

TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PEACE EDUCATION:
PROMISING PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

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“While we will need a new way of living, we need even more urgently a new way of thinking.”¹

Transformative education within a context of social justice involves teaching for personal, social, and global change. Learning involves experience, discovery, reflection, perspectives taking, relationship building, and, potentially, a significant shift in one’s beliefs, values, and actions. A transformative approach to education challenges the narrow content of authorized curricula, hierarchical forms of power in the school systems, and the preparation of individuals to be consumers in a society where materialism, competition, and technological advancement take precedence over spiritual growth, compassion, and the development of cultures of peace.² This qualitative research study considers the vital role that teachers can play in creating innovative learning contexts in which students can explore peace and social justice issues that transcend geographic, national, and cultural boundaries, including environmental devastation, systemic violence, war, the refugee crisis, powerlessness, and the exclusion of marginalized groups. The paper examines parallels between social justice education, peace education, and transformative learning, and offers recommendations for educators who wish to encourage social justice awareness and transformative learning.

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH GOALS

As an educational researcher, I wanted to investigate how teachers conceptualize teaching for social justice and peace education. I wanted to learn more about the ways educators facilitate learning that integrates key themes from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Associated Schools Project (ASPnet) in four areas: inclusive education, education for sustainable development, human rights education, and education in support of intercultural dialogue. UNESCO's Associated Schools Network is an international organization that helps teachers learn practical ways to apply social justice themes in their teaching at the academic, personal, social, and global levels.³ Many of the participants in this study belong to this organization. From the teachers' narratives, I wanted to hear how learning dynamics are articulated when working with today's linguistically and culturally diverse students. What challenges do they face? What hopes do educators have for their students as potential agents of change in a globalizing world? Maxine Greene writes about the "transformation, openings, and possibilities" for teachers to be catalysts for positive change and "new imaginings" of a world that is peaceful and accepting of diversity.⁴ Along similar lines, Robert Hill views learning as a "lifelong adventure" that is situated as a "quest for truth, authenticity, and what is right."⁵ Future studies of educators' perspectives on teaching for social justice and peace education can inform and enlighten educational program planning. To what extent does the school system value educators' efforts to create a curriculum that supports students to think more deeply about personal, social, and global issues? How is personal transformation related to social change? To what extent are their students motivated to learn more deeply about social justice issues? Deborah Britzman⁶ explains that there are three ways of telling one's story, which reflect three dimensions: the ethnographic (where the emphasis is on descriptive detail), the reflective (where the emphasis is on critical thinking and reflection), and the uncanny (where more complex, conflicting thoughts, emotions, and experiences begin to emerge). This research study is an initial attempt to explore teachers' own narratives of teaching for change at a time when knowledge, creativity, hope, and courage are needed to address pressing inequities in our world.⁷

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE INQUIRY

My qualitative research draws upon phenomenography and narrative inquiry.⁸ Sharan B. Merriam writes that “in the same way that ethnography focuses on culture, a phenomenological study focuses on the essence of the structure of an experience. Phenomenologists are interested in showing how complex meanings are built out of simple units of direct experience.”⁹ Thomas Groenwald explains: “the aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework, but remaining true to the facts.”¹⁰ There is also a dynamic and reciprocal nature to the interview process. Steinar Kvale’s concept of the “inter view,” which emphasizes the interchange of views between two individuals regarding ideas of mutual interest, best reflects my intent of the research process in this study. The interview process was not “formulaic” but rather viewed more as a discussion exploring the challenges of teaching social justice themes in today’s classroom.¹¹ Max van Manen emphasizes that there is also the potential for interviews to be transformative as new ideas and perspectives can emerge for both the interviewer and the participant.¹² In addition to tape recording and transcribing the interviews, I collected field notes which record my thoughts, insights, and impressions about the school, the educators’ insights, and their approaches to teaching and learning. I wrote a summary of each interview and highlighted key themes and patterns evolving out of the content. A number of teachers gave me artifacts that included assignments, examples of student work, and texts used in their teaching. The experiences of individuals are “bracketed, analyzed, and compared” to identify the “essence of phenomenon.”¹³

In my study, the phenomena relate to the thoughts, expectations, and experiences of twenty teachers, school counsellors, and school administrators. The participants are experienced educators with a minimum of fifteen years’ experience in teaching. Eight men and twelve women took part in this study. Each interview lasted one to two hours. I met with each teacher twice. The second interview ensured accuracy in the way that I interpreted the educators’ views. The second interview provided me with an opportunity to more clearly understand the educator’s views and perspectives. I also invited the teachers to write down any thoughts that they had about the value of teaching for social justice and peace education. The data from the interviews were collected in the years 2012-14. I reviewed ethics protocol with all the participants and they were informed that the study was voluntary. Some

of the specific open-ended interview questions included: I am interested in exploring the way race, culture, language, and social class impact teaching and learning. Can you describe your thoughts about how these factors influence your teaching and your students' learning? Can you describe a successful teaching experience involving social justice awareness? How are pedagogical decisions shaped by your understanding of who your students are? How would you best describe your role and responsibility as a teacher, counselor, or administrator? What values, beliefs, and ideals guide your practice and inspire you to continue your work? What does social justice and peace education mean to you? What does teaching for change look like in your classroom? In your view, which learners are most underserved in our society? Why? To what extent do you think that educators today have a social and moral obligation to foster equitable and inclusive schools practices? How do you create a curriculum that reflects the linguistic and culturally diverse society of Canada? How might you encourage creativity and critical thinking among your learners? Once the interviews were transcribed and summarized, I looked for themes and patterns which were then compared to the theoretical literature on social justice education and transformative learning theory. Common patterns and themes that evolved in the interviews included: literacy learning should inform, uplift, and inspire; teaching for cultural intelligence involves the development of emotional intelligence and qualities such as self-awareness and empathy; transformative teaching is complex and creative; and, raising awareness about human rights and planetary sustainability can enrich teaching and learning. Effective teaching, from the standpoint of the educators in this study, goes beyond teaching academic mastery in a specific discipline.

