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Teaching for Social Justice

Translating an anti-oppression approach into practice

A concern for social justice in education raises questions about the ways schooling has failed systematically to serve many students from diverse backgrounds. Who gets how much schooling is still an important issue. Equally vital is the kind of education that children and youth receive — and who decides. A focus on social and historical context reveals multiple inequalities which influence access to, treatment in, and outcomes of schooling. As educators and citizens, we need to be concerned about the effects of persistent poverty, cultural imperialism, racism, sexism, heterosexism — and the list goes on. Teachers alone, of course, cannot solve these injustices and inequities. But teaching is an inherently moral and political enterprise, and teachers' daily actions do matter in the effort to build a more just, caring, and democratic society. Preparing and supporting teachers to engage in this intellectually and politically demanding work, therefore, is of the utmost importance.

A wide variety of equity-oriented pedagogies currently vie for attention, yet in most of the teacher education program descriptions and mission statements that I am aware of, the call to social justice is left vague and thus open to multiple interpretations. What educating for social justice means is not always, or

even usually, self-evident until broad value statements are put into practice and contested within local arenas. In large teacher education programs in universities like the one where I work, this vagueness fosters the creation of silos rather than critical debate, both across and within departments or disciplines. It

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results in fragmentation and often token attention to “diversity” via some foundations courses or a special cohort within the larger teacher education program.

Clearly, taking diversity seriously — diversity of teacher, student, and

community populations, including global immigration flows — is essential to preparing and supporting teachers for the 21st century. Yet in the absence of clarity over the contested meanings of diversity and social justice, too often the unstated notions of liberal individualism — which are so prevalent as to be taken as common sense — shape teaching practices. In research that I have done with teacher candidates, for instance, many report valuing the various differences of their students based on race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, but they conceive of these differences as properties of individuals rather than social groups. This has a direct impact on their teaching practice. Alicia¹, for instance, witnessed one first grader make fun of another based on skin colour. With her practicum sponsor teacher, she decided to deal with the incident as an isolated case of bullying, because she saw the basis of the racial insult as arbitrary (akin, she explained, to saying, “You’ve got stupid blue shoes on”). It did not occur to Alicia to challenge ways of talking bound up in power relations that privilege some and disadvantage others or to plan a lesson or unit intended to begin to explore the meaning and impact of racism.²

If educators assume that difference resides in the individual, it can be easy to see difference as deficit and lose sight of institutional inequities and historical power imbalances. By contrast, I argue for seeing difference and diversity as (usually) a valued resource, bearing in mind the importance of institutions and col-

lective action in efforts to realize this positive vision. This needs to be accompanied by an honest acknowledgement of the continuing and painful legacy of colonialism and other forms of oppression. This is why discussion of diversity needs to be grounded in social justice, a concept that reminds us that certain groups in our society — based, for example, on race, class, gender, age, disability status, and sexuality — have experienced both systemic and attitudinal barriers that have prevented full and equitable participation in schooling and other key institutions.

This anti-oppression approach to teaching for social justice points to structural forces underpinning persistent inequalities. It shares this broad focus with other critical approaches: social reconstructionism, critical multiculturalism, and critical feminist pedagogies, to name a few. Precisely because these critical approaches to social justice propose to teach against the grain of inequalities embedded within schooling, they meet resistance. At the same time, these critical approaches are vulnerable to the critique that proponents have failed to provide many concrete examples and strategies that are cognizant of the messy political realities of schools. An important way forward, then, consists in providing such examples within a conceptual framework that can inspire further creative teaching practices and reflection and revision of these practices. The aim of this article is to contribute to this endeavour.

Why teaching for social justice?

I like the phrase teaching for social justice because it points to a positive vision, an end-goal to strive for, even as I acknowledge that we will never fully attain it. My assertion is based on the assumption that conflict as a result of power imbalances is inherent to human societies and that the frameworks for seeing and evaluating the issues of injustice that follow from power asymmetries are contested and in flux. What the vast majority might see as a satisfactory arrangement today might be tomorrow's burning social justice issue. Partly because teaching for social justice names a vision that will always be contested and provisional, it is important to seeing teaching as a verb. This highlights that teaching for social justice is also a process; it would be self-defeating for educators to employ unjust or harm-

ful practices in service of their vision of a better, more just and humane society. Thus, the phrase teaching for social justice contains an ambiguity that I embrace. One interpretation focuses on a curriculum that aims to make students aware of injustices, inform them about various social change strategies and conditions, and motivate them to work to counter those injustices. Another interpretation, equally vital, focuses on modeling social justice through equitable classroom and school practices, including assessment and governance. Inevitably, tensions and contradictions will arise. Thus, I argue that posing critical questions about the challenges of translating an anti-oppression approach into practice is vital. Testing the concrete limits to positive social change and considering the results are habits inherent to what I mean by teaching for social justice.

