

A collaborative self-study into teacher education and social justice

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Abstract

This paper is a co-constructed reflection of the research process and outcomes of a collaborative self-study that examined the personal beliefs and professional theories and practices of a group of New Zealand teacher educators committed to social justice. The authors represent three participants and one doctoral student researcher/participant. Self-study of teacher education involves teacher educators reflecting on their professional practice for the purpose of improving their practice and the practice of others (Hamilton, 1998). The research participants submitted their beliefs, theories and practices to critical analysis and reflection. It was clear by the end of the research that the group had provided support and professional development for the participants, although they had not explicitly considered it as such at the onset of the project. We invite others to form similar collaborative, self-study groups as a means to investigate their teaching practice and implement change.

Introduction (Susan)

The term ‘social justice’ refers to a contested and contentious concept (Troyna & Vincent, 1995). Sharon Gewirtz (1998) found “very little *explicit* discussion of what social justice means or ought to mean” (p. 469, original emphasis). As Fazal Rizvi (1998) has noted:

the immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning- it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavours (p. 47).

Participants attending a British Educational Research Association seminar highlighted their concerns that some terms commonly used as synonyms for the term social justice are in fact “dangerous” (Dunkwu & Griffiths, 2001, p. 11) because they could imply a monocultural or other limiting position. Yet, a number of teacher educators and teacher education programmes have an explicit commitment to preparing preservice teachers to teach for social justice (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 1991; Regenspan, 2002). It is becoming commonplace to find studies of teacher educators researching the beliefs and practices of their preservice teaching students in light of issues of diversity and social justice (e.g. Barry & Jechner, 1995; Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000). It is far less common, however, to find studies of teacher educators making explicit and interrogating their own beliefs and practices (see Richardson, 1996; Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998).

This paper is a co-constructed reflection of the research process and outcomes of doctoral thesis research in the New Zealand context. It represents the voices of one research group who took part in a larger doctoral research project. The doctoral research sought to understand the teacher educator participants’ personal beliefs and professional practices around issues of social justice. During the course of the research the question arose: How are the participating teacher educators themselves supported in the endeavour of preparing preservice teachers for diverse classrooms in New Zealand?

The collaborative self-study created an opportunity for collegial support and understanding, as well as an opportunity to understand the process of collegial support, as the participants shared their beliefs and practices regarding issues of social justice. In his discussion on the importance of connecting teacher development to social justice issues, Kenneth Zeichner (1993) wrote:

The definition of teacher development as an activity to be pursued by individual teachers greatly limits the potential for teacher growth. The challenge and support gained through social interaction is important in helping us to clarify what we believe and to gaining the courage to pursue our beliefs (p. 12).

bell hooks (1994) emphasised “it is crucial that [as] critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices [we] talk to one another, [and] collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (p. 129). Carmen Montecinos and her colleagues noted that “collaborative self-study is a promising professional development activity for creating the communities of practitioners necessary to sustain the transformation of teacher education programs” (Montecinos et al., 2002, p. 782).

Framing the research (Susan)

This paper features one aspect of a larger doctoral study: *Teacher education and social justice*. The findings of the larger study described the difficulties of articulating a conception of social justice (e.g. Sandretto, 2003), the tensions in implementing one’s beliefs in one’s professional practice, and proposed a theory of social justice that may prove useful for teacher educators.

The overall doctoral study sought to use a collaborative research process as it examined the topic of social justice. The collaborative self-study research design was influenced by the work of Patti Lather (1991) who has advocated for a consideration of “research as praxis” based in reciprocity. The collaborative research design involved the research participants in the co-construction of meaning throughout the research process and, incidentally, gave rise to the development of this paper. Participants were invited to have a say in each stage of the research process including the data gathering, data analysis, and contributing to the theorising of the results. Participants took part in the negotiation and re-negotiation of the research findings, allowing them the opportunity to add and delete from it as they saw fit. Saville Kushner and Nigel Norris (1980-81) wrote of the importance of collaborative research designs: “it may only be through sharing meaning-productions that we can develop significant understandings of schooling and education” (p. 35).