LINKING SOCIAL JUSTICE AND PEACE EDUCATION TO TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

Transformative learning describes the way individuals interpret, construct, validate, and reappraise their experiences. A fundamental shift takes place in the way they see themselves and the world. Life crises, such as the death of someone close, divorce, a move, trauma, conflict, or war, and rebuilding one's life in an unfamiliar culture, can create conflict, self-examination, reflection, and a change or revision in perspective. Jack Mezirow writes that transformative learning can be viewed as "an enhanced level of awareness of the context of one's beliefs and feelings, a critique of one's assumptions

and particular premises, and an assessment of alternative perspectives.”¹⁴ This deeper level learning involves an exploration of how social and cultural forces influence our own values, feelings, and meanings. An act of learning can be called transformative only if it involves a fundamental questioning and reconceptualizing of how one thinks or acts.¹⁵ The teacher can play a crucial role in fostering transformative learning.

Teaching from a transformative perspective involves teachers being able to acknowledge the socio-cultural context that youth today experience. Many students in inner cities, for example, are dealing with problems such as gang violence, single parenting, drug and alcohol addiction, and balancing school with employment responsibilities. In a society that is adversarial and confrontational, our students may benefit from learning ways of solving problems that are collaborative and less polarizing. Along these lines, Henry Giroux emphasizes the need to create a larger public dialogue to re-envision education, civic engagement, and social transformation. According to Giroux, the youth of today are increasingly marginalized. He emphasizes the need for educators to look critically at the stresses and challenges of our time: systemic class inequalities, racism, and a culture of downsizing are deficits that have “created a generation of unskilled and displaced youth who have been expelled from shrinking markets, blue-collar jobs, and any viable hope in the future . . . more than five million youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four are out of school, work, and hope.”¹⁶

Theories of transformative learning have been applied extensively in different educational contexts such as literacy development, counseling, health education, planetary sustainability, cultural adaptation and intercultural awareness, and professional development.¹⁷ The common themes in transformative learning involve critical reflection, creativity, self-knowledge, a reverence for life, democratic discourse, and the balance of attaining collective and personal goals. In recent years, studies applying transformative learning to individuals living in an urban setting have advanced our understanding of the contextual nature of learning and the way learning is influenced by factors such as population density, cultural diversity, the presence of financial resources, and access to quality education.¹⁸ A key difference among the applications of transformative learning theory is the emphasis on psychological and individual change in comparison to transformative social activism, political change, and critical global awareness. Edward Taylor writes that the multiple theoretical conceptions of transformative

learning theory have “the potential to offer a more diverse interpretation of transformative learning and have significant implications for practice.”¹⁹ Culture, ethnicity and race, the role of spirituality, planetary sustainability, emancipatory teaching, and non-Western ways of knowing represent themes that have emerged as transformative learning theory has evolved.

Climate change, resource depletion, the erosion of democracy, and inequality that exists across nations and borders challenge all individuals to work together in positive ways. Our educational systems are starting points to address these challenges. Teaching with social justice themes emphasizes both the teachers’ and students’ roles in imagining and creating a positive, diverse, and equitable vision for a just society. Curriculum choices, the school culture and climate, the resources available, specific teaching strategies, and the larger community can support a social justice approach to teaching. Spiritual and emotional growth can complement social change: “In an interconnected world, the uniqueness of each of us is situated in deep and respectful relationship to all living beings and the Earth.”²⁰ Deidre Kelly emphasizes that anti-oppression education builds upon an “asset” model of learning; multiple perspectives from diverse student populations are an essential part of teaching for social justice: “As educators and citizens, we need to be concerned about the effects of persistent poverty, cultural imperialism, racism, heterosexism—and the list goes on.”²¹ While teachers alone cannot solve persistent social problems, they are catalysts, challengers, and cultural guides who can assist students as they explore pressing issues of our time.

A SPIRITUAL FOCUS IN LEARNING

The work in social justice education reinforces many of the themes highlighted in peace education. Encouraging students to envision a culture of peace, notes Anne Goodman, “frees their imagination” and empowers them as they see that they and others are working toward a world that values diversity, equity, and sustainability.²² Goodman draws upon the work of Martin Buber and Elise Boulding to make her point. The “culture of peace,” as Buber writes, is a vision of “what should be . . . inseparable from a critical and fundamental relationships to the existing condition to humanity.”²³ Boulding suggests that cultures of peace have historically existed alongside and in opposition to “cultures of violence” which are defined by all forms of violence, intolerance and a view of the “other” as the enemy, authoritarian decision making, secrecy, propaganda and the manipulation of information,

and exploitation of individuals.²⁴ In contrast, a culture of peace is a vision rooted in the reality of suffering and the need for change and transformation.²⁵ Movements such as Voluntary Simplicity and Idle no More speak to a need to develop communities of peace and alternative ways of living that reduce poverty, economic disparity, structural and systemic forms of violence, and war. Goodman suggests that peace and social justice movements often begin with individual and local group initiatives:

Much of everyday living and the nurturing of families—the celebration of events, human creativity—represent examples of peace cultures hidden from official view. . . . We must go beyond the rational and the objective, calling on the artists and storytellers, the children and the mystics, in the cultures that traditionally had no word for peace, since peace was to infuse everything. This aspect of the culture of peace cannot be quantified or easily recorded and since its outcomes are not necessarily known, it is difficult to describe.²⁶

Edmund V. O’Sullivan and Budd Hall detail global and planetary perspectives of transformative learning. Systemic and structural barriers that reinforce poverty, racism, sexism, war, work degradation, human rights violations, and ecological devastation need to be examined from a critically reflective stance. Dispossession and a sense of alienation, notes O’Sullivan, are the fallout of globalization. Alternative lifestyles and ways of thinking are needed to counteract the negative impact of planetary devastation and rampant globalization. Transformative learning can be described as

a deep, structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feeling, and actions. . . . Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and the natural world; our understanding of power in interlocking structures of class, race, and gender; our body-awareness; our visions of alternative approaches to living; and our sense of the possibilities for social justice and peace, and personal joy.²⁷

