

## Teaching for social justice: reflections from a core unit in a teacher education program

Loshini Naidoo

University of Western Sydney

### Introduction

Teachers cannot restrict their attention to the classroom alone, leaving the larger setting and the purposes of schooling to be determined by others. They must take active responsibility for the goals to which they are committed and for the social setting in which these goals may prosper. If they are not to be mere agents of others, of the state, of the military, of the media, of the experts and bureaucrats, they need to determine their own agency through a critical context of their calling (Scheffler, 1968, p. 11).

The School of Education at the Penrith Campus of the University of Western Sydney has adopted a conceptual framework for pre-service teachers that includes a commitment to teaching for social justice to prepare teachers to work with students from diverse racial, ethnic, social class and language backgrounds. This initiative is an indication that there are sites of social injustices that need to be challenged if we are to have a society 'in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure' (Bell, 1997, p. 1).

It is to face this challenge that 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' was set-up as a core coursework unit of the Bachelor of Teaching (Secondary) degree. Developing a learning climate that encourages awareness and appreciation for those with various cultural backgrounds -racial/ethnic, language, socio-economic, gender, sexual orientation is an important role of this unit in the teacher education program. With a population of over 1.4 million, Western Sydney is the third largest regional economy in Australia, after Sydney and Melbourne, and its population is larger than that of South Australia. It is the most culturally and linguistically diverse region in New South Wales, and also home to 60 percent of Australia's largest urban Indigenous population (ABS, 1998).

Greater Western Sydney is an area of both diversity and resilience. Not only the diversity of the physical and social geography of the region, but also the enormous diversity of issues, constraints and also opportunities that face each of the thirteen local government areas that comprise Greater Western Sydney. The region is far from homogeneous. Variations between one part of the region and another are important indicators of deprivation. Lack of housing amenity, households without access to a car, high unemployment rates particularly for males, poor English proficiency, are greater problems in some areas of Western Sydney than others. Parts of Greater Western Sydney have tended to house those citizens least able to exercise choice in terms of their jobs, homes and personal consumption. It is evident that Greater Western Sydney and the University of Western Sydney have a unique set of communities with higher proportions of relative social disadvantage and ultimately lower access to resources. The University of Western Sydney is coming to terms with these differences and is widening its activities in order to help these diverse communities help themselves.



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Naidoo, Loshini (2007). Teaching for social justice: reflections from a core unit in a teacher education program. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 4 (2)

<http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

Within these environments, identities are challenged; relationships between different cultural groups are both eroded and reshaped. This process of rupture leads in the first instance to confusions and rejections around different 'world-views'. Often, the complexities that emerge are marginalised and silenced. If social cohesion is to be maintained, then the complexities of identities in 'new times' must be openly dealt with. These tensions are now being played out in the schools of the Greater Western Sydney region. It is crucial that these schools provide young people with the opportunities to openly discuss their concerns and fears; to acknowledge the differing viewpoints that exist; and to critically deconstruct the social, political and economic complexities of the issues that have contributed to current world events.

To inform my own practice to understand better the students with whom I work, I decided to embark on a study to evaluate the students' perceptions and understandings of social justice and its role to teaching based on their experience of the social justice unit coursework and school practicum. Students' perceptions are vital for working on social justice in the classroom and for working towards a better education. Social justice education is not only a reality but it is also a part of the socio-cultural context of schooling that teacher's encounter. In view of this fact, social justice education has become a major concern for educational scholars and practitioners in recent times since it is seen as an attempt to redress educational inequities rising from the increasing pluralism of westernised industrialised societies. Such pluralism has led to increasingly diverse school populations (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002) economic inequalities between mainstream and minoritised children (Coleman, 1990) discourses about the marginalized 'other' with little examination of the 'self' at the centre of the dominant culture (Asher, 2003) and challenges to institutionalised racism (Sleeter, 1996).

### **Conceptualising social justice**

Defining social justice is difficult and the vagueness surrounding the term is indispensable and likely to create intellectual debates. However, in attempting to conceptualise social justice the following emerged; that it (social justice) was a 'condensation symbol' (Edelman, 1987) defying 'stipulative definition' (Troyna & Vincent, 1995, p. 149). MacIntyre (1985) identified various 'historical renditions' of social justice within Australian politics and Rizvi & Lingard (1996) within political theory more generally. More recently, these have been challenged by post-modern, post-structural and postcolonial criticisms of their formerly universal character and ahistorical treatment (Foucault, 1984; Hall, 1996) as well as their failure to account for difference (Fuss, 1989; Young 1990).

In this paper, social justice is defined as equal participation in a democratic society, which allows for equal distribution of resources to all its members, who have a degree of self-determination and interdependence (Bell, 1997). In the context of education, social justice means examining why and how schools are unjust for some students. Nieto (2000) asserts 'it [a concern for social justice] means analysing school policies and practises... that devalue the identities of some students while overvaluing others' (p.183).

