TEACHER'S TOOLKIT SERIES

1

Teaching for Success:
Developing Your Teacher Identity in Today's Classroom
Brad Olsen (UC–Santa Cruz)

2

Teaching English Learners:
Fostering Language and the Democratic Experience
Kip Téllez (UC–Santa Cruz)

3

Teaching Without Bells: What We Can Learn from Powerful Practice in Small Schools
Joey Feldman (New Haven Unified School District)

4

Leading from the Inside Out:
Expanded Roles for Teachers in Equitable Schools
W. Norton Grubb and Lynda Tredway
(UC–Berkeley)

5

Teaching Toward Democracy:
Educators as Agents of Change
William Ayers (U of Ill–Chicago), Kevin Kumashiro (U of Ill–Chicago),
Erica Meiners (Northeastern Illinois University),
Therese Quinn (The Art Institute of Chicago), and David Stovall (U of Ill–Chicago)

6

Making a Difference:
Developing Meaningful Careers in Education
Karen Hunter Quartz (UCLA), Brad Olsen (UC–Santa Cruz).

TEACHING TOWARD DEMOCRACY
Educators as Agents of Change
William Ayers, Kevin Kumashiro,
Erica Meiners, Therese Quinn, and David Stovall

Paradigm Publishers
Boulder • London
CHAPTER TWO


Featuring seventeen essays and portfolios and projects by artists including Nick Cave, Ann Hamilton, Darrel Morris, Pepón Osorio, and more, this publication explores the personal, political, social, and economic meaning of work in the context of art and textile production.


This book offers ways to bring the meanings that are often the core of contemporary art to everyday teaching.

ALSO OF INTEREST

Art21—Art in the Twenty-First Century. www.pbs.org/art21/series/index.html. This television series created by the Public Broadcasting Corporation focuses on contemporary art and artists in the United States. The series has a great website with teacher resources, and all episodes are available on DVD.

CHAPTER THREE

OUR COMMUNITIES DESERVE JUSTICE!

Social Justice Teaching and Community Building

OUR WORK AS teachers is never neatly bounded—this classroom or this school, from eight to three or from nine to five—it's just not that simple or that straightforward. Teaching involves building dozens, even scores, of intense relationships that are not easily shut off like a faucet at the end of the workday; our focus on teaching carries over into every other aspect of our lives and becomes, then, something that's never very far from our thoughts. Furthermore, our students live in families, communities, towns or cities, a nation, and a country—and so do we. Our lives are a piece; they aren't experienced in fragments and segments. When school is treated as an entirely separate event, a little torn scrap of the whole wide world, that treatment does violence to teaching and learning, to healthy development, and to life itself.

When we think of families and communities as a distraction or a distortion, a deficit or a danger, we cut
ourselves off from our potentially fiercest allies and an overwhelmingly positive force for the education of the young. We choose to think of families as colleagues and accomplices, communities as partners and assets, and we start with a strong faith, based on long experience: all families want something better for their children, and every community wants outstanding schools. We urge you to embrace that faith, too: your teaching will be enhanced, not diminished, when you get this relationship right, when you open your eyes and your arms to the positive potential and the goodness to be found in families and communities.

People sometimes ask our advice on how to bring relevant or controversial issues into classrooms: the truth is that relevant and controversial issues don’t need to be “brought in” at all—they are flooding into every classroom every day, flowing over the transom, and rushing through every open door and window. Classrooms are porous places, and kids walk in with their lives in their hands, inscribed on their faces, embodied in every inch of them: they already know that the country is at war; they know that people are dying unnecessarily; they already know much of the wonder as well as too much of the horror of the human condition. What they don’t know, and what remains to be seen, is how the adults in their lives will respond to any of it.

School people too often spend unreasonable and excessive energy deflecting, denying, ignoring, misreading, punishing, and suppressing most of what the students bring, the substantial material that is right there in front of their eyes: “We’ll cover that later (or next year or never)”; “That’s not something we talk about in school”; “You’re not old enough”; “Ask your mom or dad.”

Kids get three messages right away (or in a few years): one, school may be necessary to some, but it’s also irrelevant, boring, sometimes antagonistic, and largely beside the point; two, powerful and important adults are too frightened or too beat down, too stupid, or too disconnected to tell the truth; and, three, the world is a dangerous and hostile place—you’ll get hurt and you’ll get hard, and, furthermore, you’re largely on your own—and so you must learn to assume the defensive crouch of the warrior as you negotiate your pathways into (or outside of) this society. As teachers we counter each of these messages with a pedagogy of love and truth-telling, connection and community, and an updated three R’s: relevance, relationship, revolution. This pedagogy is a form of teaching for social justice, which can be defined as the day-to-day processes and actions utilized in classrooms and communities, centered in critical analysis and action among all educational stakeholders—students, families, teachers, administrators, community organizations, community members—and dedicated to the creation of a more just, equitable, and recognizably human society.