Hall notes that, in global terms, over one hundred million people are refugees, forced to flee their homelands and live against their choice in countries in which they were not born.²⁸ Many people are losing a vital connection to each other, the natural world, and themselves, and education can play a role in helping people reframe the way they view the world. Highlighting the

work of William Rees in *Our Ecological Footprint*, Hall writes that “clearly we are on an ecological collision path between a Utopia of the rich and the carrying capacity of a still-fragile planet.”¹⁴

A transformative education can encourage the “release of our creativity and imagination” and help us to become, as Paulo Freire notes, “agents in our own history.” A “new utopia” is inspired by indigenous knowledge and can be found in local community gardens, individual and family choices to live more simple lives, and the still growing “green economic development movement.”¹⁵ Reinforcing this perspective, Jack Miller suggests that a “meaning-centered curriculum” would not only address the needs and aspirations of students, but would examine ways to reduce problems like poverty, conflict, mental illness, homelessness, racism, and social injustice. Learning cannot be compartmentalized and viewed solely from a cognitive process. “From a spiritual perspective, learning does not just involve the intellect; instead, it includes every aspect of our being including the physical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual.”¹⁶

In “The Project and Vision of Transformative Education,” O’Sullivan further posits that educational institutions at all levels need to play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of community. We need to move away from a consumer-based society and into one that is life-sustaining and inclusive: “Contemporary education today suffers deeply by its eclipse of the spiritual dimension of our world and our universe. . . . It has also been compromised by the vision and values of the market.”¹⁷ O’Sullivan suggests that educational initiatives can focus on bioregional studies that would help students develop a greater awareness of place. Bioregional study would involve a study of the land, the history of the community that has occupied a particular region, and the histories of the people in each bioregion: “Education for the purpose of cultivating a sense of the history of an area enables people to have loyalties and commitment to their place of their dwelling.”¹⁸ Creating awareness of locality and place can correct and reposition global inequities and a lack of resources.

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE UNESCO ASSOCIATED SCHOOLS PROGRAM

The application of the global-planetary perspective of transformative learning directly links to a current qualitative study that explores the conceptions of social justice of twenty teachers and administrators from various

elementary and secondary schools in Winnipeg. Many of the teachers and administrators who are participating in my study are part of the UNESCO Associated Schools network. UNESCO Associated Schools is part of global network of schools that promotes quality education through the integration of social justice themes like global issues, peace and human rights, intercultural learning, and education for sustainable development. Interestingly, many of the themes highlighted in the UNESCO Earth Charter³⁴ reflect the different strands of transformative learning theory. The commitment of the teachers and administrators that I spoke with address a need for educators to connect with the larger community of learners, not only in the Winnipeg locale but internationally. A “transformative” education, from the perspective of these educators, involves responding to the economic, technological, political, and social changes that have taken place in recent years. They want education to be relevant and potentially empowering for their students.

Teaching Roles are Complex

When I asked the participants to describe their role in the school, they identified themselves as “problem solvers,” “artists,” “visionaries,” “cultural guides,” “advocates,” “researchers,” “challengers,” and “mediators.” One school principal connects the image of a “key” to his own role as a facilitator who “opens doors” to potential projects and new ways of thinking and learning. He further explains that

while our teachers are at different stages in their learning and their career, they have valuable skills, patience, and creativity. I look for qualities like commitment, caring, and the ability to connect with challenging students. The success and planning of so many of our UNESCO initiatives have started with teachers who come to me with great ideas. I help them organize the parameters in realistic ways that will be acceptable to all—the students, the teachers, and the parents in the communities.

Many of the educators in this study hold a holistic approach to learning and teaching. The following teacher narrative excerpts reflect the various ways UNESCO themes are embedded in the mission of the school, the curriculum, and specific teaching and learning practices:

The UNESCO themes of social justice are embedded in our school and in the curriculum for all subjects. It is not an “add on” nor is it simply about “fund raising” to build a school in another

part of the world. Without helping students respect themselves and care for each other, initiatives such as food drives and building a new school in a developing country will be limited. At our school, we start with an emphasis on self-awareness and a developing of basic interpersonal skills like listening and empathy. Having said that, we also encourage the value of local initiatives like community gardening and helping students meet and dialogue with children and elders from communities that they might be very unfamiliar with. The artwork you see around the school is a representation of the cultural diversity of our students and it is their representation of different forms of social justice. I see learning as a broadening of community; it is also about gaining self-knowledge. Learning is about being open to possibilities, challenging yourself to the limit, and reflecting about what you have done.

We live in a “have and have not” society. Even in this school, we have students from both very affluent families and others who face economic hardship. A significant proportion of our students come from single parent homes. The common thread is that they are a part of this school and it represents a positive community where everyone has knowledge and experience to share. We have to find concrete ways to help our students improve their own lives and then move beyond themselves to improve their communities.

By working on global projects such as raising money to build a school in Sri Lanka or Kenya, my students see in very concrete ways how poverty, race, and social class impact the basics we often take for granted here in Canada. Some of the students will have the opportunity to travel overseas and experience a different culture. This global learning experience has the potential to activate positive change in their own lives and communities.

Innovation is being original in the way you teach. Learning is taking an idea and turning it in some way into your own

creation. History and human geography are very much linked to transformative thinking—you need to understand the past if you are to move forward in your future. History is not dead. I try to inspire my students to be investigators, ethnographers, and archeologists. I want them to see cause and consequence, continuity and change, and a historical perspective can provide this. In their inquiry based project “Shadows of Manitoba’s Past,” my students went to the Manitoba archives and found first-hand knowledge—letters, diary entries, poems, travel documents, maps, and other valuable documents of Manitobans famous, infamous, and not well known. Each student was responsible for developing expertise about a particular person. Often, someone that might have been relatively unknown, and yet they played an important role in shaping Manitoba today. The students created amazing projects that integrated art, photography, historical biography, and dramatic scripts.

