

# What Is All This Talk About “Social Justice”? Mapping the Terrain of Education’s Latest Catchphrase

by Connie E. North — 2008

**Background/Context:** As of 2006, “social justice” is frequently appearing as the centerpiece of numerous educational settings and spaces, such as article and book titles, teacher activist organizations, teacher education policy documents and mission statements, and scholarly conferences. Unfortunately, the organizations and individuals employing this label often fail to elaborate the substantive meaning of social justice education and the implications of its use.

**Objective and Research Design:** Given the wide range of terms and projects used to describe education for social justice, a focused analysis on the tensions and contradictions inherent in these models can render explicit and debatable their underlying assumptions and claims. To promote greater discussion about the possibilities for, and situational constraints on, education for social justice, the following review of educational literature maps out and evaluates the conflicting discourses about, and approaches to, social justice education.

**Conclusions:** The author concludes that singular approaches to education for social justice, as well as policy formation processes that exclude or marginalize the actors implicated in them, will not result in more just and equitable forms of education.

I would hold the view that a notion of social justice should include components of distribution, principles of curriculum justice, and should also draw attention to non-material components of equity, such as empowerment. Consistent with all three and guiding all three should be a focus on the least advantaged.

—Andrew Sturman, *Social Justice in Education* (1997)

A contested, value-laden expression that is frequently conflated with the pursuit of educational “equity” and/or “equality of opportunity” (two similarly contested terms), “social justice education” is also a dynamic concept that has been associated with different beliefs, practices, and policies across time (Sturman, 1997). Given the recent, highly publicized war over the meaning of terms like *multiculturalism* (see, for example, Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995; Ravitch, 1990), educational researchers such as Griffiths (1998) intentionally use social justice to describe the subject and methodology of their work. Griffiths argued that because social justice was not appearing frequently in academic or media and popular culture outlets, it had not yet “suffered the kind of attack as a term that the more well known terms have” (p. 85).

As the 21st century gets under way, however, social justice is appearing in various educational venues. A November 2006 ERIC search of published work with *social justice* in the title returned approximately 320 sources, and an Amazon.com search of *social justice education* produced over 1,800 book titles. Individual authors are not the only people employing this term. Educational publishers like Rethinking Schools (2006), an effort begun in 1986 by a group of Milwaukee teachers to create “a humane, caring, multiracial democracy” via alternatives to standardized, textbook-centered curricula, frequently use *social justice*, as in their recent publication, *Rethinking Mathematics: Teaching Social Justice by the Numbers* (Gutstein & Peterson, 2005). Additionally, the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE; 2006), a group of public school teachers formed in the wake of 9/11 to challenge U.S. military imperialism and recruitment efforts, describes its work as “fighting for social justice in our

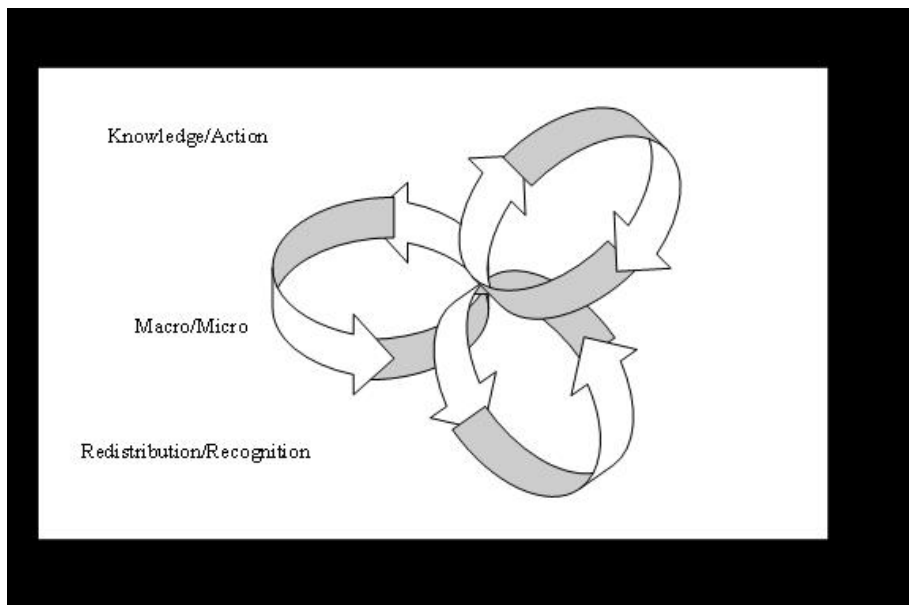
school system and society at large, by organizing and mobilizing teachers, developing curriculum, and working with community, parent, and student organizations.”

Teacher education programs, such as Stanford University’s, have also published texts about their social justice goals and practices (e.g., Darling-Hammond, French, & Garcia-Lopez, 2002). McDonald (2003) identified the University of California–Los Angeles Center X as one of the few teacher education programs in the country that has “moved toward the integration of social justice and equity in the preparation of prospective teachers” (p. 17). Center X (2006) identifies its first of eight core values as “embody[ing] a social justice agenda.” This agenda includes using the racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity in Los Angeles to construct high-quality education for all students, taking education beyond the classroom by helping children acquire the social supports they need for academic success, and approaching teaching and learning from “socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives.”