In education we are flooded with rhetoric: “standards” and “achievement,” “accountability” and “best practices.” Over time (and with overuse and misuse), each of these terms becomes a meaningless cliché diminishing and eventually shutting down our ability to think clearly or critically about any of it.

We worry about a related problem: “social justice teaching” has been used so often in so many situations to reference such a wide range of adaptations and bearings and practices—including any instance in which a teacher simply talks about an issue that she guesses might be pertinent to her students—that the phrase itself has overrun its banks and risks being reduced to a slogan without substance, a weak trickle where there should be a raging river. Simply put, the rhetoric is becoming shallower and emptier; “social justice” is a popular buzzword in some circles, but it is easily co-opted and rendered toothless in many places, and in other places it is lifeless, dead on arrival, without either any critical edges or any tangible examples of how teachers might bring justice orientations to life within resistant or even hostile environments.

Teachers with a social justice orientation oppose in their classrooms the objectification of people—all the
forces that transform people into things for use; we oppose violence in its many overt and hidden forms; we oppose discrimination and segregation and exploitation of people. We support kindness, cooperation, fairness, courage, independent thinking, peace, love, and balance. Social justice teaching lives out a kind of happy and hopeful opposition. Our work is explicit and intentional in its focus on changing both individuals and the collective conditions of our lives—classrooms, neighborhoods, cities, nation, and larger world. This requires us to include a serious critical examination of power as it relates to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

To us teaching for social justice means living up to the demands of teaching in and for democracy. We return to the democratic ideal: we must value every person’s life in our schools and our classrooms; we must recognize the dignity and integrity of each; we must embrace the idea that the full development of all is the essential condition for the full development of each (and vice versa).

This valuing of democracy has huge implications, of course, for educational policy: racial segregation is wrong; class separation, unjust; disparate funding, immoral. What justification can there possibly be in a democracy for the existence of one school for wealthy white kids funded to the tune of $30,000 or more per student per year, and another school for poor immigrant kids or the descendants of formerly enslaved people with access to less than $5,000 per student per year? How does anyone rationalize or even explain the existence of an overcrowded hundred-year-old school building that looks like a medieval prison with a rotting roof and a busted furnace down the road from a generously appointed campus containing well-maintained athletic fields and an Olympic-sized pool as well as a state-of-the-art physics lab in a building that looks like a palace for learning? That’s the indefensible reality in Illinois and in every other state of the union, and it’s a reality that offends the very idea that each person is equal in value and regard, reflecting instead the dreadful idea that some of us are more deserving and more valuable than others. It expresses perfectly the simple but crude and cruel message we send to children too often concerning social policy: if your family has money, access, social connection, and privilege, your choices and your chances will expand; if not, sorry, you’re on your own. No wonder so many kids are so resentful so much of the time, so many in full-throated rebellion at society as they find it.

But in the concrete day-to-day life in classrooms, too, the democratic ideal has a critical,—indeed, a central—role to play. Democracy is predicated on people’s informed and thoughtful engagement in a shared political and economic and civic life, and the foundations of democratic engagement are built on independent thinking and critical analysis. It requires people who are capable of self-realization (reflecting on their lives and becoming more conscious) and, at the same time, full participation (inserting themselves as actors in society and in history). Schools have been important to the development of such people. Classrooms that prepare people for democratic living are led by teachers who take seriously the demands of democracy, and then structure opportunities for free and critical thought as well as deep engagement and even action. These things are, of course, always in contention, generally under attack from some quarter or another; participatory democracy requires a high level of vigilance and activity in its defense and in its enactment.

School has always been and will always be contested space. What should be taught? In what way? Toward what end? By and for whom? We talk of equity and access as we should, but there is more: What kind of education? Whose questions are encouraged? Whose inquiries pursued? As bottom, the struggle is over the essential questions: What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be an educated person? What does it mean to construct a meaningful, purposeful, and valuable life in the world, here and now? What demands does freedom make?
No society is perfect, and none is entirely perfectible. One thing that sets a vigorous democracy apart from a mock or formalistic or sham democracy is the willingness of its people to admit that there is serious and ongoing work to be done: injustices to be identified and overcome, imbalances to be corrected, freedoms and liberations to be sought. A more perfect union is always an aspiration and never a point of arrival—it has yet to be achieved. This is the wide and dynamic arena of teaching for social justice.

