

## SUPPORTING NEW EDUCATORS TO TEACH FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE CRITICAL INQUIRY PROJECT MODEL

**Bree Picower**

### **Abstract:**

*Urban public schools and their teachers are under siege. From increased standardization, privatization and testing to a growing number of students whose needs are not being met by schools, urban public school teachers face a daunting task. Without a space in which to critically examine their daily experiences within schools, many well-intentioned teachers find themselves unwittingly reproducing existing social inequities. The Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project (CIP) at New York University was a two-year program piloted to create a space to support preservice teachers as they transition into their first year of teaching in New York City public schools. This group allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and share their apprehensions, struggles and excitement about teaching with equity centered in their classrooms. Participants used the lens of social justice, applying the frameworks of equity, agency, cultural relevance and critical literacy (Lipman, 2004), to their practice in order to improve the educational experiences and achievement of their students. The following article provides details about the project's goals, activities, outcomes, challenges and its implications for teacher education.*

Urban public schools and their teachers are under siege. From increased standardization, privatization and testing to a growing number of students whose needs are not being met by schools and society at large, urban public school teachers face a daunting task. Without a space in which to critically examine their daily experiences within schools, many well-intentioned teachers find themselves unwittingly reproducing existing social inequities. The Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project (CIP) at New York University was a two-year program piloted to create a space to support preservice teachers as they transition into their first year of teaching in New York City public schools. This group allowed participants to reflect on their experiences and share their apprehensions, struggles and excitement about teaching with equity centered in their classrooms. Participants used the lens of social justice, applying the frameworks of equity, agency, cultural relevance and critical literacy (Lipman, 2004), to their practice in order to improve the educational experiences and achievement of their students. As a model of induction that schools of education can adopt, the critical inquiry group provided ongoing support to the participants post-graduation from their teacher education program. What made this particular model of induction atypical was that it moved beyond just a focus on “surviving” the first year to supporting the educators to focus on issues of equity, race and social justice. The following article provides details about the project's goals, activities, outcomes, challenges and its implications for teacher education. The study's findings indicate that the support, motivation and accountability that the Social Justice Critical Inquiry Group provided the participants with kept them focused on the goals with which they entered the profession: to truly make a difference in the lives of their students.

### Issues Facing Urban Schools and Teachers

The problems facing urban public schools are a mystery to few. Growing poverty and social stratification along racial and class lines have severely impacted the access that low income African American and Latino students have not only to quality education but also to decent jobs, housing, and health care (Anyon, 2005, Noguera, 2004, Lipman, 2004). According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2003), 44% of children attending schools in inner cities of large and midsize metropolitan areas are living in poverty. Students who attend schools that have higher levels of poverty are more likely to have lower test scores, higher absenteeism and suspension rates, and less qualified teachers (Obidah & Howard, 2005). Many teachers either avoid teaching in these schools, transfer out of them as soon as possible or drop out of the profession altogether. In high poverty schools, an average of one-fifth of the entire teaching force changes each fall (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). In New York City, more than 2000 certified teachers choose to leave the profession rather than be assigned to a high poverty school (Grace, 2001 in Obidah & Howard, 2005). New teachers are more likely to leave the profession than their seasoned counterparts; 14 percent of new teachers leave by the end of their first year, 33 percent leave within three years; and almost 50 percent leave in five years (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

### Supporting New Teachers

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) suggests that one strategy for improving urban teacher retention rates is to prepare teachers for the challenges they will face in urban schools, but they caution that this support must be continued and ongoing (Duncan-Andrade, 2004). Quality mentoring, ongoing professional development, and having access to a network of teachers are strategies that the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) advocates as part of a comprehensive teacher induction. While these broad reports recommend a variety of strategies, what is visibly absent is an explicit focus on the

strengths and needs of low-income students of color in order to support new teachers in urban schools. Research on teacher attrition also shows that a key group of educators who leave the profession are “service oriented” and “idealistic” teachers (Miech & Elder, 1996). These are teachers who enter the profession with the hopes of “making a difference” and contributing to society. However, the constraints they face within public schools makes it difficult for them to realize their idealism, leading to frustration, a lack of efficacy and attrition. Many schools of education encourage thinking about teaching as a way to make a difference, but little support is available during induction to support these “idealistic” teachers in their pursuit of social change.

Duncan-Andrade contends that critical teacher inquiry groups can be used as a vehicle to support teachers to provide social justice education (SJE) for urban students. He facilitates a group of teachers in Los Angeles to “work to powerfully address the needs of their students while they are engaged in their own professional growth” (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p. 340). Teachers dialogue about the issues their students face, link these issues to relevant literature, and develop curriculum based on the discussions. Duncan-Andrade relies on a Frierean framework to link dialogue, reflection and practice. In this framework, teachers move through stages of being ‘critical’, beginning with a growing awareness of oppressive conditions and their causes. This awareness develops into an ongoing desire to transform these conditions through action that is continually reflected upon- a process defined by Freire as praxis (Duncan-Andrade, 2004, p. 341).

## Social Justice Education (SJE)

Lately, the term and concept of “social justice” in education has come under fire (Labaree, 2004; Stern, 2006). Rather than allowing this term to be abandoned or co-opted, it is critical for those of us who see education as a vehicle for liberation from various forms of oppression to be clear about what we mean when we say Social Justice Education. Within the context of this project, SJE “pays attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change” (Hackman, 2005). Lipman (2004) frames four imperatives that create a vision of social justice education.

1. Equity: all children should have equal opportunities and rights, but special efforts must be made to overcome past injustice and inequalities of race, gender, and class.
2. Agency: Education should allow students to take action to change their personal situations and social injustice. It should support youth to be active participants in the challenges facing them, and arm them with the tools they will need to survive and thrive in the face of multiple forms of oppression.
3. Cultural Relevance: Teachers should use students’ cultures to support academic success. They should work to develop sociopolitical consciousness and challenge unjust conditions.
4. Critical Literacy: Schools should be a place in which students can examine knowledge and their own life experiences critically. The curriculum should be grounded in students’ experiences and challenge official knowledge that distorts the histories of marginalized groups. (Lipman, p. 17).

These four domains, along with Duncan-Andrade’s model provided a framework for the for the Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project at New York University (NYU) that is discussed in the remainder of this article.

## Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project at New York University (CIP)

Teacher education has a moral responsibility to continue to support our alumni after graduation as they struggle to stay afloat in urban schools. The Social Justice Critical Inquiry Project was an attempt to support preservice teachers through their student teaching placement and as they transitioned into their first year of teaching in urban schools. It was specifically geared to support teachers committed to social justice education, providing a form of induction specifically geared to combat the attrition of “idealistic”, service-oriented teachers. By giving participants a space to share their classroom experiences related to issues of social justice, the project attempted to help these new educators to build on the strengths and address the needs of their urban students. Focusing on the actual daily experiences of participants, first as student teachers and later as first-year teachers, and linking these experiences with critical literature that examined the sociopolitical context of schooling, participants reflected and took action to meet the needs of their students within a network of supportive peers. The project attempted to help them negotiate their contexts in order to realize their vision of teaching as social change within the constraints of under-resourced urban schools.

## Formation of Group

All of the participants in CIP were students in a 14-month Masters level childhood teacher education program and were enrolled in multicultural education course that I taught in the summer of 2004. Through the course, the students explored their own racial identity and class privilege, their assumptions about communities different from their own and their developing understandings of

the role of the teacher in multicultural schools. Following the course, many of the students continued to email me seeking support on issues that they were concerned about in their student teaching placements that related to the social justice themes of the course. Through these queries, I realized that many of these students were struggling to address issues of inequity and injustice in their student teaching placements and felt they had no space in which to discuss these challenges. In the course, we had started on a journey of how to become multicultural educators, and the students now found themselves student teaching in settings often antithetical to the goals set forth in the class. I realized that they would need guidance and support to continue to have these discussions, and that they must not be receiving this if they felt the need to email me with their concerns. With this in mind, I asked my former students if they would be interested in participating in an informal support group to discuss issues that were arising in their classrooms as it related to the themes of the multicultural course. I received many interested responses that spoke to the need for this group. For example, one student wrote:

I have already had a weird moment in my placement: in a self-portrait activity, the Black girls in my class drew themselves as blue-eyed blondes. What's a teacher to do? I did my best, but I would love to have a forum to kick things like this around as they come up. (Beth, email, 9/18/2004)

This comment points to the need for teachers who care about issues of race, culture and justice to have a space to learn how to address these issues as they arise in their classrooms.

With an initial turnout of twelve that settled into a consistent multiracial group of six women, we met every two to three weeks for 2-hour evening sessions starting in the fall of 2004. Students received no academic credit or other incentives for participating; it was purely voluntary. These initial sessions met informally, either in an on-campus lounge or participants' homes and we took turns bringing food. My role was to facilitate and share resources based on the issues that they, themselves, raised for discussion. In the spring of 2005, these students graduated from the program, and expressed a desire to continue to meet and develop their practice as social justice educators. Four of the original six participants accepted positions in New York City public schools and asked if we could continue to meet after they graduated, explaining that they would take positions in more challenging schools if they had the support of CIP throughout their first year of teaching. All of these participants lived and taught in New York City and were in their twenties. Heather, a Black woman, was a first grade teacher in the Bronx. Amanda, a white woman, taught third grade in the Bronx. Kelly, a Hmong woman from the Midwest, taught in a third grade Cooperative Team Teaching special education classroom in Brooklyn. Sara, a white woman from New Mexico, was a fourth grade teacher in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The multicultural nature of the group was often commented upon and appreciated by group members.

During the 2005-6 school year, the Critical Inquiry Group met biweekly at New York University. During the meetings, we engaged in discussions about the issues that the participants faced in their classrooms. These conversations focused on concerns about individual students, mandated curriculum, assessments, administration, parents etc. The issues were linked to literature that critically examines education, such as readings by Freire, Kozol, Anyon, Ladson-Billings, Delpit and others. These readings were engaged to better understand the issues facing the teachers, rather than as isolated intellectual exercises. Through the growing awareness that this process developed, the group developed curriculum for students that reflected the four imperatives of SJE: equity, agency, cultural relevance and critical literacy (Lipman, 2004).

I served as both the facilitator and researcher of the group. I am a white teacher educator who formerly taught public elementary school in New York City and Oakland, California. I am an Assistant Professor and Post Doctoral Fellow at New York University, and recent graduate of the doctoral program in Teaching and Learning. At the time of the project, I was an advanced doctoral student and adjunct professor, also at NYU. I am also a leading member of the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), a grassroots group of teachers that organize on issues of educational justice. It is with the lens of teacher activism and the understanding of educators of agents of change that I approach all of my work, and which shaped my goals and vision for the Critical Inquiry Project. As the facilitator/ researcher of CIP, I served as the participants' mentor, arranged logistics, located relevant readings, facilitated most meetings, observed some classrooms, and documented the process and experiences of participants within the project. My role often served to keep the group connected to our purpose of social justice education when internal or external challenges or barriers took us off track.

## Research Methodology

In order to understand the role of CIP in the lives of the participants, I engaged in a qualitative research project. The data collected included field notes, video and audio taped transcripts of the CIP sessions, written reflections from the remaining four participants collected every six months throughout the two year project, email correspondence, classroom observations of one participant and videotaped lessons from two participants, the transcript of a presentation the group gave at a conference, lesson and unit plans and student work. Grounded theory method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen for this study because it allowed the data to inform the analysis, rather than forcing the data into *a priori* categories. That my framework was informed by my data, rather than by the literature or preconceived hypotheses, facilitated trustworthiness. I read through all transcriptions,

mining for themes and initial categories; my conceptual framework emerged from the themes, categories, and patterns found in the data, thereby providing a richer understanding of the phenomena. Glaser and Strauss (1967) contend that this approach ensures that the theory fits the phenomenon studied, that it does not include any forced elements, and that it is most usable because it comes directly from where those in the area are most familiar. An initial draft of my findings was shared with the participants, and their feedback was incorporated into this article.

