

## EXAMINING THE EMBEDDED ASSUMPTIONS OF TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN A SECONDARY URBAN SCHOOL: A CASE-STUDY

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### **Abstract:**

*In this essay, I examine the underlying assumptions of one secondary English teacher, Sara, who professes to teach for social justice, in an urban school. My primary concern arises from a need to clarify what it means to teach for social justice in specific locations, and to look closely at what assumptions teachers have as they teach secondary students. I utilize the ethnographic tools of interview, document analysis, and classroom observation for this study. To read the data, I utilize Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to reveal that the Discourses of Working, Equity, and Schooling influence Sara's teaching for social justice. Finally, this essay illuminates the power relationships between students and the teacher in this particular classroom, specifically how these discourses are laced with the rhetoric of "white talk", which obscures and reinforces specific racist perspectives. This essay concludes with a call to dig deeply into our assumptions about teaching for social justice, specifically when we proclaim to do so in secondary English classrooms.*

...I think that people I've met who say that they teach for social justice they teach in a very linear sort of (way)...sort of 'Ok, these are the oppressed people and these are not the oppressed people, this is black history'... in boxes or in very specific categories. (Sara, a secondary English teacher)

People of diverse backgrounds are mixed together and when they come out they're supposed to look like Vanna White and sound like Dan Rather. The only diversity we celebrate is tacos and chop suey at the mall (Christensen, 1980/2000, p. 100).

### **Social Justice: An Ambiguous Term**

Consider for a moment the following scenario: a faculty member at an urban public university that trains teachers to work in high-poverty, low-achieving urban schools suggests that the school of education delete the school's commitment to "social justice" from the mission statement. For many of the faculty at this school, teaching for social justice is the *sine qua non* of the mission statement for a school of education; it motivated them to teach in public schools earlier in their careers, and then later to become teacher-trainers at the university. Concerned faculty members responded to this request with a dismissive sigh, implementing the "close my classroom door" strategy, which essentially locks colleagues and administrators out of their college classrooms. Ideally, colleges and universities reflect the most pristine elements of a democracy, such as free-speech, debate, and voting; however, what we see in the hallways at this school is a refusal to discuss explicitly what it means to teach for social justice. There is no "public discourse that might actually arouse an unease, an unsettledness" (Pignatelli in Ayes and Miller, 1998, p. 263) about teaching for social justice, or preparing teachers to do so.

Recent research on social justice, however, illustrates that gathering a group of faculty members to discuss the nature of social justice is no guarantee that a cohesive understanding or a working definition will be generated. Zollers et al (2000) developed a multi-year study to see if a group of faculty members could develop a "shared meaning" of social justice. Even though similar themes and conceptions emerged, a common grasp of the term with comparable practices appeared untenable, claiming that they "could not assume that we were all committed to the same idea or shared fundamental meanings and assumptions about social justice" (p. 9). These examples illustrate the difficulty with determining a collective understanding of how to "teach for social justice." Even though most professors at the school of education mentioned above and in the Zollers et al. study would agree that they teach for social justice, they could neither agree on how to do it nor on how to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to do it.

We cannot, however, infer from the incongruity between a common understanding of social justice that we should abandon the yearning to teach for social justice. One way to approach its over-determined characteristic is to unpack the various assumptions that are embedded, or behind, the practices and implementation of teaching for social justice within specific contexts. Perhaps we should look at teaching for social justice as a "project" (Greene as cited in Hollingsworth, 1998, p. 76) or, as a lived practice that becomes operational in specific locations, in specific groups, with specific individuals. As Zollers et al argue, "...examining and even changing beliefs matter little if they are not translated into action" (p. 9). To be more precise, practicing or teaching for social justice entails "situated meaning(s)" in that it is "negotiated between people in and through

communicative social interaction(s)" (Gee, 1999, p. 80). Indeed, the problem with including "social justice" in the mission statement of the school is that the term itself is perhaps too inflated, or possesses too many meanings in various contexts, to ground or operationalize a philosophical framework for an entire school of education; however, we can combat claims of generality by focusing on specific sites where teachers teach for "social justice," and investigate how their assumptions, specifically socio-cultural ones, influence their implementation in their particular classrooms. This paper sets out to complete that task in a secondary English classroom located in an urban school in a large northeastern city. Doing so does not necessarily privilege a specific meaning of social justice over others, but simply initiates a conversation about the term and how teachers' conception of social justice influences their teaching. The purpose of writing this paper is not to revere a certain definition and use of social justice, but to instigate a "complicated conversation" (Pinar 2007, p. 168), or a collaborative and "dialogical investigation and consultation with others" (Pinar, 2007, p. 169) about the practices of teaching for social justice. The faculty in the scenario above, in my view, missed an opportunity to wonder about and question their own and others' beliefs about teaching for social justice when they refused to take seriously the administrator's decision to delete social justice from the mission statement. In addition, by circumnavigating the issue, they forgo the opportunity to reconsider and potentially improve their own teaching and subsequently their students' teaching that they are preparing to enter into urban schools.

Thus, the question I will investigate in this paper is: how does one implement, or teach, his/her individual conception of "social justice" in a secondary English classroom in an urban environment? Secondly, what are the embedded assumptions of a teacher's conception of social justice, and what are the affects of teaching that conception of social justice? In doing so, I completed a case-study (Berg, 2004; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) using ethnographic tools of document analysis, semi-structured interview, and classroom observation (Anderson et al., 1993; Bernard, 1995; Glesne, 1999; LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) of an English teacher in an urban secondary school in a large northeastern city of the United States.

