



# SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATORS: A NOTE ON YOUR AUTHORITY AND POWER

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by Dr. Darrick Smith

Many teachers that pursue a mission of social justice struggle with the question of authority in their classroom. After all, the idea of having Authority over someone can feel largely contradictory to a teacher that seeks to spread a sense of fairness inequality amongst the student population. Many of

us recall our first moments as activists against injustice as childhood memories of standing up against an authority figure that was in our eyes mis-using their power. As educators that seek to inspire Young people to follow their hearts in situations in which they are facing a mis-use or abuse of power. Negotiating our role as powerful figures in classroom spaces can feel a bit tricky. Further complicating things is the role that schools have played in the history of oppression and colonialism.

For many of us who have studied critical theory and the ills of capitalist institutions, we may understand the role of schools as part of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, or Althusser's idea of the school replacing the church as the most formidable of ideological state apparatuses. Through a critical lens, we tend to view schools as mechanisms intended to convince the populace to accept the stratified nature of our society and the subjugated position of the working class.

At least 1 in 3 adolescent students in Canada experience bullying each year<sup>1</sup>. In the U.S., a national survey showed that 20.2% of students reported being bullied on school property and 15.5% reported being bullied electronically during the 12 months before the survey<sup>2</sup>. In the U.S. reports have shown that nearly half of students may experience some form of sexual harassment<sup>3</sup>.

As educators, we have come to understand the soul-stripping, culture-destroying capacity of schools through examining critical authors such as bell hooks, Jeff Duncan-Andrade, Gloria Ladson Billings, Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren and many others who examine the destructive nature of schools through the neocolonial manifestations of classical attempts to "civilize" or "improve" the marginalized of our society. At the core of these ideas sits perhaps the most pivotal professional role in the area of human development in a democratic society-The educator. For our purposes as we understand

schools as communities in which people can work together to create an environment in which humans can thrive as healthy community members, we'll extend our idea of the educator past that of the classroom teacher and include administrators, counselors, and supporting staff alike. All of these positions serve as teachers. And as such all of these positions must struggle with the tension of having an interest in developing free and empowered human beings while serving as an authority figure within a historically repressive system that often functions to maintain a stratified social structure. For those of us that pursue social justice, this dynamic weighs heavy on our minds each day as we try and straddle the line between developing free minds and keeping our jobs. But this issue does not need to be one of great

1. Molcho M., Craig W., Due P., Pickett W., Harel-fisch Y., Overpeck, M., and HBSC Bullying Writing Group. Cross-national time trends in bullying behaviour 1994-2006: findings from Europe and North America. *International Journal of Public Health*. 2009, 54 (S2): 225-234
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2016). Understanding school violence: Fact sheet. Atlanta, CA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
3. Hill, C., Kearl, H., & American Association of University Women. (2011). *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School* (No. 978-1-8799-2241-9). American Association of University Women.

conflict an inner turmoil. The idea of authority can inspire a different conceptual relationship If we understand authority not as an impetus for control and repression but rather a responsibility to guide, and in doing so, maintain boundaries, sustain a sense of safety, and model community-minded decision-making.

Social Justice is not a behaviour or a statement, but rather a condition. A condition that many of us seek to establish that constitutes a vaguely described

ideal of a fair and humanizing political, economic, and social order. However, our calls for the establishment of such a condition, when clarified, can describe the various “destinations” for our journey, but not the pathways to such ideal conditions. This makes sense given the situational nature of resistance and the myriad of spaces and contexts that we might locate as the foci of our endeavors. But as educators, we don’t have to be vague in our understanding of the pathways to social justice because we have an advantage in the realm of clarifying our situation, space, and context. As opposed to other professionals in this world, we work in spaces specifically designed to influence and shape the human consciousness. We are put in position in which we have the ability to mold the content, processes, physical environment, ambitions, and relational boundaries for human beings. In other words: As educators, we are the caretakers and executors for most potent dynamic in the struggle for social change- learning. Even so, we find ourselves seeking to define the core of our social change work and activism through efforts that exist outside of our schools. This is not exclusively so. In our workplaces we mistakenly view student matriculation rates, graduation rates, and social service projects as our social justice work in schools. Many of us will rightfully include narratives, generative themes, and the exploration of conventionally taboo realities into our curriculum. And while these practices can certainly impact how students understand their world, they do not explicitly challenge students to “be” different as they walk through the world in the now. They do not challenge students to stop bullying one another or humiliating one another in-person or online. Content can shift understanding, but it does not in itself establish or maintain expectations and boundaries as to how one must speak, move, or listen for the purposes of liberation.

When we teach students about the realities of injustice and successes of their communities they can learn valuable lessons about the beauty and pain from which they came while also understanding the expansive possibilities for change. But where and when are they expected to manifest the lessons from this material? Where, when, and how do we challenge them to “act like they know”?

Often times it is easier for us to confuse the behaviours of an authoritarian mindset with the context of authority. As social justice educators, the distinctions between these two must be clear, but more so, a clarity must be established as to both the necessity for the embracing of one's power as an educator and ethical foundations that frame its use. While, as Paulo Freire warned, it is essential that we do not become oppressors in pursuit of liberation, it is also important that we don't set our expectations of our students in the areas of effort, behaviour academic performance, and healthy relationships to the low depths of those that profile, stereotype, marginalize, and target them. This balancing act between controlling and guidance can only be achieved if we are clear as to our responsibility as it is connected to a particular vision. Authority without humility and a purpose of community-empowerment becomes corrupt. For so many educators it is the very power of their position that they value and it is disconnected from any larger vision that guides their daily manifestation of their authority.

If we seek to establish a condition of justice in an unjust social order, we are engaging ourselves in a conflict. One cannot enter a conflict with only facts and knowledge. As educators, we could consider these elements as essential tools that our students need for the battles ahead. But the missing link in many of our educational spaces for social justice is an emphasis on the behaviours and attitudes that challenge oppression and provide context for the wielding of such tools.

The authority of the educator allows for them to make decisions and set expectations for students that create boundaries for how the student is expected to "be" in that space- how students are expected to talk and move and be with each other. This represents the core of the school's culture. Culture is incredibly important because it is the culture of the school that serves as the greatest instructor. As culture is defined as artifacts, language, rituals, and beliefs, it is important to understand that a huge portion of the schooling experience involves exchanges and interactions with people in the building, as well as the landscape of the campus. Who sets the boundaries for how people

are treated, who contextualize his meaning for all of these interactions that are occurring as part of the school environment? Who must maintain these ideas around meaning, purpose, human value throughout this school year for the duration of a child's development? As educators it is our responsibility to develop and help maintain an atmosphere in which students are learning how to value themselves as peers, the adults who serve them, and the exercise of learning for the purposes of personal and communal development.

When you find yourself questioning how you can make more of a dent in our world of poverty, struggle and repression, look to the opportunities you have to guide students in their daily behaviour to manifest the beautiful side of humanity. This cannot be done by passively hoping for change or softening expectations, but through clear communication and the consistent implementation of fair boundaries and support systems. As educators, we must embrace our power for the purposes of humanization. And as we acknowledge that dehumanization not only occurs systemically or in faraway places, but right in front of us in schools, we must stand in our responsibility as guides in our learning spaces in the interest of developing students beyond what they know, but what they do each day- now.

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