The collaborative self-study was informed by feminist, poststructural theoretical frameworks. These frameworks, in general, focus on issues of cultural/historical/political/social context(s), power, subjectivity, language and include attention to social change (e.g. Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). bell hooks (1981) defined feminism broadly as “a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels- sex, race and class, to name a few- and a commitment to reorganizing... society, so that the self-development of people can take precedence” (pp. 194-195). In conducting research on/for social justice, a poststructural lens “ does not allow us to place the blame elsewhere, outside our own daily activities, but demands that we examine our own complicity in the maintenance of social injustice” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484).

Ken Zeichner (1999) described the development of self-study research as “probably the single most significant development ever in the field of teacher education research” (p. 8). Self-study of teacher education involves teacher educators reflecting on their own practice for the purpose of

improving their own practice and the practice of others (Hamilton, 1998). In the self-study reported in this paper, the participants were interested in understanding each others' conceptions of social justice and how (or if) their professional practice enacted their beliefs. Tom Russell (2002) explained: "Those of us who are acutely aware of the potential for contradiction between the content and the process of our teaching and who wish to minimize such contradictions seem to be drawn to the self-study of teacher education" (p. 3).

Our collaborative self-study was grounded in critical reflection. Neville Hatton and David Smith (1995) defined critical reflection as "making judgements about whether professional activity is equitable, just and respectful of persons or not... [and it] locates any analysis of personal action within wider socio-historical and politico-cultural contexts" (p. 35). The collaborative research design took into account the argument made by Christopher Day (1999) that it may be difficult for teachers to critically reflect on their practice in isolation.

Self-study research encompasses a number of different methods (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003). In this collaborative self-study, potential participants were invited via an open e-mail to the School of Education faculty. Those who expressed interest were given a cover letter and information sheet describing the research. A group meeting was held for all potential participants who had expressed interest to be able to speak with the researcher/participant and ask questions. After signing consent forms, each participant completed an initial individual interview. The audio-taped interviews, which were transcribed verbatim by the researcher, gave each participant (including the researcher/participant) an opportunity to explore his/her personal and professional experience and articulate conception(s) of social justice. Each participant was given an opportunity to edit the transcript, and then the transcript was shared with the entire group to inform the group conversations.

Due to geographical distance, the researcher/participant lives on the South Island and the participants in this research group live on the North Island, group conversations took place within a private electronic mail list-serve which allowed participants to send documents and post comments and/or queries to all participants involved in the research group. In addition, three participants from this group elected to develop and distribute student questionnaires to examine student perceptions of their teaching practice. The results of these questionnaires were shared with the group and spurred further reflection and discussion. The research participants and the researcher/participant were involved in critical analysis and reflection as they read each other's interview transcripts, student survey results and responded in the group forum. The participants' reflections, posted to the entire group, then provided more material for further analysis and reflection. This process has been described as "spiral discourse" by Russell Bishop (1996). In addition, the researcher/participant also used critical discourse analysis to identify themes and categorise the narratives (Fairclough, 1992; Luke, 1995/6). Critical discourse analysis can be a powerful tool in research on/for social justice (Kamler, Comber, & Cook, 1997; Mills, 1997).

The following sections constitute reflections and recommendations from the research participants. Due to space constraints, detailed reflections on the research process from the researcher/participant are not included here (see thesis for details). Catherine highlights some tensions that can arise in trying to conduct research on/for social justice. Pamela shares questions raised for her by her participation in the research group. And Barbara highlights the insights she gained from using a student questionnaire to reflect on her teaching practice. We conclude by

proposing that collaborative self-study holds a great deal of promise for teacher educators seeking to support themselves and each other in their work as teacher educators committed to social justice.