To complete the findings of the study, I used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to pierce into the deep and underlying assumptions of teaching for social justice. CDA is a research methodology that reveals the inter-relationships between the social world and "linguistic practices" (Rogers, 2004, p. 1) within a given context. Thus, using language is more than simply about words, clauses, and syntax, but is about how language gets performed in certain social settings. In addition, it is a toolbox of methods that allow the researcher to "describe, interpret, and explain" (Rogers, 2004, p.2) these inter-relationships. The "critical" in CDA indicates that "linguistic practices" are not neutral, but exist within certain power dynamics; CDA exposes the "hidden power relations between a piece of discourse and wider social and cultural formations" (Corson, 2000, p. 95), and most specifically to illuminate the embedded biases and injustices within specific social landscapes. As a research methodology, then, CDA assumes that how we use language in a specific social setting, and how we behave in that setting is laced, or informed by power. Power implies dominating and being dominated, inclusion and exclusion, and the acceptable and unacceptable. The term "discourse" implies what is sayable, knowable, and doable within a given context. Discourse can either be either a "d", as in "language in use", or a "D", as in "language plus other stuff" (Gee, 1999, p. 17). Gee describes the uses of Discourses in the following manner:

The key to Discourses is "recognition." If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engage in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (and thereby continued it through history, if only for a while longer) (1997, p. 18).

While it may appear that the subject here chooses one's Discourses to perform, Gee claims that in fact many Discourses appeared historically before we decided to use them; we serve as "carriers" (p. 18) of multiple Discourses. He goes on to say that Discourses engage in a continual "conversation" with each other "...through our words and deeds" (p. 18). In short, we both choose and are chosen by Discourses, meaning that while we engage in "linguist practices," we may not be aware of the "conversation" and its real-world implications. Foucault's words are quite poignant here, "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do it; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983, p. 187). CDA provides us with a set of tools to examine closely the unnoticed Discourses, the embedded power relationships and their potential effects. Finally, the "analysis" of CDA refers to examining the ways in which individuals and groups use Discourses to negotiate power relationships within a given context. In addition, it explores the reasons why certain individuals assume certain positions in relation to specific "linguistic practices," and tries to map out the various ways in which texts, actions, and representations interact.

I did not seek to "do" a Critical Discourse analysis of teaching for social justice, but to "use" it to get at my questions (Lewis, 2006). Primarily, CDA provides me with the resources to study the power relations within the "vernacular" (Lewis, 2006, p. 274), or in the "everyday written and spoken texts" (Lewis, 2006, p. 274). In addition, it (CDA) allows me to locate tensions, or *cruces* (Fairclough, 1995) within the data, which allows me to "theory test" (Rogers, 2002, p. 251), which means compare pieces of data against other parts of the data. In short, I am able to tease out the various assumptive discourses embedded within one's

conceptions and practices of teaching for social justice. For this particular project, we see how the Discourse of Schooling, the Discourse of Working, and the Discourse of Equity influence how a secondary English teacher in a northeastern urban city teaches for social justice. In many ways, I am arguing that the general term “social justice”, perhaps one commonly seen in mission statements, fails to capture the ways in which teachers produce their teacher selves as they teach for “social justice.” Instead an investigation into the “situated meanings” of specific classrooms helps us to understand the embedded storylines (albeit incomplete) of teaching for social justice in secondary English classrooms (Gee, 1999; Trainor, 2005), and allows us to converse about the Discourses within the practices of teaching for social justice. Finally, CDA, specifically the work of Trainor (2005), and her examples of “White Talk” along with Van Dijk (1993) provides me with a critical lens to examine the power-dominance relationships within the discourses (schooling, working, equity), which uncovers the affects of these particular discourses.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### ***Social Justice in the Classroom***

Scholars have recognized the impact that education can play in creating a socially just and equitable society. In general, the scholarship on social justice and education revolves around two general areas: relations and dominations of power and the legitimization and distribution of knowledge (Apple, 2004; Freire, 1970). These two items (Power and Knowledge) are examined in relation to race, class, and gender, and demonstrate how through the circulation and legitimization of knowledge certain groups dominate over others. Domination occurs not just through economic forces, but through access to privileged forms of knowledge, and through rhetorical strategies (see below) that maintain current power relationships. Michael Apple (1995) argues that domination involves “...a complex and creative cultural process” which includes “language, style, intimate social relations, wishes, desires, and so on” (p. 84). In short, domination includes overt manifestations, such as money, is a “structural position (where you stand in the unequal processes of power, control, and reproduction)” and is “something lived...” (p. 84). Thus, understanding one’s race does not just involve recognizing color, but “where you stand” in relation to unequal power relationships, control, and your (in) ability to reproduce power structures within society (Trainor, 2005). Understanding one’s sexual orientation does not just involve recognizing one’s lover, but one’s position either as the dominating or dominated group in specific situations (Blackburn, 2006; Rabow, Stein, and Conley, 1999); understanding one’s gender does not just involve recognizing one’s body parts, but again, one’s position in relation to power, and the legitimation of certain forms of knowledge (Miller, 2005). Socio-economic and cultural forces shape one’s positions within hierarchical power relationships within society and influence how much one partakes in the control, distribution, and reproduction of those forces.

These socio-cultural factors that influence positions of domination compel many writers within education to argue that conceptions of social justice need to inform educational policy (Anyon, 2005; Apple, 2003; Apple, 1995; Biddle et al, 2001). Specifically to English Education, Geneva Smitherman (2002), for example contends that “speech, language, and composition professionals” need to continue the work of the 1974 Conference on Composition and Communication resolution “the Student’s Right to Their Own Language,” which would include other languages and dialects besides “standard English” in teaching practices. Smitherman contends that other languages should be recognized as “co-equals” with Standard English, and that a national policy on language usage should be instilled to counteract the “English Only” movement. Doing so will “bridge the gap” between the “have’s” and the “have not’s” within the black community and between whites and blacks (p. 172).