From Center X’s mission alone, it becomes clear that social justice can and does encompass a wide range of educational objectives, procedures, and processes. Indeed, Center X’s mission seems to align well with Sturman’s (1997) statement in the epigraph. However, as Sturman also emphasized, the meaning of social justice is neither incontrovertible nor static. Educational scholars not only disagree about the primary attributes and historical legacies of education for social justice, but they also continue to use additional terms to describe their work for positive social transformation. These educators and researchers, many of whom are associated with multicultural education, democratic education, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, postmodernism, feminisms (e.g., feminist poststructuralism), (dis)ability studies, postcolonialism, and/or queer theory, promote “radical structuralism,” “democratic citizenship,” “antiracism,” “anti-imperialism,” and “antioppression,” to name just a few.

Given the wide range of terms and projects used to describe education for social justice, this article aims to make visible and criticizable some of the underlying assumptions about social justice education and to promote more discussion about the possibilities and limitations of educational strategies in particular educational settings. In short, a critical examination of the current literature on social justice education can bring into relief the strengths and weaknesses of various educational approaches aimed at eliminating, or at least diminishing, the pervasive social inequality in U.S. institutions and the larger world.

A review of educational literature reveals that various scholars have constructed comprehensive multidimensional models of social justice education—for example, Lynch & Baker’s (2005) five-principled “equality of condition” framework and Kumashiro’s (2002) four approaches to “anti-oppressive education.”<sup>1</sup> Unlike these models, which outline criteria and methods for pursuing social justice education, this article presents a conceptual framework of social justice education that emphasizes the tensions and contradictions among various perspectives and, in turn, evaluates those perspectives. To simplify the complicated relationships appearing in the literature without denying the interconnected nature of these processes, I created a visual model of three intersecting spheres (see Figure 1). These three spheres address the relationships between the following major concepts: redistribution and recognition, macro- and micro-level processes, and knowledge and action.



[click to enlarge](#)

Figure 1: Social Justice Education Spheres

In the rest of this article, I draw on the work of educational scholars and social critics to describe each sphere and the frictions within and between spheres. I conclude by evaluating the competing claims on social justice education and proposing some ways to safeguard the meaningfulness of “social justice” in the field of education.

#### COMPETING CLAIMS FOR RECOGNITION AND REDISTRIBUTION IN EDUCATION

Fraser (1997; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) has used the terms *recognition* and *redistribution* to describe the frequent conflict in social justice debates between cultural groups’ claims for respect and dignity (recognition) and socioeconomic classes’ demands for a more equitable sharing of wealth and power (redistribution). More specifically, she argued that cultural groups frequently want a recognition of difference (e.g., calls for gay pride), whereas socioeconomic classes usually seek a reduction of difference via redistribution (e.g., labor strikes to decrease wage gaps between CEOs and employees). Before elaborating on how this clash around difference plays out in education, I explore how issues of redistribution and recognition map onto the educational field.

Calls for redistribution in education frequently include a wide range of social goods. Baker and Lynch (2005), for example, promote an economic redistribution of material goods (e.g., housing) and social services (e.g., health care); a social redistribution of access to high-quality educational institutions and the opportunities offered within them (e.g., small classes, college preparatory classes, multiaged grouping), both of which influence the possible academic, economic, and social outcomes of education for individual students; and a cultural redistribution of values and beliefs that normalize, and therefore privilege, middle-class, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, English-fluent males, at least in English-speaking countries. In sum, this broad view of redistribution includes attention to both the number and kind of social goods to which students, particularly disadvantaged students, have access (Sturman, 1997).

All these forms of redistribution overlap with issues of recognition because obstacles to obtaining economic resources, building strong social networks, and developing the cultural know-how, skills, and behavior prized by those with power and wealth often lead to a lower social status (and therefore less recognition) in the United States. More specifically, the commonly held belief that the personally responsible, hard-working individual will achieve success in life is directly linked to issues of (dis)respect in education. Given that the majority of U.S. residents believe that all students have an equal opportunity to achieve their dreams because

of our formally free, fair, and nondiscriminatory society, it makes sense to see those who do not succeed in school as responsible for their own demise (Tye, 2000). In other words, our deep-seated commitment to a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality helps to conceal the ways in which “the values, perspectives and life worlds of dominant groups permeate cultural and institutional norms” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 143).

This meritocratic ideology also serves to legitimate public policies, discourses, and daily behaviors that marginalize, exclude, and/or silence academically unsuccessful individuals and the social groups with which they identify or are assigned (e.g., racial groups). When left unchallenged, the common sense that results from oppressed group members having “their lives interpreted through the lens of the dominant” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 143) reinforces disrespect toward, and punitive measures for, individuals and groups who cannot or choose not to play by the rules of those in power. The disproportionate number of students of color in special education, particularly Black and Latino males, illustrates how this common sense plays out (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Lopez, 2003). Such misrecognition often hinders the development of individuals who “appreciate their own value, intelligence, and potential as political actors” (p. 179), which Anyon (2005) argued is critical for the creation of broad-based social movements that have the power to transform prevailing U.S. economic, social, and educational policies.