Reflections on participating in a group based on social justice (Catherine)

Social justice-based decisions and acts underlie the setting up of, participation in, and reporting of projects like this one. There are tensions and unsettling contradictions to consider right from the outset and all the way through. Researchers such as Marilyn Cochran-Smith et al. (1999) and Nancy Zollers et al. (2000) have also explored the tensions that can develop in a collaborative self-study focussed on issues of social justice. This section briefly examines issues of social justice that arose during the course of the research journey including participant selection, anonymity, time commitment and reciprocity. It also highlights some of the outcomes of our work together.

For the researcher, one of the first decisions, after deciding to be a participant her or himself, is the nature of the process of selection of participants. Should it be by open invitation, or by targeted selection of people who are likely to be interested or who appear to operate with a 'social justice mindset'? Immediately some tensions arise. With an open invitation, there may be concerns for potential participants about who else might become part of the 'group' and be privy to some of their innermost thoughts, beliefs and motivations. I felt this tension when I first saw the invitation to participate in this project. I was interested because of my beliefs in social justice in education (and other areas) and because I was interested to find out how these beliefs can be made explicit in one's work without appearing to 'preach', radicalise or recruit (another of those tensions inherent in exploring social justice issues). I was aware of some of my colleagues who had volunteered, and was more than happy to work with these people. However, I was concerned that there might be others who chose to participate for less altruistic reasons, such as a desire to gain access to personal information of other participants.

A related tension is that of anonymity. Making the decisions to use our real names rather than pseudonyms in writing this paper, and giving Susan permission to use our names in her work, are acts of social justice. Using our real names could be viewed as a conscious act of owning what we said and striving to enact our beliefs in our practice. There is a tension inherent in these decisions too. Any one of us could have felt pressure to agree to this because others had.

Another of the issues is that of people joining the project and then dropping out. There is a real tension between the wish to participate versus the time commitment involved in a collaborative research project. There are also potential feelings of 'letting the project down' if you find you have to pull out. A researcher working in this area should be cognisant of this tension and recognise that people have multiple commitments and limited time.

Reciprocity is an issue in any research, the notion of giving something back, usually to one's participants (e.g. Lather, 1991). In this case, as a participant, the reciprocity question involved having feelings that I ought to participate to support a project that is about something I believe in. I also had feelings that it might not attract many participants because it is may be not located at what is seen by some as the 'glamour' end of the research spectrum. Perhaps this could be termed 'sticking up for the research underdog,' a social justice act.

Among the outcomes from this collaborative self-study for myself and my colleagues in the research group at the University of Waikato, participation in the project has brought the notion of social justice to the forefront in our thinking and has made us more aware of the need to explicitly articulate issues of social justice in our work. Our participation was also an act of 'up fronting' questions of social justice in our institution. Participation has created a professional development opportunity for us. It has created the opportunity to talk with our own colleagues, in this case, quite coincidentally, colleagues in the same university department, with a focus, a motivation and a commitment that might not be sustained outside of a formalised research project. Interestingly we did not think to apply to any of our school or university professional development funds for assistance with the project. This is perhaps another instance of our own unwitting complicity in maintaining the invisibility of social justice issues, evidence that we still do not have social justice at the forefront of our minds all the time.

Taking the decision to report some of the outcomes of this project, and to have the paper go through the conference's refereeing process places us as participants in a potentially vulnerable position. It takes one of those 'acts of faith' or bravery. What will colleagues out there think of us, those people whom we do not know or whose beliefs about social justice are unknown to us? The decision to report in such a forum could be seen as preaching, radicalising or recruiting. Well, in a sense it is, we hope that by 'outing' or 'up-fronting' what we've done, in a forum like this, we might interest others in doing something similar. That is, we hope to have an impact for change, to sow the seeds of further acts of social justice.

