Social Action in the Classroom: The Kids are Better for it

by

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Abstract

Injustices of varying degrees occur in schools across Alberta every day; achievement gaps, European narratives at the expense of all others, and lack of representation of BIPOC folks are just some of the ways that injustice shows up in our schools. Using critical pedagogy as its framework, this paper aims to demonstrate the importance of providing students with outlets for fighting against the injustices occurring inside the walls of their schools and beyond. Implementing social action projects as part of a broader social justice education is one way to provide these outlets. When educators provide opportunities for social action to occur in their classrooms, students will be better for it. With this premise as it's foundation, this paper will explore the effects of social action projects on an individual and school level. It will aim to demonstrate that social action projects result in positive outcomes for participating students and greater justice in school communities. Finally, it will examine best practices for teachers wishing to incorporate social action projects into their classrooms with the hopes that educators will find this paper to be of both theoretical and practical value.

Keywords: social justice education, social action, student activism

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Howard Zinn famously wrote, "If you join a fight for social justice you may win or lose, but just by being part of the struggle, you win, and your life will be better for it." Zinn's words remind us of the importance of fighting injustice and advise that although we may sometimes fail in our quest for justice, it is never futile to struggle for it. Likewise, as we will see in this paper, when educators provide opportunities for social action to occur in their classrooms, students will be better for it, even if the goals of the social action project are not fully realized. With this premise as it's foundation, this paper will explore the effects of social action projects as part of a broader social justice education program on an individual and school level. Using critical theory as its framework, it will aim to demonstrate that vast injustices are a reality for many students in our schools and that social action projects result in positive outcomes for participating students and contribute to greater justice in school communities. Finally, it will examine best practices for teachers wishing to incorporate social action projects into their classrooms and possible tools for implementing social action projects with the hopes that educators will find this paper to be of both theoretical and practical value.

Methods

The literature selected to be included in this review was located using one or more of the following search terms: social action, social justice education, service learning, critical pedagogy, social justice learning, student activism. Electronic databases, including ProQuest, Taylor & Francis Online, and EBSCOhost were searched using key terms. Additionally, books and ebooks were located from the University of Alberta library collection and the EBSCO Academic Collection. Google Scholar was also used.

Titles were used to make initial assessments about the relevance of search results and to quickly eliminate literature that was clearly irrelevant for the purposes of this paper. The abstracts and/or introductions of the titles that were deemed relevant to the literature review were then examined to determine whether they would be included in the review. If, based on the abstract and/or introduction, it was decided that the literature aligned with this paper's topic/purpose, made a valuable contribution to the social justice education literature, and was of seemingly good reliability and validity, it was included in the literature review. In order to limit the scope of this paper to recent and relevant literature, only publications appearing between the years 2000 and 2021 were included.

There were two exceptions in which literature published before the year 2000 was included. The first exception is the literature that was located to explain the chosen theoretical framework (i.e., critical pedagogy). It was necessary to go back to Freire's seminal work on critical pedagogy from 1970 to adequately incorporate this framework into the literature review. The second exception is Bell's 1997 article, which offers one of the first definitions of social justice education that is relevant to the current educational context. While most of the literature selected consisted of articles from peer reviewed journals and scholarly books, some government and media publications were included to highlight the relevance of the academic literature.

All selected literature was read and analyzed to identify the themes discussed in this paper. The key findings were recorded from each text. These key findings were used to decide on the key, recurring themes of the literature. The themes that emerged were: origins of social justice education, necessity of social justice education, interpretations of social justice education, phases of social justice education, the importance of social action in social justice education,

benefits and challenges of social action projects, relevant case studies, and best practices and teaching tools for social action projects. This paper will discuss each of these themes in turn to demonstrate why and how social action projects can make an invaluable contribution to social justice education programs in our schools and potential ways to begin implementing them in classrooms. First, key background information about social justice education and critical pedagogy will be provided. I will then explain what makes critical pedagogy an appropriate framework for this paper. Next, I will provide an indepth description of social justice education, including some of the most popular interpretations of social justice education, the two main phases of social justice education (i.e., awareness building and action), the importance of getting to the "action" phase and the role of social action projects, and some of the challenges associated with social justice education. Following this, I will analyze three case studies of social action projects in use to demonstrate the potential benefits of implementing these projects in a classroom setting. Finally, I will introduce two teaching tools that can be used by educators who want to begin engaging their students in social action projects.

Critical Pedagogy, Social Justice Education and Injustice in Schools

Several definitions have been proposed for social justice education. Bell (1997) defines social justice education as "both a process and a goal" with the ultimate aim being "full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (p. 3), while Murrell (2006) defines it as "a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions" (p. 81). While the precise definitions vary, there tends to be agreement that the overarching purpose of social justice education is to promote the recognition of social ills and provide avenues by which students can begin to challenge them.