In conceptualising the role of social justice for teacher preparation, the focus in the paper is on assisting educators to critique the larger socio-cultural, political dimensions of teaching and schooling. This is in keeping with the assertion by Cochran-Smith (1999) that 'part of teaching for social justice, is deliberately claiming the role of educator as well as activist based on political consciousness and on the ideological commitment to diminishing the inequities of American life' (p.116).

### **Theoretical framework**

As a university teacher educator, I have aspired to prepare student teachers to be active agents in their own professional development, and hence in determining the direction of



schools. This means, not merely translating theories into classroom practise, but recognising the fact that theories are produced through practises and that practises reflect particular theoretical commitments. The relation between social justice education and pedagogical practise is a core and often rarely addressed aspect. Freire's (1985) argument of the necessity of reading both the word and the world is crucial here. It is not enough to teach about social justice. Educators must both orient and organise teaching in such a way as to practise social justice.

An important discourse and one relevant to teaching social justice is critical theory. Beyer (2001, p.154) asserts that 'it is precisely in understanding the normative dimensions in education and how they are all intertwined with social, structural and ideological processes and realities that critical theory plays a key role'. Not only does critical theory examine the educational perspectives and politics that serve the interests of the dominant groups and silence and marginalise students of colour (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1980; Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Shor, 1980) but critical pedagogy argues for an anti-oppression and emancipatory approach to education (Nieto, 1995). This implies that it is possible to critique schooling practises in terms of social class and capitalism in a national and globalised context (McLaren, 1999). Unfortunately, critical theory does not go far enough to deal with issues of race and ethnicity and hence, anti-racist education emerged as a discourse to place racism at the centre of the debate of equity and social justice. Anti-racist education aims to link race, ethnicity and power in the context of colonialism and power (McLaren & Mayo, 1999).

The above-mentioned discourses indicate that teaching for social justice is more than instilling new knowledge. While the content should focus on the dominant – subordinate relationships in society (Sleeter, 1996) pedagogy should engage students as critical thinkers, participatory and active learners. To understand the impact of critical content and critical pedagogy, two other inter-related aspects - dialogic education and active learning need to be considered.

Freire (1971) believed that dialogic education, in which the knowledge, perspectives and experiences of students and teachers are honoured, are central to the education process. In this process, students and teachers can become active citizens, challenging injustices from within and amongst themselves and in the social world around them. Reflection alone is insufficient. Active learning can help deepen students understanding.

Kolb (1984) emphasised students bringing their lived experiences into the classrooms and subjecting them to reflection and experimentation. Asking students to reflect on and debrief such classroom experiences through discussion can have positive effects. Coupled with knowledge content – lectures, readings and other conceptual input, students can develop a more abstract understanding of social life and that understanding can be tested outside the classrooms and in new situations. Thinking, talking and applying class concepts and acting upon these, all reflect engaged learning (Nagda, Gurin & Lopez, 2003, p.169) and may be brought back to class as content for further exploration and meaning making.

Important too are the works of Goffman (1964) and Helms (1990). The former explains how a social attribute may be used for discrediting an individual or a group, thereby promoting differential treatment by others. Goffman (1964, p. 3) defines stigma as 'an attribute that makes [one] different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind...He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one'. One often elaborately works to manage her/his identity away from a discreditable standing. Hence, careful attendance to how others treat us, or how we imagine being treated, provides information required for the work of managing our identities away from a stigmatised role.

The latter (Helms, 1990) in his work on racial identity suggested that in any society where some form of identity is stigmatised, members of the dominant and subordinate groups

will react to each other based on the relative status of their identity. Helms (1990) suggested that African Americans' feelings of self-worth may be associated with their assessment of racial status as a minority group member. Thus, racial identity development can be a crucial aspect of personality development for African Americans. As noted by Helms (1990), intrinsic to racial identity is the belief that individuals need an appreciation of group identification in order to maintain a healthy sense of personal identity.

## Research process

My research study focuses on the unit 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education'. The unit, drawing on many of the theories reviewed above was designed: a) to introduce students to the historical, social, political and conceptual roots of social differences and social inequalities, b) to provide opportunities for engagement with students from differing socio-cultural-economic backgrounds, c) to foster engagement through critical pedagogy, d) to help students gain a critical understanding of the role of schooling in broader social contexts, including the relevance of sociological perspectives to this awareness, e) to assist students in critically analysing the multiple contexts of power operating in schools and their relationships to concepts of discourse, subjectivity and identity as well as exploring the 'politics of difference' associated with identity, and f) to help students develop an understanding of the construction of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and the intersections between these concepts and to show how they are related to inequality in and outside schooling.

The 'unit content' based on cultural diversity, difference, social justice and change, covered structural and historical basis of various forms of oppression (Sleeter, 1996). It also includes content on schooling in socio-cultural contexts, the role of education in social justice, multiple contexts of power relations in school, curriculum/ knowledge and discipline. The unit content, using social justice education as a basis combined a structural critique of inequality with possibilities of change. It is hoped that in the process of deconstruction, future educators are able to reconstruct social reality (Caputo, 1997; Gay, 1997).

