Developing **Social Justice** Literacy

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR FACULTY COLLEAGUES

Just agreeing that social justice is important is not enough. Educators must practice social justice or else the concept is meaningless.

BY ÖZLEM SENSOY AND ROBIN DiANGELO

The times require us to have the courage to be dangerous, at the same time recognizing that there are differential dangers. Not all teachers are at equal risk; much depends on how you are positioned, on your identity(ies), on your particular situation.

— *Wendy Kohli, 2000*

If, when considering social justice, you:

- Believe equity is important, but don't know why *everything* has to be about diversity;
- Don't see why we insist our area of study needs to be addressed by everyone while yours is left to you;
- Believe that anyone who is "open-minded" can teach courses in social justice;
- Can't understand why we sometimes seem so angry in faculty meetings. . .

. . . then this letter is to you.

We want to clearly articulate the foundations of our work to our faculty colleagues, make a case for why you need to understand what we do, and suggest ways you can support social justice and faculty, staff, and students who are members of historically marginalized groups — persons of color, women, gays, persons with disabilities, and so on.

Nancy Gallavan writes that teaching about social inequality presents "challenges and conflicts for those instructors *unlike* the challenges and conflicts encountered when teaching most other courses in higher education" (2000, p. 5, italics in original). One aspect of these challenges and conflicts is student resistance to topics they do not fully understand. A

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UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL JUSTICE TERMINOLOGY

Misunderstandings often arise because of confusion about the definitions we use when discussing diversity-related issues. Thus, from a scholarly — rather than layperson's — perspective, when we use the following terms, we mean:

OPPRESSION

Oppression describes polices, practices, norms, and traditions that systematically exploit one social group (the target group) by another (the dominant group) for the dominant group's benefit. The common elements of oppression are: norms defined by the dominant group, institutional power, economic power, violence and the threat of violence, and target group invisibility (Pharr 1997).

Oppression differs from discrimination, bias, prejudice, or bigotry because these refer to individual acts that anyone can manifest (all humans have learned prejudices). In contrast, oppression occurs when prejudice is backed by social and institutional power. Oppression involves institutional control, ideological domination, and the imposition of the dominant group's culture on the target group.

Common shorthand within the discipline is: Prejudice + Power = Oppression. For example, consider suffrage in the U.S. and Canada.

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While women had to agitate for the right to vote and could certainly be angry with and prejudiced against men during that period, women could not grant themselves the right to vote. Only men could actually grant suffrage to women because only men held the institutional positions to do so. Hence, while both groups could be prejudiced against the other, only men's prejudice against women was backed by institutional power, creating a significant difference in impact. Furthermore, before suffrage, even if individual men believed women should have the right to vote, as men they still benefited from women's exclusion.

Individuals can belong simultaneously to both dominant and target groups, for example, we (the authors) are both women and white. The disadvantages of being women do not cancel out the advantages of being white, and a key project of social justice education is to help untangle the complex ways in which these locations work together to hold oppression in place.

INTERNALIZED DOMINANCE

Internalizing and acting out (often unwittingly) the constant messages that you and your group are superior to the target group and thus entitled to your higher position. Examples include:

- Rationalizing privilege as natural. "It's just human nature — someone has to be on top."
- Rationalizing privilege as earned. "I worked hard to get where I am."
- Perceiving you and your group as the most qualified for and entitled to the best jobs.
- Living one's life segregated from the target group yet feeling no loss or desire for connections with them, such as white flight;
- Lacking an interest in the perspectives of the target group except in limited and controlled doses, such as during "ethnic authors" week, holidays such as Chinese New Year, or when it appears to benefit the dominant group, as in "I want my child to experience diversity;" and
- Feeling authorized to debate or explain away the experiences of target groups.

INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

Internalizing and acting out (often unwittingly) the constant messages that you and your group are inferior to the dominant group and thus deserve a lower position. Examples include:

more awkward challenge, however, is the resistance of colleagues, resistance that often comes before a demonstration of basic social justice literacy. While universities, like all other social institutions, reflect the historical and existing unequal distribution of resources and power, there are added "dangers" within the university: the "stay below the radar" advice often given to pre-tenure faculty, the challenge to maintain collegial relations with colleagues (while doing unpopular work that is often perceived as an annoyance at best, and threatening at worst), and navigating the politics for faculty who belong to marginalized groups (along one or more axes of race, class, and gender) who often make up the core of scholars teaching about social inequities.

We offer the following vignettes to capture common challenges we face as professors who explicitly teach social justice-oriented education courses (in their variety of forms —critical multicultural education, anti-oppression, cultural diversity, anti-racism). Through professional academic discussions with one another, as well as countless spontaneous conversations in campus hallways, parking lots, and restrooms, there are consistent patterns in our experiences that will help us explain the dynamics of marginalization.

SO HOW AND WHAT MIGHT YOU DO?

In social justice studies, the term "ally" refers to a member of the dominant group who works to end oppression in all aspects of social life by consistently seeking to support and advocate for the group who is oppressed in relation to them. For example, men who speak out on behalf of women, white people who challenge white privilege and colonial policies with indigenous people, heterosexuals who break silence and lobby on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people.

In general, being an ally means:

- Validating and supporting people who are socially or institutionally positioned below yourself, *regardless* of whether you understand or agree with where they are coming from;
- Engaging in continual self-reflection to uncover your socialized blind spots where you have privilege;
- Advocating when the oppressed group is absent by challenging misconceptions; and
- Sharing power, taking risks to build relationships with target group members, taking responsibility for your mistakes, having humility and willingness to admit to "not knowing," letting go of control, and earning trust through action.

In institutional spaces, such as faculty meetings:

- Support the oppressed group's voice and sense of autonomy;
- Recognize the position of nontenured faculty (even as we write, we are considering how this essay might affect our careers);
- Operationalize a working definition of social justice and an assessment tool;
- Attend to the dynamics in meetings and *facilitate* to interrupt inequitable patterns; and

Imagine: In a committee discussion after a job candidate's interview, Vee* comments on how articulately the candidate wove together the literature in social justice with her work in teacher education. Vee notes the tight and nuanced discussion of whiteness literature and the complicated relationship the candidate outlined between her role as a white woman working with indigenous youth and the goals of social justice teacher education that she wanted to uphold. Vee's goal is to give the committee a sense of the scholarly rigor she saw in the candidate's work across various academic traditions (teacher education, social justice education, and anti-oppression-oriented theories).

After these comments, a white male colleague harrumphs with bravado and says, "Yes, well, we are all *for* social justice. . ."

The effect of this response to Vee's assessment of the candidate's proficiency is three-fold: It immediately discredits Vee's comments by positioning them as *personal* values, rather than academic and scholarly expertise; it discredits the work of a scholarly community (in social justice education) by positioning it as accessible and comprehensible to *anyone* who simply self-identifies as being "for" social justice — requiring no expertise; and third, it diminishes the candidate's competitiveness by diluting her presentation's sophisticated analysis. Furthermore, in practice, we are not actually all *for* social justice. Many of us unwittingly block every endeavor toward achieving social justice if it is inconvenient, uncomfortable, or impinges on resources or positions to which we feel entitled. It is not enough for faculty to *be for* social justice in theory without concrete and intentional practices.

Being "For Social Justice" Necessitates Basic Social Justice Literacy

Maybe it's obvious to you why these vignettes are problematic to scholars who teach social justice. But if you're not seeing them as anything more than *our* issue, allow us to tease them apart *from a critical social justice perspective*.

Imagine: Vee is sharing her struggles with student apathy and resistance in her courses with you and another colleague. She laments that one of her challenges is that what she teaches is not supported throughout the curriculum, leaving her isolated and giving students the impression that these issues are not important and that she just has a personal agenda. A colleague exclaims, "Oh, you are a braver soul than I! I could never teach those courses!"