### Defining Social Justice Education as a Group

At the inception of the group, when the participants were still student teaching, we collectively set goals. We did this again at the onset of the second year of the project when they began their first year of teaching. Additionally, we collectively developed a structure, timeline and norms for the group. Part of the purpose of this was so the participants could develop the leadership skills that they will need to take on more responsibility within their own school sites. One of the first things we did as a group was to develop our own working definition of "social justice". During several initial sessions, we watched videotapes of master teachers, read first hand accounts of teaching and examined research articles on the topic. As we engaged in these activities, we kept an ongoing list, included below, of what social justice education was (field notes, 2005).

Social Justice Education is:

- not underestimating what students are capable of,
- not using age as an excuse to address hard topics,
- teaching the "real deal"/whole picture for the purpose of empowerment,
- respecting students and their culture even if it is different from your own,
- reflecting students culture in everything you do in your classroom,
- action should be part of the curriculum,
- teachers must educate themselves before teaching topics to students,
- effective and candid self critical reflection,
- curriculum should be constructivist, exploratory, experiential, inquiry based,
- recognizing that pedagogy matters (how you teach is as important as what you teach,
- integrating social justice into core subjects,
- using curriculum that is relevant to students lives,
- recognizing that teaching extends beyond the classroom,
- being responsible in each of your multiple roles,
- treating children seriously,
- teaching is more than the here and now - it is about trying to make a better society

This understanding of what social justice education is served as a guide for us as we moved into the sessions that focused on

developing social studies units that reflected these criteria.

## Group Sessions

During the first year of the project, when the participants were student teaching, we met every three weeks. However, in the second year, the teachers decided to meet every two weeks. Kelly describes the transition:

So during our first year of meeting together we decided that we would start meeting once every two weeks because we wanted to keep in close contact and we really wanted to provide that strong support, where we just felt it was harder if we weren't seeing each other as often. So, we started meeting bi-weekly and at our meetings we would discuss a lot of the different articles that were written by veteran teachers, and then we just had open conversations about the things that we were now experiencing as teachers of our own classrooms and talking about, "what can I do? This student talked about this. I don't know what to do? Can you help me figure out what I need to do about it?" So that was also one way that we were able to support one another in terms of social justice (Kelly, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06).

Each session began with us checking in on what was happening in their classrooms and ordering take out dinners. The participants took turns facilitating discussions about the readings in order to give them more ownership over the project and process. The first month was spent on developing our collective definition of SJE, thereafter, we spent the bulk of each session focusing on one teacher's classroom with the goal of developing curriculum. We spent a great deal of time talking about the personal challenges that each teacher was facing in terms of students, administration, curriculum, adjusting to their environment, resources, etc.; this gave the group a better sense of the context in which they were teaching. We also revisited the curriculum design process that had been a part of the original course that they took with me. Using backwards design and thematic planning (Wiggins and McGighe, 2000), we developed units based on their individual contexts and who their students were. For example, several students in Heather's first grade classroom were homeless, living in shelters in the South Bronx. Because of this, she wanted to do something within the context of the curriculum about how to create a sense of security and warmth outside of the traditional sense of home. We decided to link this goal with a science unit she was teaching about earthworms, first focusing on what kind of habitat earthworms need to survive and be comfortable, and then moving out from that to think about what do children need to feel safe and comfortable. Students wrote and drew about who the people are in their lives that help them to feel safe and secure, even if they don't have the ideal "habitat". She also read several read aloud books that challenged stereotypes about homelessness.

Each subsequent meeting began with a check in about the units we had collectively planned; the teachers gave verbal updates, as well as also brought in student work or materials that they had used. We also integrated video taped lessons of the participants teaching parts of these units. The groups discussed what we were seeing and how they incorporated the criteria of social justice education in their lessons.

## Role of Group

In preparing for a presentation that the group was doing for a conference on supporting new educators, the participants reflected on what they felt they had received from being a part of the project. This fell into three categories: 1) ongoing support, 2) curriculum development and 3) forward movement. The rest of this section will focus on how they defined these categories and how it impacted their teaching.

## Support

Upon analysis, it appears the group developed three areas of support: Support to better respond to social injustice; Support as new teachers, and Support from being part of an organized group. In terms of being able to better respond to social injustice, a recurring theme the participants raised throughout the two years was that of feeling like a "deer in the headlights" when they heard remarks that ran counter to their sense of social justice. Typically, this was in the context of other teachers' comments, but participants also experienced this with their students' statements as well. Amanda reflected on how CIP supported her ability to begin to respond:

In addition to strengthening my ability to organize curriculum, our meetings help us to present the frustrations we all face, from responding to administrative demands to problems that arise with our students. In the few months that I have been teaching, I have already encountered issues of prejudices and discrimination in my classroom. I have a student that has been targeted and harassed by his classmates for being “gay”. I have overheard students’ misconceptions about September 11th (Iraq blew up the World Trade Center). As a new teacher, I have hesitated to confront these issues as they occur. Not knowing if it is “appropriate” to respond, or realizing that I should say something, but not knowing what to say, has kept me from taking advantage of these “teachable moments”. Having a forum to discuss these important incidents has helped me to recognize the need to seize these teaching opportunities as well as to receive advice for how I might choose to handle similar situations in the future. With this support, I feel better prepared to address and act upon comments raised in the classroom, especially when I am put on the spot (Amanda, written reflection, 11/15/05).

Amanda’s reflection highlights an important role of groups like CIP. Even with a professed interest in issues of equity and social justice, many teachers do not have the ability to respond to issues of injustice when they are confronted by them. This ability to respond is a teachable skill that is often overlooked in teacher education programs. The support of like-minded teachers can help teachers develop this skill within the context of their classroom. Sara added to this issue of being “selectively mute” and how the group has supported her to find her voice:

Thinking back to the multicultural course we took at NYU together, I recall several discussions outside of class in which I was selectively mute. I did not participate in much of the heated dialogue despite some pretty outrageous comments from classmates. I often walked away from discussions about race and culture with some element of disgust or disappointment in colleagues or classmates, but with little ability or willingness to confront these individuals or challenge their beliefs (Sara, session transcript, 9/27/05).

This feeling, described by Sara, is probably familiar to most people whose core values do not fit mainstream beliefs about equity, racism and classism. Learning how, when and in what way to confront and participate in these difficult discussions became a major theme in the first year of the project. As part of CIP, Sara used a teaching exercise from Rethinking Schools to engage her fourth graders in putting Columbus “on trial” for crimes against the Taino people. She discussed how, now that she is a part of CIP, she feels more willing to engage these kinds of discussions with both students and colleagues.