The unit pedagogy, which involved reflexivity as a form of social justice, operated in different ways. Students, in groups of thirty, met in tutorial groups for two hours to discuss and debrief lectures and readings, and to participate with others in the group to deconstruct and thereby provide students with an 'apprenticeship for the possibility of participation in democracy' (Nieto, 1995, p. 207). Reflection was also encouraged through assessments, two per semester, in which students articulated their understanding of issues covered in the unit in relation to their own perspectives and experiences. The criteria for writing the assessment was provided and included amongst others the critical and analytical argument of the issues studied.

Nieto (2000, p. 180) asserts that we 'place equity front and centre of the teacher preparation process if we are to transform teacher education.' She put forth five ways in which teacher educators can situate equity at the centre of the teacher education program. Firstly, teacher educators should be encouraged to take a stand on social justice and diversity issues. Secondly, social justice should be made ubiquitous in teacher education. Thirdly, teaching should be promoted as an ongoing process of transformation, fourthly, teacher educators need to learn to challenge racism and bias and finally, teacher educators need to develop a community of critical friends (Nieto, 2000, pp. 182-183).

The unit 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education', in content and pedagogy, was able to take a stand on social justice and diversity issues because it asserted the critical values, attitudes and skills necessary for just an equitable teaching. In this way, the unit addressed diversity in value added ways (Nieto, 2000) and gave students from diverse backgrounds a greater opportunity to interact. Furthermore, by taking a stand on social justice issues, the unit constantly reinforced and re-assessed issues relating to diversity and social



justice in lectures, tutorials and assessments. By constantly re-affirming that teaching was an ongoing act of transformation (Nieto, 2000), teacher educators studying the unit became aware of the socio-cultural, political context for their teaching and were able to reflect upon their own identities in relation to the identities of their students especially as it related to issues of difference, diversity, power and oppression.

Supporting teachers to fundamentally reconceptualise the relationship between teacher and student into a dynamic, bi-directional, mutually reflexive relationship is intimately tied to concepts of social justice and equity (Ball, 2000; Haberman, 1995). In examining issues related to gender, class, sexuality, racism and indigenous Australia, teacher educators studying the unit were able to build a knowledge base that allowed them to challenge injustices that occurred in teaching and learning.

Finally, to sustain a process of critical reflection and ongoing teacher transformation, students studying the 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' unit, completed a four week school practicum that allowed them to make connections between theory and practice, and hence allowed them to understand the context in which they teach and the students that they teach.

To establish whether the 'Social Justice in Secondary Education' unit acts as a catalyst to innovative teaching about social justice issues in the classroom, a study was undertaken to ask the 'questions that really matter' (Cochrane-Smith, 2000a, p.18). This meant that the questions that mattered had to be grounded in teachers' work that is 'interpretive, political, theoretical as well as practical, strategic and local' (Cochrane-Smith, 2000a, p.18).

This paper presents a critical analysis of the unit as reflected in the responses of my pre-service teachers to an open-ended question I posed to the student cohort during the beginning of the autumn (February 2004) semester, to assess student knowledge and understanding of social justice. Content analysis of their short essay responses will show how their thinking reflects internalised ideologies that justify the status quo and devalue diversity and difference. Following the analysis of their responses and discussion of the findings, it will be seen how the unit content and structure was used to counteract the cognitively limited thinking so much so that the twelve students who volunteered to be interviewed at the end of that semester were able to demonstrate through their transformative emotional growth experiences in that semester, a commitment to social justice and equity in their teaching. The concluding discussion will hence show that the 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' unit does impact on teacher educators' understanding of social justice and equity issues.

Of the group of twelve students who volunteered to participate and who were not identified within the research results, eight were females and four were males. They differed in terms of cultural backgrounds, one was Pakistani born, others were Anglo-Celtic and yet others were of European descent. Their sexuality differed in that while most of them were heterosexual, one student during the interview declared that she was a lesbian. The students were mostly from working class backgrounds and resided in Western Sydney. Of the twelve students, two were mature age students with young families. The first research question 'What social justice means to me' was given to the entire student cohort (68) at the beginning of the semester in the hope of determining what ideologies circulate in relation to social justice. This was conducted as a written response to isolate ideological discourses. The interview later in the semester, which focused on the group of twelve volunteer students, gave these students an opportunity to comment and recount their experiences in the unit and in the classroom. This part of the study occurred after the students' practicum in the field and towards the end of semester so as to serve as a comparative tool to participants' responses earlier in the semester. Changes relating to participants' empathy, meaning and definition of social justice were noted for further analysis.



