# Democracy & Education

# Becoming a Social Justice Educator

## Emerging from the Pits of Whiteness into the Light of Love

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the limitations of social justice in institutional spaces and in rhetoric. I write in the form of a quest narrative to describe the lessons I learned from a brief sojourn in a temporary position in an urban teacher education program with a social justice focus and at a nonprofit organization with other social justice workers. My quest entails a retelling of encounters with Whiteness, the challenges of engaging social justice as a process that pushes beyond conversation, and the lessons I took away from my own sense-making of the contradictions in social justice work.

### This article is a response to:

Sensoy, Ö., & DiAngelo, R. (2014). Respect differences? Challenging the common guidelines in social justice education. *Democracy & Education, 22*(2), Article 1. Available at: http://democracyeducation journal.org/home/vol22/iss2/1

*I*MAGINE YOU'VE JUST *graduated with a PhD and you have student loan debt that amounts to a mortgage. Unable to land a full-time position with a salary and health benefits, you work three different part-time jobs in order to make bill payments on time. One of those positions is at a nonprofit organization that pays little to nothing, but you believe in grassroots community building and are passionate about the work, so you look past the paycheck. The mission of the organization is to create justice-centered curriculum based on the lived experiences of people of color; the employees are people of color who open up their networks and put in more hours, energy, and passion than their checks reflect; the executive director is a White male; this story doesn't end well. Another position is part-time and temporary, and you are hired specifically to "shake things up" in a historically elite, White institution. You are explicitly told before entering the space that it is a racially hostile environment. You accept the challenge because you are an audacious person of color who is curious to a fault, isn't scared* of anything, and wants the experience of being in the belly of a beast of an institution. Your third position is to collect data for a district needs assessment in an area that recently received a large number of public housing residents who were forced out of the city limits by racist housing development/redevelopment practices. You know that the data you collect does not speak to the shifting demographics nor to the impacts on families of being displaced and focuses largely on the success of implementing the Common Core State Standards.

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*Your understanding as a social justice educator and scholar is to address inequities in education and offer an alternative to high-stakes testing models that fail to address the role that poverty, resource distribution, and institutionalized racism play in educational success (Picower, 2012). Greene's (1998) definition particularly resonates with you. She said:*

*To teach for social justice is to teach for enhanced perception and imaginative explorations, for the recognition of social wrongs, of sufferings, of pestilences wherever and whenever they arise. It is to find models in literature and in history of the indignant ones who have taken the side of the victims of pestilences, whatever their names or places of origin. It is to teach so that the young may be awakened to the joy of working for transformation in the smallest places, so that they may become healers and change their worlds. (p. XLV,)*

*From your experience, you believe that a social justice educator requires not only depth of knowledge and skill in content and instruction but heart, will, passion, and unharnessed determination. In the midst of working all of these jobs, you see Whiteness lurking in and out of the shadows of all the spaces, but you also share a space with people of color who are just beginning to acknowledge their relationships to Whiteness, which also end poorly. I define Whiteness as an ideology that both Whites and non-Whites practice as a default setting created through the state's systemic economic, political, and social oppression. Whiteness prevails when good intentions are assumed of self-centered, arrogant, inconsiderate, and opportunistic people, allowing their bad actions to be read as anomalies, happenstance, and ahistorical. Whiteness shows up in your colleagues of color who looked on as one of the "good intentioned" slandered your character, trying to deflect and externalize. Simultaneously, you are also feeling pimped by people of color who hire you to fight the exhausting, life-draining battle of racism while they are blind to the ways their seats of privilege and power provide particular shelters.*

*In every space you traverse, you are battling an unconscious monster wreaking havoc on faculty members, students, and communities of color, working toward "social justice" and slowly losing the energy and steam needed to do the work. The roles you play in these positions far exceed the job titles, and you also provide consulting, organization restructuring, curriculum development, and therapy. In the back of your mind, you hope that these positions might lead to something that could provide financial stability and health care, but when they end, you discover your energy has been depleted by the work, you are broke and without a job, and you are expecting your first child. You realize that there is no one coming to save you. You do not curl up in a ball and cry, but every day you convince yourself that this experience has made you smarter, better, stronger, and more resilient. You do not allow yourself to be a mess—you take time to heal, begin to plot a course, and create the world necessary for the survival of your own humanity and for the future your child will inherit.*