These educators emphasize the importance of “transformative creativity” in generating innovative teaching and learning strategies. They are, as Amish Morrel notes, using “creative approaches that both disrupt old boundaries and integrate disciplines in imaginative new configurations.”³⁵ As Giroux notes, literacy learning involves “reading the world in spaces and social relationships constructed between themselves and others.”³⁶ Qualities associated with creativity include an openness to new experience, curiosity, the examination of a problem from multiple vantage points, optimism, and an intrinsic motivation to learn. These characteristics are reflected in the participants’ narratives.³⁷ Educators value a climate of learning that encourages imagination and measured risk taking. They are helping their students broaden their perspective of the world and creating spaces where the students can take positive action locally, nationally, and globally. Indeed, in Manitoba, new curricula continue to be developed in the areas of human rights, English language arts, history, aboriginal studies, global issues, and education for sustainable development; they all emphasize a social justice component. There is a “reimagining” of the way curricula are being taught. Several emerging theoretical perspectives on critical literacy, including intertextuality, ecoliteracies, and cultural studies, directly emphasize social justice issues.³⁸ UNESCO themes emphasizing human rights and creating cultures of peace are interwoven with curriculum theory.

Education Should Uplift, Inform, and Challenge: Creating New Spaces for Self-Awareness and Social Change

A number of the educators in this study, such as those in English language, arts, history, and world issues courses, conceptualize the curriculum content as “mirrors and windows” with the potential to empower students personally and academically. While specific classes have curriculum units framed around UNESCO themes, the school at large provides an opportunity for students to participate in groups like the sustainable development committee. Short and longer term projects are collaboratively organized by faculty members and the student body. Anna, an English teacher at a large secondary school in Winnipeg, explains that social change begins with self-awareness, empathy, and cultural sensitivity. For her, the UNESCO pillars of “learning to do, learning to know, learning to be, and learning to be together” are connected to critical literacy components such as responding personally and critically to texts, clarifying and extending ideas in creative ways, and celebrating community. In a “Perspectives of War” unit, Anna’s students examine the nature of war from different voices that include the voice of a child, a soldier, and a mother whose son and husband were killed in war. Anna explains that reading memoirs like Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone* or I, *Rigoberta Menchu* can encourage a greater awareness of human rights and democracy, voices of children in war, soldiers, the struggle against oppression, and the concept of “freedom fighters.”

Jerrod, a world issues and English language arts teacher in a secondary school in Winnipeg where over fifty languages (other than English) are spoken, conceptualizes his role as challenger. Literacy is a dynamic practice that challenges learners to investigate different experiences, histories, cultural backgrounds, and spaces. He encourages his students to welcome difference, identify contradictions, and search for a synthesis or reframing of past and current problems. Jerrod uses excerpts from Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me* as a powerful exploration into “racial profiling” and the ongoing discrimination of young African American men in the United States. Texts like these are linked to Lawrence Hill’s *The Book of Negroes* as a way of exploring racism and discrimination across different historical contexts. Jerrod encourages reflective thought and active inquiry in his classes:

Social justice to me involves identifying the hypocrisy and contradictions in our society. What do we mean by a “war on terror”? My students can see these contradictions. As a teacher,

you are helping individuals understand their world. Teaching English language arts has the potential to be transformative if teachers are knowledgeable and are willing to take risks. There is a depth and richness that is ideal for exploring social issues such as crime, poverty, and marginalization. I want to burst my students' bubble of comfort, so to speak. We still live in a have and have not society. Why? I want my students to investigate this question. I teach books that appeal to young people; the protagonists in novels like *Night* by Elie Wiesel, and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy involve young adults facing a society with arbitrary rules. The young person in these novels is the outsider. These texts are disrupting, but in a positive way. The world is a microcosm of the human world. We use language to express emotion and if I can help my students develop self-awareness and self-expression, I feel that I am making a difference. I also give my students independence in choosing texts and writing projects. I encourage writers' notebooks, interactive technology, book talks, debates, and creative writing. Last term, some of my students read ten novels!

Jacqueline, a resource teacher at a private school in Winnipeg, emphasizes that alternative contexts and spaces for learning are needed if we are to engage more students:

School architecture is of interest to me. We need to consider new spaces for learning that provide students with more freedom to design their own schedules of learning. They need to be able to move from a smaller class to a larger forum with greater ease. Teaching is learning and we need to personalize learning more. In my view, effective teachers have multiple ways of engaging learners. Literacy learning is multi-dimensional. Mixing art, screen writing, literature, and inquiry projects that link English language arts, history, religion, and the sciences together will result in greater creativity. I see myself as a challenger and "disruptor" of the status quo. I also identify with the roles of a collaborator and researcher. Teachers are leaders but they are not always given the time, resources, and tools needed to lead.

The work produced by the students at the UNESCO schools reflects a balance of individual and global awareness. One student at an adult learning centre was generously sharing recent writing projects he developed. Roger designed a comprehensive research proposal to create a “dedicated, volunteer-based storm/flood planning emergency response agency in Manitoba.” He wrote extensively about Manitoba and its history of flooding. Another of his research papers focuses on the topic “Fear is the primary barrier against a true global community.” His analysis includes an insightful discussion of Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis*. Integrating sociology, psychology, and political studies, this student demonstrates creativity and critical thinking skills that skillfully integrate local and global issues. He examines the way North American society has responded to living in a post 9/11 world. Roger argues that fear is a basis of racism, gated communities, organized crimes, and acts of terrorism. We need to find global solutions if we are to refer to the “residents of Earth” as a single unified people in search of peace and universal values. The teaching and learning dynamic evident from the interviews echoes Giroux’s emphasis on creating a climate in which personal empowerment and social justice awareness can flourish:

Knowledge and power come together not to merely reaffirm experience and difference but to also interrogate it, to open up broader theoretical considerations, to tease out its limitations, and to engage a vision of community in which student voices define themselves in terms of the distinct historical and social formations and their broader collective hopes. For critical educators, this entails speaking to important social, political, and cultural issues from a deep sense of the politics of their own location.³⁹

Martina, a history and English teacher at an adult learning centre in Winnipeg, encourages her students to read international short fiction. They are then asked to write about race, class, and gender as these categories relate to issues of personal and global concern. Using biographies such as *Unbowed* by Wangari Maathi, and *I, Rigoberta Menchu* in her classes, Martina is helping her students integrate linguistic, emotional, artistic, geographic, socio-cultural, and ecological literacies. Martina’s ideas and approaches to teaching are consistent with Heather Bruce who emphasizes that English language arts teachers need to reimagine and redirect the focus of teaching

classic and contemporary texts in a way that promotes

empathy for both human and nonhuman species, for the soil, water, and air in which all of life depends. . . . English teachers specialize in questions of vision, values, ethical understanding. . . . Our expertise in addressing the aesthetic, ethical, and sociopolitical implications of the most pressing human concerns of our time enable us to reach toward and embrace environmental problems.⁴⁰

One UNESCO-themed student learning project featured a photo contest called “Rachel Carson—Sense of Wonder” to highlight the environmental awareness unit. Martina’s students could either present their final project in a photographic essay or a montage of their own visual images and photographs of the “wonders of nature” that they have observed in their neighbourhoods or in the city. Martina emphasizes that the students were expected to take the pictures and organize their photos in a way that told a story of their “wonders of nature” in their own community.