We live in a painfully serious time and a critical situation: the three evils that Martin Luther King Jr. identified and preached against—militarism, racism, and materialism—have intensified and entrenched themselves in the past half century. War is a constant feature of American life now. White supremacy has adopted “post-civil rights” rhetoric, while racial disparities in everything from health care to incarceration to access to education continue apace. Poverty is rampant as the gap between rich and poor deepens and widens. Consumerism acts as a drug habit we seem incapable of kicking even as we acknowledge that it is killing us, our friends and families, and the planet itself. Each of these “evils” diminishes all human beings, and each can be seen as a challenge we can choose to face and take on, as citizens and as educators. Finding ways to name the challenges in their various new forms and guises, to oppose them in innovative and effective ways, and to identify real alternatives demands that we move with a heightened sense of urgency.

To take one salient example that some of us have been grappling with for years: local, state, private, and federal entities have waged a forty-year urban renewal experiment (dubbed “Negro removal” by community activists from the start) that has resulted in mass displacement of communities of color from valued inner-city areas. In Chicago, as part of the larger gentrification process, public school students have been steadily pushed into distinct although hidden tracks: college prep, low-wage service or military employment, incarceration, and dropouts. As schools become a key conduit by which to “sell” newly gentrified neighborhoods to affluent homeowners, this whole process is put forward as a positive contribution to the life of the city.

Omitted from the official story is the fact that thousands of poor residents of color have been displaced in the name of “progress.” Many children and youth are forced into overcrowded schools because their neighborhood ones have been closed to make way for schools of “choice” for the more prosperous incoming residents, or they leave the system altogether because their families, unable to find employment or afford escalating rent prices, are forced to move to one of the even poorer suburbs now rising in the city. Students are sorted and tossed out into the world to participate as the products of these tracks, their destinies determined and set as early as the third grade.

Now more than ever we need real talk and real action—something often referred to as praxis—if we are to rectify the current realities in schools. Teachers can, if we choose, move beyond rhetoric and toward the substance of social justice education by engaging students, families, community members, and community organizers to study and research the goings-on right outside the schoolhouse door, and to challenge through concrete initiatives the difficult, unjust realities of urban education. That kind of classroom and extracurricular activity could keep your teaching vital, timely, and exciting. It could also keep you viable in your places of employment, and at the same time provide opportunities to engage other teachers in the ongoing project of teaching for social justice by demonstrating the potential power of this approach to their students.

There are several questions that can help to frame our discussion:
• What relevant content and engaged practices can social justice educators introduce into their classrooms to ensure or encourage positive, thought-provoking, critical, and challenging learning environments?

• What relationships can teachers build with students, parents, concerned community members, and community organizers in order to learn from them as they cooperate to create such spaces? How can teachers incorporate parents and community members into the curriculum as authentic partners? How can these folks serve as the essential bridge for social justice educators to build critical consciousness in young people?

• How can educators identify and effectively resist a system that does not support young people critically analyzing their situations and working to change their conditions? How do we encourage revolutionary change—sweeping transformations within every individual as well as fundamental structural revolutionizing of entire systems?

Wrestling with these questions sets us on a course to become outstanding educators—the kind of social justice teachers who are poised to learn from, by, and for the people.

Every one of us, of course, experiences pressure and constraints; we each feel some fear. If we act, what do we risk? If we don’t act, what do we risk then? If we weren’t afraid, what might we do? What do we need in order to find the courage to get started? One thing is certain: if we choose to close our eyes and turn our backs, if we fail to take the situations of our students and their communities as acute and urgent, if we fail to align ourselves with their needs and hopes and fears, then we have chosen to contribute to their detriment.

**BEWARE THE “DO-GOODERS”**

Obviously we are opposed to the “commonsense” notion that individuals and groups external to the institutionalized school (parents, concerned community members, community organizers) need to be “managed” by professionals. This thinking is highly problematic, as it positions parents and community members as forces who will likely prevent us from doing our work well. Because they possess the potential to disturb our work, “management” entails the minimization of distractions from the goals set forth by the individual teacher, school administration, district, or legislature. Placing this in the context of race, class, and gender, the people in need of managing are often low-income/working-class, of color, and overwhelmingly female. Whereas traditional management rhetoric marks these groups as troublemakers and adversaries, we consider them critical allies, people whose energy and insights are essential in creating the micro and macro functions of a good classroom. If you provide avenues for students, families, and community members to contribute in meaningful and substantive ways to the process of education, you can build a foundation that will extend and help to protect the integrity of your work in classrooms over the long haul.