## Introduction

Preparing teachers in the 21st century is not an easy task, but it is even more difficult when social justice classes remain in a vacuum while the entire fabric of institutions is tightly woven to support dominant ideologies and ways of operating. The goal of colleges of education should be to liberate individuals, advocating for the participation of individuals to transform their realities, not just allow the colleges to give lip service to social justice initiatives while carrying on with business as usual. But this is not the case. The traditional models of teacher education that reinforce a lifetime of racial inequalities must be intentionally addressed, held accountable, and transformed if we truly care about the future. But do we? Is the system not designed to do exactly what it is doing? Whites once amassed their wealth off the backs of people of color through the vicious system of slavery, and what is the explanation for the unbelievable disparity between the rich and the poor today? Hard work, determination, and values? By asking these questions, we must wake up to the reality that is being masked. Teaching, then, becomes an act of awakening.

In response to Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2014) article "Respect Differences? Challenging the Common Guidelines in Social Justice Education," I agree that establishing social justice guidelines should be reexamined and critiqued according to the desired educational outcomes. I also want to add a critique of the institutions that do not support this type of work taking place in classroom spaces. In my last teaching placement, students identified the lack of accountability for racial discrimination in a program that was incorporating social justice and then called for an institutional response. This was a really messy situation. Whiteness needed to be addressed, as it always should be. But what happens when your response to Whiteness is criticized as an overemotional reaction? What happens when your pain consumes you, and you allow yourself to be driven by this pain? And what happens when the actions of people of color begin to look like that of their oppressor?

As a result of business-as-usual educational programs and the healthy, thriving presence of White supremacy in the "alternative" spaces of nonprofit organizations, a new way of operating and navigating the world needed to emerge. By sharing my experiences with other educators, organizers, and activists of color, I realized what I experienced was common, and real change was not going to come about through the systems and structures that created the conditions we sought to challenge. What emerged through those conversations was the road map toward liberation, freedom from the mental plantations, and rediscovery of our humanity. This was the beginning of the Human Restoration Project.

Knowledge emerges through invention and reinvention, the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 1970). The institutional lessons of social justice education provided the foundation for investing in new ways of operating within and outside of societal structures. This response will outline the following: (1) the limitations of social justice guidelines and acknowledging the work of Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014), (2) social justice as a process and what it looked like, (3) the healing power of love, and (4) moving beyond limitations and the vision for the Human Restoration Project.

## The Limitations of Social Justice Guidelines

The work of Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) examined the limitations of the guidelines established for social justice classroom discussions, which were found to create obstacles for achieving the goals of social justice education. They argued that common guidelines upheld unequal power relations instead of interrupting them; this affected actions and behaviors such as sharing of opinions, affirming everyone's perspectives, assuring everyone feels heard, eliciting personal connections and feelings about the course material and emotional responses to course texts, and even co-constructing the curriculum and sharing airtime. Furthermore, they argued that the interests and needs of dominant groups drove the guidelines that led to the preservation of comfort of those group members. Dominant group members in teacher education are mostly White and middle-class (Picower, 2009); guidelines such as everyone's opinion matters, be safe, and assume good intentions work toward keeping the "goodness" of dominant group members intact while allowing them to avoid responsibility for their transgressions and protect their perspectives from critical analysis. Sensoy and DiAngelo are right in pointing out the need to address the limitations of social justice guidelines especially when students are challenged to let go of their dominant ideologies and their resistance ends up hijacking discussions to re-center Whiteness. At those moments, it is imperative that guidelines are reconfigured according to the objectives of the social justice classroom, and they must also respond to the needs of nondominant groups in the space where these interactions take place.

Moreover, when looking at social justice classrooms, it is important not to lose sight of the larger context in which they are embedded. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) acknowledge that their courses function within institutions that reproduce inequality and support the system that social justice seeks to challenge. If one of the goals of social justice is to change systemic inequalities, then it is important not only to readjust social justice guidelines of conversation but to hold students accountable for their resistance to letting go of dominant, oppressive, and damaging ideologies. The system of inequality continues to thrive when social justice spaces operate in a vacuum while the rest of the institution cultivates, nurtures, and protects ideologies and practices that privilege White norms and ways of being. Without the institutional support of holding students and faculty accountable for operating under business-as-usual, White, privileged maneuvers, the work toward social justice gets undermined. Social justice then becomes another buzzword that is adapted to mask institutionalized racism by creating an illusion that programs are striving to change the conditions that have historically oppressed and marginalized people. The intellectual, emotional, and personal work of social justice educators can feel unappreciated, misused, and exploited especially when they are brought into a racially hostile environment without the structural support necessary to challenge institutionalized racism and hold students accountable for their biases and ignorance.