Reflections on personal and professional benefits (Pamela)

The motivation to participate in a project that sought to collaboratively reflect on our practice as educators committed to social justice was clear for me. If I could develop practice that creates more just outcomes for our students and our tamariki (children) in schools and if I could ensure that I was living the practices that I teach about, then this would be worthwhile for me. The fruits of my involvement have not been as I expected. The project has encouraged me to keep my eyes open to new ways of seeing. It has also created an intensity about questioning who I am, what it is that I am trying to teach, about my approach to teaching, and my commitment to social justice.

During our on-line conversation I was inspired by Nieto's (2000) idea of teaching as a life-long 'journey of transformation'. I continue to wonder how as a teacher educator I might live such a 'journey of transformation' with my students. If as teachers, we teach out of who we are (Palmer, 1998), then am I willing to be and live the pathway of integrity that I expect of my students? The desire to be open to the kind of transformation that would make this possible, requires the deepest levels of interrogation of the inner self, the motives and intentions, the thoughts and actions that speak to us of who we are (Palmer, 1998). It is a notion of reflection that means tapping into a more unarticulated intuitive awareness (Claxton, 2000; Loughran, 2002a; Schön, 1983). According to Norsworthy (2002), working in this way requires educators to make this intuitive process explicit and the degree to which there is a match between one's actions and espoused theory becomes important. This kind of inner honesty encourages me to let go of familiar grounds and lands, to set sail into new territory to begin to look and see differently. But am I really willing to do this, or do I just talk myself into thinking that I am doing it? Does this notion of reflection, this place of honesty with the self assist us in the process of reflection, does it help us communicate with others, does it make a difference to our practice?

Our group conversations inspired me to continue to be true to my own social justice aspirations by helping me to keep social justice to the front of my teaching and learning. There was always the question, though, is this enough? Social justice must be more than inner interrogation, talking and writing about it. It must be about doing it. I wondered, does a commitment to creating space to reflect collaboratively with a social justice kaupapa (agenda) ensure socially just outcomes in my teaching? Is becoming consciously aware of socially just practice and sharing thinking about these matters going to impact on my practice? It will continue to be an on-going challenge to have congruence between my beliefs and practices. For example, this semester I sought to offer my honest intentions in my work with students who I perceived as communicating some racist perspectives in class. Cochran-Smith et. al. (1999, p. 246) asked, “is it actually possible to conduct research on social justice and, and at the same time, hold honest, open, useful discussions about it?” There was always the question of how far can I take my challenges to these people, and when it is time to let things ‘be’.

How might one contribute to the creation of a more equitable, respectful, caring world for everyone? Is it possible through contributing to a project such as this? Reflection that contributes to a new way of seeing has been a beginning for me in this project. I have experienced some professional and personal encouragement in the truth of Fullan’s (1993) words, “the more one takes the risk to express personal purpose, the more kindred spirits one will find” (p. 14). But has this fostered an integrity of word, thought and action? It has certainly fostered the evolution of questions which step themselves out a pathway of enquiry and hopefully socially just action.

Reflections on student understanding (Barbara)

Being involved in a collaborative self-study like this one, has been both cathartic and salutary. Cathartic, by heightening my awareness of the concept of social justice and at the same time providing a unique opportunity to reflect on my professional practice as a teacher educator. Yet salutary, by baring that professional practice to both colleagues and students and finding a mismatch between rhetoric and practice.

Following the interview about my practice, I did a follow-up survey with some of the student teachers in a teacher education programme I coordinate. By way of a brief questionnaire¹, the survey was designed to see if there was a correspondence between lecturer perceptions of teaching ‘social justice’ articulated in the interview, and student views. Thirty-two third year B.Tch (primary) students were invited to participate and twelve completed the survey.

The feedback from those 20 students who chose not to respond to the questionnaire provided a reality check. I should have been alerted to the conceptual dilemma by the quantity of emails asking “What do you actually mean by the term ‘social justice’?” In retrospect I realised I had not directly used the phrase social justice with this group of student teachers. I had been so intent on utilising a non-aggressive approach as my way of trying to lure them into an empathetic mindset towards the concept of social justice that I had neglected to actually identify the concept by name. I may have been inadvertently unfair in my lack of specificity when trying to help the students develop a greater understanding of fairness.