Maybe I was tired or nervous about how the trial had gone, or maybe I felt prepared with the planning, research and discussions from CIP and so I decided to engage in a relatively uncomfortable discussion with this teacher about why and how the Europeans acted towards Native Americans. I think meeting with this group of extraordinary and motivated women has reminded me that some of these daily confrontations are well worth confronting. Because we engage in difficult dialogue with each other as well as sort through daily issues that arise in our classrooms and analyze complicated readings I feel better equipped with resources, information and personal support to take on some difficult conversations that I might otherwise have avoided (Sara, written reflection, 3/27/06).

Sara reiterates the need for people who have a commitment to shared issues to have a forum in which to practice, discuss and feel safe to express their fears and apprehension about taking on tough issues in their schools. CIP provided the space and skill development to help the participants develop the tools they need to act as advocates outside of the group setting.

Another area of support that the group provided the participants was in adjusting to their new life as beginning teachers, particularly teachers with a political perspective. Kelly described how difficult it was to be unfamiliar in a school and not know

where to go for support. She felt that, in contrast, the group provided her with a sense of safety. "I guess by having like-minded people who are having the same experiences and feeling like there is someone that you can trust, and in that way we were very strong supports for one another (Kelly, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06)." The participants often expressed a discomfort with "outing" themselves as social justice educators within the contexts of their schools. This is discussed further in the section on challenges, but it is mentioned here to talk about the way in which the group supported them to continue to develop their critical pedagogy. The support they provided each other served to remind them that they were not the only people who shared their perspective on educational justice, and who were also experiencing the same challenges for each other. While Kelly focused on the role the group played to support each other, Sara discussed how the existence of the group legitimized her stance to her administration. At one point in the year, Sara published an article online at TeachersUnite.org, a local teacher activist website about a unit she developed as part of CIP, and how this resulted in further legitimacy by her principal:

I think being involved in the group from NYU that was being supervised gave credibility to what I was doing. There were times where people would be questioning what I was doing and it was like, I wasn't like this crazy newbie who was just being radical, there was a background to it and I do think that even simple things like that article—I emailed that article to my principal and all of a sudden I had more support and I think it was because something was being published and I don't think I would have published something if I wasn't part of this group. So there's an underlying credibility, especially as first year teachers that wouldn't have been there had we not been an organized group (Sara, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06).

Shortly after receiving the email, Sara's principal made an announcement in the school staff meeting about Sara's accomplishment and encouraged other teachers to talk to her about her project. For beginning teachers, alone in schools where their values are either not shared, or not immediately visible, CIP provided the participants with the support to sustain their commitment to social justice education despite pressure to abandon it. In cases like Sara, it helped to define her and her teaching in a way that gained the support of administration and helped to establish her as a leader within the school.

## Curriculum Development

The most tangible results of CIP were the curricular projects and resources that the teachers developed. Each teacher implemented at least one social justice social studies unit, gathered and shared resources, and collaborated with each other and teachers at their schools to infuse the mainstream curriculum with social justice themes. For much of the duration of the project, we focused on individual teachers curricular projects because each teacher was teaching a different grade. However, at a certain point, the teachers realized that despite their varied grade levels, they were all using the same language arts program that focused on the same literacy genre during particular months for all grades. So we began to use sessions to pool resources. For example, in March, all the teachers were required to teach poetry as part of the mandated curriculum. Sara explained how the group helped them to teach poetry in a richer way than they would have been able to do individually. She identified the challenge of trying to find resources, and how the group assisted:

So the meetings were also a forum for us to bring together what we had at our schools. We basically made poetry books ourselves by pulling together all of our poetry collections, and as a result we were able to teach poetry, which was mandated, in a culturally relevant way. I was using poetry in my classroom as a medium that people who have been oppressed throughout history have found a voice. So, we looked up poems from enslaved people, poems from the Harlem Renaissance. I don't think I would have had the resources on my own to have covered such a span of history and from the perspectives of so many ethnic groups. For whatever reasons I had a lot of poetry books in my room from African American poets, but really no other ethnic groups, and Kelly was able to bring others to the table, she had a few really beautiful books by Dominican poets. There were some books brought in by Asian poets, so because we came together we were essentially able to make our own books, so then it was like the work was done for us---all we had to do was make the copies---it was done, which as simple as it sounds I think as first year teachers you just can't underestimate how having the resource organized for you can help (Sara, session transcript, 5/8/06).

The power of their pooled resources allowed the teachers to provide a richer and more culturally relevant curriculum to their students. They also shared these resources with other teachers at their school sites, establishing themselves as leaders and advocates for multicultural education within their individual schools and increasing the amount of students who have access to social justice education.

Teaching in schools that have mandated literacy and math programs, but do little to encourage the teaching of social studies, the group served as a reminder and support to the participants to continue to keep these subjects on the table. Amanda shared:

I receive monthly curriculum calendars for reading, writing, and math, with suggested lessons to do each day. Even as I graciously accept these guides, I have begun to look at the “suggested curriculum” with a more critical eye. I am particularly proud of the work we (CIP) are doing in transforming the established curriculum. The content areas—social studies and science, are not deemed very important at my school. Reading, writing, math and TEST PREP(!) take precedent over these subjects in most classrooms...With an eye on the standards, I am planning on extending the mandated “study of countries” to explore such issues as colonization and its effects on indigenous populations (Amanda, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06).

As discussed further in the section on challenges, simply teaching social studies in the contexts in which these teachers found themselves is in and of itself a political act. Having a group that provided support in how to do this in a way that was meaningful for the teachers and their students was a form of professional development to which the teachers typically did not have access. For the most part, they were handed scripted guides that told them what to teach and when to teach it. CIP provided them with space to think critically about who their students were and what type of curriculum and instruction would be relevant and important for them. Having an opportunity to develop their own curriculum, contextualized around their actual classroom and students, is an important skill of teaching that is being pushed out of the profession. Sara shared how the collaboration and curriculum development enhanced the mandated curriculum by pushing the participants to look past excuses and work together to create curriculum. She believes that this collaboration and transformation resulted in the high achievement of her students, many of whom were special education students. She credits her students’ high math and language arts test scores to the method of transforming mandated curriculum with social justice teaching that she learned in CIP. “I think that was a huge result of us not allowing those requisites of standardized testing and certain formulated curriculum to be a barrier, but coming together and saying, we’re going to overcome that and still adhere to the values that we went into teaching for in the first place. “ Her test scores and students’ behavior provided her with evidence to believe that this kind of teaching is effective, “not just because of the obvious reasons for a better, greater society, but it creates kids that can think and can surpass the mandated curriculum (Sara, session transcript, 5/8/06).”