The literature search had revealed that while students' school practicum experience had been adequately researched, there are almost no studies that focus on students' experiences with social justice issues. As such the central aim of the study was to 1) document accounts detailing the experiences of pre-service teachers in social justice education. It was hoped that by having these social justice conversations that it would be possible to investigate students' understandings of the meaning of social justice so that they may be able to teach for social justice in the increasingly diverse school population. In our global world where the rift between these accesses is getting larger and there is an increasing divergence of the privileged and non-privileged, education in social justice issues for upcoming teachers can prepare them consciously by bringing these issues to the surface. This may be able to advance their understanding on societal interactions and develop a commitment to teach students in an egalitarian environment (Lewis, 2001).

It was proposed that the purpose of the study was also to 2) identify the critical discourses that emerge in the contested environment of schools and classrooms. By focusing on social justice issues, it is hoped the study will also provide insights on socio-cultural issues that arise in schools and classrooms. As such, information obtained from the study will lead to 3) an awareness of and respect for those from diverse cultural backgrounds as well as an understanding of the policies and practices of school systems within which teachers work. It was hoped that the research will make 4) a valuable contribution to knowledge about social justice issues in teacher education at UWS, Penrith Campus by understanding the discourses influencing secondary pre-service teachers' perspectives about the extent to which social justice issues is incorporated into their school practicum program. Not only did the research try to understand and document the participants' theoretical and pedagogical approaches to social justice education, it also demonstrated an increasing awareness 5) of pre-service teachers' experiences of social and cultural diversity issues in schools and classrooms. Furthermore the focus on the development of social theory around the contradictory relationship between education as the simultaneous challenger of social inequities and the maintenance of the social order, particularly around social justice issues reinforced the conceptual framework of the School Of Education.

This research fills a vacuum in understanding social justice issues in teacher education programs at UWS, Penrith. It is a fact that racism, gender, ethnicity, sexuality to name a few are social justice issues relevant to schooling. Consequently, teachers have a professional, moral and legal obligation in intervening and addressing issues related to social justice and with providing their students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination. Amid generalised feelings of global unrest ensuing from September 11, it is more likely that individuals from certain ethnic sectors will experience elevated risks of subjection to racist comments and behaviour. Hence during school practicum, pre-service teachers are likely to encounter instances of social injustice experienced by school students from a non –dominant culture. It is absolutely essential therefore to engage pre-service teachers in social justice education.

## **Method and techniques of research**

The methodological approach was ethnographic and included discourse analysis, in-depth interviews and collation, description and analysis of pedagogical frameworks. This approach also included an analysis of materials and approaches used in the subject.

### ***In-depth interview***

The key to this research study was the way in which definitions of social justice and social justice education was shaped by participants' experience of the social justice education coursework and school practicum. This study aimed to explore the dynamics of this process



using in-depth interviews of participants who were students in the 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' unit. In-depth interviews were carried out towards the end of semester to serve as a comparative tool to participants' responses earlier in the semester. In-depth interview is a qualitative research technique that allows person-to-person discussion. It can lead to increased insight into people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour on important issues. This type of interview is often unstructured and therefore permits the interviewer to encourage an informant (respondent) to talk at length about the topic of interest.

It is a flexible approach that aims to ask questions to explain the reasons underlying a problem or practice. You can use the technique to gather ideas, to gather information, and to develop materials for social justice education. This allowed the researcher an opportunity to gain an insight into the various meanings, perceptions and understandings identified in the written responses and to note changes relating to participants' definitions of social justice.

### ***Discourse analysis***

To delve more deeply into the values and ideas that circulate in relation to social justice, the student cohort (68) engaged in a written response entitled: 'What Social Justice Means to Me'. In teaching and learning about social justice, there is emphasis on a range of genres mainly in written responses and class discussions. Discourse analysis involves seeing talk and text as social practice (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). Discourse Analysis is a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a issue or text and will, thus, not provide absolute answers to a specific problem or issue, but enable us to understand the conditions behind a specific 'problem' and make us realize that the essence of that 'problem', and its resolution, lie in its assumptions; the very assumptions that enable the existence of that problem or issue. The written response from participants which was conducted at the beginning of the autumn semester 2004 focused on content-meanings; form, genre and field since these demonstrate action; and argumentation showing how texts are organised (Bryman and Burgess, 1994). It was hoped that the analysis of the discourse would provide a rich source of data for comparison with participants' views once the coursework and school practicum had been completed.

### ***Qualitative case study***

The qualitative case study method (Merriam, 1998) was selected because it allows the researcher to gain an insider's view of questions being studied (Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1998). In qualitative research, the investigator tells each participant's story by using the voice of the participant to tell the participants' experiences. A triangulation approach was adopted involving the review of a written response by participants, an in-depth interview and document analysis. The triangulation approach is a mixed-method analysis approach. The core premise of triangulation is that all methods have inherent biases and limitations, so use of only one method to assess a given phenomenon will inevitably yield biased and limited results. It is important to process as well as analyse the data. Thus a triangulation approach, one that uses multiple layers of analysis through systematic procedures, is used to identify essential features and relationships. A combination of the above three (3) research methods would adequately address the questions of the study and provide a rich source of data.