Social justice aims at institutional and structural change. To understand this further, I draw from political theorist Iris Marion Young's conception of oppression. In brief, Young (inspired by the work of social movements of the 1960s and 1970s) defines oppression as "institutionalized processes, which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen" (1990, p. 38). Oppression in this sense is structural: "Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (p. 41). It is also a condition of social groups, where a structural social group is understood as "a collection of persons who are similarly positioned in interactive and institutional relations that condition their opportunities and life prospects" (Young, 2000, p. 97). Members of disadvantaged social groups suffer injustices often as a result of the normal functioning of everyday society. More specifically, Young (1990) classifies oppression by five different types of structural constraints on the self-development of members of social groups, namely: cultural imperialism, marginalization, systemic violence, exploitation, and powerlessness.

In what follows, I use these five forms of oppression to organize and explicate some ways that teachers can and have attempt-

ed to counter these systemic injustices. To illustrate my analysis of the different strategies, I draw from the stories of 70 teachers who were interviewed as part of my research project titled, *Teaching for Social Justice: Veteran and Beginning Teachers' Perspectives and Pedagogical Possibilities for Public Schools*. I also cite some examples from among three cohorts of M.Ed. students (all practicing teachers) who took a two-term course called *Teaching for Social Justice: Teacher Inquiry* and conducted a small-scale practitioner research project in their own classroom or school (some of which have been published; for details, see Brandes & Kelly, 2004; Kelly & Brandes, 2010). Although all educators were teaching in British Columbia, the context varied widely in terms of whether the community was urban, suburban, or rural; its level of affluence; the diversity of the student body; the predominant political and religious ideologies; school size and history; and school type (elementary, secondary, alternative, traditional). These contextual factors mediated the translation of any one teacher's vision of teaching for social justice into the complex realities of everyday classroom practice.

Countering cultural imperialism

One form of oppression is cultural imperialism, whereby the dominant group's experience and culture reigns as common sense, the unquestioned norm. The oppressed group is stereotyped and portrayed as "the Other," which leads to the Other's being ignored and — paradoxically and simultaneously — singled out and vilified (Young, 1990; see also Hall, 2000). People with serious mental illnesses, for example, are represented as evil, dangerous, and wild looking, while their needs (e.g., for education) are routinely overlooked and underfunded. Strategies that teachers use to counter cultural imperialism include: (1) brainstorming reasons for omissions in the socially dominant curriculum; and (2) making visible the constraints associated with belonging to an oppressed group and how this then informs and inspires political struggle, including counter narratives or oppositional discourse.

A prime example, cited by several social studies teachers, involved lessons aimed at getting their students to think critically about the impact of the arrival of Columbus on the Americas and, specifically, on Aboriginal people. Canadian social

studies textbooks and enacted curriculum tend to “perpetuate mythologies of white settler benevolence” (Montgomery, 2005, p. 439; cf. Orlowski, 2008; Rezai-Rashti & McCarthy, 2008). From an Aboriginal perspective, Columbus symbolizes the brutality of the European invasion of North America. Presenting him as an “explorer” or leaving untouched the “murky legend of a brave adventurer” does nothing to trouble the white settler version of history (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998, p. 10; cf. CoDevelopment Canada, 1992).

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Judy, a teacher in a highly affluent school district, had taught and revised a “re-thinking Columbus” unit in her grade-9 social studies class several times. The unit culminated in her students writing an essay on whether Columbus is a great historical figure, based on what was happening in his time and today. Leading up to this, she focused on Aboriginal culture (including a field trip to a First Nations restaurant) and the history of colonialism and the residential school system. As well, she presented students with census data documenting high rates of poverty and negative health indicators among Aboriginal people, a result of their near cultural genocide. Early on, she met with resistance: “I had a parent phoning saying that children don’t need to know [these] facts, that this isn’t the curriculum, so why am I doing this? And I said, ‘Well, I’m just supplementing and helping them to think, and isn’t that what you actually want, is your child to think?’”