Critical pedagogy is a subfield of critical theory that examines and challenges underlying power structures and dynamics of society in order to question and transform the way we educate members of society in an effort to more equitably distribute power to all its members. Critical pedagogy aims to create educational environments where historically marginalized people can be empowered, inequitable social arrangements and institutions can be challenged, and strategies for a more just world can be envisioned (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). McLaren (2003) puts it concisely: critical pedagogy aims “to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices" (p. 186).

One of the foundational scholars in the field of critical pedagogy was Paulo Freire. Despite Freire (1970) having written his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in a specific time and about a specific space, it still holds significant relevance to the Alberta education system in the 21st century. Freire wrote his book while he was exiled from Brazil and it is based both on his observations while exiled from his home country and on his experiences teaching illiterate, oppressed people to read and write in Brazil prior to his exile (Shaull, 1970). The colonization of Brazil and enslavement of Brazilian people by the Portugese beginning in the 1500s resulted in lasting harsh economic conditions for Brazilians well after independence in 1822 and the abolishment of slavery in 1888. As a young adult, Freire was committed to the eradication of illiteracy as a means for the oppressed peasants of Brazil to acquire greater power, particularly through voting, however, as he continued to work with the oppressed people of Brazil, and later those in Chile, he came to the conclusion that literacy and the absence of slavery alone would not provide people with freedom; he began to recognize the existence of what he coined the “culture of silence.” This term describes how the “silence” (i.e., ignorance) of the oppressed is a direct result of the economic, political, and social domination they are victims of.

In order to overcome this condition, the oppressed must develop *conscientização*, critical consciousness, which is an awareness of the conditions of reality so that one might work towards changing them (Freire, 1970).

As Shaull (1970) explains about *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in its forward, "we have thought about it primarily in terms of its contribution to the education of illiterate adults in the Third World" (p. 10), however "[Freire's] methodology as well as his educational philosophy are as important for us as for the dispossessed in Latin America" (p. 10). Torres-Harding and Meyers (2013) point out that Freire was highly critical of traditional education, believing that it mirrored an oppressive society. According to Freire (1970), educational institutions were one of primary vessels by which the culture of silence was reproduced via what he called "the banking concept of education." In this model, "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p. 72), which results in the projection of ignorance onto others. Many classrooms still rely on the traditional educational methods described by Freire, in which teachers are viewed as the experts and students are expected to be passive recipients of the information teachers provide. In this model, the information being passed from teacher to student is primarily information that serves the interests of the dominant group in society and functions to maintain the status quo (Freire, 1970).

Although the injustices occurring in our schools are not the same as those that Freire drew on in his work, injustices of varying degrees occur in schools across Alberta every day. These injustices can be less obvious, as is the case with curriculum, policy, and achievement or graduation gaps, or very blatant, as with the creation of hate groups within schools. Curriculum documents can perpetuate injustice with the often harmful European narrative that still dominates

in curriculum (Chen, 2009) or by excluding or misrepresenting Aboriginal peoples of Canada (Fletcher, 2000). For example, curricular explorations of World War II heavily focus on European events and impacts while neglecting to investigate the impacts of the war on Asian populations (Chen, 2000) while curricular outcomes related to the history of Canada emphasize European "discovery" and "expansion" while minimizing the devastating effects of colonization on Indigenous peoples (Fletcher, 2000). Injustice also shows up in the large gaps seen between different groups. For example, in 2008, Trypuc and Heller reported a worrisome gap between the percentage of Indigenous, Black, immigrant, and English Language Learner students versus white students who graduate from high school in Canada. While these gaps have begun closing in more recent years, Toronto District School Board's (2017) student census data showed that as of 2016 Latin and Black students were still approximately ten percent less likely to graduate high school than their white peers and in the 2019/2020 Vital Signs Report the Toronto Foundation (2020) states, "despite significant progress over the last decade in improving graduation rates, there are still some important differences between groups" (p. 101). Injustice also exists in schools in more conspicuous ways. Kumanshiro (2002) states, "Researchers have illustrated oppression [in schools] … by pointing to the recognizably harmful ways in which only certain students are treated in and by schools" (p. 33). Indeed, very recently in Edmonton, an Instagram account was created for a "White Alliance Student Group" at a local high school (Bench, 2021). The group encouraged students of the school to rise up and fight racism against white people and contained posts such as, "White Lives Matter." White Lives Matter rhetoric represents a significant misunderstanding of the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement, which aims to bring justice to Black communities who face disproportional injustices in our society, especially

when compared to white communities. Participation in groups such as White Lives Matter indicates a serious and harmful misunderstanding of racial power structures by students.