In contrast, education that seeks to respect and include all students creates multiple opportunities for teachers and students to experience diverse perspectives and people on a daily basis and to dialogue critically about difference, human rights, and social justice (Lynch & Baker, 2005). Caring relationships among the various actors involved in teaching and learning are also important because they provide the kind of mutual appreciation needed for self-affirmation (Noddings, 1984). As Lynch and Baker argued in their discussion of care, love, and solidarity work in educational contexts, “being cared for is a fundamental prerequisite for mental and emotional well-being and for human development generally” (p. 133). In short, neither recognition nor redistribution alone can make education more socially just. Students require both respect and adequate social goods to develop, pursue, and achieve their academic and life goals.

As noted above, many of the redistribution policy suggestions promote an equalizing of material resources—that is, a reduction of differences in income and wealth. However, sometimes redistribution efforts call for the disparate rather than equal sharing of social goods, creating conflict among those who associate equality with sameness. More specifically, given the deep-rooted history of social inequality in the United States, some individuals and groups require more resources than others to become productive, participating citizens in our democratic society. Affirmative action policies based on race and gender are the most prominent examples of intentionally defying the equality-as-sameness principle in the name of redistribution. Children with physical and cognitive disabilities may also require more than their “fair share” of resources. Ideally, all children should be “provided an education that fosters their autonomy, which in turn contributes to their participation as equal citizens in the public sphere and facilitates a capacity to form, revise, and pursue a conception of the good” (Reich, 2002, p. 8). Although the ultimate goal is citizenship equality, providing a disproportionate amount of resources to individuals and groups who have suffered unduly at the hands of society’s most powerful—who are frequently White and from the upper classes (Anyon, 2005; Delpit, 1995)—will be justified in specific situations that are democratically deliberated (Gutmann, 1999).

Recommendations for recognition that rely on group differences also contradict the equality-as-sameness ideal that strives to treat all people in an identical manner regardless of social group differences. The proposal that we should all receive the same treatment uses a redistributive argument to claim that all individuals must have the same rights and privileges (Young, 1990). However, dignity, not rights and privileges, is usually what is at stake in human relationships. As Lynch and Baker (2005) argued, “equal respect and recognition is not just about the liberal idea that every individual is entitled to equal rights and the privileges of citizenship in the country in which they live. . . . It is also about appreciating or accepting differences rather than merely

tolerating them” (pp. 132–133). Too often, a seeking of sameness in the name of equality does not explicitly challenge harmful group stereotypes, recognize the complexity and dynamism of individual identities, or acknowledge the ways in which various political, economic, and social forces continue to subordinate some groups of people and not others (Britzman, 1998; Fraser, 1997; Kumashiro, 2002).

However, a primary focus on individual and group differences in recognition claims also has problematic implications, particularly because differences are not stable in our transnational world, where different cultural groups continually come into contact and create hybrid cultural formations (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Friedman, 1998). When thinking about how respect relates to difference, attention to the effects of creating fixed distinctions becomes particularly important because established categorizations, such as “at-risk,” “learning disabled,” and “homosexual,” and the repeated use of them, can actually produce and justify unequal educational policies and practices (Butler, 1993; Hacking, 1986; McDermott, 1993; Swadener & Lubeck, 1995) and make it difficult for less recognized groups, such as student parents or the homeless, “to claim legitimacy as being educationally in need of support” (Sturman, 1997, p. 100).

Moreover, as many feminist scholars have argued (e.g., Gewirtz, 1998), recognition claims seeking to celebrate individual differences can ignore the human need and longing for connection. The acceptance of differences need not oppose the creation of educational communities that, although attentive to the changing and varied needs of its members, remain committed to shared principles and goals and provide their members with a sense of belonging and solidarity (Lynch & Baker, 2005). As Lance McCready (2005) argued in his discussion on building coalitions for social justice in urban schools, “Allying with other students and teachers who are broadly concerned with the ways multiple forms of oppression, such as institutional racism, poverty, and heterosexism, can make urban schools more effective and safe for all students” (p. 194).

Importantly, this allying for social justice requires continued attention to inequitable power relationships within and among educational communities. With so much attention these days to “multiple intelligences” (Gardner, 1983) and, as a result, each student’s individualized style of learning, the reality is obscured that not all knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and behaviors are equally valued in U.S. society. Whether we like it or not, the “business of education is never neutral politically. . . either in terms of what it teaches, to whom, how and when, or in terms of how it assesses attainment in particular fields” (Lynch & Baker, 2005, p. 148). Consequently, if educators want to reduce power inequities, they need to make explicit the rules of the “culture of power” to those who are not already participating in it (Delpit, 1995, p. 24). I am not suggesting that educators ignore individual learning differences, only that they also be vigilant about the functioning of unequal power relations in daily classroom interactions, educational institutions, and the larger society, a point to which I return in the next section.

To minimize social inequality during and after K–12 education and to increase students’ capacity to act in and, thus, transform the public sphere, some scholars argue that education ought to include a focus on the development of academic competencies, such as advanced literacy and numeracy skills, and an understanding by students of the “effects that their [academic] subject choices will have” (Sturman, 1997, p. 117; also Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Westheimer & Kahne, 1998). The realization of these concurrent calls for students’ increased political engagement, academic achievement, and critical understanding of the way U.S. social institutions function requires both access to a variety of social goods and respectful social interactions. Unfortunately, the dominance of beliefs in equality as sameness and competitive individualism impedes efforts to create educational communities that are both inclusive and able to address the deep-seated, systematic inequality between sociocultural groups in the United States.