There’s a telling bit of satire from *MADtv* available on YouTube called “Nice White Lady,” which sends up the typical trope of practically every teacher movie ever made. The opening scene is an urban classroom replete with tough teenagers lounging on desks cleaning their guns and sharpening their knives while the voice-over catalogues the dangers of city schools: out-of-control kids, incompetent teachers, parents who don’t give a damn, communities in collapse. What can possibly save them? At this point the classroom door opens a crack, and a young, fresh-faced teacher peeks in. Hi, I’m Amy Little, her beneficent smile says, here to help. She looks like a lamb ready for the slaughter, and when a young
Latina woman with maximum urban attitude gets up in Amy’s face, issuing a profanity-laced list of deficits and disasters in her own life, Amy shrinks in horror. But she recovers, and dramatically pulls out pad and pencil, hands them to the young woman, and says meaningfully, “Write that down.” Soon everyone trades their guns for pens, and Pulitzer prizes are surely just around the corner. Of course, the dreadful veteran teacher scorns her efforts as misguided idealism—I know you mean well, but these children are minorities!—but she reminds him that she’s a nice white lady—Lady Bountiful in the classroom—and that her good intentions and her heartfelt desire to save the little natives are all it will take.

The Maori community activist Lilla Watson offers a pointed and powerful response to this kind of thinking: “If you have come to help us, she says, you are wasting your time; but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, let us work together.” Similarly, Ella Baker, the great civil rights leader, told the college-educated volunteers pouring into Mississippi in 1964 to help with voter registration that they should understand they had much more to learn from the sharecroppers and peasants they had come to “help” than the rural people had to learn from them. Begin by listening, she advised, and paying attention to the extraordinary ordinary people. Patronizing beneficence is an anemic alternative to full regard, authentic identification, and day-to-day solidarity with people, and Watson and Baker are reminding us in part that transformation is never a one-way affair.

The complicated and messy work of teaching for social justice involves building transformative classrooms that push the self-development of both students and teachers who are mutually engaged in a struggle to learn and to teach, to change themselves and simultaneously to change others, and indeed to change the world around them. Together they work to provide tangible examples of what justice might look like in classrooms and in our communities, and why we must become new people if we are to be worthy of the changes we want to make. In this work there’s no productive role for “do-gooders,” people who view communities as all-deficit sewers of pathological neediness waiting to be “saved” by the saintly teacher who “cares.”

Some new teachers are inspired to organize a “social justice day” or to start a “social justice” project. This is not really the way to begin—it’s too tepid, too flimsy, and too cosmetic. Crises are everywhere—war, financial collapse, economic depression, chronic underemployment, war on the poor, runaway incarceration, privatization of everything from prisons and police to parking meters and public education, skyrocketing health care costs—and crisis is the defining tenor of these times. As Nina Simone laments: “Can’t you see it? Can’t you feel it?”

A pedagogy for democracy and liberation—teaching for social justice—should not be conceptualized as something done on the side or reduced to an add-on: pep club, debate, 4-H, Social Justice Day. Enlightenment and freedom, justice and liberation—these are the heart of the matter in a democratic society, coloring every relationship, each instructional gesture, and the entire curriculum. It begins with paying attention, seeing your students fully and in context, seeing the world wide and wondrous and in need of repair, and then plunging in and getting busy.

THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

We embrace the idea that our work as teachers constitutes a deeply personal and political act, and that the two sides of that dialectic are in fact inseparable. Teaching is traditionally positioned as an apolitical occupation—more technical, less relational, entirely disengaged from social life, and therefore much less messy. If you come from a traditional teacher-training program (or even one of the zillions of alternative programs springing up everywhere), chances are that your studies contained few
courses that encouraged the politicizing of teaching. If most teachers had in-depth knowledge about political economy, race, class, gender/sexual orientation, and their relationship to K–12 content areas, our classrooms would look remarkably different than they do currently.

Carter G. Woodson noted that the masses of African Americans, if educated about the realities in which they were forced to live out their lives, would become “unruly” or “ambitious to become free.” This strikes us as a central requirement for teachers: truth-telling. Some may argue that these realities of life are beyond the scope of your classroom and thus counsel caution, urging you to stay away from any of this; we urge teachers (and encourage ourselves) to dive in full-on. No K–12 classroom or content area is outside the scope of the political act of teaching. Some of the most forward-thinking teachers we know, for example, come from the disciplines of math and science; they tell us that the math and science folks who don’t feel like they can make the leap to education for social justice are simply making excuses.