As an instructor of color whose family was subjected to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, I am keenly aware that the privileging of White narratives and the emotional babysitting of those calling for attention to their "goodness" despite their toxic behaviors and willful ignorance to their internalized dominance are unacceptable, and those people should be held accountable by programs and institutions. I also challenge people of color working toward a more humanizing approach to education and business as usual to not become those we are trying to combat.

## Social Justice as a Process—This Is What It Looked Like

When I began a job as a part-time, temporary adviser to students in a teacher education program that wanted to incorporate a social justice center, I was told racial tensions had escalated to a high degree. White students had begun challenging instructors of color, one White female had left the program, and a lot of healing needed to occur in order to move forward. The director of the program, who hired me, was a woman of color dedicated to antiracist practices, and I entered the position well aware that I was expected to engage colleagues and students in challenging White privilege and normative ways of operating within a systematically racist institution. Less than half of the student population represented people of color. Engaging students in conversations about race was difficult. On my first day, another White female student removed herself from the program, for mental health reasons, and in the following two months, two more white females followed in her footsteps. I am not speculating that they left as a result of not wanting to partake in conversations that challenged their privilege, pushed for reflection on positionality, or required a degree of vulnerability. However, I do want to acknowledge that their exits impacted the classroom community and created an opportunity to recenter Whiteness.the space for them to centralize their situations.

In the first month of this position, when addressing the topic of race, students of color were increasingly frustrated with the silence of their White counterparts. Similar to what Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) stated in their article, the White students would normally feel free to speak first when their identities were unchallenged and their intellect was given the stage. However, the moments of conversation in which the emotional, self-reflective work was given space, students of color were met with silence after sharing their experiences. Students of color began to feel positioned as "native informants and unpaid sherpas" (Thompson, 2004, as cited in Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014), guiding White students into a racial awakening while having their thoughts, opinions, and experiences essentialized for all people of color. As a result, the students of color reached a breaking point during one of the class sessions, staged a walkout, and stated the need for time and space for racialized caucus work.

As a facilitator of the people of color caucus and aware of my temporary status, I gave students the space to focus the conversations on their needs. During the caucus work, students of color shared frustrations with their experiences in a program that they described as "being built for White people." Students felt like they needed a space where they could safely processing their experiences and challenges. They named the following issues of concern:

- Students of color were tired of having conversations that were seemingly going nowhere because White students remained unable to share or be vulnerable.
- They felt betrayed and disrespected by their White classmates for not being able to reciprocate in conversation. Silence was no longer an option.
- Students were exhausted by sidebar conversations about race and felt that White students should do more research on race before coming to the discussions.
- They felt like time was being wasted when class was devoted to unpacking and processing White silence and vulnerability while their needs of unpacking their own identities were not being met.
- They were frustrated by the need to filter conversations and speak in a way that could be more accessible for White classmates.
- Students were tired of being the voice of expertise for the experiences of all people of color.
- Students of color thought it was unfair that the depth of their conversations was limited to White understandings of race.

It appeared that the teacher education program students were enrolled in historically functioned by "positively managing White people's emotions and helping them to maintain an image of themselves as good and innocent" (Juárez, Smith, & Hayes 2008, p.23). However, as the students of color called out their White classmates, instructors, and the institutionalized racism that permeated the program, they created and utilized the time and space of the people of color caucus to voice their pain, heal, and realize their power. The following resulted from this caucus work:

- Students found their voices in speaking up and out against White supremacy.
- Before the people of color caucus, sharing in interracial spaces felt like a study of people of color and not, as it should be, a time of learning from one another. Students felt safe to share their experiences and opinions without the gaze of their classmates.
- Students felt their pain was acknowledged.
- Students created a space to interrogate their racialized identities without the focus on White understandings about race.
- The people of color caucus kept the focus off of Whiteness.
- Caucus structures established accountability with White classmates.
- Conversations in the people of color caucus pushed thinking about racialized identities forward and asked tougher questions.
- The people of color caucus provided the space for students to be pushed in different ways in thinking about the intersectionality of multiple identities.
- Students named the battle against the preservation of comfort for White classmates.