To situate these redistribution and recognition tensions in the settings where they are enacted, I

now turn to the contexts, actors, and processes centrally involved in education for social justice. I address some of the “where” and “who” issues in social justice education before tackling competing arguments about the educational processes and strategies required to remedy social injustices.

## MACRO- AND MICRO-LEVEL DISTINCTIONS

Attention to the equalization of power relations in education and society at large begs consideration of who holds power and in what locations. Lynch and Baker (2005) recognize two distinct levels at which equality of power is an issue in education:

At the macro level, it concerns the institutionalized procedures for making decisions about school management, educational and curriculum planning, and policy development and implementation. At the micro level, it concerns the internal life of schools and colleges, in terms of relations between staff and students and among the staff themselves. (p. 148)

Although these two levels begin to tease apart the multiple contexts and actors involved in relations of power, a dichotomous model is restricted in its ability to address the interactions across and within the two levels, and the numerous social contexts outside formal schooling that influence education in less direct ways. McLaughlin and Talbert’s (2001) model of the “multiple and embedded settings and contexts of schooling” attempts to illustrate this complexity (p. 144). Although their embedded framework, represented by one large box holding a series of smaller boxes within it, still suggests a linear view of the world and thus does not demonstrate how different forms of power interrelate, it more adequately addresses the multiple forces and actors in education. More specifically, their model addresses parents; community organizations, services, and businesses; local, regional, and national occupational systems; and societal cultural norms. Via McLaughlin and Talbert’s framework, macroeconomic policies, educational endeavors that take place beyond school walls (e.g., community-based youth organizations; Heath & McLaughlin, 1994), and actors other than students and teachers enter the social justice education landscape.

Nevertheless, McLaughlin and Talbert’s (2001) emphasis on society as the most macro level of contexts obscures how transnational forces contribute to local, national, and global social injustices. We should not forget that “a globalizing wall-to-wall capitalism is increasingly marketizing social relations, eroding social protections, and worsening the life-chances of billions” (Fraser, 1997, p. 3) and that to dismantle the U.S. Empire, we must first acknowledge that it exists (Sleeter, 1996). Moreover, although “technological advances mean that the West can (and does) assert its hegemony over what people see and hear, how they speak, and ultimately what they think” (Ladson-Billings, 2004a, pp. 61–62), attention to the multidirectional relationships between “Western” cultures and those in the rest of the world (Bhabba, 1995) is also critical. Indeed, the circulation of cultures in a postcolonial world means that “we are all already contaminated by each other” (Appiah, 1995, p. 124). Some educational theories and curricula integrate issues of globalization into their vision of social justice (e.g., Banks, 2001; Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2004a; Lipman, 2004; Torres, 1998), but more work needs to be done.

Elaborating on society-wide, macro-level issues of social justice, Anyon (2005) made a compelling argument that educational policies, which focus on pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment without addressing the macro economy, will not resolve the systemic problems of urban education. Her claim speaks eloquently to the multiple and embedded contexts of urban education that McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) identified:

Macroeconomic policies that set the minimum wage below poverty levels, that train inner-city hopefuls for jobs that do not exist, that do not extract from the wealthy a fair share of social expenses, and that rarely enforce laws that would decrease substantially the economic discrimination of people of color, all support persistent poverty and near-poverty among

minority urban populations. This economic and social distress can prevent children from developing to their full potential. Holding two low-wage jobs to make ends meet can sap the energy of a parent and make it more difficult for her to negotiate the public systems in which her children are enmeshed. Being poor in a rich country can lead to ill-placed blame, pervasive despair, and anger. Living in poverty is to experience daily crises of food, a place to live, and ways to keep your children safe. All this can be debilitating; and can certainly dampen the enthusiasm, effort, and expectations with which urban children and their families approach K–12 education. (Anyon, p. 61)

In effect, Anyon (2005) contended that the adage, “Where there is a will, there is a way” should be reversed and restated as “Where there is a way, there is a will” (p. 45). Yet many educational theories reveal that political will does not emerge solely because of particular political, social, and economic conditions, even if such conditions are necessary for political will to become realized in socially transformative actions. At the macro level, for example, Apple (2000, 2001) drew on Gramsci’s (1971) notions of “hegemony” and “commonsense” to argue that political ideologies also influence our core ideas about democracy and citizenship. According to Apple (2000), “well-funded and creative ideological efforts by the right to form a broad-based coalition” have often successfully reduced citizens to clients and consumers and intensified a “politics based on resentment and a fear of the ‘Other’” (pp. xi–xii). In effect, by inhabiting our minds (consciously and unconsciously), dominant viewpoints shape not only macroeconomic and educational policymaking but also our willingness to accept policies that may not advance our best interests, at present or in the future.

In the realm of schooling specifically, Tye (2000) described this “coupling” of widely held beliefs and the concrete policies and practices that “actively seek to prevent change in how schools are put together and work” as the “deep structure of schooling” (p. 23). The “conventional wisdom” that sustains, produces, and reinforces “the appalling condition of impoverished inner-city and rural schools,” as well as “the vast discrepancies in resources available to school districts even within just a few miles of each other” (p. 21), includes the above-mentioned hyper-individualism that underlies talk about freedom and human rights. A “cult of efficiency” is also part of this conventional wisdom that promotes behavioristic, mechanical, and standardized notions of teaching and learning (pp. 20–21). Tye further argued that we cannot exclude the media in a model that examines the multiple contexts and settings influencing socially unjust forms of education because various news and entertainment channels manufacture, package, and sell this conventional wisdom in ways that hide the hierarchical and exclusionary social, economic, and political arrangements of schools and other social institutions.