Social justice educators also argue that the teaching force needs to be more diverse, and that teachers need to employ student’s culture into their teaching strategies not simply to transmit the codes of the “culture of power,” but to acknowledge the student’s culture as an important element to learning (Ayers, 2006; Brooks and Thompson, 2005; Delpit, 1995). Teachers, thus, need to reflect on and become conscious of their own attitudes and impressions of their students, specifically non-white students from urban, poor areas, and recognize that their cultural references are different from their students.

Educating oppressed groups of people does not involve simply indoctrinating them into the culture of power, but includes recognizing one’s “structural position” in relation to the other and how it influences your “lived experiences” and perhaps more important theirs. By doing so, we take notice of the unequal relationships due to race in socio-economical and cultural spheres of society, and perhaps make those within structural positions of privilege “uncomfortable” (hooks, 1994, p. 43) and raise the consciousness of those who are oppressed (Coats, 2004; Freire, 1970; Williams and Evans-Winters, 2005). Finally, by raising student voices and including their commentary on our own practices, especially those in oppressed positions, we begin to work in a more “inclusive and collaborative way,” producing a more democratic society (Brookfield, 2000; Johnson-Bailey, 2002).

Social Justice has also become a prominent theme in secondary English studies. Recently, writers in the field have called for a “Critical English Education,” (Fleischer, 2005; Morrell, 2005), one that challenges dominate texts, such as canonical texts, and provide students with the skills to “create their own critical texts” (Morrell, 2005, p. 312). In addition, scholars have demonstrated how Young Adult Literature (YAL) can prepare students to negotiate and empathize with diverse populations, and to become “critically conscious of their operating world views” (Glasgow, 2001, p. 51); and to use multicultural literature to develop

sophisticated responses to individuals who are different from ourselves (Vinz, 2000). Reading, writing, and multiple literacies serve as important instruments to teach for social justice.

Linda Christensen (2000), for example, writes that teaching literacy skills is ultimately a “political act” because reading and writing allows students to “know themselves and to heal themselves” (p. vii), and they provide students with the tools to “interrogate society” (p. vii). In addition, Christensen contends that literacy provides students with the possibility of “imagining alternatives” (p. vi) to socially unjust situations within society. Thus, teaching literacy involves more than ensuring that students comprehend what they read, or possess the writing abilities to compose an essay or a business letter, but must encourage students to “rise up” or engage in reading that “challenges, that organizes for a better world” (p. vii).

Gordon Pradl and John Mayher (2004) agree with Christensen that English educators can teach for social justice. Reflecting on their careers in teacher education, Mayher and Pradl argue that teaching for social justice involves helping students to acquire “some critical perspective on what humanity has so far created and experienced and how far we still have to go” (p. 14). In addition, they contend that “test evaluators” focus on the “skeleton” of the writing instead of the “meat”, or content, of student’s writing. The Standards Movement and standardized testing limit students and teachers in schools. Mayher and Pradl endorse a “deeply social” English, one that acknowledges the student’s “sense of agency.” The English teacher’s role, according to Mayher and Pradl is to teach students how to be “powerful language users” (p. 20).

To conclude this section, Janet Miller (2005) explains that English Education is continually “in-the-making” (p. 203), in that it continually exposes categories that seek to make permanent and stable “educational identities” (p. 203). Teaching for Social Justice, whether it is to allow students the freedom to express themselves, to critically challenge their own world views, or to use language in powerful ways, involves examining the social and political contexts in which it (social justice) appears as a main tenet or goal of the participants. The notion that the term is unstable, or “in-the-making”, and that it may be over-determined or saturated with meaning(s) necessitates investigations into specific situations in which it appears a main goal of the participants, and a closer look at the hidden assumptions that influence one’s conception and implementation of social justice. A case-study of a secondary English teacher in an urban school allows us to see these hidden assumptions in this particular location; and CDA provides the tools to consider the power-knowledge relationships within those assumptions. To reiterate, this paper does not seek to privilege a certain view or practice of social justice over others; the literature review above demonstrates that a standard, or universal, view of social justice is dubious. The intension is to encourage teachers and teacher educators to engage in a conversation about what it means to teach for social justice, and to examine closely the discourses and power relationships that inform those conceptions and practices. The next section explains the school, the subject and research methodology; while the proceeding section completes an interpretation of the data using CDA.

## **Context**

The Secondary School for Social Justice originated in 1999 as a collective effort between parents in the community, the city board of education, and a community action group. The school was founded in a similar fashion as Stovall and Ayers (2005) describe as the “school a community built” in that the notion to open a school in this particular poverty-stricken area of a major metropolitan northeastern city began with a parent who wanted his child to attend a school near his home instead of traveling great distances to attend another school. In addition, the school aligned itself with a community-based organization that historically organized protests against institutions that exploited the poor, such as predatory lending companies and housing gentrification projects. This particular school is a clear example of how “Parents and community are natural allies in the struggle for better education” (Stovall and Ayers, 2005, p. 34).

At the time of this study, the school was in its second year of existence, and thus had a population of approximately 200 hundred students. Many of these students lived below the poverty line, and were part of the free lunch program.

## **Participant and the Researcher’s Role**

As a secondary English Teacher for three years in urban schools at the time of this study, I had taught literature and writing in a variety of ways and for different purposes. Also, as an English teacher at this school at the time of the study, I understood the struggles that many of the faculty members had as they tried to “teach for social justice.” As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle (1992) state, “Teacher researchers are uniquely positioned to provide a truly emic, or insider’s perspective that makes visible the ways that students and teacher s together construct knowledge and curriculum” (p. 43). As a teacher in the school and as the researcher, I possessed an “insider’s view” of how students and teachers in this school “together construct knowledge and curriculum.”

I knew Sara as a new teacher in my department. She arrived highly recommended from another faculty member, and took over the course-load from a teacher who left suddenly during the fall semester of the school year for a job in a local suburb. Sara

possessed limited teaching experience, working only at a local organization that works with schools to help students improve their writing; working at Secondary High School for Social Justice was her first opportunity to function as a full-time teacher in an urban school. Korean-born, Sara was adopted at an early age and grew-up in a suburb in a Northeastern state of the United States, and was in her mid-twenties at the time of the interview.