Although we believe Vee's colleague was trying to be supportive by acknowledging the skill and commitment it takes to address issues of social justice, her response was problematic. First, she actually increases the institutional isolation Vee feels by affirming the very dynamic she is lamenting — that these issues are not addressed throughout the curriculum. But she does this through a kind of "back-handed compliment" by positioning them as too hard for anyone else. The effect is to confirm that social justice literacy is something *extra* in relation to the main curriculum. Furthermore, her emphasis on the personal dimensions of Vee's qualifications minimizes the scholarly rigor of the field. Thus, Vee's intellectual work is diminished while her emotional work is elevated, effectively sidelining the discipline by associating it with characteristics that aren't valued in academia.

Second, Vee's colleague effectively exempts herself from having to infuse social justice throughout the curriculum by making it seem too difficult for the average faculty member, requiring special character traits that only a few possess, rather than sets of concepts and dynamics that can be studied. From our perspective, any skills or character traits we possess as faculty members working in this area are the result of many years of intentional education, self-reflection, cross-racial relationship building, and practice. It is only your colleague's social privilege that enables her to avoid building these skills and not receive any penalty for lacking them.

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* "Vee" is the name we will use to refer to our faculty member who teaches social justice courses.

- Believing that dominant group members are more qualified for and deserving of their positions;
- Seeking the approval of and spending most of your time with members of the dominant group;
- Behaving in ways that please the dominant group and do not challenge the legitimacy of its position;
- Enduring micro-aggressions from the dominant group in order to avoid penalty;
- Having low expectations for oneself and others associated with your group;
- Believing that your struggles with social institutions (education, job, health care) are the result of your (or your group's) inadequacy, rather than the result of unequally distributed resources between dominant and target groups.

Internalized dominance and oppression create observable social group patterns. While there will always be exceptions, these patterns are well-documented, recognizable, and predictable (Adams, Bell, and Griffin 1997; Derman-Sparks and Phillips 1997; Mullaly 2002).

PRIVILEGE

Privilege refers to the rights, benefits, and advantages automatically received by being a member of the dominant group, regardless of intentions. From the critical social justice perspective, privilege refers to systemically conferred dominance (McIntosh 1988) and the institutional processes by which the beliefs and values of the dominant group are "made normal" and universal (Dyer 1997; Kimmel 2003).

"But," you may protest, "there are more white people in the U.S. and Canada. It's a matter of majority rules. What does that have to do with privilege?"

In some cases, the privileged group is also the numerical majority, but that is not the key criterion. For example, women are the majority of the world, as are poor and working-class people. Blacks were the majority in South Africa under apartheid, etc. The key criterion is social and institutional power.

"-ISMS"

Scholars use the "-ism" words — racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. — to refer to specific forms of oppression. They do not refer to or describe individual acts of prejudice or discrimination that anyone can commit.

The -ism words allow scholars to discuss

- Recognize that it matters who is in our building; work not only to increase representation along multiple fronts — gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, ability, first language — but also to *change the climate*.

In your classroom, when charged issues arise:

- Recognize and affirm the importance of the conversation;
- Be honest about your lack of experience but your willingness to try;
- Change your pedagogy, e.g., move to small groups for some discussions;
- Facilitate by inviting other voices in — e.g., "Does anyone have a similar or different perspective?" "Who hasn't spoken yet?"; and
- Facilitate dialogue rather than debate, e.g., "both/and" rather than "either/or" frameworks.

In conversation with faculty whose area is social justice:

- Be humble about your skills. Members of the dominant group are the least qualified to judge their ally effectiveness. Be accountable to targeted group members — check in and build relationships.
- The "isms" are always operating and thus feedback about something problematic you've done *is not an accusation*! Appreciate the courage it takes to give feedback on social justice issues, learn from it, and move on.

CONCLUSION

Just agreeing that social justice is important is not enough without the *practice* of social justice. As faculty, we must do more than pontificate self-congratulating platitudes. Declarations that one is for social justice may be compared to declarations that "I am a good writer." The declaration alone is not credible, for you must *produce* good writing. Colleagues with expertise must assess and validate your claim. Thus writing is an ongoing process of idea-generation, practice, peer evaluation, and rewriting. It would certainly not be enough for one to declare that one supports literacy and yet be illiterate.

