

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Working in schools—where the fundamental truths and demands and possibilities of teaching are obscure and diminished and opaque, and where the powerful ethical core of our efforts is systematically defaced and erased—requires a re-engagement with the large purposes of teaching. (Ayers, 1991, p. xxiii)

In our previous issue, “Troubled Times: Education in a Time of War and Disaster” (Volume 4, Issue 2), the contributors described efforts to understand how tragedies of violence, sickness, and destruction have affected schooling in today’s society. This issue, “Teaching for Social Justice,” continues this conversation from a different angle. This issue asks: how can we, as educators, confront the social injustices entangled in these tragedies? The articles included tackle a wide range of injustices: racism, classism, homophobia, sexism, ablism, and environmental injustice. Though they are diverse, they share a theme of *searching*, and, as Ayers states in the above quote, struggling for “re-engagement,” in the meanings, ways of teaching, learning, and speaking about social justice in education.

The “searches” in this issue fall into two categories: investigations into how teachers *become* social justice practitioners, and analyses and arguments regarding the *discourses* surrounding teaching for social justice. The concept of “becoming” is addressed from many perspectives. In our Featured Articles section, Bree Picower and Anne Burns Thomas share stories of new teachers struggling to build a sense of identity that includes a core belief in social justice. In “[Teacher Education Does Not End at Graduation: Supporting New Teachers to Teach for Social Justice](#),” Picower describes the activities of a small group of new teachers, led by Picower as a teacher educator/facilitator, to critically examine their practice and efforts at teaching for social justice. This research study reveals the issues and challenges that new teachers face in taking a stand for social justice, and also provides a model for “re-engaging” teachers in social justice work. Another story of becoming, Burns Thomas’ study, “[New Visions for Social Justice in Teaching](#),” provides a unique model for supporting new teachers want to teach for social justice. Burns Thomas tells the story of four new teachers (herself included) who are involved in a progressive teacher network. The teachers challenge the network to be innovative in supporting their needs and bringing their vision of justice to teaching. The result is a collaborative effort between new and experienced teachers to celebrate children and their work through a highly organized and child-centered grand event, “The Celebration of Children’s Work.” Ila Deshmukh Towery’s article, “[Fostering Gender Equity in Schools Through Reflective Professional Development: A Critical Analysis of Teacher Perspectives](#),” straddles both the theme of ‘becoming’ social justice educators and of investigating discourse arguments. Towery’s study describes the National SEED Project on Inclusive Curriculum’s Gender Equity in Model Sites (GEMS) initiative, an in-service professional development program aimed at disrupting gender bias. Teachers involved in the program met to analyze and discuss the ways they approach issues of gender in the classroom. Towery finds that these discussions revealed an unconscious “gender blinding” among the teachers that could be unmasked through discussion and reflection. She argues that initiatives such as SEED/GEMS should continue to be supported.

Two featured articles further develop the “search for discourses” concept. First, David Lee Carlson’s feature article, “[Examining the Embedded Assumption of Teaching for Social Justice in a Secondary Urban School: A Case Study](#),” argues that social justice in education has multiple interpretations, and that it is important to continue the dialog between scholars on its meanings in order to strengthen the connections between theory and practice. Through a case study of one teacher, Carlson uses Critical Discourse Analysis to show how the teachers’ deeply embedded assumptions about social justice shapes her lessons and responses to students. In our Special Feature for this issue, entitled “[The Identity of Education](#),” Kwame Anthony Appiah’s challenges listeners to engage in conversation about education from multiple perspectives and to recognize that though what we think, say and believe may be very different, there are often common threads woven through these conversations which we must continue to engage and discuss.

Two reflective articles about becoming appear in our Notes from the Field section. Chris Soto and first-year Teach for America teacher Ayan Chatterjee discuss how their teacher certification program worked to support new teachers’ efforts to teach for social justice, in “[Supporting Social Justice in the classroom of New Urban Teachers](#).” From a more personal perspective Mathangi Subramanian critically examines her experiences as a teacher and identifies three “myths” to which she had unconsciously subscribed in “[One Teacher’s Path to Progressive Pedagogy](#).” In “[Resisting Imitative Habits: “Looking up” to urban schools](#),” Rebecca Skulnick meshes the theme of becoming with an inquiry on discourse. Through a retrospective account of her experiences instructing pre-service teachers and a review of literature on conceptualizations of “difference,” Skulnick argues that teacher education programs should give pre-service teachers the opportunity to have experience teaching in urban schools and give them analytic tools and opportunities to critically examine their identities and understandings of their experiences.

Our Commentary section includes articles on both the concept of “becoming” and of “discourses” in social justice and education. Two articles which challenge us to re-frame the current discourses on social justice in education are comments on teaching about disability and environmental justice. In “Truly Inclusive? Disability and Deaf Experience in Multicultural Education,” Jesus Nieto and John R. Johnson claim that although issues of injustice affecting the disabled and deaf community are defined as components of multicultural education, an analysis of multicultural literature and textbooks reveals that the disabled and deaf are rarely discussed. Nieto and Johnson argue that this community deserves more attention and also provide suggestions for educators interested in incorporating the topic of disability and deafness into their curriculum. In “Environmental Justice Education: Empowering Students to Become Environmental Citizens,” Jeane Peloso describes several model environmental justice education programs, and argues that this perspective should be incorporated into more curriculum and educational programming. The third article in the commentary section, “The Presence of Homophobia in Fieldwork: Preparing Pre-service Teachers to Challenge Heterosexism and Homophobia,” also challenges readers to re-think how we talk about and teach social justice, and further, it tells the story of Stacy Geiger, a pre-service teacher, becoming aware of homophobia in schools. Jeane Cooperhaver-Johnson (with contributions from Stacy Geiger) argues that issues of gender--specifically, homophobia--are not discussed enough by schools of education and teacher educators. Cooperhaver-Johnson includes a helpful resource list of ideas for ways to discuss issues of homophobia in classrooms.

In the Book Review Section, first-year teacher Sarah Adams describes how she used concepts from “Drama Activities for K-6 Students: Creating Classroom Spirit Review” (Polksy, Schindel & Tabone, 2006) in her classroom to help students understand the concepts of peace, tolerance, and affirmation. Jessica Kim’s review of Thea Abu El-Haj’s book, “Elusive Justice: Wrestling with difference and educational equity in everyday practice” is a portrait of Abu El Haj’s critical examination of the varying concepts of difference between two schools and how these perceptions shape social justice education. In her review of Norman Newberg’s “The Gift of Education,” Janell Smith describes how urban students’ assumptions and beliefs about education determined their success in the Say YES college fund program.

We invite you to re-engage with the topic of social justice in teaching through reading these articles, and through the actions and conversations they may inspire you to participate in.

Kira Baker-Doyle (Student Editor)
Philip Buckley (Web Editor)
Kathy Schultz (Faculty Advisor)

Ayers, W. (1998). Foreword—Popular Education: Teaching for Social Justice. In Ayers, W., Hunt, J.A., and Quinn, T., *Teaching for Social Justice*. New York, Teachers College Press, xvii-xxvi.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2025 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-5-issue-1-spring-2007/introduction-teaching-social-justice>