## **Findings**

At the beginning of the autumn (February 2004) semester, students in the 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' unit were asked to write a short essay (250 words) entitled 'What Social Justice Means to me.' Of the sixty-eight students that made up the cohort, eighty six percent believed social justice to be related to fairness and equality with intolerance of discrimination. The responses highlighted an appreciation of inequality rather



than an acknowledgement of inequality as a result of hierarchical and systemic differences of domination and subordination. The following selected responses from students are indicative of the limited thought processes.

*When I heard the term Social Justice, for the first time last week, I did not know what to think... But I suppose it means to be fair in the classroom.*

*Social Justice means equity and fairness and it promotes fairness and personal rights.*

*Social Justice means equality, equity and the distribution of fairness.*

*I am not really sure; perhaps justice refers to the treatment being fair.*

*Social justice encompasses areas of anti-discrimination.*

To truly understand social justice, it is important that the responses reflect an understanding of the historical, political, economic and social forces that shape relations of power in schools, classrooms and communities. Thus, the majority of students explained social justice in a limited way... as fairness and equality without recognising the structural inequality built into the social order. Only seven percent of the respondents made a link between social justice and the structures of society.

*Social Justice is a concept of rights and privileges of the citizens living in a social set up.*

*Social Justice means that anyone can participate in learning irrespective of gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and disability.*

*Social Justice is the idea that all members of society are given equal rights including education availability, health care and adequate housing.*

*Social Justice means equality for all regardless of age, gender, ethnicity or social class.*

While the majority of students failed to link social justice to other forms of societal oppression and exploitation, there were still others (about seven percent) who had very different ideas of what social justice meant to them.

*Social Justice starts with the individual and if the individual were to place the needs of him/her before others, this will be an excellent start.*

*Social Justice is to be able to ride a bike legally on the road and not be abused by oil burning car drivers who entomb themselves within their own metal world in which they play God.*

*Social Justice is about evaluating the disparity among school students.*

*I have no idea. It sounds pretty airy-fairy.*

*It is a term that does not involve government or political bodies to intervene. It relies on people enforcing what they deem is right.*

These students studying this unit have limited knowledge and understanding of social justice issues. Not only are they unaware of their own ideological perspectives, but they are also unaware of how their subjective identities reflect an uncritical identification with the existing social order.

For those who made the link between social justice and law or politics, the link was more one of 'legal/law' rather than equal access to say education and healthcare as examples. To achieve social justice, the existing structural inequality has to be recognised and struggled against. The equality and fairness that most of the students write of is not the one reflected in this explanation. Thus their responses reflect uncritical limited ways of thinking about social justice.

One of my outcomes in this unit is to encourage students to think critically about education in general and about schooling in particular and more particularly in relation to social justice and their own identities as teachers. The unit is so organised that students have an opportunity through lectures, tutorials, readings and online discussions to critically analyse the social purposes of schooling. Students are also made aware of the fact that education is not neutral; that it can serve various political, economic and cultural interests (Cagan, 1978; Freire, 1971; O'Neill, 1981). Not only do students learn about macro social (societal) issues but they also examine micro social (classroom) issues.

In an analysis of the social construction of childhood, students examine the concept of childhood within a historical perspective. They learn that the creation of the concept of childhood is 'grounded in enlightenment/modernist, cultural bias that places limitations on younger human beings, constructs privilege and power for those who are older and lessens the connections we make with children and each other' (Sloan, 1997, p. 158). This construction of the child silences a group of human beings, removing all possibilities for social justice. Our constructions for social justice therefore embrace the struggle for liberations avoiding constructions of the 'Other' and aiming for just and caring communities (Giroux & Simon, 1989). The power relations constructed within such patriarchal value systems such as education would be acknowledged and evaluated.

Students also encountered the scholarship of Apple (1993) which demonstrates that it is possible to engage in educational practises that are meaningful, critical and grounded in a sense of critical literacy. From him they also learn that education is inherently political, an arena in which groups attempt to institutionalise their cultures, histories and visions of social justice issues. Similarly, Meadmore (1999) is examined for her views in social class and the ways in which it works in and through education to produce advantage and disadvantage. In the same way, we look at how Bourdieu's (Webb, Shirato, & Danaher, 2002) concept of 'habitus' provides the core of his understanding of how schools work to reproduce social inequalities.

The unit further examines modernism, post-modernism and feminism as three of the most important discourses for developing a cultural politics and pedagogical practise capable of extending and theoretically advancing a radical politics of democracy. Afshar and Maynard (1994) are studied for their concerns with theorising the relationships between 'race' and 'gender' oppression and the extent to which it is furthered by using the concept of 'difference'. Students also examine ways in which schools support and reinforce binaries or heterosexuality/homosexuality in terms of normality and abnormality and ways in which Aboriginal Australians and other minority groups are portrayed as objects of paternalistic concern.