Kelly, a pre-service teacher, grew up hearing non-Aboriginal adults dismiss a focus on the “underlying causes” to explain the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. This convinced him of the importance of countering cultural imperialism among young people. For example, while on practicum he planned to read and discuss with his grade 4/5 class *Shi-shi-etko*. This picture book, written by Aboriginal author Nicola Campbell (2005), is about an Aboriginal girl who is preparing to leave her family and community to go to a residential school. Kelly noted that it would provide a rich springboard for discussion with elementary students:

How would you feel if you were taken away from your family? And if everything you had been taught by your parents — your language, the way you cut your food at the dinner table, the way that you dress — everything was taken away from you, and you were told that that was not valid or good or the way to do things and that suddenly you had to start doing this [instead]?

Many obstacles remain that make it difficult to counter cultural imperialism. The British Columbia Ministry of Education (2006) published *Shared Learnings*, which provides lesson ideas, instructional strategies, and resources for integrating Aboriginal content into the BC curriculum in grades K-10. But this valuable guide too often goes unused, according to teachers in my study, because not enough resources have gone into providing professional development for teachers. Teachers also reported feeling constrained to challenge the canon by institutional and organizational factors, such as: provincial exams in some grades and core subjects; standardized testing in grades 4, 7, and 10; cross-grade and cross-department exams; textbooks required across a department; insufficient resources; and Eurocentric attitudes.

Countering marginalization

Marginalization means exclusion from “useful participation in social life” (Young, 1990, p. 53), including school. In Canada we no longer formally segregate students by race, gender, and class, although, through streaming, ability grouping, and related practices, this still happens informally. Also, due to the lack of adequate funding for supported integration, schools sometimes still exclude students from full participation due to ability (physical, psychiatric, or developmental) and language background. Such marginalization is unjust, in part “because it blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways” (Young, 1990, p. 54).

Strategies that teachers use to counter marginalization include: (1) challenging assumptions in texts and discussions that serve to exclude groups of students; (2) devising class activities that allow for greater inclusion; (3) creating assignments that allow for the exploration and articulation of alternative narratives; and (4) fostering supported integration and de-streaming. For example, students with English as an Additional Language

(EAL), particularly recent immigrants to Canada, do not always understand the many references to pop culture or current events, which hampers their participation in discussions in social studies and other mainstream content areas (Duff, 2001). Educators, therefore, need to value EAL students' experiences through providing them with opportunities to research and represent their own stories, activities which allow them to draw on their prior knowledge while they continue to build their linguistic and cultural repertoire in the dominant language of instruction.

Chris Castellarin, an experienced grade 1 teacher, wanted to enhance the status of his EAL students in Vancouver, an urban school district where 60% of the students speak a language other than English at home (Vancouver School Board, 2011). Inspired by the research of Jim Cummins and work done at Thornwood Elementary in Ontario (Chow & Cummins, 2003), Chris decided to encourage the open use of languages other than English in his classroom in an effort to increase EAL students' sense of belonging and encourage them to think of their home languages as resources to be shared rather than as stigmas to be endured. Specifically, he invited EAL students to write in their classroom journals in their first language and to call upon bilingual peer translators when conferencing with him. His students co-created dual- and triple-language picture and story books with their grade five reading buddies. Perhaps most important, Chris invited parents to his classroom to read stories in Mandarin, Spanish, and Korean; he supplemented this by reading the same stories in English, either before or after the parent's visit. Over the course of the year, Chris was able to talk to parents about how quickly a home language can be lost if families do not support it at home and urge their children to speak only English at school (for details, see Castellarin, 2010).

Countering systemic violence

Systemic violence refers to physical force, harassment, intimidation, and ridicule visited upon members of a structural social group "simply because they are members of that group" (Young, 1990, p. 62). Members of such groups "live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person" (p. 61). A prime example is violence

against lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, Two Spirit, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) people. In a recent survey of Canadian youth in school, to cite just one of many relevant statistics, “More than one in five (21%) LGBTQ students reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation” (Taylor & Peter, 2011, p. 16).