## Data Collection

Each of the methodological tools appeared in random order, mostly determined by personal and school schedules. The study took place over a two-week period. The interview occurred first, classroom observation next, concluded with the submission of the one-page teaching philosophy statement. I organized the study this way because I wanted to see how her conceptions of social justice influenced her teaching for social justice; hence I could receive her conceptions, her thoughts about teaching for social justice before seeing it in action in her classroom. The interview occurred in my classroom because Sara didn't have her own classroom; she was a "roaming teacher." The interview was audio-taped, and later transcribed by me. Sara reviewed the transcription of the interview. Questions for the semi-structured interview were organized around three general categories: Sara's biography, her teaching, and her views of social justice. The semi-structured format allowed me to ask follow-up questions and to use her words as sentence starters. For example, early in the interview she stated that in high school she had adopted many of the "values" of her parents and grandparents. So I asked her, "What would you say those values are?" Later in the interview, when we were discussing the role of literature in the secondary urban English classroom, she stated that she "loved literature" because it made her feel "less lonely." So I followed-up with "So literature then serves then as a way ..." she finished the sentence with "as a tool." In addition, I tried to get her perspective on her obligations as a teacher in a school that services mostly poor students. I asked this type of question to see how it match against her views of social justice. So I asked her "What does it mean to be a good teacher for your students?" For questions related to teaching for social justice, I asked her several clarifying questions just to make sure I was clear about her ideas. Thus, I asked the following: "What does it mean to teach for social justice?" and "Well, you stated that you don't teach for social justice, but social justice is sort of embedded in your teaching...is this accurate? Maybe you could explain that a little further?" Finally, when issues of race and class arose, I posed follow-up questions that linked her views to her teaching and/or her background to see how these issues influenced her teaching. Thus, I asked questions such as: "What do you mean specifically by 'class'?" "How does it (her views on class) affect the way you teach?" and "Do you teach with the assumption that inequalities will always exist?" The observation occurred after the interview. The next section explains the observation.

Instructed to pick a lesson that illustrated her views of teaching for social justice, I observed her sixth period class of tenth-graders. The observation protocol included focusing on Sara's teaching and her interactions with her students. I watched and listen with the following series of questions in mind (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993, pp. 199-200):

1. Who is in the class? How many students? What are their ethnicities?
2. What is going on? What is Sara saying and doing, and what are the students doing and saying?
3. Which behaviors are repetitive? What routines are occurring? How do the students interact with Sara and vice versa? How are the desks arranged? What is written on the chalkboard?
4. What is the content? What is Sara teaching? What pedagogical strategies is she using? How are the students responding to her and to what she is teaching?
5. What are the physical settings? What resources are available?

These questions directed my observations. I focused on Sara most of the time because I was interested in how she implemented her notions of teaching for social justice. While students spoke to each other during the class, I only wrote down in my fieldnotes interactions they had with Sara and themselves throughout the lesson.

Of the 15 students in the class, about half of them were African-American and half of them were Hispanic. Females comprised about 75% of the class, while males comprised of the remaining 25% of the class. The class lasted for 42 minutes. I observed the entire time, sitting in the back of the room. The lesson was audio-taped and later transcribed by me. Sara reviewed the transcript and field notes for accuracy. Finally, Sara submitted a one-page teaching philosophy to me.

## Data Analysis

Utilizing the tools of ethnography (Bernard, 1995; Anderson, Herr, Nihlen, 1994; LeCompte and Priessle, 1993), and the interpretive strategies of Critical Discourse Analysis (Trainor, 2005; Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2002; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Gee, 1999; Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 1995; VanDijk, 1993), this study examined the discursive influences on how a teacher in an urban school implements her conception of teaching for social justice. The first level of analysis was an interpretive exercise, focusing on specific moments of references to "social justice." These moments were surprisingly rare, as Sara didn't mention social justice in her teaching philosophy or in her classroom. To collect greater "chunks" (Miles and Huberman, 1994) of data, I reread the data several times reading for relevant and potential topics. From this, several topics emerged, such as choices, behavior modification, appropriateness, idealism, distribution, opportunity, working, class, discrimination, realism, and teaching.

I then began to develop meta-codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which group topics into themes, patterns, leitmotiv, or “casual link” (p. 57). In addition, I began to see how the data, and thus discourses “cannot have discrete boundaries” (Gee, 1996, p. xv), meaning that different parts of the data began to overlap with other parts. For example, her discussion of “choices” overlaps with her goals for her students; and her views of teaching students to be “appropriate” overlaps with her self-proclaimed realism. These overlaps helped me to develop the discourses that influence how Sara implemented her conception of teaching for social justice. The meta-codes helped me to group, or categorize, certain themes, which became the “discourses” which informed her teaching. For example, the discourse of working included topics such as class, the American Dream, opportunity, and choices. To keep the data manageable, I decided to have three prominent discourses. Thus, I grouped the data into the discourses of schooling, equity, and working. Organizing the data in this manner allowed me to excavate the underlying assumptions that influence her teaching for social justice. I discuss in greater detail the data sources and then explain the discourses of schooling, equity, and working below.

## Findings and Discussion

The ethnographic tools revealed different elements of Sara’s conception and implementation of teaching for social justice. Although the interview and philosophy statement (document) are discussed at greater length below, it is important for the following discussion to know that Sara taught the first stanza of Walt Whitman’s poem *Song of Myself* (1855), provided some background information on the philosophical influences on Whitman’s thinking, and the class discussed why he (Whitman) was the “quintessential” American poet (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001). The next section elaborates on the three discourses (schooling, equity, and working) that expose the hidden assumptions of Sara’s conception and implementation of teaching for social justice. After this analysis is complete, the remaining part of the paper examines the power-dominance relationships within these discourses.