In comparison, the survey data showed that the twelve student teachers who responded to the questionnaire had a competent understanding of social justice, centred around the 'trilogy' of

ethnicity, gender and social class. They attributed their awareness to the consistency of messages conveyed in the teacher education programme overall, and positively confirmed my role in the process. Even more convincingly, astute responses to the question “What continues to puzzle you with respect to issues of social justice in schools and education?” convinced me of the students’ integrity towards the concept. For example, one student replied “How something so blindingly obvious as social justice for all is still, to a large extent, not being given sufficient push for it to become a ‘normal’ part of our educational lives?”

At first reading, the feedback affirmed my practice of trying to affect attitudes and values through role-modelling and the use of subtle teaching strategies and activities, rather than through a more didactic approach. It reiterated my perception of myself as a teacher engaged in ‘extended sociopolitical action’ (Groundwater-Smith, Cusworth, & Dobbins, 1998); confirmed that I was effectively promoting the university’s commitment to the Treaty of Waitangi by developing student understanding of their obligations to this partnership; and demonstrated the students were becoming ‘critically reflexive’ (Pennycook, 2001). Euphorically, I even reflected on my practice as being ‘transformative’ (Nieto, 2000; Zeichner, 1994), rather than just ‘transactional’ (Parry, 2003).

It was only when I critically reflected on why more than half of the class had not respond to the survey that I realised the mismatch between rhetoric and practice. While it was a timely reminder that I needed to make the implicit explicit, it also provided the impetus to re-commit to the notions of continuous learning or ‘extended professionalism’ (Hoyle, 1975) and the “continuous reflexive integration of thought, desire and action sometimes known as ‘praxis’” (Simon, 1992, p. 49).

Concluding thoughts (All)

Change means growth, and growth can be painful. But we sharpen self-definition by exposing the self in work and struggle together with those whom we define as different from ourselves, although sharing the same goals (Lorde, 1984, p. 123).

The self-study of teacher education practices has an important role to play in the continuous improvement of teacher education (e.g. Dinkelman, 2003; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000). As Mary Lynn Hamilton and Stefinee Pinnegar (2000) proposed: “If we do not study the impact of our teaching [as teacher educators] on the thinking and practice of our [preservice teaching] students, how can we improve the experience of children in classrooms?” (p. 239). In addition, self-study research represents an “attempt to speak to individuals, groups, programs, and institutions as they seek to illustrate tensions, dilemmas, and concerns about practice and programs” (Loughran, 2002b, p. 244).

We want to emphasise that this paper does not signal the end of us striving, both individually and collectively, to continue to interrogate our beliefs and practices as we teach for social justice. The benefits that the group members were able to articulate can provide encouragement to others to begin a journey of self-study into their own professional practice:

it’s inspiring, it... brings energy for me in my work and a kind of on-going commitment to just keep working towards [social justice] (Pamela); [the project has] made me consciously think about [social justice issues] (Catherine); and, now [social justice is] in the forefront of my mind, rather than being in the background (Barbara).

In the end, articulating one's social justice views is a matter of trust and honesty, about confidence in one's personal relationships, and a little bit about bravery. One has to have faith in the motivations of others, in their willingness to commit time and in the power of the social justice learnings that are inherent in the process. “[S]elf-study of teacher education practices has rapidly generated a new landscape for professional dialogue among teacher educators” (Russell, 2002, p. 9). We invite you to join in the conversation.

Note

¹ Questionnaire:

Q 1 : What does the term social justice (SJ) mean to you?

Q 2 – How do you define SJ in an educational context?

Q 3 – How has Barb Whyte helped your understanding of SJ issues?

Q4 – How do SJ issues impact on your role as a teacher?

Q5 – What continues to puzzle you with respect to issues of SJ in schools and education?

Q6 – Any further comments?

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