Strategies that teachers use to counter systemic violence include: (1) explicitly identifying demeaning, exclusionary language, behavior, and policy as a form of oppression; and (2) modeling challenging taken-for-granted systemic violence, understanding privilege, and creating alliances across difference.

Cheryl had five years of teaching experience in her home town, a socially conservative community; she described herself as a “big advocate for anti-homophobia” in the high

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school where she taught. Students resisted by questioning her sexuality and accusing her of having a “personal agenda.” She countered this by telling them: “Straight people need to get behind it [anti-homophobia], too, because it is about human rights. I care about it, because I care about people being treated with fairness and equity and kindness, not because I want to marry a woman.” As part of her strategy, Cheryl deliberately refused to divulge her sexuality out of solidarity with queer people. Her example was later taken up by a senior high drama troupe that Cheryl sponsored, who were performing an anti-homophobia skit and had devised the following as a response to people asking them about their individual sexual identities: “As a group we represent all different sexual orientations: some of us are straight, some of us are gay, some of us are bi.” When administrators refused to allow the troupe’s skit to be performed at district middle schools, the students protested by organizing a Day of Silence. “They wore taped crosses over their mouths and made up cards saying, ‘We are not speaking today because of the oppression.’” Calling attention to heterosexism and homophobic violence as a form of oppression and, at the same time, refusing attempts by some administrators and parents to recast the issue as sexual identity proved to be powerful social justice pedagogy.

Kelly, a pre-service teacher, provided another example of countering systemic violence, in this case a racial slur. While reading his grade 4/5 students a traditional Chinese tale, he noticed two White boys mocking the Chinese language. Kelly immediately stopped the lesson, called attention to the feelings of Asian classmates, and named the incident as “making fun of their traditional language.” Kelly was not afraid to push students to the edge of their comfort zone by naming their privilege and examining with them the potentially harmful effects of particular actions taken “without thinking.” Kelly encouraged the boys to apologize to their fellow students before returning to the lesson.

Often, slurs like this one are dismissed as thoughtless or misguided humour and, therefore, not harmful. In response, feminists describing the academy’s “chilly climate” for women have used the metaphor of a “ton of feathers” to convey the systemic violence of sexist jokes and innuendo, seemingly harmless if viewed in isolation but crushing to the human spirit when seen in sum total. Teachers reported the following initial strategies to help students — particularly those privileged relative to a particular form of institutional inequality — to understand particular forms of systemic violence: (1) drawing an analogy to a form of violence already understood as oppressive, (2) relating a personal story of perpetuating systemic violence and realizing one’s privilege, and (3) examining instances of textual violence, including the harmful histories of particular terms (e.g., the origins of the word “moron” in the racist and ableist eugenics movement).

Countering exploitation

Exploitation refers to an unequal structural relation wherein “the energies of the have-nots are continuously expended to maintain and augment the power, status, and wealth of the haves” (Young, 1990, p. 50). An example is the sexual exploitation of street-involved youth who feel coerced into engaging in sexual activity in exchange for money, shelter, or food. Strategies that teachers use to counter exploitation include: (1) connecting historical to current examples, (2) linking global to national and local examples, and (3) drawing attention to student and other activist movements. A teacher could, for example, bring the Occupy movement into the classroom by comparing it to earlier movements

(e.g., mobilization of the unemployed during the Great Depression, youth-driven protests of the 1960s) and inviting students to reflect on indicators of the widening inequality between rich and poor in Canada (see Yalnizyan, 2010) and globally.

Attempts to name and counter exploitation can spark resistance, particularly when the contemporary and local manifestations and consequences of exploitation are highlighted. Myriam Dumont (2010), a first-grade teacher in Vancouver's poorest neighbourhood, described the resistance from colleagues and parents that she experienced for, among other things, talking to her students about the costs of hosting the Olympics, including the gentrification of their neighbourhood and increased homelessness. Less controversial are lessons asking older students to consider items in a household budget and what it would be like to try to live while working at a minimum-wage job. In asking young people to consider whether full-time workers should live in poverty in Canada or to form an opinion on a living wage policy, teachers are gently raising the issue of exploitation and how it might be countered.