### The Discourse of Schooling

One of the discourses that informs Sara’s implementation of social justice in the classroom is her own views of education and purposes of schooling. In her philosophy statement, Sara states that for her the main purpose of “institutionalized education” is to provide students with an environment that fosters both “freedom and consequences” (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001). Central to her perspective on teaching, she asserts that students should be encouraged toward “self-directedness” and “purpose” but only “under careful adult supervision” (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001). Furthermore, education should teach students the “values of a particular society, allowing them to socialize themselves within a larger community of people,” (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001), which should be expanded so that students may “identify commonalities among all human beings” (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001).

The importance of understanding “commonalities and “values” of a “particular society” are consistent with her goals for her students. In the interview, Sara claims that she wants her students to leave her class knowing how to make the “appropriate connections and the appropriate identifications between themselves and characters in the books” (Interview, March 27, 2001). Appropriate for Sara means “the reasoning rational thing” where students learn to understand the limits to their behaviors (Interview, March 27, 2001). She uses Jack from William Golding’s novel *The Lord of the Flies* (1954) as an example. Her students enjoy the part in the book where Jack kills the pig and he smears the blood all over his face. Sara claims that students need to recognize that a little bit of Jack exists in all of us, but that we can’t “run around like Jack,” we have to recognize that we don’t act impulsively or violently for a reason. Students, according to Sara, need to understand that they speak and act differently when they are in school and when they are on the street. Part of schooling is to teach students about commonalities and appropriate ways of speaking and behaving, and that there are behaviors that are “inherent in most societies.” Even though she indicated that she thinks that the teacher’s role in the classroom is to be a “facilitator”, and in her teaching philosophy she claims that she is “opposed” to the “all-knowing instructor,” the lesson indicates that she functions as the purveyor of the “values” of the particular society (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Sara’s teaching style demonstrates that a tension exists between what she believes and what she does in her classroom. Although her philosophy statement would imply that she is against teacher-centered classrooms, my observation of her lesson indicates otherwise. Sara’s classroom was an example of the “traditional” classroom, where the students’ desks are in rows, and she stands in front of the entire classroom the whole time (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001). In addition, it was clear that she wanted to guide her students into getting certain or, appropriate, interpretations of the poem. Take the following exchange as an example:

Student #1: He thinks he’s like a God and stuff he can control you...

Sara: Ok...he's (Walt Whitman) thinking, "Yes," he's part of everybody...but at the same time you guys (sic), everybody's part of him?

Class: NO!

Sara: Why Not?

Student #2: Cause he wanna be on top...

Sara: Listen...listen...so everything I've got, you've got, but at the same time everything you've got, I've got...so part of my...you know...bad mood is going to be a part of your bad mood...part of my courage is going to be part of your courage... you guys (sic)...you understand that at all...how like there's like a complete mixing...

Student#3: He's going to treat you like how he feels like he's going to be nice and he treat you nice...he feels like he in a bad mood...then he going to treat you as if you're in a bad mood...

Sara: Ok so...right, you guys understand that all of these other people are part of him, he's saying...but can you also say that in this poem he's also saying that you are all of me as I am all of you... (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001).

Sara's frustration at ensuring that her students receive the "appropriate" reading of Walt Whitman's poem comes through in this example. Student #2 agrees with Student #1 and interprets Whitman as wanting to be in charge of others, like a "God", or "on top", and that is why he claims that "what I assume you shall assume"; while student #3 tries to argue that what Whitman is saying is that he treats you similarly as he feels about himself. Both responses were ignored. This interaction typified Sara's relationship with her students; she continually struggled to get her students to see what she saw in Whitman's poem, dismissing "inappropriate" responses, and continually reinforcing her own perspective of the poem. What is not lost, however, is her view that social justice involves a sense of community. This point becomes highlighted in the discussion about the discourse of equity.

## **Discourse of Equity**

There are several ways that the discourse of equity appears in the data. There are the overt references to "equity," "equating," and having "equal" opportunity. There are also more subtle ways that Sara teaches for social justice with the discourse of equity. The following section discusses each of these in detail.

Sara appears to have a sense that equity and social justice are synonymous. Her choice of texts and the focus on the first three lines of the poem indicate that she believes on some level that "what I can assume you can assume," that there exists the possibility that people can live in harmony with each other. She states in the interview that she has a "sense of the interconnectedness of things" (Interview, March 27, 2001), and she hopes that her students recognize that in her classroom. In the classroom, Sara ties two philosophical traditions to Whitman's poetry (transcendentalism and Empiricism), and argues that Whitman was a "hog" and a "hippy" who wanted to spread America's way of life throughout the world (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001). She also links passion and reason with Whitman's poetry, arguing that every "atom" that he feels, you feel. This is consistent with her philosophy statement discussed above when she makes references to a "larger community," and "commonalities among all human beings." Yet on closer examination, we see more of a critique of equality instead of a celebration of it.

Towards the end of the lesson, we begin to see Sara's critique of equality. She poses the following question: "...what he (Whitman) is saying is that we share everything, do you think that in this country everything is shared?" (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001). Students clearly understood that everything is not shared in this country, as Sara summarizes their comments as "There's a lot of greedy everybody," (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001) there was no further discussion about the possibilities of how to obtain equality in this country. Sara dismisses an opportunity to imagine a world as Whitman does, one without hierarchies and structures that oppress people. Her skepticism of equality also appears in her philosophy statement when she makes references to students learning "...the values of a particular society" (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001), where schools allow "them to socialize themselves within a larger community of people" (Philosophy statement, April 9, 2001). On one level, I think many teachers, including Sara, want her students to feel a part of the larger community of humanity, but a more detailed look reveals that she's perhaps more interested in assimilation and acculturation rather than appreciating diversity. For example, when she discusses the literature she uses in her classroom, she contends that she doesn't want to necessarily teach literature that is "...at their immediate level...that they can identify with" (Interview, March 27, 2001). Instead, she wishes to teach literature that is "more universal, maybe more abstract" admitting that she "gravitates towards" the "conservative" or, "privileged body of reading" (Interview, March 27, 2001). Although not opposed to teaching Toni Morrison or Zora Neale Hurston, she does

not include them in the “privileged body” of literature. Even though she admits that most of her students are “black and Latino,” and are “from a community and a class that I could have gone through my whole life having no contact with,” (Interview, March 27, 2001), Sara believes that the best way to teach them is to acquaint them with specific works of literature, and to be realistic about their “options” (discussed below under discourse of working). Sara takes issue with Smitherman’s view (see above) that alternative uses of language should be seen as “co-equals”:

“...I felt a certain way before I started teaching and now that may have changed, but when I first came to this school I strongly believed that if a kid growing up in like affluence, suburban, you know two cars, two kids, two dogs, sort of atmosphere, like they’re going to get the whole tradition, you know, and they’re going to get stuff, and now days, they’re definitely going to get stuff outside of the tradition, but they’re gonna get that, if they’re going to do a unit on poetry, they’re not going to read, they’re not going to read all of Langston Hughes, and just do ‘spoken work,’ and contemporary slam stuff, slam poetry right? They’re gonna learn Keats and Shelley, all of Byron, all those different people, Whitman, and they might learn the more contemporary (writers). I think it’s worth throwing it (traditional works of literature) at the kids, because I mean, quite honestly, I grew up in a very different place than where these kids are growing up, but I didn’t get it, I mean it’s almost as far, it was far, it was far out...it was as far outside of my mental furniture as theirs to an extent I think” (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Thus, teaching the traditional cannon to urban students who are growing up in poverty reflects equality because they are given a similar education as suburban students. The key words in her answer are “to an extent.” Sara recognizes that she can not give them exactly the same education because their “options” are different. Yet, for her, equity does not necessarily include using the students’ culture (see literature review above) to help them understand literary texts; instead, it involves recognizing the possible “choices” that her students possess:

“...you know...that ballet teacher who’s complaining that she’s only making \$9.00 an hour, but that’s a very good choice that she’s made..she made the choice to make \$9.00 an hour or to have no benefits or no anything, because she wanted to be a ballet dancer, and she had that choice and she grew up knowing that she had that choice right? Whereas a person from a completely different background, completely different place could be making \$9.00, they might not have that choice just yet...I mean a lot of these students I realize like for them like, after high school, to get a full-time job, and to stay pretty clean, stay positive, and have a nice family and be able to provide for their family... that’s great...I realize like (laughter) for my female students, it’s like I really hope you don’t get pregnant in the next two years, you know? And that’s like a huge reality, and I mean it’s a reality, I guess, anywhere you are, but one thing that I realize is that these kids have these gigantic, gigantic families, of like so many people, it seems like everybody’s having babies, or has like eight to ten siblings or whatever, and I’m not saying that that’s a bad thing, but I’m just saying that like if a kid has a dream, or a vision or a goal, to like want to do something, to realize that like, you have to make a certain set of choices before you get there, it’s a lot harder, it’s more difficult, to become the major novelist when um... you know...when you’re 15 and you have your won kid...it’s just a different set of responsibilities... (Interview, March 27, 2001).

The Discourse of Equity recognizes that environment limits choices and can determine a person’s future. The teacher’s role, then, at least according to Sara, is to take these factors into consideration as they plan their lessons. On the one hand she concedes that there will “always be conflict,” and there will “always be inequity,” but she celebrates commonalities. It appears based on this logic that inequities are just part of those commonalities, and thus serve a larger purpose in the giant scheme of things. As she stated in her interview, she doesn’t want to give her students the “impression” that they could “do what ever they wanted” in life; instead she takes a more “realistic” stance and tries to help them through high school (not getting pregnant for the girls and staying “clean” for the boys), and for life after high school, even “if it doesn’t mean college” (Interview, March 27, 2001).

## **Discourse of Working**

Preparing students to enter the workforce informs much of Sara’s teaching for social justice. Her personal background certainly influences how she perceives her abilities to influence and prepare her students. Adopted at three years old, Sara, Korean, grew up “very middle class,” in a suburb in a large city in Connecticut (Interview, March 27, 2001). Assimilated into “high school life”, she didn’t ever feel discriminated against mostly because there was such “little diversity” in her town that she acquired the “values and background” of her classmates (Interview, March 27, 2001). She admits to growing up with “rose-colored glasses” on because “prejudice and discrimination” were “very far away” from her (Interview, March 27, 2001). One of the main values



that shapes her ideas of teaching for social justice is the “protestant work ethic,” specifically “if you work really hard and sacrifice you can have all of this for your children and ...they will be able to live a more privileged life and that’s the way it should go, very unrequited, very small amount of cynicism” (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Sara creates writing assignments for her students that reflect this perspective. For her unit on the Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954), instead of having students write a “comparative paper about two books,” she has them write a cover-letter and resume for one of the characters in the novel. She hopes that this assignment will encourage students to think about what they might do after graduating from high school and “college might not be it.” Sara justifies this view asserting that “I’m trying to as much put myself in the student’s perspective as I’m trying to convey my own to them,” (Interview, March 27, 2001), which connects to her use of Walt Whitman’s poem discussed above. Yet, her students can’t “assume” what she assumes. Sara concedes that her students may not have the same options that she had and to not encourage the “you can do whatever you want to do” attitude because, for her, it’s not “realistic.” As indicated above, Sara, a self-proclaimed “realist, understands that “there’s always going to be inequalities” and her job as a teacher in an urban school that caters to under-privileged youth is to prepare them for the workforce.