Critical pedagogy has been used as the theoretical framework for this paper because it highlights the urgent need for social justice action to be taken in our classrooms. Rooted in critical theory which is a framework that examines, critiques and challenges the underlying power structures and dynamics of society in a quest to change it (Horkheimer, 1982), critical pedagogy uses this same approach to question and transform the way we educate members of our society in an effort to more equitably distribute power to all its members. Because the goal of social justice education is to enact real change, a framework that gets to the heart of the issue - the societal power structures that limit equity - is needed, and critical theory provides a lens through which this groundwork can be laid (e.g., Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013).

Thematic Findings

The themes that emerged from this literature review were: the origins of social justice education, the necessity of social justice education, interpretations of social justice education, the phases of social justice education and the importance of social action in social justice education, benefits and challenges of social action projects, relevant case studies, and best practices and teaching tools for social action projects. This paper will discuss each of these themes in turn to demonstrate why and how social action projects can make an invaluable contribution to social justice education programs in our schools and potential ways to begin implementing them in classrooms.

Interpretations of Social Justice Education

There are varying interpretations of what constitutes social justice education. Lynch and Baker (2005) claim that social justice education must be based on the principle of equality.

According to them, there are four key dimensions of equality that are central to social justice education: resources; respect and recognition; love, care and solidarity; power; and working and learning. Other scholars have different interpretations. For example, Carlisle, Jackson, and George (2006) argue that a socially just education is built on five principles. These principles state that socially just education includes the promotion of inclusion and equality, maintaining high expectations for all students, developing reciprocal community approach, utilizing a system wide approach, and providing direct social justice education and intervention. Many other scholars have suggested their own principles or foundations for social justice education (e.g., Bettez, 2008; Grant & Gillette, 2006; Michelli & Keiser, 2006). While interpretations of what the exact building blocks of social justice education are vary, there tends to be general agreement that social justice education consists of two clear phases.

Phases of Social Justice Education

Social justice education can be understood as comprising two overlapping phases. The first of these is awareness building, which consists of guiding students to build awareness about oppressive conditions. The second phase is the action phase, which consists of having students take concrete action, either through social action projects or in other ways, to combat injustices.

Social justice education and awareness building.

Social justice education generally begins as an exercise in awareness building. Torres-Harding and Meyers (2013) point out that awareness of oppressive conditions, whether affecting oneself or others, is a necessary precursor to social action. When students are faced with upsetting or difficult information, such as information about the negative, widespread impacts of privilege and oppression, without adequate preparation, there may be resistance that manifests in behaviours or strengthening of beliefs opposite to those that are desired. Therefore, it is

important for educators to support and facilitate this awareness-building. Different strategies have been proposed for guiding students through awareness-building. Torres-Harding and Meyers (2017) suggest inter-group dialogue and self-reflection writing. They claim that group discussions, when inclusive of people from distinct social groups and focused around topics of social justice and impacts of social issues, promote participants' understanding of multiple perspectives and provide opportunities for constructive resolution of inter-group conflicts. Additionally, reflective papers provide individuals with an outlet where they can grapple with issues of oppression and difference. This strategy also allows teachers to provide private feedback to students as they work through complex issues without the risk of causing feelings of shame. Storms (2012) qualitative study of six students from social justice education courses also found that the sharing of lived experiences in group discussions was an important component of creating awareness among students about the functioning of oppression in daily life.

Shalish et. al (2020) concur that reflection papers are an important tool to help students gain awareness about their social location. As they point out, there are many students, particularly students from middle- and upper-class white families, who struggle to understand the concept of hierarchical structure of privilege and to locate themselves in power structures. Before students are ready, or even able, to have discussions about the abstract concepts of identity, privilege, and oppression, they must be able to consider their own location and reflective writing is a powerful tool to get students to accomplish just that. Another strategy that Shalish et. al (2020) proposed to facilitate student analysis of their own location within different power structures is to show documentary films, which can help students understand intersectionality and structural injustice. Documentary films opened students' eyes to the many experiences that

exist outside of their own lives and allowed them to see stories that challenged the ideas of individualism and meritocracy.

Browne et al. (2013) recommend framing social issues in terms of target and agent groups to allow students to critically examine structural oppression without making them feel blamed or victimized. In their study, Browne et al. (2013) found that when faced with facts about how structural injustices adversely impact certain groups of people (e.g. the quality of medical care received by Black people) many people reject the information; they are not able or willing to recognize disparities that exist in our society due to structural inequalities. Unsurprisingly, Seider (2009) suggests that in particular, privileged students (i.e., those from the suburbs who are largely insulated from collective suffering) can be easily overwhelmed by knowledge of social injustices. Using the terms target group and agent group lessens the level of threat and feelings of blame that some individuals experience when confronted with their privilege (Browne et al., 2013). The agent group is the group that is granted greater access to resources, participation and power and the target group is the group that has limited access to power. This framing of social issues draws attention to the structural level dynamics at play and allows people to see that it is not an individual level affront to be told that you belong to the agent group (Browne et al., 2013). By taking people off the offensive, they will hopefully become more receptive to learning about social issues.

