



STOP and Think:

Addressing Social Injustices through Critical Reflection

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"WE TEACH TO CHANGE THE WORLD."¹

Critical reflection is an essential element in teachers' efforts to address the social justice issues that are often part of their lived experiences and those of their students. When educators begin to examine how power, privilege, and widely accepted assumptions about their practice may be working against their goals, such as eliminating forms of oppression and working for equality, they are often involved in some form of critical reflection. Indeed, the more I explore issues of social justice education, the more convinced I become that as we teachers become more knowledgeable about ourselves, we can share our insights with colleagues and students and work collaboratively for a more equitable world.

A focus on teachers' reflecting on their practice is not new. Such an emphasis is evident in many pre-service teacher education programs in Canada and elsewhere. However, re-emphasizing and discussing the critical aspect of reflection can be beneficial to those of us who are working towards social justice and equity in schools. Decades ago, John Dewey emphasized the importance of an individual's experiences with self-reflection and judgment. In his words, "The old phrase "stop and think," is sound psychology."²

The ideas presented in this article are based on my experiences as a racialized, minority, female teacher working within the Ontario educational context and my ongoing efforts to build my knowledge base through continuing formal education. For over two decades, I have worked to develop my awareness of issues related to systemic, structural, and institutional practices that lead to the marginalization of particular individuals and groups in schools. I now more fully understand how power and privilege intersect and often support and perpetuate the forms of oppression relating to gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ability that sometimes operate within our classrooms.

CRITICAL REFLECTION

Brookfield describes critical reflection as:

"a hopeful activity that happens when teachers discover and examine their assumptions by viewing their practice through four distinct, but interconnecting lenses: autobiographical reflection; the lenses provided from the perceptions of students; the lenses provided from the perspectives of our colleagues, friends, and mentors; and the view of our practice through the lens of literature."³

He also warns teachers of the challenges associated with critical reflection by cautioning us about the political struggles that are involved in changing people and systems. Critical reflection can cause waves because it is often accompanied by a challenge to the status quo. In this article, I illustrate some points with examples from personal experiences cautiously, recognizing the political and emotional risks involved in this sharing.

Nel Noddings, in her book, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach*, states, "Probably no goal of education is more important – or more neglected – than self-understanding."⁴ A teacher's ability to turn a critical lens inward is part of the work of critical reflection. Teachers who embark on critical reflection often find they become more aware of themselves and the ways in which *who they are* influences how and what they teach. This deep understanding can provide an informed foundation for tackling social injustices.



EN BREF Souvent, les enseignants engagés dans la réflexion critique se rendent compte qu'ils deviennent plus conscients de leur personne et de l'influence de leur identité sur ce qu'ils enseignent et la façon dont ils l'enseignent. Cette prise de conscience peut constituer le fondement informé nécessaire pour aborder les questions d'inégalité et de justice sociale. Pour certains éducateurs, il demeure difficile de reconnaître la réalité des privilèges, du pouvoir, des préjugés, de la discrimination, des injustices et des luttes contre l'oppression. La réflexion critique peut leur permettre de résoudre certains problèmes, de progresser sur le plan professionnel et d'examiner leurs pratiques pédagogiques avec une plus grande sensibilité. Sans réflexion critique, la perspective utilisée par un enseignant pour comprendre les situations qui nous entourent, créer une vision, aborder le programme d'enseignement et mettre en pratique des méthodes pédagogiques peut être faussée, perpétuant ainsi les injustices que nous souhaitons voir disparaître.

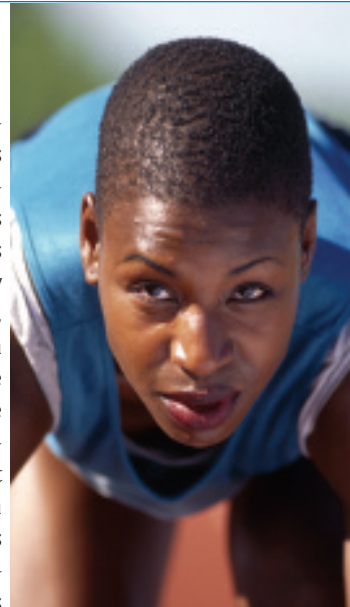
CRITICAL REFLECTION AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

For some educators, acknowledging the realities of privilege and power, prejudice and discrimination, injustices and struggles against oppression, continue to be challenging. It can be frustrating at times speaking with colleagues who, for example, do not see the value of equity principles and affirmative action programs. I find myself asking, "How can this still be happening in 2006?" Perhaps it is because, in both our personal and professional lives, we function within limited circles, meeting and interacting with the same people – people who often think and behave as we do. Our similarities may also be reflected in our lived experiences. Unless we branch out of our small circles to meet and learn about people with experiences different from our own, we remain satisfied with how the world looks through our eyes, and this satisfaction narrows our perspective on issues. When we take off the blinders, it becomes clear that the ways in which we interact with one another and function within our societies automatically privilege some groups of people while disadvantaging others.