Jesse, during his practicum, highlighted the role of union organizing in advancing the right of workers to a living wage. In a unit on Canadian symbols, he organized an improvised play on the formation of the prairie grain unions to demonstrate to his grade 2 students the meaning of "cooperation" and "making themselves strong through being a team." After role-playing how much of the farmers' income was being siphoned off by the grain engineer, Jesse asked the students playing farmers to "hold hands in a circle, and they put the grain in the middle, and then when the grain engineer came along, they went 'No!'" In debriefing this part of the play, Jesse explained to his students: "That's what the germ of the union movement is about — cooperation."

Tiffany described a more sustained example. On her practicum in a grade 5/6 classroom in a middle-class Vancouver school, she created and taught a unit on child labour. As background, she introduced the students to the idea of the United Nations by creating a story about a playground at war, where each child was a nation. Students then created posters demonstrating what they were learning about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly articles pertaining to child labour. Following this, Tiffany asked them to examine photos of children in coun-

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tries around the world laboring (e.g., sewing a soccer ball) and to discuss in small groups questions such as: “What are these children doing? Do you think this is fair? Do you think they enjoy what they’re doing?” Tiffany shared facts about child labour and told the story of Iqbal Masih, who, as a 12-year-old carpet labourer-turned-activist in Pakistan, “made a difference.” She explained to her students, “He’s a famous child labourer who was killed [in 1994] because he took a stand against it.”

The unit culminated in a highly-scripted child labour sweatshop simulation. At each table, the student in role as the “master” would yell out commands to the three in role as labourers: “Work harder! Work faster! You’re not doing it right!” Tiffany rang a bell, and students switched roles so that each had the experience of being the master. She debriefed the simulation through discussion of emotions the students had experienced; they later wrote and drew pictures in their journals, from the perspective of a child labourer. Tiffany’s faculty advisor had reservations about the unit, warning: “A lot of children have shoes made in sweatshops. You might anger the parents. Say the kid comes home and says, ‘I can’t go to Walmart anymore, because those children making Walmart clothes are being exploited.’” No such incidents occurred, however, and in the weeks ahead, Tiffany noticed her sponsor teacher and students alike referring back to the unit: “Remember when we studied about Iqbal?”

Countering powerlessness

Powerlessness is a form of oppression that Young (1990) links most fundamentally to the division of labour in late capitalist societies, and her most detailed example is that of nonprofessionals in the paid economy and their relative lack of status. I would note that this conception does not imply that anybody is ever completely powerless, but the relatively powerless are constrained to exert their will through informal and indirect means, using “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985). In a formalized, bureaucratic setting, “the powerless are situated so that they must take orders and rarely have the right to give them... The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work ... and do not command respect” (Young, 1990, p. 56).

It is not a far stretch to consider K-12 students powerless, given how conventional schooling has been organized and practiced. These practices have been reinforced by dominant discourses circulating in the wider society. The identities of children and youth have been historically constructed in dominant culture as opposite to that of adults (irrational, emotional, ignorant, carefree, etc.), and this construction has then been used to legitimate curtailing their self-determination. A discourse of control, underpinned by tenets of behavioural psychology, encourages teachers and administrators to value student docility and conformity in the name of good “classroom management.”

Given children’s dependency on adults for survival, some power inequality between the two is most likely inevitable. But teachers in my study, inspired by movements for social justice — including those to democratize public education — aimed to treat children and youth in more respectful ways. Teachers endeavouring to promote a sense of individual and collective agency give children and youth a say over what and how they learn and invite them to brainstorm a variety of ways to demonstrate their learning. Specific strategies that teachers use to counter powerlessness include inviting students: (1) to make alternative interpretations of texts beyond the obvious themes; (2) to produce their own artifacts (e.g., the dual-language books that Chris Castellarin’s students created or protest songs [see Blackwell & Knight, 2005]); (3) to help set and weight evaluation criteria and design assignments; (4) to appear in wider public spheres, communicate their ideas and concerns, and think through alternative courses of action and their consequences; and (5) to consult meaningfully on or co-determine the rules governing behaviour in the classroom and school.