We should be clear that when we state that teaching is political, we are not referring to partisan politics. Instead, we are speaking about systems of power that operate above and beyond political parties or electoral matters, systems that affect all of us as teachers and as persons occupying multiple social, cultural, economic, and civic spaces in the larger world. This points us toward awareness and even analysis of the surrounding community and its relationship to the city at large, the school’s relationship to the central office, the central office’s relationship to the state, the state’s educational relationship to the federal government, and our relationships to the various members of the school’s surrounding community as well as our individual relationships with students, parents, and colleagues.

In Chicago, community organizations, parents, and teachers mobilized against Chicago Public Schools (CPS) to prevent the closing of twenty-two schools for the 2009–2010 school year. Calling themselves the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), they were able over a long and sustained struggle to get several schools removed from the “hit list” of closings.

Peabody Elementary was scheduled for closure for what CPS called “underutilization.” This designation represented a range of infractions from student underenrollment to nonuse of empty spaces in the building. When the school community was notified of the impending death sentence, parents and teachers alerted a group of local university researchers, and the newly formed team uncovered a critical fact ignored in the initial CPS report: Peabody was one of the few schools in the entire system with the capacity to accommodate young people with severe disabilities. It was also one of the few schools recognized for being in full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Further investigation revealed that one space cited for nonuse housed a resource center for parents. This vital school challenged the traditional notion of management by affirming the role of parents as critical actors in the educational community.

In the end, CPS acknowledged that the data collected by the Grassroots Education Movement were valid, and relented, explaining that placing Peabody on the hit list was a “central office oversight.” The group felt a bit like someone who’d accompanied a friend to the hospital and wound up having to alert the staff just before a surgeon removed her gallbladder that she had in fact come for an eye exam: on the one hand, great that you could help out; on the other hand, what the hell?

**EXTRA WORK/BETTER WORK**

Any type of education for social justice will require work beyond the scope of the 8 a.m. start and the 3 p.m. finish. This is obvious to most teachers, but for those who don’t already know it, there’s no sensible way around it. Because this work runs counter to current trends in management and accountability, you will constantly have to balance
your own values, and work with the requirements placed on you by your individual school, the district, and the state.

The balancing act will mean negotiating a multitude of constraints. For example, if you teach in a school that uses a scripted curriculum, some supervisory person may periodically come into your class to make sure you’re on a particular page at some precise moment. Teachers in these instances are operating under duress. Some have embraced their extra work by deconstructing the script: breaking down the goals and objectives, they replan the unit, taking an issue and concern of their students and remapping it onto the curriculum unit.

One fifth-grade teacher in Los Angeles has become an expert at this. He was required by the district to use a scripted curriculum called Open Court. Included in the curriculum was a unit on a dog, the objective of which was to meet the state requirement that students demonstrate the ability to write a descriptive letter. Students were asked to describe the dog using particular descriptors (color, size, disposition, and action) and then write a set of questions about what they wrote. The idea was to get students to pose questions and offer answers using their own words.

Instead of using the unit on the dog—something boring to him as well as his students—the teacher asked his students to write a letter describing any issue or concern they were having in their own lives. One common concern was the fact that substitute teachers in the building often disparaged students in their words and their actions. Many talked down to students, telling ten-year-old African American and Latino kids, for example, that they would never amount to anything in life and were destined to become prostitutes and bums. Alerted to this and taking serious issue with it, the teacher decided to shift the letter-writing unit to address these concerns.

During the letter-writing exercise, he caught word of a meeting of the service workers’ union. These were the people who performed the services for the building (cafeteria work, maintenance/custodial, groundskeeping). He approached one of the union stewards and asked if one or more of his students could express their concerns about the district at an upcoming union rally. The steward agreed, and two fifth graders read their letters as part of the rally to support service workers in the school.

This teacher deconstructed the goals and objectives of the scripted curriculum, created a unit centered on a real issue of consequence to the kids, and demonstrated how his students could meet (and exceed) the state standard. Throughout the process, the teacher accomplished several critical things with his fifth graders. One was that by taking the students’ ideas seriously, he built a different kind of relationship with them. A second was that he took an important concern and, instead of deflecting or ignoring it, he turned it into a curriculum matter, demonstrating that we can all learn from things that are relevant to us. A third was that he showed that we can act on what we see and know and uncover, and play a part, then, in something larger and more important than the teacher’s grade book. A fourth was that he revealed that we can empower ourselves in the process.


All of this important learning came from a creative teaching initiative in response to a somewhat silly and surely disconnected unit about a dog. If you can imagine the extra work and planning involved in pursuing this unit, you are well on your way to understanding what we mean by extra work.