Although some gains have been made, I am well aware that an equitable world is still very much a vision, even though my own personal experiences may contradict this reality. As I take up social justice issues, I have come to realize and accept that educating is complex and continuous, and teachers are at varying points in their understanding of issues.

Cherryholmes reminds us that "some of the current injustices of society are rooted in our histories, others are perpetuated by our social arrangements, and still others are being constantly created and re-created."⁶ I find that a constant vigilance in all aspects of my life has become a necessary skill, since professional and personal boundaries often intersect. It can be disheartening to hear colleagues commenting that things have changed, and they no longer need pay attention to issues of race, class or gender. Perhaps some prefer to remain in a zone of comfort that buffers them from the realities of injustice. However, as Tilley points out, in order to confront difference and address the tensions created by conflicting beliefs and values, educators must learn to function within the discomfort that is encountered during critical conversations.⁷

Exploring these tensions becomes crucial to the continued interactions in which educators, administrators, parents and students engage. I recall when the curriculum resource, *We're Erasing Prejudice For Good* was first released by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, some



In my process of critical reflection, I dig beneath the surface of my practices, scrutinizing information and my actions. I question myself: "Why don't I agree with this? What about this change is really bothering me? How does this new information fit with other beliefs I hold?" Teachers may begin to explore their knowledge and evaluate their reasons for actions by following a similar process. However, to be effective this must be done in a conscious and purposeful way.

According to Dei, "Change must come from within; transformative socio-political action begins with the examination of our selves and the strategies we employ to make sense of the world."⁵ This type of self-examination requires open-mindedness and a positive attitude. It carries with it a willingness to negotiate knowledge and build understanding that can motivate us to make ethical choices. A person who is willing to do the work of critical reflective thinking is one who acknowledges the complexities of life and accepts the reality that not all problems have simple solutions. This describes a critical educator.

For example, a critical teacher's heightened sensitivity and awareness may reveal that some classroom structures used for student discussion – such as pair share-pair square, circle, or debate format – provide equal voice and affirmation for some students, but create tension or censorship for others.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY HOLDS AT ITS CORE A VISION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY. IT EXAMINES SOCIAL, CULTURAL, ECONOMIC, COGNITIVE, AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS ASSOCIATED WITH EDUCATION AND HUMAN INTERACTIONS AND CHALLENGES COMMONPLACE PRACTICES, PROCESSES, AND ASSUMPTIONS IN AN EFFORT TO EXPOSE HOW POWER OFTEN OPERATES INVISIBLY.

individuals objected to the inclusion of same sex family books in the document, yet no objections were made about other family groupings. Critical educators work hard to acknowledge differences and connect schooling to the lived experiences of their students, and the books in question were included to validate the experiences of some of those students.

Teachers who learn to articulate their beliefs and investigate how they are formed can begin to make visible to other individuals how their perspectives developed. This facilitates the dialogue and discussion necessary for professional growth. By coming to form groups of 'critical friends', teachers can assist one another through listening, questioning, and collaboration.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND PEDAGOGY

"Advocates of critical pedagogy are aware that every minute of every hour that teachers teach, they are faced with complex decisions concerning justice, democracy, and competing ethical claims."⁸

Often the pedagogy most influential in the work of teachers who are conscious of and committed to equity and social justice in schooling contexts is referred to in the literature as "critical pedagogy". Though it is no easy task to define this concept, I offer the following working definition, based on ideas from Kinchloe's *Critical Pedagogy Primer*:⁹ Critical pedagogy holds at its core a vision of social justice and equality. It examines social, cultural, economic, cognitive, and political contexts associated with education and human interactions. Critical pedagogy challenges commonplace practices, processes, and assumptions in an effort to expose how power often operates invisibly.

Each educator is charged with the responsibility to make individual decisions that involve ethical and moral choices. Critical pedagogy offers a viable framework that can assist educators with these decisions. Often, as we begin to think more deeply about our actions and find ways to share our insights with students, unconscious choices become conscious and informed.

A primary reason for doing critical reflective work is that, when teachers interact with students, we make decisions that can impact their future choices and behaviors. Students look to teachers for guidance, and we ought to be vigilant and passionate about the ways we take on that responsibility. Secondly, the choices that educators make with respect to curriculum and pedagogy – that is what we choose to teach, and how we choose to teach it – stem from how we construct our knowledge and the aspects we

choose to prioritize. Critical educators often attempt to expose this knowledge construction and priority-setting process to students, as well as the curriculum that results from it, in an effort to share the skills and processes that are at work and so that their students can learn to make more informed decisions themselves.