Paul Orlowski aimed to generate a sense of political agency in his Civics 11 students. In a unit coinciding with the federal election of 2006, he discussed with his students the limits to our existing political system. An immediate example presented itself when David Emerson, who ran and won as a Liberal in his riding, announced a few days after his election that he was joining the governing Conservatives as a cabinet minister. Emerson’s party defection so outraged one of Paul’s students that she was inspired to write a speech about why it was anti-democratic and contributed to voter apathy. She later delivered her speech to a

crowd of over a thousand at a pro-democracy rally. Paul observed that this incident energized the entire class, who enthusiastically completed various assignments requiring their participation in the political process: writing and submitting a letter to the editor on a political issue, volunteering on a community-related issue, and attending a political rally and writing “a one-page report that described the crowd in terms of race, gender, and age, as well as quotes they read from rally signs” (Orlowski, 2008, p. 120; see also Orlowski, 2011).

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Bruce, a veteran inner-city school teacher, sought — in the context of his M.Ed. teacher inquiry project — to counter student powerlessness by changing his role from instructor to mentor and providing students with more autonomy over their learning (design, implementation, assessment). In a grade 9 novel study of John Steinbeck’s *The Pearl*, for example, students formed into groups based on common interest in exploring a particular Prescribed Learning Outcome (PLO). At the outset, Bruce worked with each small group to provide background and ensure through dialogue their understanding of the PLO. Next, the full class discussed the novel, with each small group highlighting connections important to their PLO. Finally, each group of students created and taught an assignment designed to help classmates develop reading and thinking strategies encompassed by their group’s PLO. Initially, Bruce felt uneasy over students’ suggestions for assignments, and students accustomed to receiving A’s worried they would not learn what they needed in order to advance to honours English or do well on provincial exams. A few rebelled at the extra work, stating it was simply easier for the teacher to tell them what to do. At the end of five weeks, however, Bruce found that engagement was high among students across the traditional academic achievement spectrum (McCloy & McCloy, 2006). Decreased feelings of powerlessness stemmed not only from de-centering the teacher as sole authority but equally from newfound respect for their peers as co-teachers

(people with knowledge) as well as co-learners (people willing to listen to their ideas).

Challenges and tensions

Aiming to counter powerlessness and other forms of oppression is much easier, of course, in alternative settings, where smaller class and school size, democratic governance, and a de-emphasis on ranking and sorting make it easier for teachers to focus on helping students to exercise creativity and judgment in their learning rather than fending off bureaucratic demands. Nevertheless, there are teachers in larger conventional public schools (allied with administrators, parents, students, teacher educators, and community members) experimenting with anti-oppressive practices. Key to this is teacher vigilance with respect to how inequitable social and economic realities operating outside of and through the schools can warp even the best of intentions. I have witnessed self-evaluation sheets in a grade 3 classroom unwittingly become a tool for learning to please the teacher. Fear of being left behind in our competitive economy can prompt students to turn self-reflection assignments into justifications for why they should receive top marks. Efforts to widen participation in issues of governance, such as class meetings or involving students in revising codes of conduct, can wind up favouring students who already have a relatively strong voice within the classroom or school, such as high academic achievers or top athletes.

Thus, translating an anti-oppression approach into practice requires being wide awake to the challenges and tensions borne of confronting the shaping force of inequitable social conditions. The challenges of this work can be anticipated and, to some extent, planned for. To explore one aspect in some depth, consider the complexities of social location. The teacher and students in any one class are diversely socially positioned, and any one marker of relative power and status will connect differently to a particular equity issue. Further, even people identified as similar by virtue of their social location will respond in a range of ways to anti-oppression pedagogies. Educators for social justice can expect to experience student defensiveness (eye rolling), denial (“women are equal now”), and accusations of being on a soapbox (recall, for example, Cheryl’s story). They can anticipate

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that at least some relatively privileged students will resist an examination of that privilege and that some relatively disadvantaged students will feel vulnerable or become complicit in maintaining the inequitable status quo.

Robyn predicted such a mix of student reactions as she planned to explore gendered power relations and the institution of marriage in the context of teaching a grade 12 English unit on Shakespeare's play, *The Taming of the Shrew*. She had experienced student resistance in her six years of teaching in her home town, an agricultural community with strongly-held socially conservative values. "It's really difficult when students go home, and home is an opposite idea, so that everything you've been fighting or hoping to deconstruct is being reconstructed at home." Robyn asked students to examine "traditional conceptions of gender roles," their "legacies," and "how they impact our thinking and our interactions with each other. We talked about dating and, in dating, who pays, and what do we look for in a potential partner." Students read current articles on spousal abuse, comparing Petruchio's acts of cruelty — refusing Katherina food, sleep, and the clothing she wants in order to make her a submissive bride — to tactics abusive men use today to control women.