On the community level, when we want new teachers to learn about the neighborhood, we encourage as a start something like a community walk: a group of teachers led on a tour by a trusted community member with the aim of getting folks to develop a stronger feeling of connectedness to their surroundings. This can be useful and, when done purposefully and well, enlightening. We
know an entire school faculty that decided to go a step further.

At the Lawndale/Little Village School for Social Justice (SOJO), every summer presents a new opportunity to engage the communities of Little Village and North Lawndale, which are Latino and African American neighborhoods, respectively. There is a concerted effort by staff to be intentional about introducing themselves to the community; and because the school came into being through the efforts of community members (mothers and grandmothers) staging a galvanizing nineteen-day hunger strike, the staff is extremely clear on the importance of community inclusion in creating an educational environment that is critical, reflective, and geared toward consciousness-raising and action.

Because SOJO is a small school—one hundred freshmen are admitted each year, and the staff consists of only nineteen teachers—each teacher makes home visits to the families of entering freshmen the summer before school begins. Unlike schools where teachers rush in and out as an unpleasant formality, or where home visits seem like little acts of surveillance representing a form of punitive discipline (signing family contracts dealing with homework or potential discipline issues with students), the purpose of SOJO home visits is of a different order: to allow teachers to introduce themselves to the families of the new students, and to provide families with several points of access and a range of possible ways to be in touch. Building relationships. Becoming partners. Being modest and even humble in approach and stance.

This may sound simple, but it can be instrumental in establishing the relationship between families and staff. It’s part of the extra work because traditional teaching tells us that these types of interactions are unnecessary.

SOJO teachers are also cognizant of the power dynamics in play during a home visit. Some households fear intervention by local, state, and federal agencies that may result in the separation of families, and may not want teachers to visit the home. Out of respect for their right to privacy, teachers should always be aware of this possibility.

Extra work of the type described here is also better work. It is not make-work, and it is not work in the form of a gut check or an unreasonable genuflection meant to prove your “commitment” or your worthiness. It is relationship building and truth-telling. It is critical and it is essential.

**GETTING OVER THE “WHAT TO DO NOW” SYNDROME**

The “what to do now” syndrome occurs when a teacher gets to the point where a curricular unit may have ended or a unit has finished earlier than planned, or he or she decided to go in another direction with the unit because it has flat-out bombed in its current state. When any of these scenarios happen, teachers often reach the age-old question: what am I going to do now?

This is especially important for social justice educators because your teaching will take on a life of its own, and your planning will be of a different type altogether. Instead of mapping entire units and assuming everything is set for the year, you will have to intentionally carve out time to develop your teaching while evaluating existing work and determining whether or not it’s relevant, whether or not it follows the interests and questions of students, and whether or not it connects to deeper and wider ways of knowing.

Social justice teaching is not some postmodern free-for-all, but it does have the potential to take off in numerous directions; it is therefore imperative that you take serious time to organize what you do as a teacher. It’s important to plan, adjust, and develop your units, your curriculum, and your teaching. One effective way to promote your work as a social justice educator is to demonstrate that skills are indeed being learned through
the content and approaches you have chosen to employ. This is not about standardization of social justice curriculum, but rather about focusing attention on how to create, critique, and revisit relevant spaces that will allow students to make informed decisions about their lives and seize an education worthy of a free people. This can also be done in a way that includes community, as in the case in Textbox 3.1.

TEXTBOX 3.1
A science teacher we know developed a unit on a coal-fired plant in the neighborhood where his school was located. Using an organization in the surrounding community as an anchor, he was able to collaborate to create a series of projects and assignments with the aim of engaging students in a real-life issue. Through this collaboration, he and the students discovered that there had been a community push to close the plant that dated back almost thirty years. The community where the plant is housed (the Little Village community in Chicago) has one of the highest rates of childhood asthma in the United States. Coal emissions are directly correlated with respiratory problems, and students were able to identify quite personally with the issue. As the unit progressed, students went through a number of experiments to demonstrate the harmful effects of particle ingestion over time. With the help of the partnering organization, the Little Village Environmental Justice Organization (LVEJO), students were able to learn about current efforts to address environmental justice issues in the community. In addition to the initiative to close the coal-fired plant, LVEJO was involved with other projects, including a push to develop a park, renew a discontinued bus line, and develop a sustainable living corridor in the neighborhood. The class was able to participate in thinking through various plans of action to address these problems, and so the students learned skills while connecting to bigger issues and working for change.