Although understanding the influence of dominant beliefs on policymaking, educational institutions, and individual behaviors helps to explain the continuation of inequality at all levels of the educational system, such macro-level analyses do not adequately address the complex, diffuse ways that power flows within and through individual subjects who do not always behave in rational, predictable ways. Feminist and poststructuralist scholars in the field of education (e.g., Britzman, 1998, 2003; Ellsworth, 1987/1994, 1997; Popkewitz, 1998) challenge both a dualistic oppressor/oppressed model of power and the notion of power as a commodity that individuals possess and exchange. Although these scholars emphasize the ability of individual subjects and groups to disrupt oppressive policies, practices, and perspectives, they object to those educators who claim that empowered people can completely and permanently overcome unequal relations of power, “escape” from their positions in the social order, or ignore deep-seated self-interests in the name of social justice.

Furthermore, these scholars argue that exposing the subtle ways that power moves through institutions and people has significant implications for educational endeavors aimed at social justice. Although attention to “systems of ideas, distinctions, and divisions” in particular contexts and how they “produce boundaries to what is possible in thinking and acting” (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 29) does not rule out the development of broad-based social movements to

tackle economic, political, cultural, and educational injustices (Anyon, 2005), it requires that those making sweeping claims for social justice become aware of the culturally and historically specific conditions out of which such claims arose and be prepared to revise their claims as conditions continue to change (Fraser, 1997). At the micro level of classroom social interactions, a view of power that recognizes students' and teachers' dynamic identities and their desires and fears challenges a view of empowerment based on an "unproblematic, direct, reflexive, total exchange of knowledge" (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 65). As this statement acknowledges, the constraints on individual empowerment and social transformation relate directly to issues of knowledge, which I address next.

To summarize and transition to the debates about effective educational interventions for social justice, I return to a point made by Newmann in 1981. He argued that different skills and actions are required for local versus society-wide political participation because the former relies on face-to-face interactions whereas the latter, which seeks to transform "corporate organizational life," usually requires impersonal, centralized, instrumental strategies. Although technological innovations since the 1980s have changed the way that local and global communications take place, Newmann's attention to how social relations differ in diverse contexts remains salient, as does his advice: Educational scholars seeking social transformation need to use a "both/and" approach by examining and advocating for citizens' political participation at micro and macro levels within and beyond U.S. borders.

## KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION DEBATES IN EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Within the institution of schooling, policy makers, teachers, parents, and students often emphasize the intellectual development of students as the principal (or only) function of education and thus depict learning as an instrumental means to an end (e.g., good grades, educational certificates, full-time employment opportunities, and access to higher incomes; Lynch & Baker, 2005). Although Lynch and Baker asserted that both learning and work shape "access to resources" and "relations of status, power, and love, care and solidarity" in all societies, they also insisted that learning and work have intrinsic value. They therefore declared that all people have a right to "potentially satisfying work" and "engaging and satisfying learning" (pp. 133–134). The latter claim requires more than a transformation of individual classrooms because a restructuring of the division of labor is necessary to sufficiently reward caretaking professions (e.g., K–12 teaching, social work, child care). Moreover, the creation of public educational settings that encourage learning for learning's sake requires restructuring the educational system.

Lynch and Baker's (2005) argument aligns well with additional theories that advocate forms of education that contribute to both academic competencies and the democratization of social institutions and relations, within and beyond school walls (e.g., Apple, 2000; Ayers, 2004; Banks, 1995, 2001; Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Parker, 2003; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 1987, 1999; Torres, 1998; Westheimer & Kahne, 2002). These scholars suggested that education for social change requires that students and teachers actively transform social injustices, not just study them. An emphasis on action in social justice education, then, challenges the notion that education is limited to developing knowledge, academic or otherwise. However, scholars disagree about the relationship between knowledge and action.

Banks (1995), for example, argued that teaching students how knowledge is produced, particularly how the various historical, political, social, and economic viewpoints of the knowers and the known influence that production (Ladson-Billings, 2004a), can lead to action. He therefore seeks a restructuring of curricula that enables "students to view concepts, issues, events, and themes from the perspectives of various ethnic and cultural groups" and in turn to use this knowledge to "make decisions on important personal, social, and civic problems and take actions to solve them" (pp. 12–13). King's (2004) notion of "deciphering knowledge" also highlights the development of particular knowledge to evoke social change; however, her theory calls for a critical examination of existing relationships of power and privilege and a subsequent

reinvention of cultural rules that challenge the current social order (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995). Unlike these scholars, Anyon (2005) emphasized action first and foremost, highlighting the need for “personal and social processes that assist people in producing public contention” (p. 131). Although she acknowledged that the development of “critical consciousness. . . provides a crucial base for understanding,” Anyon insisted that raising awareness “through information, readings, and discussion does not by itself induce them to participate in transgressive politics. . . . To activate people to create or join a social movement, it is important to actually involve them in protest activity of some kind” (p. 141).