Another important theme that influences the Discourse of equity is notion of living the American Dream. For her, the American Dream signifies the “...hey we’re all created equal, we’re all coming together, big melting pot, we’re all going to get along together, and there’s something for everyone and it’s easy for every body to get to where they want to go” (Interview, March 27, 2001). Even though she’s a proponent of this view of the American Dream, she claims that it’s a little more “complicated” than just believing it:

I mean I don’t think that everyone coming to this country are starting from the same place, have the same set of difficulties um...things working against them, and I think a lot of that has to do with color, but although ...I don’t know, I haven’t really thought this out yet, but I’m beginning to think that a lot of problems that ... most (of) the major problems that we have in the country have to do with class if not more than color, and the problem is that class is so much about color. I’m saying that like it’s more complicated than, “Oh, I’m black or because I’m something, that I’m discriminated against. Although I think people’s economic situation defines that is color or race, I feel that it so often class plays a major part in it (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Even though she concedes that everyone are not “starting from the same place,” she doesn’t necessarily agree that students should be taught to raise their consciousness (Christenson, 2000) to contest dominate texts or to critically examine specific “operating world views” (Glasgow, 2001, p. 51). Critical Discourse Analysis provides us with the means to further reveal the underlying assumptions of Sara’s implementation of teaching for social justice. It showed how three discourses drove her ideas about social justice, and informed her teaching practices. CDA also provides a framework to examine the relationship of power and dominance of this particular situation. The next part of this paper will deal with this relationship.

### **Teaching for Social Justice and the Rhetoric of “White Talk”**

If, as Apple (1995) argues, that power relations exists as “...a complex and creative culture process,” (p. 84) that involves a network of linguistic and social relationships, then we can say that power as domination employs certain rhetorical strategies to justify its positions. Sara implements the specific rhetoric strategies of “white talk” (Trainor, 2005) to justify her positions and her teaching practices. She employs the rhetoric of “Rationalization of racism” (“That’s the way the world works, and if you can’t handle it, then you’ve got a problem”) and “Assertions of cultural or historical stasis” (“The world has always had racist people.”). The former appears when she contends that there will “always be conflict” while simultaneously recognizing that individuals possess different choices based on their race and class, representing cultural stasis. The combination of the two places disadvantaged students in a continual oppressive position without any hope of any change. Finally, she uses the rhetoric of presenting “negative stereotypes of people of color,” while describing the “positive stereotypes of white” people. Sara does this when she states in her interview that her high school was free of discrimination, and that she never felt discriminated against based on her race; simultaneously, she presents negative stereotypes of her students of color as drug-users, hyper-sexed, and potential criminals. This rhetoric appears in her Discourse of Schooling as well when she explains that students in her class could not produce the same “college-prep” work as students in her suburban high school. In a more subtle fashion, her choice of Whitman’s poem symbolically represents the privileging of canonized texts, common in suburban schools, over culturally relevant texts; again minimizing African-American writers for the “quintessential American poet” (Fieldnotes, April 5, 2001). Finally, it appears in her Discourse of Working stating that students in her school possess different choices and thus could not be held accountable for their limits, and subsequently their plight in life.

Each of these forms of rhetoric is embedded in how Sara teaches for social justice. The rhetoric of domination gets obscured by her rationalizations for her teaching practices. In addition, they further expose the relationships of power and the legitimization

of certain knowledge. To further unpack the relations between Sara's conception of teaching for social justice, and power and knowledge, the next section examines how the discourses and rhetoric affects her interactions with her students.

## **Teaching for Social Justice: Power and Dominance**

Power involves the controlling of one group of people over another (Van Dijk, 1993). It can occur through action, as in limiting the freedoms that certain groups may enact, and/ or through "cognition", which entails influencing the minds of the other group (Van Dijk, 1993). CDA describes how certain discourses become legitimate or seen as natural. There are three ways that this paper will analyze power relations: 1. It will look at who has access to discourse and communication; 2. It will look at the ways that dominant discourses seek to influence "knowledge, beliefs, understanding, plans, attitudes, ideologies, norms and values" (VanDijk, 1993, p. 257). These forms of cognitions operate on the social level because they are shared by group members and help to monitor social action; 3. It will examine the discourse structures that seek to reproduce power relations among groups.

### **Power and Access**

Controlling access to discourses and establishing the limits of action are key components to maintaining power over someone else. Those who have access to "special discourse genre or styles" in certain contexts possess the upper-hand over those who do not. In Sara's situation, she was asked to compose a lesson that exhibited her views of teaching for social justice. There were many ways that she could have established access to certain forms of knowledge and actions; it is in the "estranged reading positions" (Janks, 1997, p. 330) that I notice the underlying power relations at play in Sara's classrooms; meaning what did she not do in her classroom with her students, what did she not teach, and how did she not teach. For example, Sara controlled the agenda, the piece of literature, and perhaps more important, dominated the students' responses to her questions, continually leading them to the "appropriate" answer.

Furthermore, Sara chose a specific type of literature that, as she exclaimed in her interview, is part of the traditional canon. Excluding culturally relevant literature for her class on social justice, we see from the interview, was a deliberate choice. Instead of exposing students to literary texts that could enrich their understanding of their cultural heritage, Sara's selection seeks to legitimate the dominant "suburban" canon, and simultaneously dismiss or minimize theirs. She is on some level seeking to give inner-city, underprivileged students "access" to the kind of privileged education that she had, but doesn't really believe that her students can "access" it. This explains why she has her students write a resume and cover-letter for characters instead of a literary paper. Sara, educated in the genres of power and dominance, opts to give her students genres that will help them "get a job." In her view, if the girls don't get pregnant, and the boys stay "clean" and they know how to apply for a job, then she's teaching for social justice. Finally, she debunks the message of her text (what I shall assume, you shall assume) towards the conclusion of her lesson when she briefly touches on the issue of inequality. Although her students agree with her that equality does not exist in the United States, she refuses to dive into the issue and investigate why this is so. Instead, she moves on to another topic, and ends with the homework assignment. It's as if she sends the message that inequalities exists, and you need to learn the dominant discourses in order to be successful. Based on this information, what sort of "norms" is she endorsing in her lesson?