TRUSTING YOUR STUDENTS AND COMMUNITY

Relationship building is central to teaching. This is the process of getting to know your students, where they come from, and how they interact with the world. Critical to this process is getting to know ourselves as teachers. Teaching for social justice in this sense moves away from the anthropological notion of doing research “on” someone and turns the arrow inward to carefully think about what we do as teachers. Our reflections are critical in continually assessing what went well, what didn’t, and what more we need to know and to do. By reflecting on our work as teachers, we take a step toward what it means to trust our students and the community.

During 2008–2009, a handful of college professors decided to dedicate half of their college course load for the school year to teaching high school classes at SOJO. Because two of the professors were on the design team responsible for developing the school, they had established important relationships with community members. When the time came to turn in the final proposal to CPS, one of the stipulations was that the two professors would teach at the high school.

Even more impressive was what the teacher did in his evaluation process. After this unit was finished, he asked his students to evaluate the work and develop a list of what the next unit should be. During this evaluative time, he projected the state standards for science on a screen and took notes on students’ suggestions. From these suggestions and notes, he developed ideas for the next unit and brought them back to the class. This developed into a student curriculum team that worked to plan the forthcoming units for the class. Planning in this sense is antithetical to how we were taught to develop lessons in teacher education programs—everything based on a hierarchy of knowledge and ignorance, teacher above student, the knower and the blank slate.
CHAPTER THREE

Since its opening in 2004, these two have team-taught courses with SOJO faculty and consequently established close relationships with the students. Through the process of fostering these relationships, they felt that they could challenge their students in a constructive way while preparing them for college and next steps after graduation. They decided that in order to make the students’ experience most meaningful, they had to challenge their own thinking as to what level of work the students could handle. In creating their classes, they decided to modify two graduate-level courses that they hoped would speak to the issues and concerns of the community: they trusted their high school students to take on the rigors of graduate work.

In concert with the promise made to the community in the initial proposal, the professors decided to add another component to the courses: students were dually enrolled at a local university and at SOJO; they would create a college class that would take place on a high school campus. Upon completion of the course, the students were given college credit that would count as an elective at any university they decided to attend. This type of relationship would not have existed if it were not for the initial efforts of the community to create the school. In the same vein, the accountability of the professors to the community-driven initiative was a key to providing this type of innovation for high school students.

SEEKING POWER IN THE COLLECTIVE

Teaching should not be a solitary act, especially for teachers who have made a conscious decision to go against the grain of “standards-based,” “value-added,” “research-driven” education. Conventional wisdom tells us to shut our doors and keep what we do in our classrooms between us and our students. Although this may provide some small amount of initial protection, many teachers will tell you how this process has a very short

shelf life. Teachers with closed classrooms sometimes burn out or leave the profession altogether; other times they find their passion being sucked out of them. Teaching in isolation can be a painful experience that creates anxiety and distrust in your abilities as a teacher.

One of the most important things you can do as a social justice educator is to find allies—other teachers, parents, and community members—who are interested in supporting your work. It’s crucial to be proactive throughout your journey as a teacher. In many cases we wait until it’s too late to mobilize our colleagues and comrades in support of our work. There is a lot we can do on the front end of our teaching to solidify the needed support for our work.

Locally and nationally, a number of teacher collectives have engaged the task of establishing networks. Central to their process is the sharing of resources with each other to develop curriculum and to organize with families and communities. This creates a support network of educators committed to creating viable spaces for young people to ask critical questions and develop strategies to address their concerns. These mechanisms are critical in your journey as a teacher.

By embracing the fact that we are constantly learning, one of the most practical steps you can take as a new teacher is to find the people in your building who have a good reputation for teaching. We don’t care how “bad” your school may be; there’s always at least one. Once you find those people, sit down and ask questions about how they see teaching and how they see their students.

Not sure how to identify the right teachers to talk to? Ask your students who they think is a good teacher. Ask them what this teacher does, and why they think the teacher is good. Remember, the content area doesn’t matter so much. What you want to get from these teachers is how they understand their students, the larger community, and the politics of the place in which you teach.

OUR COMMUNITIES DESERVE JUSTICE!
Another step you can take is to find other new teachers in the building, folks who are anywhere between their first and third years of teaching. Contact them, invite them to a space outside of the school (homes are always nice), and do something relaxing—a potluck, cookout, or movie night. Also invite the teacher identified by your students as a good teacher. Ask that teacher to say a couple of words about the school and whatever he or she feels you need to know about the building. When you wind down in the evening, ask folks if they want to get together again. If you receive positive responses, you’re on your way to developing a space where you are able to reflect on your work and potentially bring other teachers from your area into the fold. This only takes three things: time, space, and the will to keep it going. Over time you will recognize that these collective spaces are critical to your survival as a social justice educator.