- Students grappled with concepts around what it meant to be an American; the false blanket of privilege and consequences for all; surrendering culture and identity; disassociation from culture; self-preservation; American individualism; cultural appropriation; private and public actions to control the perceptions of others; language; how we're named; how we are taught to code switch; and how we teach students to navigate the contradictions of who we are, where we come from, who we want to be, against the limitations of our ideas of what it means to be those people in America.

What ensued in the interracial spaces was a series of awkward, clumsy, and intense discussions that called people in to face the ugliness of racism and privilege. One of the outcomes of the caucus work was the support that students of color felt from each other and the instructors of color who participated in those conversations.

It was powerful and inspiring to see students of color decentralize Whiteness, call for institutional and structural change, and design the educational space that they needed. Challenging institutionalized racism and White supremacy was a courageous act that came with life-changing lessons for those who were intricately involved in the process. To engage in this process of confronting deficit thinking and wrestling with knowledge that is disruptive, discomforting, and problematizing is not easy nor is it in the best interest of the soul to be broken, to enter into a state of crisis, to feel discomfort, displaced, or threatened (Kumashiro, 2004). Learning should not be a process that repeats and affirms what we think we know—it should be a disarming process that allows us to escape the uncritical complacency of repetition. Entering into states of crisis in our knowledge can help challenge the status quo and oppression, and it can push the boundaries that make us apathetic and impotent and strengthen our audacity to fight for something greater. Simultaneously, these states of crisis can take tolls on the spirit and syphon the energy we need to continue the work.

When my temporary position came to a close, I left feeling good about supporting the students in their educational journeys and seeing them through the tumult and turmoil. However, my position as a part-time and temporary instructor added a layer of conflict that I was unprepared to process. To do this work is incredibly exhausting. As a person of color hired to bring balance to Whiteness, it is not an easy task to come into an established space and call out institutionalized racism, support walkouts, facilitate racialized caucus groups, and navigate the internalized oppression/dominance of students toward a greater evolution in their humanity, all while advising them through student teaching placements (and for me, this happened during one of the most tumultuous years of the city's public school system). It is also difficult to walk away without a future of job security or financial stability and wonder if engaging in this type of work is also a form of career suicide.

During this time period, I also walked away from a position at a nonprofit organization where a White male executive director

publicly assaulted my character. After a series of difficult conversations in which we discussed feedback from volunteers and staff of color who felt that their time and energy were being abused, the executive director responded by accusing two staff members, including me, of participating in racialized, gendered, hostile attacks against him. To this day, I still have to pause for a minute to allow my brain to process that; this touched a chord particularly because there were people of color who watched silently as our characters were questioned and our reputations slandered; there was no relief crew to help us pick ourselves up after the damage. I believe there were reaons why no one could stand up for us in that moment. Maybe no one had enough evidence to know who was saying the truth; maybe it was an emotionally charged moment that needed to be tabled until a different time; maybe people hated conflict and confrontation so decided not to engage. Whatever the reason was, I left disappointed and heartbroken.

This was a culminating experience in my professional and educational trajectory that left me confused and threw my equilibrium off, but it also provided some difficult lessons that I'm still learning from. I was not surprised by the White people who found it difficult to acknowledge their privilege, their deflection to protect their goodness, or their inability to change. In the same vein, it didn't surprise me when the institution did not conduct a full overhaul of the program as a response to the centrality of Whiteness. That was to be expected. What did surprise me was the response from other people of color, and through this experience I began to see how social justice work can become a practice of striving for a utopia. And it is for the sake of the utopia that we can become oblivious to the opportunities we have to directly change an injustice in front of us. This set of experiences led me to grapple with several questions: How do we sit back and watch White executive directors treat volunteers and staff of color disrespectfully and then fail to hold those executives accountable? How can we hire people of color for part-time work that has long-term emotional impacts and then disregard them? Do we allow these practices because they are means to an end? Have we not just replicated the structures that we seek to dismantle?