Parker (2003) provided perhaps the most measured approach to the knowledge/action debate by emphasizing both “political engagement” and “democratic enlightenment” in his model of democratic education. For Parker, democratic enlightenment represents the “moral-cognitive knowledge, norms, values, and principles” needed to guide political engagement, which refers to the political behaviors in the public sphere that are essential to building and sustaining a democracy (p. 34). Central to Parker’s ideal of enlightened democratic engagement is the development of students’ ability to deliberate problems collectively before making decisions that affect the larger public. Drawing on Gutmann’s (1999) theory of democratic education, he underscored that such deliberation “demonstrates a good faith effort to find mutually acceptable terms of social cooperation” (in Parker, p. 12).

In their study of democratic education programs, Westheimer and Kahne (2002) illustrated how knowledge and action often become separated in the playing out of these educational theories. They observed the creation of three types of “good” citizens in schools: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizens. Because education for personal responsibility emphasizes individual character over collective responsibility in the public sphere and band-aid solutions to complex, systemic problems, Westheimer and Kahne promoted a combination of the participatory and justice-oriented educational paradigms, which advocate participation in “the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national levels” and the critical assessment and collective transformation of unjust social, political, and economic structures, respectively (p. 8). Nevertheless, they concluded that most students in democratic education programs either learned to participate uncritically in the public sphere or developed a critical understanding of social problems without learning how to act on their findings.

Westheimer and Kahne’s (2002) attention to the unintentional separation of action from knowledge relates to Anyon’s (2005) concern about the limited role of critical consciousness in large-scale movements for social change, and Ellsworth’s (1997) concern about the influence of fears and desires on the transformation of individual actors. Although these two scholars focused on different levels of the educational system, they both questioned the ability of knowledge to evoke action. Whereas Anyon promoted students’ increased involvement in political action, Ellsworth (1987/1994) challenged the assumption that classroom dialogue leads to empowerment and mutual understanding. More specifically, Ellsworth questioned the possibility and desirability of using critical dialogue and self-reflection to achieve both a “reflective, ‘full understanding’ between teachers and students” and an increased acceptance of self and Others (p. 78).<sup>2</sup> The scholarship that Ellsworth critiqued resembles that of Parker (2003), with its emphasis on “enlightenment,” and frequently drew on Freire’s (1970/1994) notion of “conscientizacao” to argue that educators should aim for two goals: (1) teaching students how to examine critically and in sustained ways the relationships among, and consequences of, White supremacy, patriarchy, and advanced capitalism, and (2) translating this critique into transformative political action (e.g., Giroux, 1997; Kanpol & McLaren, 1995; McCarthy, 1994; Shor, 1992; Sleeter, 1996; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995).

Ultimately, Ellsworth (1997) proposed an instructional style that recognizes the limited ability and willingness of students *and* teachers to expose and subsequently address their blind spots. Calling it “performative pedagogy,” she resisted the dominant practice of giving students a “single, fixed, locatable, decidable position from which to respond” by suggesting that teachers “manipulate the students into a position of taking [political and social] responsibility for the

meanings and knowledge they construct” (pp. 157, 160). This “manipulation” requires that a teacher draw on the “unique elements in each classroom” to create “space for change, invention, [and] spontaneous shifts” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). In effect, rather than adding new information about Others to students’ understanding of self, teachers push students to go beyond the realm of cognitive “knowing” to “perform” “new readings, new meanings, and associations with different emotions” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 63).

This notion of performative teaching and learning challenges the distinction between knowledge and action because it involves a change in disposition toward—not just a deeper, more critical understanding of, or greater participation in—the world and self. Drawing on psychoanalytic theories, Britzman (1998) clarified this point by explaining the difference between “learning about” and “learning from”: “Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance . . . between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight” (p. 115). When an educator tries to invoke insight by challenging deeply internalized beliefs, he may very well provoke learners’ defenses and resistances as they seek to maintain a certain level of comfort and safety. When educators are similarly challenged to confront their “actions, advocacies, and thoughts” (p. 119), these same resistances to insight frequently arise. Thus, “learning from” demands “both a patience with the incommensurability of understanding and an interest in tolerating the ways meaning becomes, for the learner, fractured, broken, and lost” (p. 188), “exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness, and consolation” (p. 129). Absent from many social justice educational endeavors is the notion that “learning from” involves internal conflict and the mourning of deep-seated attachments, such as investments in institutionalized racism, that are realized (rather than understood) as harmful to ourselves and others.<sup>3</sup> Yet, attention to Britzman’s argument seems critical to a vision of education that diminishes suffering in the world.

Sticking with a “both/and” perspective, I would argue that the “how” of social justice education requires a critical examination of institutionalized beliefs, policies, and practices and attention to individual ideas, deeds, fears, and desires. As Westheimer and Kahne’s (2002) work shows, neither uncritical action nor critical knowledge alone leads to “enlightened democratic engagement” (Parker, 2003). Moreover, as Ellsworth’s (1997), Britzman’s (1998), and Kumashiro’s (2002) scholarship demonstrates, student empowerment and unlearning oppressive beliefs and practices require more than knowing how to think critically or act politically because fears and desires—and the performance of them—influence what we are willing to learn and do.