In addition to sharing resources, each participant developed a curricular unit that focused on social studies. Amanda described the projects the women developed based on their shared definition of social justice:

We each chose an area that we were going to go into and share with each other at our meetings. For Sara, the project she presented to us was putting Columbus on trial, and she had a video of her teaching that, and she wrote an article for Teachers’ Unite about the project. Kelly did a project on confronting stereotypes in her classroom. Heather did a project on different kind of homes, and I had to teach Australia as part of a mandated social studies curriculum, so I just took a different spin on that and talked more about indigenous groups in Australia and how they were oppressed, and I showed the video Rabbit Proof Fence. So, we would report back to each other at our meetings, share video tapes of some lessons, and really critically looked at them and what we were seeing. We shared student work that showcased the effectiveness of the lessons (Amanda, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06).

In this quote, Amanda describes not only the content of the projects that the women developed, but also the role of the group in this process. The group served as a place to develop units, but also a place to check back in, problem solve, and hold each other accountable to the work developed. We worked together to plan the units, and used protocols and tools to observe videotapes of the teachers delivering lessons. At a certain point, we returned to our definition of SJE to hold the group accountable to our goals.

For Sara’s unit, she used an activity from Rethinking Schools in which different groups are put on trial for the crimes against the



Taino people. As previously discussed, she faced resistance from other teachers in her school, but her understanding of who her students were gave her the incentive and courage to teach the unit anyway: "Knowing the lived realities of my students has taught me that doubting whether or not children are emotionally capable of dealing with controversial topics in any curricular area is not only an underestimation of their cognitive skills, it is simple ignorance of all they already understand." Sara took the risk to teach this social studies unit based on her understanding of who her students were and the issues of racism and poverty that they faced in their own lives, drawing parallels between the taking of Native American land and the gentrification that is taking place in their lower east side community. She described what she believed her students got out of the unit:

While the trial at first glance may appear a simple role play, in fact, the students were required not only to demonstrate a deep understanding of the historical encounter of Europeans and Native Americans, but were also required to engage in the highest level of critical thinking in accordance with Bloom's taxonomy. Students had to evaluate the causes of European actions and the trial included a tense discussion of racism, superiority, and the process of assimilation. Students spoke about the "loss of culture" the religion and acknowledged the horrific human actions that took place when these two cultures collided. The students display of comprehension not only transcends the "heroes and holidays" level of social studies curriculum, it also encompasses several state standards including increasing skills in public speaking, listening, note-taking, active engagement, and interpretation of texts (Sara, written reflection, 3/27/06). ♦

Because Sara chose this project herself, and wasn't mandated to teach it, she was put in a position where she learned how to articulate the strengths of the unit and defend why it was important work for her fourth graders. In this sense, CIP returned the intellectual work of teaching back into her practice, as she was encouraged to reflect and plan based on both her students interest and her own teaching goals rather than on mouthing the words from scripted dittos that were handed out every week.

#### Forward Movement

Another role that the group played for the participants was the sense that they were there to push each other forward in their pursuit of teaching for social justice. All of them spoke about the sense of accountability they felt to each other, to be developing curriculum, having difficult conversations and taking risks in their classrooms to veer from the mandated curriculum. Sara reflected that due to her participation in CIP, she put in more hours to better understand and research the content she was teaching. It also provided her with pressure to put in the extra work of changing the mandated curriculum. She stated, "There is an element of accountability that this group creates and it has been a necessary factor in completing the extra work and thought it takes to truly extend my teaching". As a first year teacher bombarded with mandated curriculum, she is right to identify this as "extra". While trying to balance the demands in her first year, it would be easier for her to just go along with the curriculum that is handed to her. Her personal philosophy of teaching provided her with the motivation to transform the curriculum, but it was her participation in the group that provided the space, support and push to do the additional work. Heather adds to Sara's sense of being accountable to the group:

Being forced (not forced, but you know what I mean) to come up with a multicultural themed unit to do with my students has done so much for me mentally, as well as my students. It gave me the one thing that can get lost in the seemingly endless amount of paperwork that we are required to do- purpose. I feel like my kids are actually learning something, not just disconnected skills. I honestly don't think I could be a teacher if my only job was to teach kids how to read and write. I think it is my job to teach them how to think as well, how to understand their own lot in life and the world beyond their neighborhood more and how they can be agents of change if even in a small way (Heather, written reflection, 3/27/06).

Heather identifies how the pressure of the group, being "forced" to do the work they themselves set out to do, helped to keep her aligned with her original sense of why she went in to teaching. Her daily reality in her school ran counter to the kind of work she wanted to do with her students, and CIP provided her with the outlet to hold on to her teaching philosophy. She continued to discuss how the relationships and discussions with the other participants have kept her going:

As the weeks and then months have gone by it has been hard at times to make my way to all of the meetings, and to not allow my mental commitment to social justice education to be just that, all mental. What has kept me going probably more than anything else is the privilege to talk and learn from a group of people who bi-weekly have such deep and thoughtful insights about education on a whole and within their own practice (Heather, written reflection, 3/27/06).



Because Heather felt that she was getting something from her participation, CIP was able to push her to actualize her ideals in her practice. Like the other participants, it was tempting to forget about her commitment to social justice, and just try to wade through the pressures of first year teaching. Fortunately, the support of and accountability to the group pushed the participants to continue to try to reach their goals.