Empathy, Self-Awareness, and Intercultural Intelligence are Dimensions of Literacy Learning

While the teachers do not directly state that they were integrating “emotional intelligence” into their teaching, many of the teaching and learning strategies that they apply reflect, in essence, self-awareness, empathy, cultural intelligence, and an appreciation of social and global issues.⁴¹ Choice, accessibility, and the “demystification” of literature were themes that surfaced in the interviews with the teachers in this study. Reflective journaling, critical questioning, and classroom dialogue create a climate of safety and sharing. Some of the teachers identify with the role of advocate, cultural guide, role model, challenger, and seeker when asked to elaborate on their role or image that came to their mind when they reflect on their own teaching. A number of the teachers also write poetry, fiction, and non-fiction that have appeared in local and national publications.

Stephan, a drama and creative writing teacher in a large urban inner city high school, describes the value of helping reluctant or struggling readers and “at-risk” older teenagers read a range of fiction and nonfiction texts that focus on loneliness, peer pressure, family, the future, and relationship building. He emphasizes the importance of choice, creative writing, and the value of integrating life skills across the disciplines:

Writing is an act of seeing. I try to encourage my students to be good observers. I want my students to articulate their experiences and in the process heal in some way. Poetry allows my students to articulate their experiences and in the process heal in some way. Many of my students are burdened by terrific emotions. I think that the whole idea of teaching literature and creative writing is to inform, uplift, and serve as a useful psychological and spiritual guide.

Psychology, cultural studies, sociology, and world issues can be integrated in teaching English. Stephan highlights the role of “powerful” literature and non-fiction to inform, uplift, and ultimately transform life experience. A greater understanding of human nature and the ability to solve problem can emerge:

The human question . . . who one is and what makes other people tick and so on is a never ending process. Literature also provides shape and form to life’s questions. That’s what keeps people reading. My approach to teaching involves this exploration. I have a desire to make shape out of different facts. Unlike other kinds of teaching where the curriculum may be very set and specific, there is an element of discovery in teaching English. Freud studied literature as a way of understanding personality and motivation. There is something bigger than an academic discipline in studying literature. We all have a narrative to tell. At its basic level, literature exists to help people understand themselves and the world.

Stephan uses texts such as Simon Wiesenthal’s *The Sunflower* to explore essential questions about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness and compassion. The students were asked to write about a situation in their life where they had forgiven someone for betraying or hurting them. Perspective-taking can be explored in *The Sunflower* when students read the response to Wiesenthal’s question: “A dying Nazi soldier asks for your forgiveness. What would you do?” The second half of the text challenges the students to read the responses given by well known thinkers and leaders such as The Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mary Gordon, and Herbert Marcuse. The responses in Stephan’s class were shared and new insights into the nature of human compassion were gained. As a published poet, Stephan encourages his students to read varied poetic forms such as ballads, free verse, and

sonnets; he then challenges his students to write their own poetry. Alluding to William Wordsworth's insight that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," Stephan's students wrote about topics meaningful in their own lives: the experience of racism, life without parents and living in foster homes, financial hardship, and the desire to move ahead in life and not be burdened with depression and anxiety. In many ways, he views his teaching as therapeutic for students struggling with identity and self-esteem challenges. The class poetry anthology is titled "Awareness," and integrates classic poems with the students' own contributions.

Emily, a Grade Twelve teacher in a large secondary school in Winnipeg, shares her approach to teaching from a social justice stance. She explains how important it is for students to understand a connection between their own lives and the larger world. She explains that teaching for social justice is aimed at both personal and global change: "The quote that best sums up the UNESCO themes is from Mahatma Gandhi who said 'Become the change you want to see.'" The books that Emily's students read are used in an interdisciplinary way to bridge literature, psychology, sociology, and history. While students have choices in terms of reading and project work, she uses "anchor" texts that form the basis of exploring topics such as racism and stereotyping. Sherman Alexie's popular novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian*, for example, can be used to challenge negative cultural stereotypes and racism toward First Nation People. While the book is set on a reservation in Spokane, Washington, she tries to make connections between the American and Canadian cultural contexts. Her students explore the cultural and historical factors that forced First Nation people in North America to live on "reserves." The loss of one's language, culture, and lifestyle, and attempted escape through alcohol and other substances, can be explored through a complex and critical lens if the novel is taught in an interdisciplinary format that integrates aboriginal studies, psychology, history, and literature. Renee Shilling emphasizes that a greater understanding of the high level of collective stress in daily life of many First Nation people is needed for pathways to reconciliation and healing to occur: "The constant energy of poverty, violence, sadness, family breakdown, abuse, death, assaults, accidents, chronic illnesses, unemployment, and intergenerational trauma paralyzes a community."⁴² An awareness of and insight into the systematic injustices toward cultural minorities could foster empathy and potentially lead to transformative learning experiences. In recent years, investigation of

murdered and missing Aboriginal women in Canada, for example, has been at the forefront of human rights movements demanding restorative justice and truth. Novels such as Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* and graphic texts such as David Alexander Robertson's and Scott B. Henderson's *7 Generations* address family fragmentation, personal tragedy, and the need to build resilience and self-direction. Problem solving and a discussion of the wider institutional barriers that continue to stifle personal, social, and career achievement can be explored in meaningful ways. What has changed among First Nation people in terms of human rights, access to education, family life, and career fulfillment? What has stayed the same and why? Working in a school with a large First Nation population in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Emily feels that the students resonate with this text's attention to poverty, the tragic legacy of the residential school system, societal marginalization, systemic violence, addictions, family fragmentation, suicide, and the loss of language and identity:

The Alexie book is powerful and sad but at the same time it is hopeful, humorous, and gives my students a platform to discuss the cultural stereotypes and racism they have experienced. The hero of the book is trying to make a better life for himself amid the chaos and family tragedies. We make connections to the *7 Generations* series by the Manitoban writer David Robertson, historical documents, and then the students reflect on the ways they have experienced racism and the way it interfered with their plans for the future. I want to find ways of dialoguing that enable students to see beyond themselves in more reflective and hopeful ways. How can we help out students navigate the dangers? Emotionally and cognitively, we are bombarded with images and information that many people do not question. It is like a Pandora's Box. We do not know how each student is interpreting the messages—whether these messages are from Facebook, other social media, or the larger world around them. . . . For many of our students, a piece is missing in their lives and they have experienced trauma. Some days I feel more like a counselor and parent to my students. I feel that an effective literacy teacher is like a person with a key who can open new doors and opportunities for students.

Teachers examining their personal philosophy of teaching is a starting

point for integrating emotional and social intelligence more intentionally within English language arts. Too often the perspectives and philosophies of teachers remain tacit and unclear. Teachers are rarely given opportunities to reflect on the links between the beliefs, values, and ideas that guide their practice and their choice of curriculum, their preferred teaching strategies, and the way they assess student learning.⁴³

Kiran Qureshi encourages empathy and sharing perspectives through reading world literature. In reading texts from a range of cultures, students become more aware of cultural misconceptions and social justice issues. Three key questions can be explored by students as they read texts from around the world:

- What is familiar or unfamiliar to you about these books?
- What misconceptions do you have about any of the books based on their country of origin, title, or the author's name?
- What connections can you make between these books and your own life?⁴⁴

Related multi-genre reading and writing projects enable students to incorporate personal narratives, interviews, and social commentaries into their work. Qureshi weaves empathy into her lessons and says that “by the end of the year, students have explored the spiritual, physical, and emotional implications of humane and inhumane acts across cultures. Only then can they successfully turn the mirror on themselves to evaluate their humanity and arrive at a set of universally valued human rights.”⁴⁵ In reading a classic play like Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1895) or modern classics like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), students explore the similarities and differences of values, lifestyles, poverty and wealth, and the social roles of women and men from a historical and cultural frame. Students can become active researchers and seekers of knowledge as they broaden their understanding of the social problems faced by individuals today. Reading strategies that involve helping students make predictions, annotate difficult passages, and create glossaries for challenging words can make texts more accessible.

Integrating the dramatic arts into the curriculum is also a valuable way to help students understand volatile and controversial issues such as youth gangs, bullying, and homelessness. Melinda McBee Orzulak writes that “weaving empathy into a lesson is particularly important when dealing with complex topics. . . . The arts can help teachers explore potentially

volatile topics with the students in a free yet safe environment.”⁴⁶ Students can write, read, and act out scripts and plays that focus on themes relevant to their own lives. Allison Baer and Jacqueline Glasgow present an example of using process drama to highlight the theme of bullying that surfaces in young adult fiction like Nancy Gardner’s *Endgame* and Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*. They cite Schneider and Jackson who write that “process drama is a powerful role-play and problem solving activity that encourages the creation of imaginary, unscripted, and spontaneous scenes.”⁴⁷ Active visualization, dialogue, reflection, writing, and performing are some of the ways students are able to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections. Creating readers’ theatre versions of powerful scenes from the novel can encourage a deeper level of awareness of power dynamics of bullying.

Angela Beumer Johnson, Linda Augustus, and Christa Preston Agiro examine the way media literacy and classic plays like William Shakespeare’s *Othello* can be used to explore bullying and its impact on self-esteem. Their article synthesizes the work of a ninth-grade advanced English language arts class in the rural Midwest. The school reflects a rural-suburban student population with approximately eight hundred students in grades nine through twelve. Part of the students’ project involved analyzing the media messages in Jean Kilbourne’s documentary *Killing Us Softly*. In particular, students were asked to analyze the way children are depicted in the media: “Girls are typically portrayed passively, and boys actively; boys are typically standing or taller than girls, unless ethnicity comes into play, in which case the child of color is often seated or shorter than the white child.”⁴⁸ In examining bias in contemporary media, students were then challenged to explore related themes in *Othello*. The concept of “harmful persuasion” was then applied to Iago’s negative influence on *Othello*. Like Shakespeare’s famous villain Iago, a key goal of advertising is to create a climate where fear and insecurity influence a person to buy a particular product. Students were asked to delve more deeply into the psychological and social dynamics of jealousy, rumour, gossip, bullying, group conformity, and the bystander effect. They further analyzed strategies to counteract the harmful effect of the Iagos of the world—“whether these conflicts are presented by people, images, or words.”⁴⁹ Activities like these set the foundation to critically examine literature, the media, and conflict in their own lives.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE WITH POWERFUL TEXTS AND CREATIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

Intercultural competence is a vital personal and social skill that teachers need in today's culturally diverse classrooms. Edward Taylor describes intercultural competence as "a transformative process whereby the [individual] develops an adaptive capacity, altering his or her perspective to effectively understand and accommodate the demands of the new culture; he or she is able to actively negotiate purpose and meaning."⁵⁰ Consistent with Taylor's explanation, Christine Bennett describes the multicultural person as

One who has achieved an advanced level in the process of becoming intercultural and whose cognitive, affective, and behavioral characteristics are not limited but are open to growth beyond the psychological parameters of any one culture. The intercultural person possesses an intellectual and emotional commitment to the fundamental unity of all humans, and at the same time, accepts and appreciates the differences that lie between people of different cultures.⁵¹