At the community level, there are a couple of other steps you can take to make tangible connections. One strategy is to find the person in your building who has the deepest ties to the community. In many instances, this person may not be a teacher. It could be someone who works in the front office, a school engineer, a security guard, or a member of the custodial/maintenance staff. Many times these people are overlooked as integral components of a functioning school. If we’re honest, we will submit that these folks are often the lifeblood of the building. Honoring this community knowledge is key. If you’re a new teacher, introduce yourself and be forthright in your conversation. It’s not a bad thing to say that you’re not familiar with the neighborhood. You won’t be condemned for that. The most important thing is to understand that you must be respectful of the spaces you are entering, just as you expect students to be respectful of your classroom.

We know of a number of teachers who have engaged in this type of process and established considerable contacts for themselves in the community. Once they found those individuals with deep and tangible connections to the community, they asked them about good places to introduce themselves to the community. These might include a church gathering, a staff meeting at a local community center, or a block club meeting. When these teachers introduce themselves, they thank the group for letting them speak, tell them that they’re teaching nearby and are new to the community, and then leave their contact information. They also stay after the meeting is over to talk to people. Key to this interaction is accountability—if someone calls or e-mails about a question pertaining to the school or community, call him or her back. Your ability to follow through as a teacher is critical to your long-term credibility.

Most important to the whole process, you absolutely must not be patronizing or condescending in establishing these relationships. Humility is the key. It will be important to remember one of the central components of effective teaching: admitting that you don’t know everything but are willing to find out. People will respect you more if you take this approach.

We make this point as authors because here is where the real issues come to the table. Many who read this book may be apprehensive to approach others because they are unfamiliar with group differences in regard to race, class, sexual orientation, or ability. Don’t use this as a crutch—admit it and move forward. Yes, many of you might find it extremely uncomfortable at first, but if you foreground your actions with the conversation and understanding that you want the very best for your students, you will be fine. Don’t try to be something you’re not; nothing good comes from that. There will be some trial and error in the process, but it deserves a concerted effort. This is also part of standing up for education and justice.

CONCLUSION: DIVING INTO THE CONTRADICTIONS

We would be lying if we professed that social justice teaching is easy. In many cases it is the direct opposite.
Some of our schools resemble prisons more than palaces of learning. Some students are required to wear drab uniforms; some schools reward teachers for enforcing discipline over instruction; and some principals can hover like wardens looking over the general population deck. In these situations, teachers operate under duress and isolation, and some folks still are required to administer tests that we know do absolutely nothing in a positive learning sense for our students.

There are also personal contradictions that arise when we contemplate the extra work we put toward attempting anything transformative in the classroom. We sometimes have to come to grips with the fact that our lesson didn’t work one day, or that our students think we are the worst thing in the world, or that we took a shortcut where we shouldn’t have. These become the difficult spaces where we have to admit to failure while simultaneously engaging our ability to self-correct.

Within these contradictions, we have to muster the courage to ask uncomfortable questions. In addition to engaging these issues from a macro level, we must embrace the personal level. We still should ask: Why do we go outside the traditional boundaries of teacher education and school-based instruction to do the work we do? Why is it important? Knowing what we know, what substantive changes will we make in our lives to lessen the contradictions and move forward in providing an alternative context rooted in critical analysis and action?

The answers are not simple. Nevertheless, we embrace the difficulties of teaching and make the conscious decision to engage our students in forward-moving ways that are built on healthy and respectful relationships, relevance, and revolution.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Before the requirements mandated by standardized tests or scripted curricula, what skills and abilities are you trying to develop with your students? Choose one area where you think your approach to curriculum, teaching, and learning might not align easily with school or district mandates. What is the nature of the misalignment, and how will you practically and concretely navigate the tensions and contradictions?

2. How are you prepared to navigate the tension between what you are trying to do in your classroom and what is required by your school, district, or state in terms of requirements or standards?

3. Who are the people inside and outside of your school who can support you in this process?

4. In what tangible ways are you engaging community concerns in your daily instruction?

**FURTHER READING**

Kozol, Jonathan. 1980. *Children of the Revolution*. New York: Delacorte Press. Though this book is out of print, you may find a used copy. It is an interesting account of Cuba’s educational system after the revolution in 1959. Most notable is the ideology of free public education for all.


**SUGGESTED RESOURCE**

National Network of Teacher Activist Groups (www.teacheractivistgroups.org). This lists a number of teacher-based organizations across the country that focus on issues of social justice in communities and schools. Links to groups like the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), Association of Raza Educators (ARE), and Teachers for Social Justice (TSJ) are on this site, along with examples of curriculum and community initiatives.