In many ways, the group legitimized the teachers' sense that there was more they should be doing to make the curriculum relevant to their students. As Heather identified, the group reminded her to stay true to her vision of what teaching should be about. Sara added to this sense of how the group helped her to hold her teaching to a higher standard than the typical accountability systems provided by the schools:

I do think that our meetings remind me that these are almost side notes to my teaching, that I can't allow the 5000 people that come in and out of my room, bubble sheets, math programs or the crazy specialist to dictate the direction of my classroom. Our meetings remind me to keep my head above water and that the successes are not ELA scores, but rather, may be measurable in the contents of a letter to the Europeans telling them it was unfair to take Native American land and culture (Sara, written reflection, 3/27/06).

By identifying social justice goals and criteria, Sara and the other participants held themselves to a different vision of what success meant for themselves and their students. This sense of being held to higher standards was a double edged sword, at some times providing a sense of moral pride, but at others a sense that they weren't doing enough. Because the teachers faced many challenges, reaching their goals was very difficult. It was often tempting to use these challenges as excuses as to why they weren't doing all that they set out to do. Finding the balance between support and push was an ongoing challenge that is discussed further in the section on challenges of the facilitator.

Overall, participation in the group provided the teachers with ongoing support, curricular development, and forward movement. By providing a sense of legitimacy for their personal philosophies, the group helped to support each other to actualize the kind of teaching they originally entered the profession to accomplish. Through their collaboration, they developed intellectually challenging and innovative units, pooled their resources and transformed the mandated curriculum. They were able to accomplish this despite the overwhelming external, as well as internal, challenges they faced as new teachers in New York City Public schools. In the following section, some of these challenges are further explored.

## Challenges

The participants faced many challenges in their quest to teach from the perspective we laid out in our ongoing list of SJE. From all the adjustments that comes with being new teachers, to mandated curriculum, to testing, to apprehension and fear, the participants struggled to stay true to their vision. The ways in which they were able to overcome these challenges to support and push each other to produce curriculum and experiences in their classrooms were discussed in the previous section. In this section, the issues that limited their ability or willingness to reach their goals are shared. The multiple challenges that I faced in my role as mentor/ facilitator of the project are also explored.

## Challenges of Beginning Teaching in NYC Schools

In a very real sense, these women were beginning to teach in one of the most challenging situations in the country. Having graduated from a “fast-track” program with only 14 months of training, they accepted teaching positions in under resourced schools in one of the most complex school systems in the nation. To contextualize, Mayor Bloomberg was just a few years into his major reorganization of the school system under the recently implemented mayoral control. As staples of his administration, the participants were required to use mandated curricula for reading and math, had block schedules, extended days for test prep and were teaching in a system that retained students who did not pass standardized tests. The pressure that they faced were reinforced daily from their administrators, math coaches, literacy coaches, new teacher mentors, local and regional instructional supervisors and others who entered their classrooms without warning multiple times a day. Kelly explains the toll this took on her:

Before entering the school year, I imagined myself as a teacher who would be able to straightforwardly develop and implement units of study in which the students would learn how to effectively learn about issues of social justice both on the local and global level. Unfortunately, as a first year teacher, the overwhelming responsibility of managing the students, the classroom, the teaching, the curriculum, the administration, and more has left little time for planning critical and creative units of study that effectively incorporate issues of social justice (Kelly, written reflection, 3/27/06).

Kelly explains how the pressures she felt made it difficult for her to focus on the issues of social justice that we talked about in sessions. The participants experienced this as both an external as well as internal struggle. As Heather expressed:

This, my first year of teaching, has been easier in a lot of ways than I expected and much harder than I expected in others. I have definitely had the feeling that maybe I should be doing something else with my life at times, not that I want to do something else but all of the b.s. that goes along with teaching had really gotten me down at different points. I felt I was not spending enough time doing the kind of teaching I envisioned – transformatory, multicultural, even just meaningful. After I got done with all of the things that I was supposed to do, it left little time to plan the way I wanted to. I had a struggle – If I say I am committed to multicultural, social justice education how much time should I allow it to take up. I have to take care of my self too. I spend so much times doing the other stuff that I have to do, so maybe it is okay to just let this first year go by and learn my craft and then try to incorporate more social justice themes later (Heather, email exchange, 4/3/06).

Like Heather, Sara also expressed frustration with all the pressures they faced on a daily basis. She recognized that she was “consumed” by test pressures, and this resulted in her pushing aside social studies and other curricular areas. “Sometimes I am so frustrated with all that has to be done, I don’t think at all about social justice, social action, social studies, social skills, multicultural education, action, culture or any kind of issues at all!” In some ways, the pressure to teach for social justice became just another item on the list of things that the participants had to do. The overwhelming sense of pressure that was part of these beginning teachers daily context made it difficult for them to focus on priorities laid out in CIP.

### Ownership of the Classroom and Curricula

In the first year of the project when the participants were student teaching, the most repeated refrain in our sessions was “it’s not my classroom”. Discomfort with their role as student teaching in the classroom of a veteran, cooperating teacher who often had no commitment to issues of social justice, served as a powerful deterrent for the participants to develop multicultural, social justice projects or to stand up for their beliefs. For example, Heather student taught in one classroom in which her White cooperating teacher transitioned the predominately African American kindergarteners from one activity to the next by saying “FREEZE, put your hands on your head!” She turned to Heather, a young Black woman, and whispered, “I’m just preparing them for their future lives”. Unsure of how to handle this situation because of her role as a student teacher, we spent at least one session problem addressing this situation (field notes, 1/28/05). There was a sense from the student teachers that once they had their own classrooms, they wouldn’t have to deal with this lack of ownership over what happened in their classrooms.

Unfortunately, this proved not to be the case, especially for Kelly who team taught with a more experienced teacher in her first year as a new teacher.

While the project has provided me with a new knowledge about the elements of a social justice education, I have found great difficulty in linking that knowledge with my teaching practices, mandated curriculums, test preparation, and remaining daily obstacles... Different than remaining members of the project, teaching in a collaborative team teaching classroom is one of my greatest challenges in meeting my goal for teaching through a social justice perspective. All decisions made must be made collaboratively (Kelly, email exchange, 4/8/06).