## The Healing Energy of Love

Having spent some time away from the situations and the people involved in these events, I focused my energy on healing. For me, healing meant reconciling the reality I experienced with my perceived reality. It meant walking away from anger, hatred, sadness, and self-pity. Healing was a process that forced me to engage my foundational values of social justice work, and that meant I needed to revisit love. Love is a decision, a promise, and a commitment. Love is not based on a feeling that could come and go; love is an action that involves judgment and decision. Love is also not contingent upon the other person being lovable. Especially when there are people who you don't agree with, who seem void of values, or who you just can't stand. Thich Nhat Hanh said:

> The essence of love and compassion is understanding, the ability to recognize the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others, to put ourselves "inside the skin" of the other. We "go inside" their body,

> feelings, and mental formations, and witness for ourselves their suffering. Shallow observation as an outsider is not enough to see their suffering. We must become one with the subject of our observation. When we are in contact with another's suffering, a feeling of compassion is born in us. Compassion means, literally, "to suffer with." (p. TK)

Love is not an easy practice, but it's a practice. Something we learn by doing, even if the lessons have to be repeated over and over again. And this is my repeated life lesson: to choose love even in loveless times. Love does not try to keep everything nice by shrinking away from difficult conversations or truths. It requires intentionality in speaking truth, assassinating ego, and reconciling pain. Love calls for compassion, but it doesn't call for weakness.

Love was the key to my internal transformation of leaving behind anger, negativity, and hopelessness. I have to model the change I wish to see in this world, and if my work as a social justice educator is to facilitate healing and transformation, then I must practice it myself. Fromm (1956) stated:

> To have faith requires courage, the ability to take a risk, the readiness even to accept pain and disappointment. Whoever insists on safety and security as primary conditions of life cannot have faith; whoever shuts himself off in a system of defense, where distance and possession are his means of security, makes himself a prisoner. To be loved, and to love, need courage, the courage to judge certain values as of ultimate concern—and to take the jump and to stake everything on these values. (p. 116)

I am more confident now that in difficult times, in order to heal and continue to build, we must revisit the values that commit us to this work. Love requires courage and faith to leave the past behind and all that we know and walk into the darkness of the unknown. In faith, it asks us to cling to hope, to choose righteousness, and to walk alongside others who choose to love. On this journey toward love, we find ourselves, each other, and the greatness we were all destined for.

## Moving Beyond Limitations and the Vision for the Human Restoration Project

The experiences I underwent that tumultuous year made it clear that an alternative was needed. No longer could these challenges to justice could be couched under a generic "social justice" moniker. It was along this journey that I connected to others who were critical of the roadblocks present in their social justice work. As we shared stories, commiserated, and healed, it became clear that we were the ones we were waiting for. At that point, we decided to gather our knowledge, creativity, and skills to build a vision that we could all work toward together with the understanding of the importance of operating within and outside of mainstream structures.

Our lives were examples of the need to reimagine the world of education in a fundamental and grand way and in a way that is evident of how we want to live as a human race. The Human Restoration Project is rooted in a philosophy of humanist values

and love. We started as a group of people struggling and wrestling with our own humanity. What began as a series of conversations around being disconnected from ourselves and one another allowed for the creation of an entity that represented our struggle. As our conversations unfolded, we agreed that we needed a common understanding of inalienable rights and freedoms to help us realize and acknowledge our human rights. The Human Restoration Project is a reflection of our own process and the world we seek to create, and it provides the tools necessary to facilitate people's understanding of their human rights and how to identify, document, and enforce them. We work to restore and protect the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.

The founding members of the Human Restoration Project are educators, organizers, activists, philosophers, and humanitarians who have a vast range of work experiences: serving in higher education institutions; grassroots community organizing; public, charter, and alternative school teaching; and holding careers in nonprofits as well as corporations and politics. Our paths collided at different times while we played different roles and fulfilled different capacities, but we pooled our talents, skills, and resources to create a new road that we could walk together. We are committed to challenging normative approaches to education and providing an alternative to the neoliberal education project. We understand that in order to solve many challenges that face the human race today, we must work collaboratively to dismantle the individualistic, capitalist structures that have created the environmental, social, and economic issues we have today.

My experiences have brought me to a very simple conclusion: We can do better. I use the term *we* as an all-encompassing, terribly generalizing term because the current social, political, economic, and environmental moment points toward an evolution in our humanity. I believe we have arrived at a time when we must acknowledge that part of being human is to continuously define and redefine ourselves. It is not enough to declare ourselves social justice workers and partake in conversations. We must be willing to engage in the self-work that is necessary to start building the world our children will inherit. We must also ask ourselves what kind of people we want to be. And then be willing to look ourselves in the mirror and start the work toward becoming.

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