During lectures, tutorials and online discussions, students discussed their thoughts and feelings about the abovementioned authors/ ideas and reflected upon the soundness of such arguments. In so doing, students struggled with the ideas, values and social interests at the heart of the different educational and social visions which they as future teachers must either

accept, reject or resists. The 'Social Justice Issues for Secondary Education' unit thus provides a forum for students to debate and reflect upon their own views in relation to the views of others. Freire's (1971) strategy of 'problem posing' is often used as a strategy for students to detect bias and prejudice in school texts. Sometimes, an alternative view of history is presented and often reflects aspects of the 'hidden curriculum', unmasking the political and cultural role of schooling of which many students are unaware.

Such intellectual and emotional growth opportunities allow students to reflect on the nature of their own socially constructed knowledge and identities. This will lead to a transformation in thinking which was clearly reflected in the responses to the interview questions conducted at the end of autumn (July 2004) semester in which twelve volunteers were interviewed. Their responses reflect a transformation in students' values, beliefs and ideologies regarding social justice.

An analysis of the data obtained from student interviews indicated that consciousness was raised about social justice issues during the unit. Clearly the ideas expressed during the interview indicated that the unit increased awareness of social justice issues, allowed students to be self-reflective about their teaching practices, while on professional experience, permitted students to identify issues relating to social justice in the school environment and to offer possible solutions which could make a positive change to the school environment.

Through unit readings and lectures, followed by practicum in schools, students reported that their awareness of social justice issues had increased and changed the way that they viewed the world. One student reported that the unit taught him about:

*Equality for all people, having opportunities, caring for others, making a better world, understanding why inequities exist and looking at practical solutions to power, privilege and wealth, such as the underprivileged in terms of resources, education and social capital, etc. being more in tune with human relationships.*

Students also spoke about the fact that the unit content allowed them to be more critical of issues and understand the importance of access to resources. Another student commented that:

*An awareness of social justice issues means giving everyone the opportunity to reach their potential. So it doesn't mean giving everyone the same money or the same job or whatever. It means that everyone has the same access to their own potential. I think that's basically it, irregardless of gender, sex, race, ethnicity ...*

There was certainly consciousness raised in the unit and this was further supported by the impact the unit content had on school practicum. As a result of the unit, students were able to reflect upon their own roles as teachers in the classroom setting. A student summarised his self-reflection by saying that:

*It's given me the opportunity to reflect on some of the social justice issues in school, such as gender and racism. In terms of change I've always been fair and non discriminatory. Through self-examination I become more aware of my experiences, and analytical of my constructed prejudice.*

Interestingly the unit made an impact on students from both the dominant and minority cultures. One student reported that:



*What we've learned challenged our assumptions of morality and opinions. I don't always agree with people's views. They can be overly critical and personally sensitive. Being from the dominant culture, myself, I have gained more respect for 'others' while I was out at schools. For example, I took on feminism more seriously when we were talking about a mothers place in society. Those things affected me. I'm more aware now about differing perspectives.*

Overall, students believed that by studying the unit they were able to bring about not only a change in themselves but also a change in the school environment. A student reflected that:

*Social justice is broader not simply about equality. School practicum taught me that it is also about not being discriminated, teased, or abused and having a school as a safe place to learn.*

Another student believed that the unit and school practicum encouraged him/her to reflect upon their privileged upbringing.

*I'm from a privileged middle class background. We had money, and education was valued. I thought that everybody had equal opportunities, and access to further their education. Now I realize that other prejudicial factors, such as race and sexual also affect access to the privileges that education provides.*

Acknowledging recognition that teachers are predominantly envisaged as white, middle to upper middle class heterosexuals (Smulyan, 2004) because a majority of the teachers are from a privileged background, gives rise to the need for social justice to be taught to the privileged (Smith, 1999). This will bring forward a realization that the institutions that are responsible for maintaining social inequalities can also be used as a catalyst towards social change (McMahon, 2003).

Yet another student saw the unit and professional experience as providing an opportunity to closely examine and assess issues relating especially to racism and aboriginality. This pursuance of knowledge and further research was reflected in the comment made that the unit and school teaching experience encouraged:

*Research into issues of Aboriginality. Looking at what different types of socializations that there are, and how differences in socialization, at home, changes what's considered normal behaviour in the classroom. Now I'm better prepared to approach an Aboriginal student and deal with their responses and interpret them more accurately.*

It would appear from the above as though students' understanding of social justice issues particularly in the secondary school deepened as a result of the unit. Not only were their beliefs and assumptions challenged but the unit and its content also allowed students to challenge many of the unjust practices that became evident in the classroom and school playground.