Kelly explains how her lack of ownership of her classroom that she shared with a more senior teacher who did not share her perspective served as an obstacle for her to teach towards the criteria that we developed within CIP. While this was most extreme in Kelly's case, other participants shared the sense that they needed to guard their stance from other teachers at the school. As Amanda expressed, "I think it was just because it was our first year and we were still just trying to get familiar with the people at our school, so it was hard to know who was thinking like us, who could our allies be (Amanda, Presented at The New Educator Conference, 10/21/06)." This sense of uncertainty about what was "ok" to teach or "how far" they could go, served as a deterrent for the participants to teach to the fuller vision that they expressed within sessions. From being uncomfortable in someone else's classroom, to being unsure of their ownership within their own, to Heather's question of "is it okay to just let this first year go by ...", real questions remain about when the participants will feel the time is "right" to center teaching for social justice in their classroom.

At times, the fear of teaching from a social justice perspective was self-imposed, while at other times, they did face challenges at their school site from colleagues with different ideologies. When Sara's class put Columbus on trial, Sara ended up having an argument with a fellow teacher about the unit. The teacher questioned Sara's focus on racism and believed that she had "scripted" the trial for her students. This teacher stated "that it had never occurred to her that the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans could have been related to or based on race, how did we really know what happened anyway?" While Sara was challenged about her unit from a teacher who clearly did not share her perspective, the fact that a conversation was even taking place at the school about racism and colonialism in the context of curriculum represents a great step in the right direction. Additionally, Sara shared that the trial became "the talk of the school" and that many other teachers asked for copies so that they could replicate it in their classrooms (field notes, 3/27/06). The fact that other teachers reached out and expressed an interest in the materials and topics created a space for Sara to find allies at her school. These initial queries developed into an ongoing planning partnership with the other fourth grade teacher who was an expert in the mandated curriculum. By planning together and using their respective areas of expertise, they developed curriculum that met the mandated standards as well as the CIP social justice criteria.

### Challenges as the Facilitator

As the facilitator of this group, I faced a number of challenges, which fell into three interconnected areas: finding a balance between supporting them as first year teachers vs. supporting them as social justice educators; mixed expectations around roles and leadership; and accountability. Because of the number of frustrations they faced on a daily basis as first year teachers, the participants often wanted to spend a great deal of time talking about the small, bureaucratic challenges they faced, such as lack of supplies or Xeroxing privileges. I often had to bring them back to the goals of SJE and remind them of the purpose of the group. Therefore it was difficult to find a balance between supporting them as first year teachers, and developing them as educators who had expressed a commitment to issues of social justice. While many of the issues they faced were in actuality issues of SJE, in that they were working in under resourced schools, the nature of their comments were not about issues of equity, but rather were complaints that kept them from focusing on the work of the group. As the facilitator, and former teacher, it was difficult to know when I was providing them with empathy and support, and when I was allowing them to create excuses for not addressing SJE in their classrooms. I often felt that I was erring on the side of "being nice" rather than pushing them to reach their goals. While I recognized that we talked about social justice issues in the sessions, I wondered if their classrooms really reflected these discussions on an ongoing basis. As an activist and an organizer, I often found myself frustrated by the mildness of the participants' interpretation of social justice and wondered if their own students knew that they participated in discussions about racism, inequity and unfairness, and if so, how did they experience it? Was our group mainly "talk"?

Another challenge involved our roles. It was always a goal of mine that the participants would take on more of the leadership of our group: facilitating meetings, identifying readings, and setting direction. Perhaps because of our initial roles of professor and students, or because of their daily demands- this did not happen. The participants often missed deadlines, didn't reply to emails,

didn't prepare for their weeks to facilitate, and expected that I would have everything prepared for them despite their lack of follow through. Because I felt such a responsibility to see this group be successful, I erred on the side of taking on too much responsibility for the functioning of the group, letting the participants off the hook rather than holding them accountable. This was because I was empathetic to their situations, but it resulted in serious problems with our group dynamics, cementing my role as leader and 'expert' and the participants as dependent students.

There came a point when I recognized the problems with our group dynamics, and had serious questions about how much of the themes were being integrated into their classrooms. This resulted in an extremely emotional meeting in which I asked the participants to return to our definition and identify how much of them were actualized in their classrooms. The challenge of finding the balance between friendship and critical friendship was difficult to negotiate, and in this instance, I fell on the side of critical. The participants recognized that they had not met the standards we had set out for ourselves, but they also felt caught off guard when asked to hold themselves accountable. They reported a sense of ambush, and we had to do quite a bit of work to debrief and come to terms with what it meant to them to not be reaching the goals they set out for themselves. While I think it was tempting for all of us to throw our hands up and walk away, we remained committed to the vision of the project and to each other. However difficult, this meeting represented a turning point. It was after this meeting that the participants started getting together outside of the designated meeting time to gather their poetry materials and attended different local teacher activist events. We only had a few sessions left and spent them debriefing "that" meeting. For the final sessions, they took on the role of facilitator, set final goals, and decided that perhaps the project had come to its natural end. We had a culminating dinner at a local Mexican restaurant to celebrate all the work that they had accomplished in the two years of the project. At the end of their first year of teaching we sunsetted the group on good terms; we subsequently met a few times to prepare for a conference presentation during their second year.

I mention this meeting and its aftermath not to air our dirty laundry, but to encourage people who may choose to facilitate similar groups to be prepared to take risks. Facilitating the group required constant negotiation of roles and relationships. We danced from being friends, to peers, to more traditional hierarchical roles of professor/students. To have to push them to be accountable to a volunteer project was uncomfortable and challenging yet of absolute necessity if this group was to move beyond inquiry and into action. A year after the project concluded, I still reflect on the delicate balance of critical caring that is required of facilitators who will hold new teachers accountable to goals of social justice. A recent email from Kelly written near the end of her second year of teaching reinforced the need for facilitators to take these kinds of risks. In reflecting a year after "the meeting", she wrote:

I think that we almost needed to disband in order to start being more accountable for ourselves. That meeting, I think, was a pivotal point in our lives as SJE teachers. We woke up and we started acting. We re-evaluated our practices, got over the first year jitters, and started doing the things that we talked about. I definitely went into my second year of teaching thinking about that meeting a lot and not so much about how it got a little crazy but how you sorta just said, get moving cuz there hasn't been much movement (Kelly, email exchange, 3/30/07).

Supporting educators to teach for social justice is at times exhilarating and at others exhausting. This issue of the risks involved in actually holding people accountable is just one of the challenges involved in facilitating such groups. Other issues are further explored in the next section on further research and development.

