked in my own home culture. I was saddened by a child in Costa Rica, who held her brown arm next to mine and said “blanca bonita,” or in other words “beautiful white skin.” She explained to me that my white skin was better than her darker skin tone. It seemed curious to me at the time. Although I had similar experiences in Thailand and Africa, it was this small girl in Costa Rica who inspired me to become more critically aware of my whiteness.

In graduate school, I have been lucky to have friends of color who have patiently helped me to learn about their lives and experiences. One is a Vietnamese-American who co-taught a combined social studies and social foundations course with me. In teaching with her, I learned about how not only her ethnicity but also how her position as immigrant elicited teasing from other students. She shared with me stories of her having to wear the big orange sticker with free and reduced lunch emblazoned across her chest like the scarlet letter.

Other friends including four African-American women and two Latinas have generously shared their stories and life experiences with me. Likewise, they have given me the greatest gifts of patience and insight allowing me to make mistakes and ask questions. Additionally, I have benefited from working with some incredibly insightful, talented, and dedicated activist teachers such as those who generously dedicated their time and energy to this project. Likewise, I have had the opportunity to work with several students who have not

only taught me by sharing their life experience but also through asking me insightful questions. Ashley Weston was once such student.

As stated earlier, I first met Ashley when I was serving as instructor in the course Culture, Society, and Teaching, an integrated social studies and social foundations course. Ashley stood out among her peers as a student who was passionate about equity and equality. As she moved toward graduation, Ashley consulted with me as an informal mentor. I was impressed with her as a mature and articulate young teacher. Similarly, I met Elizabeth and Jane when they opened their classrooms to some of my undergraduate pre-service teachers. I met Rachel through my participation in the Critical Friends' Study Group. I will ever be indebted to this talented and dedicated group of teachers who have challenged thinking and helped me to transform my teaching practice.

Assumptions and Worldview

When I began this study, I also had preconceived notions, and as I see now a simplistic view of teaching for social justice. Initially, my idea of social justice involved “helping disadvantaged kids to succeed” and “encouraging children to be inclusive.” Likewise, I had a limited view of how this might work in a classroom. I had the idea that a teacher “either was or was not a socially just teacher” and that what made a teacher “socially just” had more to do with being “politically liberal” than “struggling with issues.” I do understand now that activist teaching has a great deal to do with having the commitment to grapple with big issues and the courage to fail. I have learned that activist teaching, like good teaching, is complex and situation-specific. I have learned a great deal about the theoretical and historical underpinnings of social justice. I have learned even more about the power and

potential of a small group of teachers who are willing to admit, “they don’t have all the answers.”

Finally, I have been confirmed in my belief that teachers are an incredible resource for teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers alike. Indeed, teachers must be included in our research on teaching. As Ayers (1989) states:

Because they are visible in their own worlds, teachers (along with children and parents) are dehumanized, de-intellectualized, and disempowered by many of the current reports on education. Studies continue this offense when they deny teachers voice and context. On the other hand, teachers are humanized when their lives, their real and varied experiences, and their unique situations and pathways to teaching are accounted for. Teachers are dignified when they are assumed to be a rich and powerful source of knowledge about teaching, when they are looked upon as people who are essential in making sense out of the intricate and complex phenomena that they know best. And, most important, meaningful school improvement, improvement that really touches the lives of teachers and children in schools, is a process that takes hold on the inside and therefore depends on an understanding of the subjective world of the classroom. (p. 3)

As Ayers so eloquently states, teachers are a vital resource for understanding the complex, situation-specific craft of teaching. My firm belief about the importance of illuminating teacher voice in educational research is at the heart of my positionality in relation to this study.

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