### **Power and Cognition**

Perhaps the most insidious forms of power are the ones that legitimize norms and values. In brief, power dominates through "mind management" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 257). For Sara, she reinforces the view of the teacher as the "all knowing" person in the classroom, where students learn to give the "appropriate" answers, and she dictates what occurred in the classroom. In addition, her classroom reflected traditional pedagogy, desks in rows, facing the teacher, where the teacher poses the questions and student answers the questions. Positioning herself this way, Sara legitimizes the discourses that inform her pedagogy, namely the discourses of schooling and working, privileging "appropriate" literature, appropriate assignments, such as resumes and cover-letters instead of essays, and the appropriate responses to literature. A very subtle rhetorical strategy Sara uses is the use of hyperbole of the "other" and of her culture to support the impression that hers is better than the other. In the interview, she stated that she did not experience discrimination in her environment because there wasn't much diversity and thus, very little "antagonism." This hyperbole, almost an Eden-like description of her environment is matched with her hyperbole of her students where she describes her students with "large families," where the girls are trying to make it through high school without getting "pregnant," and the boys trying to stay "clean." This rhetorical strategy of overemphasizing certain characteristics of one culture over another perpetuates or reproduces dominate cognitive structures of the "elite classes." Sara can thus make the following conclusion about teaching her students:

...in terms of my ideas on social justice, um I think that there's just a need for teachers, and a need for good teachers, and there's a need for teachers who often times think like me...if you look at a body of English teachers, I think somebody with my ideals, my philosophy towards education, towards literature, probably would be necessary (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Based on the discourses that inform Sara's teaching for social justice, we can see how she may draw this conclusion. The purpose, then, of her role in this particular school that has social justice in its title is to perpetuate dominant cognitive structures that glorify suburban, elite culture, while distorting and minimizing the "other's" cultural heritage. As discussed above, Trainor (2005) demonstrates that such exaggeration, one that presents "negative stereotyping of people of color" while portraying whites with "positive stereotypes" (p. 167) obscures racist rhetoric and justifies dominating oppressed, underprivileged people.

## **Power and Discourse Structures**

Discourse structures illustrate the relationship between discourse and cognition. Within power-dominance relationships, we begin to see the US versus Them attitude, and the legitimation of dominant discourses through various rhetorical strategies. In general, those who have access to dominant discourses, generate a view of themselves and of the "other," while simultaneously, and perhaps subconsciously, monitor the production of those discourses, and "if there is no fear of retaliation" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 262) may lead to a certain "production of discourse structures that signal...underlying bias" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 262). This system occurs by arguing that "this is way it always is" or such examples of the "other" are "typical."

A clear example of how discourse structures emerge in Sara's classroom is her reference to the "large families," and how they influence the girls to get pregnant at an early age. This example exhibits a "hyperbolic enhancement" of her students' "negative actions" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 264). Another example she chooses to describe her students is when she referred to a male student who followed her directions, but wrote about an "inappropriate" response:

I asked them to write down ten things that they did yesterday...he writes, "I was shot by something, something, something, I smoked crack, I sold crack, I sold weed" (Interview, March 27, 2001).

Such storytelling, where she describes an event that happened to her, but highlighting the "other's" negative attributes, allows Sara to argue that her students don't know what's appropriate and what's not appropriate for school. Again, we see how she wants to silence students' experiences for ones that resemble her own. Also, the hyperboles and storytelling produce a separation between Sara and her students. Such separation is required in order for dominant discourses to reproduce and oppress other people. In many ways, Sara's primary struggle is not with her students, but with her ability to silence them in order to instill in them dominant modes of thinking and behaving. She did not, in short, take the "dialectical" stance that Greene recommends.

## **Conclusion**

This paper raises an "uneasiness" about professing to teach for social justice. It is not intended to support deleting it from a mission statement but it is intended to get at the underlying assumptions that people may have when they claim that they teach for social justice. If we are going to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach for social justice, we have to continually challenge, consider, and ask: What does that mean? What are the power-dominant relationships at play according to your implementation of your conceptions of teaching for social justice? Do they reproduce dominant structures or, do they seek to subvert them, empowering oppressed groups to liberate themselves from these dominant structures? In short, we need to excavate the underlying assumptions embedded in both our views of social justice and our practices of teaching for social justice. What Sara missed in her quest to give her urban students a suburban education was that doing so neither requires them to think critically about their own positions, nor to question dominant discourses. By not taking this key step, Sara instead reproduces dominant structures, thus keeping her students in place. If teacher-preparation programs, or schools of education, are going to prepare individuals to "teach for social justice," then we need to engage pre-service and in-service teachers in a conversation about what it means and how one can do it. This study offers some suggestions, such as combining the following assignments: 1. Have students write a philosophy statement and/or an educational biography, 2. Have students prepare and present a lesson that embodies their views of teaching for social justice, 3. Encourage students to consider the role that reading and writing play in their conception and enactment of social justice, 4. Hold debates on issues of equity, class, race, and other forms of discrimination, 5. Have a panel (talkshow format) of secondary urban students visit your class to discuss their various experiences of being in school. In short, we can use our teacher-preparation classes as spaces to hold a "complicated conversation" about teaching for social justice where we reveal embedded assumptions about our perspectives, expose

dominate Discourses and power relationships, and the rhetorical implications of our “talk.”

A common understanding of social justice may not be obtainable, and many of us may disagree about how to develop a common way to teach for social justice, it seems clear from this study that looking further into the power relations and forces that legitimize certain forms of knowledge is a fruitful endeavor. By doing so, we may consider thinking twice next time someone claims to teach for social justice or, when they recommend excluding it from a mission statement.

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