## Lessons Learned

My findings indicate that critical inquiry groups can support new educators to teach for social justice. Several key lessons from this pilot program should be taken into consideration for other researchers/ practitioners who choose to facilitate similar groups. First and foremost, it is critical to remember CIP's are strategies for *equity and social justice*. They are not support groups, mentorship opportunities, or content area professional development. These other types of teacher supports are important, and are available to educators, typically without a focus on SJE. While successful CIP's will incorporate all of these elements, the facilitator must keep the eye on the SJE prize or risk going off track.

Another key lesson and implication for the findings is the need to recognize that the development of social justice educators takes time. As Kelly reflected a year after the project ended:

The CIP years were essential because it kept us aware and it kept the importance of SJE alive for us; now, I'm DOING those things... Even though our group ended, the work and the talks that we had in those two years were ESSENTIAL to what we do now. I can say that I was intimidated last year -- by many things -- and I am not so intimidated now this year; I think, I plan, I develop, and I do! I think that it was all a process for us. What we did is impacting my actions everyday (Kelly, email exchange, 3/30/07).

In some ways, the CIP project was the preparation period for these young educators- the different spices of critical pedagogy, innovative instruction, parent involvement, teacher activism were being added to the pot; but all of this needed time to marinate in order for the teachers to be able to sort it out and start acting.

### Schools of Education as sites for Critical Inquiry Projects

Teacher education programs can be uniquely situated to provide this kind of ongoing support for a number of reasons. First, we have established relationships with our students whom we have prepared to go into the field. These relationships can be enhanced if it is clear that as teacher educators, we will be by their sides as they enter the profession and are not asking them to jump off the deep end without our ongoing support. Second, we do not have to play the role of evaluator. Unlike the multiple coaches, administrators, and district personnel that enter the teachers' doors, we do not come with a clipboard and checklist, holding the teachers accountable to external standards that often have little meaning for the teachers or their students. Rather, our role in groups like this is to support and push them in directions that they themselves have identified as essential to their personal philosophy of teaching. Additionally, creating ongoing relationships with teachers who teach for social justice can provide more models for current pre-service teachers to learn from. For example, Sara often comes back and speaks to my current students about the social justice curriculum that she does in the classroom, and both she and Kelly now serve as cooperating teachers for our preservice teachers. Because there are few models out there of successful new teachers who teach for social justice, this process helps to support their development, strengthens the pipeline of teachers who do this work and serves to create a network of teachers with shared commitments. The statistics for the retention of new teachers is no secret. For morally responsible schools of education that are truly committed to developing socially just educators, our work is not done at their graduation. We must continue to support them as they enter the field and begin the real work of teaching for equity and social change.

### Facilitators of Critical Inquiry Projects

The above lessons have implications for who can/ should facilitate CIP's. The following represents some of the characteristics that I believe facilitators should have in order to lead such groups:

- Successful Experience Teaching in Urban Public Schools: Facilitators will need to have had this first hand experience in order to help participants navigate the unique challenges of teaching in urban schools and to help them develop strategies for advocating on behalf of themselves and their students.
- Commitment to Social Justice: Without an explicit focus on SJE, facilitators can easily allow the group to be derailed by both internal and external challenges. Having access to networks of social justice organizing opens up new avenues and supports to participants typically not available through mainstream social justice.
- Understanding of the role of teachers as agents of change: One of the theories of change underlying CIP's is that educators can play a role in changing structures of educational injustice. If facilitators see their role as simply helping participants develop piecemeal lessons absent of a larger vision of school/ societal change, then CIP's become merely another item in the menu of mainstream professional development.
- Ability to inhabit multiple roles with participants: As explored in the challenges of the facilitator section, leaders of CIP's will play many roles within the life of the project. While one must hold participants accountable, it is important to reiterate that "evaluator" should not be one of these roles. In order for SJE to be imbedded in the lives of teachers, it cannot become another item on a checklist of things teachers must do.

### Conclusions

The lifespan for new, urban teachers is devastatingly short. As schools of education, responsible for preparing these educators, we cannot sit idly by, continuing to do business as usual and ignoring what is happening to our alumni as they flounder in schools once they leave us. It is of critical importance that we look for new ways to continue to support our students as they transition into their first years of teaching. For those of us concerned with teaching for social justice, it is mandatory that we support early educators who share these concerns as they struggle not to give into the pressure to abandon their commitments to equity that brought them into the profession. These educators are like candles in the wind, struggling to find ways to keep their flames lit in a windstorm. There are multiple ways that schools of education can serve to block or redirect these winds- if we so chose, and critical inquiry groups is just one of those models. My findings indicate that through their participation in CIP, the participants were able to keep a focus on social justice education despite the challenges they faced. As Heather stated:

That is what being a part of CIP has done for me. It has taught me how to think about so many things- parents, history, students, curriculum, and my role as a teacher. We can become so programmed to think in clichés and stereotypes about kids, parents and education in general. It is great to be part of a group that constantly forces me to challenge the status quo, challenge my own prejudices and stereotypes again to feel like my teaching has purpose (Heather, written reflection, 5/26/06).

Even teachers with expressed interest in social justice education fall prey to the stereotypes and deficit thinking that is part of the air they breathe in urban public schools. No-one is immune. Having a space to continually reflect on the messages they are receiving about their students and families, can serve to stop new educators from falling into the trap of becoming teachers who give up on their students and the profession and push them to become educators who play a role in improving the conditions of urban education.

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## Bree Picower

Bree Picower is an Assistant Professor/ Postdoctoral Fellow at New York University where she also received her Ph.D. Her dissertation research, "The Unexamined Whiteness of Teaching", explored the role that race plays in how student teachers conceptualize urban education and was awarded the NYU-Steinhardt Outstanding Dissertation Award of 2007. Her current research focuses on the role of Critical Inquiry Groups as a strategy to support urban educators to teach for equity and social justice. Dr. Picower is a core member of the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), a grassroots collective that organizes teachers to take action on issues of educational justice. She has taught in public elementary schools in Oakland, California and New York City. She can be contacted at [bree@nyu.edu](mailto:bree@nyu.edu).

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