

A Reflection on Educators for Social Justice

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Antonia Darder
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

In establishing a special interest group that focuses on social justice, there are two central questions that must foreground our efforts. The first question we must ask is what should be the role of the Social Justice organization in these times? And second, how do progressive educators continue to do this work when a highly conservative rhetoric about social justice abounds? I will attempt to briefly address these questions, recognizing that this short amount of time does not permit me to engage them necessarily in a linear or even systematic manner.

First, I believe that any group committed to social justice must be fundamentally linked to an effort to construct a new culture, in the midst of an existing culture that, more often than not, has been informed by a traditionally conservative definition of social justice—that is the view that as long as everyone is treated “the same” then justice is served.

Unfortunately, this is a perspective that categorically ignores the historical and contemporary disparities that persist in material social conditions across populations, as well as the ideological, and structural inequalities that shape and reproduce all forms of human oppression or injustice within the capitalist state. Moreover, with the dismantling of the welfare state, the liberal idea that the State should provide for the needy has been supplanted by neo-liberal, conservative notions of social justice that now permeate the nation’s health, education and welfare agencies.

As critical educators, this means that we must recognize how schools function within an untenable contradiction. On one hand, schools are expected to respond to the needs of hierarchies associated with the capitalist labor force and the marketplace. And, on the other hand, schools are supposed to create equality of access to rights and opportunities for the nation’s citizens’ as promised within an ostensibly democratic republic—a republic that functions as an empire, given its impact on the current global state of affairs, whether that be the occupation of Iraq, foreign economic policy in Latin America, or the control of the world marketplace.

Critical educators who are concerned with questions of social justice must also grapple with what Henri Lefebvre (1971) calls the *colonization of the everyday life*—where every aspect of everyday life, including birth, death, marriage, family, work, leisure, parenthood, spirituality and so on is disconnected, compartmentalized, and placed at the mercy of economic imperatives. The consequence is a deep sense of dissatisfaction that results because of the inability of the marketplace to meet or satisfy authentic human needs. For authentic human needs can only be met through conditions that break the

alienation and isolation so prevalent in educational institutional today. Given all this, we then need to work toward establishing a new working culture among us—one that cultivates human connection, intimacy, trust and honesty, within the context of this intellectual political project.

Unfortunately, in our efforts to construct such a culture, we must contend with the commodification of social life that has functioned to destroy a series of social relations and replace them with commodity relations that also translate into power relations. Meanwhile, persuasion, compulsion, and seduction (I might add) have become the predominant methods for constructing consensus, rather than authentic human relationships based on dialogue and struggle in our efforts to live and work together toward a democratic vision of schooling. Even more disconcerting is the manner in which the accent in many organizations and institutions is placed upon individual heroism. Within such a context, individuals can readily (or conveniently) forget that any opportunity can be garnered or shaped for one's individual aggrandizement and/or for the collective good.

There is no question in my mind that the individualism of heroism or seeking to be the shining "star" can be linked directly to the competitiveness of the marketplace. Here, even our work as social justice educators can easily become just another rhetorical chip or "bit of theoretical capital" stashed in our expertise bag of tricks, devoid of any connection to a larger transformative project for social justice, human rights, and, least of all, economic democracy.

From a critical social justice perspective, the central role of schools should be to educate for the construction and participation of emancipatory life. But to carry this out requires that educators be willing to contend with two major forms of curricular mechanisms, which uphold the capitalist State: the media (television, popular culture, etc.) and schooling. Both are steeped in a hidden curriculum that disastrously functions to curtail historical memory and impose apolitical and ahistorical public transcripts of events, in concert with the imperatives of capitalism. As such, another role of critical educators for social justice must be not only the unveiling of the hidden curriculum in schools and society, but the reinstitution of a multiplicities of historical memories tied to the everyday lives of disenfranchised populations.

In our work, the realm of schooling represents an essential political project in the interest of not only engaging questions of racism, sexism, class inequality, compulsory heterosexism, homophobia, and disability but of challenging the very politics of empire. This requires contending with the unfortunate consequences of heightened productivity and gross economic structural changes on working-class populations in this country and abroad, particularly in terms of constructing economic dependencies, reserve armies and incarcerated subjects.

To accomplish this through our teaching and research, we must cultivate a critical understanding of how U. S. global or neoliberal interests have perpetuated increasing material inequality and human suffering, in the name of economic development,

democracy and social progress. Meanwhile, the consequences of modernity have resulted in a new wave of massive immigration to the center of the empire, along with inciting a revival of vicious attacks—both within the popular arena and the academy—against immigrants, particularly immigrants from Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Racialized conjectures of immigrants have intensified within public policy debates on bilingual education, immigrant labor, and heightened surveillance and control of immigrant populations in the U.S.

Along the same vein, the pernicious legacy of racisms must be understood within the context of everyday inequalities and the formation of student identities, conditioned by a capitalist-inspired curriculum, steeped in gendered, racialized and patriotic notions of U.S. life. As such, critical educators must come to terms with the fact that inequality or injustice, as Sam Gindin (2002) argues, “is not an unfortunate aberration of capitalism, but an inescapable outcome and an essential condition of its successful economic functioning. Capitalism is---and this is surely as clear today as it ever was---a social system based on class and competition” (Gindin 2002, p.3). A globalized system which requires the deep impoverishment of a large sector of the world’s population.

Given this reality, it is unfortunate that the language and attitudes adopted by many well-meaning educators function conveniently to deaden and annul opposition to the capitalist order, as it seeks to maintain social control, even in the wake of increasing impoverishment and incarceration. Meanwhile, the market, as Richard Brosio (1994) often reminds us, continues to move people from few, modest needs to the creation of many false needs through advertising and an ideology of consumption as happiness. There is no question that such an ideology results in the demise of class-consciousness. While the media breeds passivity and instills the notion that money is everything, capital rules, and all aspects of life are open-game to the wiles of profit.

In this context, we as critical educators for social justice must struggle to revive a politics of collective self-determination to our teaching and our research. However, to do we must acknowledge that self-determination requires energy that is not committed to paid labor, household problems and our enmeshment with non-fulfilling personal relationships.

Hence, if we are to continue developing a multiplicity of projects that might potentially challenge the politics of empire with its legacy of oppressions, we must work to construct together a common public dialogue and a counter-hegemonic sphere. This must be a sphere or network of relationships that is not anchored in materialistic interpretations of reality nor fueled by a drive for acquisition and accumulation. In our work, we must abandon the penchant for chasing after new intellectual experiences for the sake of obtaining personal fulfillment, recognition, or reward. Instead, what we need is to connect, rigorously and with perseverance, our labor within schools, universities, and communities to real conditions the produce inequalities, with a clear purpose and moral intent of transforming these conditions collectively in very concrete and meaningful ways.

Lastly, if we believe that a New World is possible, then we must begin by constructing that New World within the environments in which we live, work and teach. In doing this, we must not forget that even when we work in small interest groups, we are always in danger of the oppression that resides within and enacts itself in undemocratic ways when we struggle to work together. Moreover, we must keep in mind that special interest groups can also function to veil the reproduction of inequality in the larger body politic of an organization, as it does out in the world.

That is to say that by disaggregating society into fragments (particularly those who resist the hegemonic relations of the larger body politic), structural inequalities can persist without any real avenue for changing these structures. For this reason, it is important that our collective work not stop within the Critical Educators of Social Justice SIG. Instead, our work must conscientiously engage and interact with the work of other groups and communities. So, in this way, we might ultimately participate in changing the organizations and institutions that so strongly impact our everyday lives—not only as educators, researchers and cultural workers, but as human beings.

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