Still the analysis of the transcripts indicated that there was room for improvement in the unit more particularly in regards to providing actual examples or strategies for dealing with social justice issues in the classroom

*To some degree I was familiar with racial, sexual, and gender issues, but not in terms of why they're there, and being able to identify where they are coming from, and who the powers are causing factions or inequalities to occur. Nevertheless is important to be*



*aware that people are different, and that they figure in hierarchal power struggles over resources, knowledge, etc. Treating people equally will resolve many issues.*

In general, students wanted real strategies for real classrooms. As one student stated:

*I haven't strongly defined strategies for teaching, yet. I think I will develop strategies on the job. Theories are nice, but I know what I'm going to do. I'd be deluding myself if I walked into a class expecting things to be perfect. I want to know and study the students in terms of their personality, cultural background and expectations, their issues, English, literacy skills, and economic circumstances. I'm more motivated and determined according to the curriculum in knowing students better so I can focus my lessons more appropriately. In terms of power relationships I can move from being the leader and them being the submissive students if I knew more about the students. I can also empower them to succeed in the school environment without making them conform slavishly to the current system.*

## Conclusion

This has led me to conclude that the 'Social Justice Issues in Secondary Education' unit has provided the opportunity for students to recognise and evaluate the ideological influences that shape their thinking about schooling, society, themselves and diverse others. As a pre-service teacher is progressively made aware of the current struggle that is occurring everyday within the educational institutions, students, through the unit, came to the realization of the enormity of the obscured political forces that dominate the curriculum. Not only had this unit given these students the motivation to teach students under any challenging circumstances, but also it had created an appetite to learn about other cultures and the continual study of social justices issues.

A teacher needs to act as a mediator between two cultures, both the dominant and the disadvantaged. This is achievable by facilitating the less dominant to understand, acclimatise and hence thrive academically in pursuit of conquering the dominant culture without loss of identity, therefore bridging the cultural gap and levelling the societal inequality, resulting in the empowerment of students in succeeding academically and socially (Chisholm 1994). A teacher may be successful in a school that is predominantly white and middle-class, but when placed in a school that is disadvantaged and underprivileged, may find it difficult to cope and, in turn may devalue their self worth as a teacher. A study of social justice could contribute to their success as a teacher by making them aware of their position within the school environment and by allowing them to adopt critical teaching strategies to challenge the status quo. Social justice education therefore needs to be continually taught and monitored as it is not a natural or permanent structure (Merrett, 2004). As one student stated:

*If you want to stay being a teacher and make it meaningful, you've got to look at social justice with your heart...*

Since this research study was undertaken to provide a greater link between theory and practice, the unit has been improved to include an integrated task between the social justice Issues unit and the students' teaching methods, so that students will develop an original teaching unit of work relevant to their teaching methods, which can be used in the classroom. The unit will need to address the following:

- A rationale (750 words) justifying why this unit of work should be taught. The justification should briefly indicate how the unit meets syllabus requirements but



more substantially how it meets the directions set by the broader school curriculum in terms of equity and social justice. The rationale should be linked to relevant sociological theories with evidence from relevant weekly readings covered in lectures and tutorials, specifically Social Justice Issues in Schooling. The rationale needs to argue a position on the equity of social justice concerns associated with an issue in schooling and the broader community.

- The unit outline must include all the necessary components as outlined in method lectures and tutorials. These will include outcomes, content, assessment, resources, timeline and anything else relevant to a unit of work in your method area.
- In-depth lesson plans for 4 lessons will also be included. Each lesson will need to show connections in terms of outcomes and content as well as an explanation of the relevance of the particular lesson to equity and social justice issues, strategies and resources addressed and used by each lesson.

I have also extended the unit content to include an examination of the globalized community in which students live in order to move students' thinking from the local to the global. Further examination of the effects of globalisation on local communities is inherent to a pedagogy of social justice. Globalisation forces seem to be introducing a mix of homogenising tendencies, but they are also opening space for new identities and contestation of established values and norms, many detrimental to the achievement of true social justice (Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). The development of identities, friendly to market economies will press educational systems and programs towards greater uniformity... consequently creating tension between the global and the local in the educational arena.

## References

- Adams, M., Bell, L.A. & Griffin, P. (1997). *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*. New York: Routledge.
- Afshar, H., & Maynard, M. (Eds.). (1994). *The Dynamics of 'Race' and Gender: Some Feminist Interventions*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Apple, M. (1993). The politics of official knowledge: does a national curriculum make sense? *Teachers College Record*, 95(2), 222-241.
- Aronowitz, S., & Giroux, H. (1980). *Education under siege*. Boston: South End Press.
- Asher, N. (2003). Engaging Difference: towards a pedagogy of interbeing. *Teaching Education*, 14(3), 235-247.
- ABS. (1998). 2032.0 *Australia in Profile: A Regional Analysis*. Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Ball, A. F. (2000). Empowering pedagogies that enhance the learning of multicultural students. *Teachers College Record*, 102(6), 1006–1034.
- Bell, L. A. (1997). Theoretical foundations for social justice education. In M. Adams, L. A. Bell, & Griffin, P. (Eds.). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*, (pp. 3-15). New York: Routledge.
- Beyer, L. E. (2001). The value of critical perspectives in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 52(2), 151–163.
- Bryman, A. & Burgess, R.A. (1998). (Eds.). *Developments in Qualitative Data Analysis: An Introduction*, (p 47.). *Analysing Qualitative Data*. London: Routledge.
- Cagan, E. (1978). Individualism, collectivism, and radical educational reform. *Harvard Educational Review*, 48, 227-266.
- Caputo, J. D. (Ed.). (1997). *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. New York: Fordham University Press.