Yet, in recognizing the complexity of how we educate for social justice, we cannot lose sight of what is at stake: people’s suffering. Sleeter (1996) rightly argued that although we “cannot reduce relations of oppression to class, race, or gender, nor can one simply add these in a linear, additive fashion,” we also cannot allow the “complex, crisscrossing relations of difference” in our daily lives to obscure or overshadow the very real inequalities of power and wealth between different cultural groups (p. 47). In Ladson-Billings’s (2004a) terms, “Sometimes what is pushing up against an individual is racism or sexism, or class discrimination pure and simple. An argument about one’s complex identity does not alleviate that oppression” (p. 61). Moreover, as scholars like Delpit (1995) noted, many students need to learn the rules of the culture of power and develop the skills to play by those rules—namely, advanced literacy and numeracy skills but also the capacity to deliberate and negotiate issues in “reasonable” ways—if they are going to be able to challenge the status quo.

## EVALUATING CONFLICTING CLAIMS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Of course, I am not saying researchers should not try to answer questions. The problem is *ending* with answers—being unaware of or uninterested in the ethical questions generated or avoided. The “answers” to research questions do not end things but offer new circumstances for exploring the persistent question of what

is good for people.

—Karl Hostetler, “What Is ‘Good’ Education Research?” (2005)

Taking seriously Hostetler’s (2005) call for educational research that is committed to people’s well-being, I have tried to avoid putting forth easy solutions to complex problems in my multisphered theory of social justice education. The section on macro- and micro-level distinctions, specifically, attempted to show that the possibilities for and limitations of social justice education often depend on the circumstances of program implementation. Moreover, as Kumashiro (2002) wisely asserted, every purported answer to our problems “makes possible some antioppressive changes while closing off others” (p. 9). Evaluating proposals for social justice education thus requires careful attention to the potential reverberations of these plans on the people and settings directly and indirectly implicated in them. Nevertheless, making some general assessments about the issues raised thus far is both possible and desirable.

When considering the tensions between problems of redistribution and recognition, we need to recognize the extent to which neoliberal economic and neoconservative social principles have seeped into our psyches and thus masked the need for both macro-economic redistributive policies (Anyon, 2005; Apple, 2000; Fraser, 1997; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; O’Connor, 2001) and an increased recognition of marginalized cultural groups that goes beyond tolerating individual differences (Britzman, 1998; Cornbleth & Waugh, 1995). Two anecdotal examples from a recent high school leadership program for social justice (see North, 2007) illustrate these points.

First, during an informal conversation among a handful of the high school student participants, the students referred to an unpopular peer as “off-brand.” When individual consumption practices and materialism seep into every aspect of our daily lives, including determinations of insiders and outsiders in our cultural groups (Gee, 1996), it seems that we desperately need to reevaluate our vision of democratic citizenship and community membership, a point to which I return below. The second example involves a White upper-middle-class high school student who spoke in an interview about “accepting” her poor peers. She used the language of tolerance to say, “I will not negatively prejudge you because of your poverty.” This consideration of poverty as something to tolerate rather than eradicate suggests the extent to which structural issues of income distribution, class, and racial inequality have fallen off the radar screen (O’Connor, 2001).

Although economic redistribution desperately needs to get back on today’s political agenda, the dominance of a capitalistic doctrine in the United States means that distributive notions permeate our language, leading to the neglect of critical recognition and respect issues (Young, 1990). We may rarely discuss “sharply rising material inequality” (Fraser, 1997, p. 3; O’Connor, 2001) in our “ownership society,” but we commonly describe who has what rights and privileges, as if we can possess and trade rights and privileges like a pair of jeans. The dominant language of markets, free trade, and goods means that we frequently overlook the quality of relationships between and among individual human beings and sociocultural communities, a point that feminist educational scholars like Noddings (1984) have been making for decades.

Because social transformation, particularly at the micro level of everyday interactions, is not a purely rationalist, tactical enterprise, procedural notions of social justice that ignore “the *nature* and *ordering* of social relations” are inadequate (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 471). Indeed, scholars like Honneth (Fraser & Honneth, 2003) have gone so far as to argue that humiliation and disrespect lie at the heart of social injustice. If, as Nhat Hanh (1992) asserted, words and actions that “open the door to liberation” require a deep recognition—a “witnessing”—of “the physical, material, and psychological suffering of others” (pp. 81–83), then redistributing rights and resources via strategic organizing will not be enough to achieve social justice. In fact, if peace and justice emerge from a person’s ability to suffer with another, whether it be a nearby neighbor, displaced victim of Hurricane Katrina, undocumented worker, or Iraqi child, then many of the prescriptive remedies advocated by curricular and pedagogical researchers and developers will not realize

their stated goals.

In 2006, issues of maldistribution and misrecognition are playing out in troubling ways at the macro levels of the nation and world. A burgeoning number of U.S. high school students, particularly in the nation's largest districts, where the majority of students are African American and Latino, are not graduating in 4 years (Kozol, 2005). The increase in mandated high-stakes standardized testing is contributing to larger student retention and drop-out rates (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2005) and threatens to reduce education to the technical transfer of basic literacy and numeracy skills, particularly among the most impoverished youth (McNeil, 2000), of whom there were 12.1 million according to the 2002 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Many school districts in the United States are rapidly resegregating (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Lee, 2002), and over 3.5 million English language learner youth are enrolled in U.S. schools (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) as the government wrangles over the passage of punitive immigration laws. In addition, a rapid rise in homeschooling (an estimated 1.9–2.4 million students were homeschooled in the United States during the 2005–2006 school year; Ray, 2005), as well as its deregulation, has the potential to undermine significantly the ability of public education to “bring children into social and intellectual contact with other children of diverse backgrounds” (Reich, 2002, p. 172). These trends do not bode well for a society that has not adequately addressed the suffering of its own poor and oppressed peoples—as evinced painfully by both the shameful pre-Hurricane Katrina preparations and posthurricane fallout in New Orleans—let alone “the effects of our imperialism on the poor and oppressed peoples around the world” (West, 2004, p. 19). The systematicity of these developments demands that we take seriously Anyon's (2005) call for broad-based political campaigns that are capable of effecting large-scale social structural change.