TOWARDS AN EDUCATIONAL VISION

Educators use their vision to guide learning and teaching. However, articulating a vision statement isn't always an easy task. Noddings was clear and unapologetic in articulating her vision for education. She stated, "The main goal of education should be to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people."¹⁰

A vision is very personal – and ought to be so, since it comes from the beliefs and values that one holds and strives to uphold. Generally speaking, vision guides our actions. Specifically, within my educational vision, I seek ways to take up issues of social justice that affect people with whom I interact. One goal of my vision is to make visible injustices that often go unnoticed. The relational aspects of care and respect are integral components of my vision as well. When I take the time to build relationships of trust and commitment, and when I make fair-minded and ethical choices, I demonstrate care and these actions often earn me respect. But such actions are not always easy or unconscious. Instead they require rigorous scrutiny, planning, and ongoing discussion with colleagues, feedback from students, and professional development opportunities to keep me on track towards achieving my goals.

Sometimes the processes of critical reflection may involve *learning* new approaches or *unlearning* previously held beliefs and values. Probing beneath the surface helps to uncover what is held at the core of each educator's vision. It is as Palmer asks: "Who is the self who teaches?"¹¹ Working toward a vision requires planning and intense consideration that often entails flexibility and revision of goals. Critical teachers demonstrate determination and persistence as they pursue their visions.

I recall that during my high-school years in the 1970s there were very few women shown in the curriculum materials in use. In fact, I don't remember ever seeing a visible minority female featured as making any kind of valuable contribution to science or mathematics or any other subject I took. Over two decades later, I have been fortunate to have opportunities to address such omissions and work towards achieving my vision of equitable representation. I find that as I articulate my goals, I also clarify them. Through dialogue and conversation, I learn fresh perspectives on issues from colleagues. Research and readings also bolster support for the goals I strive to achieve.

In my work with teachers, one important goal has been to make space for individuals whose perspectives might otherwise remain invisible. Lack of representation becomes a focus because of who I am. When I preview a teacher resource I may want to select for use in class, I want to know about the writers, examine the perspectives they set out, and understand why these particular authors have chosen to write such a text. I want to be reassured that there has been some thought given to who the authors are in relation to the text. When selecting writers for curriculum resources, I make every attempt to include diverse



The following suggestions that may assist with developing a critical self-awareness and becoming familiar with the processes associated with critical pedagogy.

- Begin to pose critical questions such as “Who benefits in this situation?” and “Whose voices are being omitted?” Critical educators realize that understanding power and privilege is an essential component of social justice work.
- Create space for thinking. You may find answers to critical questions by making time for reflective thought and valuing the personal and professional growth this heightened awareness brings to our everyday interactions.
- Form a group of critical friends. Collegial support is vital to how we come to understand new perspectives. Dialogue and conversation about educational issues can assist us in making more informed decisions.
- Share personal examples of your own growth and development. Educators and students can benefit from hearing the successes and challenges that accompany growth and development in critical education.
- Continue to learn more. Professional development opportunities such as workshops, conferences, research, and texts can offer new perspectives, as well as validate the ongoing work of learning and teaching.
- Be open-minded, keep a positive attitude, and be flexible as you work towards achieving your vision. The depth and scope of the effectiveness of critical reflection lie in how qualities like open-mindedness and a positive attitude toward change are negotiated. Critically reflective educators often challenge systemic injustices and are vigilant about improving their practices.
- Take risks with your new knowledge. Share your goals and new learning at staff meetings, workshops, or by writing an article. Ask for feedback to assist with further learning.

perspectives from educators who have knowledge and/or experience of various forms of oppression and equity issues. Bringing together individuals who are willing to share their varied lived experiences and produce a resource for use in schools creates a unique opportunity for both professional and personal growth of those involved.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

“Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together.”¹²

Frances Moore Lappé reminds us that “Every aspect of our lives is, in a sense, a vote for the kind of world we want to live in.”¹³ Without critical reflective practice, the lenses that an educator uses to view current situations, create a vision, understand curriculum, and deliver pedagogy may become clouded and perpetuate the very injustices that each of us seeks to end. I close with a challenge from Halpern who urges us to “Think well and with great wisdom. The future depends on it.”¹⁴ |

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Notes

- 1 S. D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995).
- 2 John Dewey, *Experience & Education* (New York: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938).
- 3 Brookfield.
- 4 Nel Noddings, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 5 George S. Dei, “The Denial of Difference: Reframing Anti-racist Praxis, *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 2, no.1 (1999).
- 6 C. Cherryholmes, *Power and Criticism: Poststructural Investigations in Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988).
- 7 S.A. Tilley, “Multicultural Practices in Educational Contexts: Addressing Diversity and the Silence Round Race,” in D. Zinga, ed., *Navigating Multiculturalism: Negotiating Change* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholar’s Press, forthcoming)..
- 8 J.L. Kincheloe, *Critical Pedagogy Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Nel Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternate Approach to Education* (New York: Teachers’ College Press, 1992).
- 11 P.J. Palmer, *The Courage To Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 J. Beecroft, C. Brown, M. Neigh, C. Pawis, S. Ramrattan Smith and P. Wright, *The Power of Story*, Volume 1, (Toronto: Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, 2002).
- 14 D.F. Halpern, *Critical Thinking Across The Curriculum: A Brief Edition of Thought and Knowledge* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997).