Social Justice Education in an Elementary School Classroom

Kaitlyn Anderson
Soc 4/ Social Problems
Prof. Wilson Hirst/ MWF 8-9
November 18, 2011
Social Justice Education in an Elementary School Classroom

Since the introduction of a formalized public elementary school system, educators have focused on mathematics, language, science and history. Social justice education (“the exercise of altering those arrangements (institutional and organizational power arrangements) by actually engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational and personal dimensions”) has been neglected in the meantime. Oftentimes, this field of study has been left for busy families to teach their children about equity, how to be a good individual, and care for humanity. While this used to work, we can no longer rely on busy parents to take this immense responsibility without the help of the community. It is for this reason that social justice education must be implemented in schools. Social justice education is a necessary component of every classroom and should be incorporated not only throughout every subject, but also throughout all aspects of day-to-day life.

In a rapidly changing society such as our own, many different sets of morals, values, ideas, social standings, and cultural aspects are common amongst the population. In a positive and well-informed manner, students must be made aware of the dynamics of the world. One way to educate
about the diversity present in society is to teach multicultural education, a sub-set of social justice education. According to Paul Gorski in “The Challenge of Defining ‘Multicultural Education’,” multicultural education is defined as “a progressive approach for transforming education that holistically critiques and responds to discriminatory policies and practices in education. It is grounded in ideals of social justice, education equity, critical pedagogy, and a dedication to providing educational experiences in which all students reach their full potentials as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally.” Multicultural education acknowledges that starting in elementary school, school communities play essential roles in laying the foundation for the transformation of society and the elimination of injustice.

In order to empower at-risk children, it is imperative that families, teachers, and administrators have an inclusive relationship aware of each others’ situations and needs. High amounts of participation, nurturance and activism of parents during the early childhood years has a direct correlation with a child’s commitment to social justice and belief in equity. A study published in 1972 by Rosenhan shows the correlation between parental involvement and a child’s beliefs: “Both groups of freedom riders [the fully committed participants and the partially committed riders] were equally strong advocates for equality, the parents of the fully committed activists had been models of both altruism and political activism” (Berman 72).
In order to allow a child to feel the need to get involved in remedying the problems of societies around the world, a teacher must first create the proper environment for this to take place. A child must feel accepted and comfortable with themselves and his or her immediate community before even learning about the problems of the world. Once this comfortable, classroom community is built; a child is able to develop the character traits desired for social action. Berman says in *Children’s Social Consciousness and the Development of Social Responsibilities*, “Cooperation and mutual trust lead to open self-expression and risk-taking, which, in turn, promote mutual respect, shared meaning, and intimacy” (Berman 91). All people long to be a part of a group and find happiness when they truly feel accepted and as if they have a voice; to learn, one has to feel confident in one’s abilities and see that they are supported by others.

Sociologists Malcolm Spector and John Kituse mutually decided upon four different stages of the stages of a social problem. The first step is transformation, or “taking a private trouble and transforming it into a public issue. In this stage, influential groups, activists or advocates call attention to and define a social problem” (Leon-Guerrero 12). Applied to the academic setting or an elementary school classroom, this stage would be the teaching stage. The instructor would make cases for justice aware to the children and make it more accessible. After this stage is complete, most students have gotten it through their head (at least in a very basic way) that there are
problems in society; the child has an idea of what these problems are and should be able to think if a few examples on his or her own.

The second stage of Spector and Kituse’s process of social problems is legitimization: “formalizing the manner in which the social problems or complaints generated by the problem are handled” (Leon-Guerrero 12). An example of this would be to offer a weekly meeting of all of the students in a class to hear their thoughts about what is happening both inside and outside of the classroom. Students would be encouraged to not only speak honestly, but also to attempt to provide solutions to the problem. The atmosphere of the room should be such that all students are supportive of one another and use teamwork to help provide solutions to these issues. Many different policies, clubs, and lessons can be results of the legitimization process of social problems.

The third stage is the “conflict stage, when Stage 2 routines are unable to address the problem. During Stage 3, activists, advocates, and victims of the problem experience feelings of distrust and cynicism toward the formal response organizations” (Leon-Guerrero 12). The power of a child and his or her efficacy is challenged. For example, a class may have been able to lobby for a recycling and composting program at their school—they place all of the items that can be recycled into the clearly marked bins around the school. They inform all students of the importance of recycling and composting and teach them what can go into the bin and what cannot. For a few weeks, the
children in the class see the program working, but more and more often they are seeing kids in a hurry to go out to recess and play so just place all of their leftover food, recyclables, and trash into the trash can. The activist children struggle with the fact that so much is going into landfills instead of being recycled or becoming compost. At one of their class meetings, this comes up and the students begin to brainstorm what can be done about this issue. They decide that the school needs incentives to continue their environmental efforts—a challenge of sorts. They design and implement a program that will give the entire school cupcakes and extra recess time once seventy-five bags of recycling are collected (and exchanged for money to cover the cost of the cupcakes) and ten bags of unused food can be placed into the compost bin.

Step four occurs when “groups believe that they can no longer work within the established system...or to radically change the existing system” (Leon-Guerrero). Because educators are trying to create honest, hardworking citizens, working outside of the system (and breaking the rules) is typically not encouraged at schools. The children should be taught to exacerbate the system until they get their way. Once a particular technique no longer works, alter it and create a new one. The children will find out that as long as they are extremely determined and perseverant, are willing to put in a lot of time and energy and are articulate, well-versed and logical with
the proposed solutions, change will occur within the system to better the
good of the people.

Interactionists focus on “how we use language, words, and symbols to
create and maintain our social reality. This micro-level perspective highlights
what we take for granted: the expectations, rules, and norms that we learn
and practice without even noticing. In our interaction with others, we
become the products and creators of our social reality. Through our
interaction, social problems are created and defined” (Leon-Guerrero 16).
Although extremely large problems are addressed through social justice
education, educators typically try to provide students with smaller-scale
solutions with tangible results to encourage action and efficacy. Once a child
gets hooked, it is hard to stop. The child will influence their friends and
family to serve along side of them and change their ways, thus making a
larger change through the micro-level interactions of just one educated and
passionate person.

Many people would agree that social justice education should be
taught more in elementary schools. It runs into a number of problems,
however. Beside the typical battle of not having enough funding or enough
time, many teachers and parents desire to convey this message of civil duty
and social justice, but do not know how to properly do so. They have been
taught about the problems of the world and have been able to witness them
firsthand, but are unable to think of creative ways to teach them to younger
audiences. However, it can be as simple as reading a book (like *One Hen: How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference*, *Just Like Martin, Seeds of Change*, or any other story of book that promotes social justice and self-awareness), conducting a short reflective piece, and providing some sort of active service-learning component.

The sooner people are knowledgeable about what is occurring in the places that surround them, the sooner they are able to act upon it. From a young age, they understand that change is in fact possible and through a lot of time, hard work, and putting yourself out there, society can change for the better. Our educational system has many changed to make and the area of social justice education is surely one of them. As bell hooks states in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, “Students are eager to break through barriers to knowing. They are willing to surrender to the wonder of re-learning and learning ways of knowing the go against the grain. When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education” (hooks 44).


Milway, Katie Smith. *One Hen* "How One Small Loan Made a Big Difference."