The intersection of race, ethnicity, nation, class, religion, and gender can be explored through an examination of world literature.⁵² Sherly Finkle and Tamara Lilly's *Middle Ground* provides teachers with sample lessons for teaching literature such as Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* from a multicultural perspective.⁵³ These authors note that, all too often, world literature courses are not offered to students until they are in high school and, even then, they are usually an elective. Finkle and Lilly emphasize that students' exploration of multiethnic identity, and their need for self-examination in terms of "other," should start earlier in their educational experience. Given the growing number of North American students from Middle Eastern, Asian, and African backgrounds, curriculum choices representing different cultures, experiences, and people should be provided. Societies in these parts of the world are also multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual yet generalizations are often made about individuals and cultures. Bennett writes that, in developing pedagogy for multi-cultural education, there should be "the movement toward equity or equity pedagogy, curriculum reform, or a rethinking of the curriculum so that it represents multiple narratives and perspectives; helping students gain multi-cultural competence." This would provide a foundation for teaching social justice issues and discrimination of all kinds, such as racism, sexism,

and classism.⁵⁴

Developing curricula related to social justice and cross cultural understanding becomes particularly important when considering the trajectory of immigration in North America. The social and cultural fabric of Canada is becoming increasingly complex as the heritage countries of immigration have shifted from European to non-European. Estimates are that, by 2031, one in every three Canadians will be born outside of Canada.⁵⁵ Urban and rural centers in North America continue to receive immigrants and newcomers from war affected countries like Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Middle East. Students from these countries are often developing essential literacy skills while navigating an unfamiliar social and cultural context. Roberta, a senior high EAL teacher explains: “So much of what I do is a type of transmission of culture but I am also involved in helping the students develop social awareness, practical knowledge, and problem solving skills. I have to balance ‘essential literacy skills’ they need in order to move ahead with their interest in North American culture and knowing how the society works here.” Knowledge of other cultures, traditions, languages, and customs that mirror the diversity of the world will equip both teachers and students with the skills to navigate these micro and macro changes. George J. Sefa Dei explains that education provides new ways to help students integrate history, place, and culture:

The individual as a learner has psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cultural dimensions not often taken up in traditional processes of schooling. Holistic education that upholds the importance of spirituality recognizes this complexity by speaking to the idea of wholeness. Context and situation are important to understanding the complex wholeness of individual self or being. The individual has responsibilities to the community and it is through [holistic] education that the connection between the person and the community is made.⁵⁶

Teachers can assist their students in developing the creative, analytical, and intellectual skills to clarify, justify, and realize a more positive vision of the future. Dei further observes that a school system that fails “to tap into youth myriad identities . . . is shortchanging learning. Identity is an important site of knowing. Identity has in effect become a lens of reading one’s world The role and importance of diversity in knowledge production is to challenge and subvert the dominance of particular ways of

knowing.” He emphasizes that a “pedagogy of language liberation” would empower learners to tell their stories and learn about their heritage, history, and culture in interconnected ways. For Dei, spirituality “is about a material and metaphysical existence that speaks to an interconnection of self, community, body, mind, and soul.”⁵⁷

The school can play a major socializing role for learners who have experienced trauma and loss. Teachers who incorporate texts reflecting a diverse range of authors and cultures can promote an inclusive atmosphere. Chris Weber emphasizes that “the very act of writing invites reflection by both students and teachers, which can take place in journals, letters, poems, speeches, formal essays, or more informal personal essays. Whatever the form used, students should see writing as a means of thinking through changes and dilemmas that they and others face.”⁵⁸ He further notes that the larger question concerning the relevance of such personal writing lies in an understanding and appreciation of the way they may have changed or improved, and “an understanding of the larger implications of certain events or actions.”⁵⁹ As Anne Mahon attests to in *The Lucky Ones*, all of our students have powerful narratives to share. In reading biographical accounts and in encouraging students to write autobiographies and personal reflections, teachers honour and validate their students’ prior experiences. Discussions around human rights, the plight of refugees, child soldiers, cultural differences, and the importance of faith and perseverance provide a valuable foundation for writing and further research.⁶⁰

Daniel Xerri and Stephanie Xerri Agius use poetry as a way for their students to build empathy and intercultural awareness. In their research, they specifically use poetry to help their students understand the plight of refugees fleeing the Middle East and finding a safe haven in Mediterranean islands like Malta. In sharing poetry written by refugees fleeing war torn countries like Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Lybia, and Iraq, their Maltese college level students became more sensitive to and understanding of the refugee experience. Cross-cultural understanding, and abstract issues that include racial, economic, and gender inequities, can emerge in ways that enabled their students in Malta to understand the “mindset of an individual caught between two cultures, trying to find a sense of identity in alien surroundings.”⁶¹ They also wanted to help their students break down cultural misconceptions and fears of being “invaded” by refugees seeking a safe haven on their tiny island. Racism, tension, a lack of security, overpopulation,

job availability, economic burden, and the devaluing of citizenship were themes that emerged from the students who wrote poems about their fears of refugees fleeing to Malta. The Somali and Eritrean refugees' poetry reflected alienation, personal tragedy, hardship, and hope for a better future. The Maltese students then read these compelling texts; as a result, a greater empathic understanding of the experiences of immigrants was learned. Through this poetry project, the students transformed their "preconceptions and [were able to] advocate a more sympathetic attitude toward immigrants and their plight . . . we hope that this lesson served to nudge them into a long-term embrace of the emerging multiculturalism of contemporary Maltese society."⁶² The research by Xerri and Xerri Agrius points to a deeper way that the exploration of literary texts can reflect emotions, values, and beliefs. Kyle Vaughan suggests that, rather than asking students to explain the "meaning" of a particular poem, it might be more appropriate to explore where a particular poem is located from a psychological, spiritual, and physical stance:

Ask what part of us the poem might be speaking to or what emotions the poem might be trying to evoke. Is the poem speaking to our own dream life? If so, it will use dream-language and dream-images, which are quite different from waking language and waking images. Is the poem speaking to our philosophical wanderings/wonderings? Is it speaking to our vulnerability, to our rawness, to our spiritual pain, or to our shadow self? Whatever the place or state may be, the language, imagery, method, and experience of the poem may differ greatly.⁶³

Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Mary Alfred developed a framework for transformative teaching that is rooted in teacher self-awareness, social justice, consciousness raising, and developing a safe classroom climate that encourages "connected ways of knowing." These researchers encourage diverse learning contexts and the inclusion of a range of learning strategies:

Each class we teach has varied instructional modes (printed materials, audio, WebCT components, video presentations guest lecturer, collaborative and individual projects) and a range of other ways in which students can participate. . . . Perhaps the most often used and most successful building block of our transformational teaching is the use of dialogue, an informal conversational approach for verbal exchanges and discourse—a

more formal, linear, and directive methodology. It has been our experience that multiple voices, whether ordered as discourse or free flowing dialogue, produce a symphony of ideas and lay groundwork that supports an environment where change is possible.”⁶⁴

Empowerment, whether it be in the form of helping students develop greater self-confidence or helping them gain the academic and social skills needed to succeed in college and in a career, self-direction, and lifelong learning are overall educational goals, note Johnson-Bailey and Alfred.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Maria Montessori writes that “the world was not created for us to enjoy but we are created to evolve the cosmos.”⁶⁵ The world challenges we face today place a greater urgency on educational systems to provide new direction and focus. An exploration of twenty first century demands suggest that complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, and compassion are needed: “Teaching for social justice involves a vision of the society we hope to create but it also necessarily focuses attention on material social inequities, winners and losers, the painful legacy of colonialism, and so on.”⁶⁶ A positive vision for the future emerges when education is holistic and integrated at the personal, community, and global levels. The voices of the teachers, administrators, and counselors in this study indicate a strong interest, intentionality, and commitment in bridging schools with wider communities of learning. Alternative sites of learning that include museums, art galleries, field trips, service learning opportunities in other countries, and neighborhood revitalization projects are all potential new spaces for transformative education. The educators in this study envision the educational curriculum as a vehicle to explore themes that include sustainable development, peace initiatives, and human rights in ways that contribute to critical awareness and personal empowerment. Creative, cognitive, and artistic ways of knowing can be facilitated through poetry, media studies, art and photography, storytelling, personal narratives, and texts that cross disciplines and cultures. As a result, discussion pathways examining the intersection of socioeconomic class, gender, culture, identity, and ethnicity within a framework of social justice and action can emerge. Freire eloquently captures this dynamic in writing that “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention; through the restless, impatient, continuing hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in

the world, with the world, and with each other.”⁶⁷ Indeed, significant social changes often begin with personal transformation. Cultures of peace and social justice are more likely to flourish when the potential of this holistic and multidimensional form of learning is valued.

APPENDIX: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

The following recommendations provide a synthesis of ideas that could encourage teaching for social justice and transformative learning.

- Provide opportunities for educators to learn more about the dynamics of transformative learning, social justice, and peace education. Books, articles, web sites, debates, case studies, reflective journals, community action projects, storytelling, and related teaching and learning approaches can be used to create a more culturally inclusive curriculum. An integration of social justice and equity issues can be integrated in interdisciplinary ways when novels such as McCarthy’s *The Road* are used not only to teach literature but as a way to teach world issues, planetary sustainability, and human rights. A broad and more expansive approach to curriculum planning can encourage creative and critical thinking.⁶⁸
- Assess learner needs and interests more holistically, including academic, emotional, linguistic, socio-cultural, and career aspects. Help learners find the information necessary to realize their short and long term goals.
- Diversify assessment by integrating empirical reasoning, quantitative reasoning, communication, social reasoning, and emotional intelligence competencies such as self-awareness, empathy, and motivation. Encourage more self-directed projects, presentations, portfolios, and reflective assignments that draw upon the learners’ prior knowledge and learning.
- Educational institutions need to be more aware of the specialized needs that culturally diverse learners have in terms of language abilities, prior work and educational experiences, and life circumstances. Become more knowledgeable about the cultures and experiences of your students; be careful not to stereotype or generalize as there are many differences within each cultural group.

- Create a climate conducive to learning, an environment that balances structure and creativity and that gives individuals an opportunity to feel valued and included.
- Build on your students' strengths and experiences; give your students an opportunity to share their expertise. Encourage learners to suggest additional discussion/writing topics or bring in resources that can enhance learning.
- Take risks and explore teaching roles beyond being a content expert and manager to those of a co-learner, facilitator, researcher, advocate, artist, cultural guide, researcher, designer, and mentor.
- Become more aware of the "hidden curriculum" that takes place outside the classroom. It is in the larger community that students learn about consumerism, competition, unequal self-worth, and psychological intimidation.
- Use literary and non-fiction texts as opportunities to share cultural knowledge, world issues, and controversial topics that provide opportunities for learners to hear different perspectives. Texts should also reflect diversity in terms of voice, culture, gender, and ethnicity.
- Provide opportunities for teachers to learn more about creative problem solving and divergent thinking.
- Create authentic and experiential learning opportunities. Some examples include research reports, field work, speeches and presentations, literature circles, debates, place-based inquiry and ethnography, and case studies. Maximize learning through cross-cultural approaches, art and photography, storytelling, drama, creative writing, interdisciplinary approaches to teaching content area courses, and teaching literature from a "cultural studies" lens.
- Provide service-learning opportunities for students to gain a greater understanding of the larger community and the needs of children, youth and adults. In working with marginalized youth, for example, students can learn valuable emotional intelligence skills such as empathy and self-awareness. Links between theory, reflection, and action can be strengthened when students are given service learning opportunities. Students can make connections between the content in the courses they are studying with the challenge of a real situation.
- Improve cultural diversity and representation in the teaching

profession. Re-examine hiring policies to reduce systemic barriers of racism and discrimination. This also means that the employment of teachers, administrators, and those involved in various aspects of the educational institutions should represent the growing diversity of Canada's population.

- Continue to be a lifelong learner and expand your knowledge of organizations and resources that are committed to social justice and peace education.
- Role model empathy, intercultural competence, and enthusiasm and continue to broaden learning contexts to enrich students' experiences beyond the school, such as international cultural exchange, "voluntours" that give students a chance to work overseas on a timely project, such as inquiry-based research in the local community.

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