However, the transformation of macroeconomic and educational policies alone, even when “the world of communities, families, and students” fight for them and they encompass the wide-ranging areas of “jobs, wages, taxes, public transportation, housing, and investment,” is unlikely to lead to the “economic justice and real, long-term school reform in America's cities” that Anyon (2005) seeks (pp. 199–200). First, to reargue the above-mentioned point, we cannot lose sight of the link between injustice and suffering. Tactical organizing without a concomitant attention to ethics—particularly the way we treat people in our daily social interactions—will not automatically address the injustices of humiliation and disrespect. Compassion, care, and responsiveness must become central to antioppressive and democratic educational efforts (Kerr, cited in Parker, 2003; Young, 1990).

Moreover, singular efforts, such as a “new social movement” (Anyon, 2005), foreclose other possibilities for challenging oppression, which may or may not exceed the theories and methods with which we are already familiar (Kumashiro, 2002). As the foregoing knowledge/action debates reveal, multiple pathways are necessary to create politically engaged, critically aware citizens. When some students are struggling to find food and shelter while others are debating the merits of this advanced placement class over that one, we can hardly expect that a single approach to social justice education will be effective for all students in all contexts. We can conclude that those students with the most privileges need to do more than “learn about” (Britzman, 1998) other people's suffering if they are going to effect real social change; those who are experiencing numerous injustices on a daily basis also need more from education than test preparation or access to “progressive” curricula and teaching techniques if they are to develop the skills, knowledge, and commitment needed to tackle those injustices (Anyon, 2005; Delpit, 1995; FairTest, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; McNeil, 2000).

When seeking to remedy social injustices, we also must look at who is constructing educational theories, policies, curricula, and programs. Too often, university-based scholars make proposals for change that do not relate to the daily struggles of the K–12 educators trying to teach and learn for social justice (Singer & Pezone, 2000). A frustrated dissertator's response to a faculty member's assertion that the teachers under study were not acting as “change agents” effectively spoke to this point:

I know the critical theorists and post moderns think that teachers should be doing all manner of things, but most teachers are just trying to survive the school day. The changes that these teachers made in their curriculum, in their pedagogy, and in their interactions with students and their families represent real change and may be all that is possible in REAL classrooms. (Ladson-Billings, 2004b, p. xiv)

More dialogue and collaboration between policy makers, scholars, and practitioners seems necessary if the field of education is going to continue to claim that it is working for social justice. Additionally, the university, like schools, needs to democratize its social relations and recognize the efforts and commitment of all educational actors.

Returning to Hostetler's (2005) point that the search for "what is good for people" is ongoing, let me close with Griffiths's (1998) appeal to a "guarded optimism," "an optimism that it is worth struggling for justice, knowledge, and understanding while accepting that there will be no final victory" (pp. 76–77). To avoid the substitution of one oppressive discourse for another, we need to continue questioning, theorizing, and expanding our knowledge claims about, and actions for, social justice. Just as important, if not more so, we need to examine critically the consequences of our good intentions, practices, and policies to ensure that they do more good than harm to ourselves, others, and the surrounding environment. Not losing sight of Anyon's (2005) argument, we also need to create real-life conditions that can sustain this work. Such labor is admittedly exhausting, painful, and not always rewarding in the short term. But, as activist and socialist Helen Keller once said, "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved."

### *Notes*

1. The five principles in Lynch and Baker's (2005) "equality of condition" model are (1) equal resources, including time, high-quality health care, a clean environment, and economic, cultural, and social capital; (2) equal respect and recognition, involving both the acceptance and appreciation of difference and the ability to engage in critical dialogue with others; (3) love, care, and solidarity work, with its attention to teachers and students as emotional beings; (4) the reduction of power inequalities "as much as possible"; and (5) the right both to potentially satisfying work and learning. Kumashiro's (2002) four approaches to antioppressive education are education for the Other, which seeks to make schools helpful, safe spaces for all students; education about the Other, which strives "to enrich all students' understanding of different ways of being" (p. 42); education that is critical of privileging and Othering, which emphasizes "a critical awareness of oppressive structures and ideologies, and strategies to change them" (p. 45); and education that changes students and society, which "suggests curricular and pedagogical reforms that help to address the complexities of antioppressive education by developing such notions as partiality, resistance, crisis, and unknowability as they apply to teaching and learning" (p. 68).

2. I am borrowing Kevin Kumashiro's (2002) definition of "Other" in this article. He wrote, "I use the term Other to refer to those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e., Othered) in society, including students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically 'masculine,' and students who are or are perceived to be queer," and added, "I believe [my analysis] extends to other forms of oppression and to other marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities, students with limited or no English-language proficiency, and students from non-Christian religious backgrounds" (p. 32).

3. See Berlak and Moyenda (2001) for an account of antiracist teaching that addresses mourning and suffering as central to education for social justice.

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