In the case of social justice education, the stakes are high because we are dealing with historic and current differentials in power, privilege, and access that are manifesting concretely (even as their existence is denied). We ask you to consider how a lack of knowledge and any feelings of passivity or irritation toward these issues actually function to hold oppression in place. Ideally, you would educate yourself on social justice and play a range of roles informed by the degree to which your courage makes possible. But if you do not have the knowledge and skills that develop out of sustained intentionality, rather than mere good intentions, and are not actively working toward attaining them, please do not position yourself or your program as being "for social justice." Proclamations of support without a foundation of action undermine the work and render it meaningless.

Social justice education is not about serving the interests of political correctness. Every single measure of disparity in education is tied to group position — target vs. dominant. Special education and discipline referrals;

Vignette #3: "That's an interesting point. Moving on. . ."

Imagine: In Vee's courses, students begin to grapple with anti-oppression-oriented theories and apply them to understanding school culture, the curriculum, and practice. Excited by the complexities they are beginning to see (such as the interlocking networks that uphold injustices and how these were obscured to them before), these students begin to speak up, name, and challenge these dynamics in their other classes. One of Vee's students always seems to point out the racism/sexism/classism in the dynamics or the course content in your class. Fearing you might make a mistake and be perceived as prejudiced if you open the conversation, you say, "that issue (race, gender, or class) will be addressed in week 8," or "that's interesting, but we need to move on."

These responses function problematically on multiple levels. On the level of group dynamics, they immediately silence the student and whatever fledgling courage he or she was acting on. This response from the arguably most powerful person in the room makes it clear that the student is not going to be supported in initiating a discussion on a difficult issue. Moreover, any other students who may have appreciated the student's challenge receive the same message: They are on their own here. If the issue pertains to a marginalized group to which the student belongs (such as a student of color bringing up problematic racial dynamics in the class or curriculum), the impact is even more crushing. In the case of racism, when the professor and the majority of students are most likely white (the typical racial demographics in the average higher education classroom), the effect reinforces the dynamics of internalized dominance for them and internalized oppression for the students of color. Sadly, based on our experience, we are confident that these responses will ensure that most students will not raise difficult issues again.

Another similar response when social justice issues arise in class is: "They will deal with that in the diversity course." This response marginalizes our courses as the receptacle for "difficult" issues the rest of the faculty doesn't want to deal with, and it reinforces a societal message that these are not permissible conversations in mainstream spaces. This silence maintains and protects the status quo and communicates to students that the ability to address social inequities is auxiliary and not required for successful completion of their program. As scholars, we do not need to be experts in the field of social justice education in order to deal more constructively with these admittedly difficult moments in the classroom.

Vignette #4: "Why wouldn't they want social justice in the mission statement?"

Imagine: Department leaders propose revising the mission statement to reflect a commitment to social justice. At the department meeting, everyone supports the move, except faculty who teach courses and conduct research addressing social justice (including Vee). You, along with the rest of the faculty, are perplexed about their abstention but are confident that everyone supports social justice, so you assume their objections must be about something other than the spirit of the mission statement. The motion passes without further discussion.

Many schools of education list social justice as a programmatic value in their mission statements. However, *how* social justice will be operationalized is rarely addressed. Social justice requires active and intentional promotion (see Vignette #1). While doctoral programs attend to future faculty's preparation for conducting research and sometimes to teaching, few prepare future faculty for practice that is socially just. Putting the term in your mission statement while having no specific goals, no system for measuring progress, or no accountability renders it meaningless. For example, is a question designed to assess a candidate's skills in integrating social justice content a part of *every* hiring interview? Are all hiring committee members able to assess the basic quality of the candidate's answer to such a question? Is the committee prepared to reject candidates who cannot speak adequately to the question? What kind of ongoing education is the department prepared to commit to, given that being "open-minded," "well-meaning," and "nice" are not the qualifications of social justice literacy? Are processes in place for meetings that attend to ensuring equitable group dynamics? If we cannot answer these and other questions of social justice in the affirmative, are we willing to remove the phrase from our mission statement, and if not, why not? What do we gain by having the statement without the practice?