- Chisholm, I. M. (1994). Preparing teachers for multicultural classrooms. *The Journal of Educational Issues of Language Minority Students*, 14, 43-68.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (1999). Learning to teach for social justice. In G. A. Griffin (Ed.), *The education of teachers*, (pp. 114-144). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2000a). The future of teacher education: Framing the questions that matter. *Teaching Education*.11 (1), 13-24.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of Social Theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, *College Record*, 70 (1), 1-11.
- Edelman, M.W. (1987). *Families in peril: An agenda for social change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1984). What is an author? In P. Rabinow (Ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (pp. 101-120). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freire, P. (1971) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Freire, P. (1985). *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation*. London: Macmillan.
- Fuss, D. (1989). *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Gay, G. (1997). The relationship between multicultural and democratic education. *Social Studies*, 88, 5-11.
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1986). Teacher education and the politics of engagement: the case for democratic schooling. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56 (3), 213-238.
- Giroux, H. A., & Simon, R. I. (1989). *Popular culture, schooling, and everyday life: Critical studies in education series*. Granby, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A., & McLaren, P. (1998). *Between borders: pedagogy and the politics of cultural studies*. 3rd Ed. New York: Longman.
- Goffman, E. (1964). *Stigma*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Goldring, E., & Greenfield, W. (2002). Understanding the evolving concept of leadership in education: roles, expectations, and dilemmas. *Yearbook- National Society for the study of Education*, 1, 1-19.
- Haberman, M. (1995). The dimensions of excellence in programs preparing teachers for urban poverty schools. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 70(2), 24-43.
- Hall, S. (1996). Introduction: Who needs identity? In S. Hall & P. du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity* (pp. 1-17). London: Sage.
- Helms, J.E. (1990). *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research and Practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. New York: Prentice Hall.
- Lewis, J.B. (2001). Social justice, social studies and social foundations. *The Social Studies*, 92 (5), 189-192. Washington: Heldref Publications.
- MacIntyre, S. (1985). *Winners and losers: the pursuit of social justice in Australian history*. Australia: Allen & Unwin.
- McLaren, P. (1999). Che Guevara, globalization and leadership. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 2 (3), 269-292.
- McLaren, P., & Mayo, P. (1999). Value commitment, social change, and personal narrative. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 8(4), 397-408.
- McMahon, B. J. (2003). Putting the elephant into the refrigerator: student engagement, critical pedagogy and antiracist education. *McGill Journal of Education*, 38, 257-273.
- Meadmore, D. (Eds.). (1999). *Practising Education: social and cultural perspectives*. Riverwood, NSW: Prentice-Hall.

- Merrett, C. D. (2004). Social justice: what is it? Why teach it? *The Journal of Geography*, 103(3), 93-101. National Council for Geographic Education.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Nagda, B.A., Gurin, P., & Lopez, G. E. (2003). Transformative pedagogy for democracy and social justice. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 6 (2) 165-191.
- Nieto, S. (1995). From brown heroes and holidays to assimilationist agendas: reconsidering the critiques of multicultural education. In C. E. Sleeter & P. L. McLaren (Eds.) *Multicultural Education, Critical Pedagogy, and the Politics of Difference* (pp. 191–220). Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
- Nieto, S. (2000). Placing equity front and center: some thoughts on transforming teacher education for a new century. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 180–187.
- O’Neill, W. F. (1981). *Educational Ideologies: Contemporary expressions of educational philosophy*. Santa Monica, CA: Goodyear.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rizvi, F., & Lingard, B. (1996). Disability, education and the discourses of justice. *Disability and the Dilemmas of Education and Justice*. C. Christensen, & F. Rizvi, Disability and the Dilemmas of Education and Justice, Open University Press.
- Scheffler, I. (1968). University scholarship and the education of teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 70(1), 1-12.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Teachers College.
- Shor, I. (1980). *Critical teaching and everyday life*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Sleeter, C. E. (1996). *Multicultural Education as Social Activism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Sloan, C. G. (1997). *Deconstructing Early Childhood Education: social justice and revolution*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Smith, T. S. (1999). Teaching for social justice. *College Teaching*, 47(3), p119. Washington: Heldref Publications.
- Smulyan, L. (2004). Choosing to teach: reflections on gender and social change. *Teachers College Record*, 06 (3), 513-543. Columbia University.
- Stromquist, N. P., & Monkman, K. (2000). *Globalization And Education: Integration And Contestation Across Cultures*. UK: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Troya, B., & Vincent, C. (1995). The discourses of social justice. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 16, 149-166.
- Webb, J., Shirato, T. & Danaher, G. (2002). *Understanding Bourdieu*. London: Sage Publications.
- Young, I. M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

## Author

Loshini Naidoo is a lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. Email: [L.Naidoo@uws.edu.au](mailto:L.Naidoo@uws.edu.au)