Robyn used a few strategies to try to prevent defensiveness. She deliberately allowed a contained space for students to discuss respectfully gender-related "pet peeves." She prompted girls to look at how they treat each other, interact in heterosexual relationships, and are sometimes complicit in the "patriarchal system" (e.g., expecting boys to pay for them on dates, open the door for them). In an effort to counter boys' dismissal of the unit as "men bashing," Robyn had the class read and discuss an article linking "macho" attitudes and behavior to societal messages that constrict boys' self-knowledge and emotional expressiveness. Thus, she tried to avoid positioning people as either victims or perpetrators and to prompt boys to think about the interest they might have in gender equity or transformation. A related strategy for combating defensiveness is to make students aware of examples where members of dominant groups have worked as allies (see Kelly, Brandes, & Orlowski, 2003-2004, p. 48). Robyn might, for example, have had her students "read about other teenage boys or young men who were trying to do something to change sexist behavior" (Espinosa, 2003, p. 5).

Yet another strategy involves teaching about the interconnections among different forms of oppression, with an eye toward building coalitions that can work toward positive social change. With my colleagues Gabriella Minnes Brandes and Paul Orlowski, I have written about some examples at the high school level (Kelly, Brandes & Orlowski, 2003-2004, p. 45; see also Orlowski, 2001). This work can be done with younger students, too. Think back to Jesse's improvised play on the formation of the prairie grain unions. As he continued his unit on Canadian symbols, Jesse introduced the character of Nellie McClung. The second-grade girl playing Nellie asked her husband, "Dear, why is it that I can't hold hands and join with the rest of you farmers? Why am I not treated the same as you?" The student playing her husband told Nellie to go home because that was a woman's place. The play then touched on women's suffrage and the Persons Case, where women activists sought and eventually won legal recognition as persons with rights. To class inequality and sexism, one could add racism to the mix. Recently, I saw on a grade 5 social studies quiz the question "When did women get the vote in Canada?" This, of course, begs the question: Which women? White women in 1919? Chinese and Indo-Canadian women in 1947? Women of Japanese descent in 1948? Aboriginal women in 1960?

Conclusion

The phrase teaching for social justice may conjure images of facing off against opponents or carrying protest placards while marching in the streets. To be sure, mass mobilizations and non-violent disruptions of business as usual are important ways to protest structural inequalities. What I hope is clear from the examples I have provided, though, is that anti-oppressive pedagogy includes work that teachers are doing, or might be inspired to do, in their classrooms and schools on a daily basis. The teacher stories I have detailed in this article, plus the growing number of published teacher inquiries, collectively suggest that teaching for social justice is possible even within current constraints and prevailing power dynamics. Robyn, teaching in British Columbia's bible belt, responded with hope, tempered by realism, when I asked her about whether she had been able to match her teaching practices to her vision of what schooling

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ought to be about. “You try to do whatever you possibly can do,” she replied, “and because of that, I don’t let things derail me too much.” Specifically, Robyn mentioned large class size, “conflicting philosophies” within her department, and lack of administrative support as hindrances; she noted, however, that “you still have to focus on what you are capable of doing within those constraints.” Teachers make many choices every day and frequently face difficult situations; they must act in one way or another, with uncertain and uneven results. If Robyn’s experience is indicative, teachers should not let fear of conflict stop them unduly from engaging in practices aimed at promoting social justice: “When it comes to things I’ve tried to do or wanted to do, I’ve just tried to do it, and it has been okay.”

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ENDNOTES

¹ I gave teachers participating in the *Teaching for Social Justice* study the choice of selecting a pseudonym or using their real name. Alicia is a pseudonym.

² Well-meaning adults often signal to children that it is not “polite” to draw attention to people’s skin colour, which can have the effect of making race a taboo subject unless teachers signal otherwise. First-grade teachers could broach the topic of race and racism through reading aloud stories that prompt questions and discussion of times when children may have been left out or ridiculed because of their appearance. Teachers might ask students to monitor children’s TV shows, commercials, or movies and notice the race of main characters or patterns in racial representation as a springboard for further discussion (Cherian, 2001; Polite & Saenger, 2003).

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