these specific forms of oppression and also include the dynamics of unequal social and institutional power between dominant and target groups in our discussion, rather than deny them by reducing oppression to individual acts of prejudice and positing these acts as comparable, regardless of who commits them. (This mean that so-called reverse racism or reverse sexism, from a critical social justice perspective, do not exist because the -ism words refer to power relations that are historic and embedded, and these relations do not flip back and forth. The same groups who have historically held systemic power in the U.S. and Canada continue to do so. For example, despite suffrage and women's numerical majority, in 2008 in the U.S., women still had only 16% of the House and Senate, 10% of the Supreme Court, and have never held the highest office, the presidency.)

THE EXAMPLE OF RACISM

Racism is a specific form of oppression. Racism encompasses economic, political, social, and cultural structures, actions, and beliefs that systematize and perpetuate an unequal distribution of privileges, resources, and power between whites and people of color (Hilliard 1992). Racism is white racial and cultural prejudice and discrimination, supported intentionally or unintentionally by institutional power and authority, used to the advantage of whites and the disadvantage of people of color. The critical element that differentiates racism from race prejudice and discrimination is the prop of institutional power and authority that supports the prejudice and enforces discriminatory behaviors in systemic ways with far-reaching effects. People of color may hold prejudices toward whites but do not have the social and institutional power backing their prejudice that transforms it into racism; the impact of their prejudice on whites is isolated, temporary, and contextual. From a critical social justice perspective, when we say only whites can be racist, we mean only whites have social and institutional power and privilege.

math, science, and reading literacies; graduation and dropout/push-out rates; test scores, all of what is known as "the achievement gap" are tied to race, class, and gender. This disparity is *real*. And to ameliorate such disparities and offer meaningful leadership in school contexts at all levels, we must attend to the *real*, to the concrete and active dimensions — not simply the slogans — of social justice. 𝕂

"SOCIAL JUSTICE" IN EDUCATION

Social justice-oriented approaches in education refer to standpoints and scholarly traditions that actively address the dynamics of oppression, privilege, and isms, recognizing that society is the product of historically rooted, institutionally sanctioned stratification along socially constructed group lines that include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Working for social justice in education means guiding students in critical self-reflection of their socialization into this matrix of unequal relationships and its implications, analysis of the mechanisms of oppression, and the ability to challenge these hierarchies (Cochran-Smith 2004).

There are shared principles but no unified approach to social justice education. As in other fields, scholars study a range of theories and conduct research examining the functions of oppression and strategies for its amelioration in education. However, there are some shared principles:

• There are very real differentials in access to social and institutional power between relationally positioned group members.
• While all people have socialized prejudices and can discriminate, only the dominant group is backed by social and institutional power, which is multidimensional and constantly operating, being contested, and renegotiated.
• Those who claim to be for social justice must also be engaged in self-reflection on their own socialization into patterns of oppression and continually seek to counter those patterns. This is a lifelong project and is not achieved at the completion of an article or workshop.

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Without a concrete action plan, these mission statements become empty slogans that actually function to counter an authentic project of social justice education by reinforcing the idea that *being for it* is all it takes. As Frederick Douglass pointed out in the mid-1800s, "power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and it never will."

Vignette #5: "If you're concerned with equity, you need more men in your group."

Imagine: You, Vee, and others are in a committee meeting discussing a new program with an explicit social justice orientation. All of the department's experts in equity studies are affiliated with the program. The committee chair, a white male, notices that the list is all women and recommends adding male faculty to demonstrate the value of inclusion that the program professes. You think this is an insightful suggestion, but Vee and the other social justice faculty appear irritated.

Given the deeply embedded patterns based on our social locations, simply adding a member of the dominant group will not ensure inclusive and just practice. Dominant group members bring their patterns of privilege with them. For example, men in relation to women (and white men in particular) are socialized to take up more physical and intellectual space. Men will tend to talk first, last, and most often; set the tone and the agenda of meetings; have a disproportionate effect on decisions; and be perceived as (and presume themselves to be) leaders in almost any context (Bornstein 1998; Kimmel 2000).

Conversely, target group members also have conditioned patterns that predispose them to defer to the dominant member (see *internalized dominance* and *internalized oppression* in the definitions on pages 346 and 348). Women *overall* will talk less and defer when men are present, and they expect men to assume leadership (Cleveland, Stockdale, and Murphy 2000; Krupnick 1985; Sadker and Sadker 1995). These patterns and relations do not reverse or change based on the ratio of dominant to target. Without clear intentionality, support, and skills of alliance, members will enact the inequitable relationship. The new member will not be suddenly "oppressed" or have a "minority" experience because he is the only man in the work group. For example, in every field considered "female" and in which women are the numerical majority (teaching, nursing, social work), the patterns of internalized oppression and dominance play out — the few men who enter these fields will invariably rise to take leadership over the women. Of greater importance, then, are the skills and perspectives the new member brings to the group.

Another dynamic at play in this suggestion to add a man to the group is the ways in which "the numbers game" manifests in academia to counter the project of social justice. Statements such as: "We don't have much racial diversity here because we don't have very many people of color in our area" or, conversely, "we are doing well because we have a lot of people of color in our department" are often heard in response to questions of racial diversity in the workplace. Two important dynamics to notice about these statements are: 1) they reflect the dominant perspective, for example, a workplace that seems racially diverse to white people may not seem diverse to people of color, and 2) all of these statements defend and rationalize the situation in question and thereby limit, rather than expand, further action.

But what if the statement is, "But our dean is a woman, so how can there be sexism in our department?" In thinking about numbers, there is an important distinction between *rank* and *status*. *Rank* refers to social membership, which is not temporary and affects all aspects of one's life — i.e., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, age, etc.). *Status* refers to a temporary position/job and is contextual (i.e., the infamous story of Oprah Winfrey, one of the richest women in the U.S., unable to hail a cab once she exits her workplace). Your dean may be a woman but will likely need to enact the norms and values of the dominant group and will still deal with unaware sexism from the men she supervises. A black manager who supervises a white person will still have to deal with the (often unaware) racism of employees. Leaders of color are scrutinized more closely and harshly, are often assumed to be recipients of special programs rather than having earned their positions, and are often perceived as being biased or having special interests (Bonnilla-Silva 2003).

Numbers do, of course, matter. But *when* and *how* they matter are the questions asked from a social justice perspective. Policies that get at "numbers" of representation are *not* playing the numbers game because they are about correcting a historically anchored inequity.
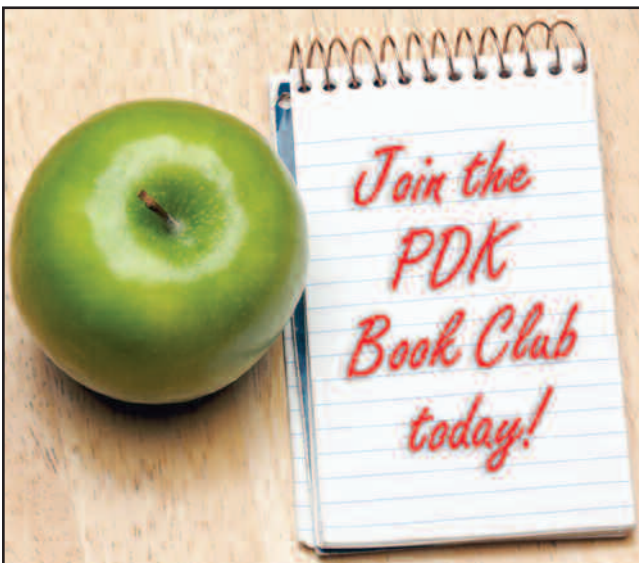
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