While creating awareness about systems of oppression and building students' capacity to recognize their own location within these systems is an important step in social justice education, the ultimate goal is actually to connect this awareness and knowledge with action to reduce oppression (Torres-Harding & Meyers, 2013). Unfortunately, many times when social justice education is brought into classrooms and schools, it never goes beyond the awareness building

phase. When this occurs, social justice education falls short of actually enacting social change because no action emerges from the awareness building (Boyd et al., 2018). As Picower (2015) points out, "without larger forays into activism … teachers are not creating change around the issues they express concern over" (p. 910), which in turn may also undermine the intended lesson about the importance of social justice.

From awareness to action.

Freire (1970) states, "[the oppressed] must intervene critically in the situation which surrounds them" (p. 54). He explains that the conviction to struggle against oppression cannot simply be handed over to people. It must be reached through reflection and action. This premise can be applied to students: the aims of social justice education will not be obtained simply because students are taught about or made aware of social justice; only through reflection and action can the goals of social justice education be attained.

Storms' (2012) study provides a look at some of the tools students need to be armed with in order to feel ready to take action. In her study, students expressed that they had developed many skills in their social justice education course that allowed them to feel prepared for social action engagement. For example, after students had the opportunity to "find their voices" in the classroom setting, they felt more ready to use that voice to challenge or critique oppression out in the world. Additionally, students were provided with models for social action which allowed them to be better prepared to take action when a situation presented itself. Students who were interviewed in the study mentioned that being presented with examples of other people taking action, including their teacher and people in the media, helped them realize their own potential to be activists.

Boyd et al. (2018) provide recommendations for implementing social action projects as a means to "reconstruct" the world after it has been deconstructed in the initial, awareness building phases of social justice education. "Taking action" is not a simple thing to teach students, which may explain why it is so often left out of social justice education programs. In a study of 65 students in a high school civics class, Boyd et. al (2018) found that successful action projects were characterized by three markers. The first marker was locating social problems; while students were easily able to locate social problems historically, they showed resistance to contextualizing social problems in the present. The researchers determined that this was often because students did not want to misspeak and be perceived as racist. The second marker was the avoidance of controversial issues. While students showed interest in social issues related to highly controversial topics, such as the rights and protections of transgender folks, they tended to choose less controversial issues, such as environmental issues, as topics for their individual action projects. The third marker was the tension between autonomy and guidance. Students were keen to choose issues to tackle but required more guidance than anticipated in order to create actionable steps for their projects. In summary, Boyd et al. (2018) provide a good starting point for taking students from awareness to action with social action projects.

Wade (2001) makes the critical point that "Too often, service learning projects stop short of questioning why those needs exist in the first place" (p. 26). Having students complete service projects without also helping them to analyze why the problem they aim to address exists in the first place and consider which steps can be taken to address the root cause of the problem is not truly an exercise in social justice. Social action and social awareness must go hand in hand. Just as social awareness building cannot accomplish the goals of social justice education on its own, action projects will not contribute to social justice without ensuring social awareness is a

precursor. In fact, when service learning is enacted without awareness around the social issue in question, it can potentially be a form of charity that actually perpetuates hierarchical assumptions where the helpers may begin to see themselves as superior to those they are helping (Wade, 2001). In order for action projects to be successful and to avoid the creation of a paternalistic orientation among students, Wade recommends that these projects be completed alongside those who have been oppressed and marginalized. Through this process, students are able to see that everyone is an important part of their community with their own role to play. Additionally, Meyers (2009) recommends having students participate in reflection exercises throughout their service learning project as a means to bridge what they are experiencing with what they have learned. He suggests that reflection exercises can help students gain greater self awareness and increased awareness of differences, diminishing the probability of them imposing their beliefs on others.

Challenges of Implementation

There are many obstacles to enacting a robust social justice education program. To start, it is time consuming, and most teachers have not been provided with the training to effectively lead this charge (Wade, 2001). However, even teachers who are willing and able to make time to dive into social justice education face several further challenges. For example, social justice education will generally not fit neatly into the curriculum. Wade (2001) explains that content coverage is front and centre of many curricula, but content coverage needs to be secondary to questioning norms and assumptions and engaging with social issues in a social justice education. Depending on the curriculum teachers are legally bound by and the standardized tests that their students are required to take that revolve around this content, this may be nearly impossible. Schutz (2010) discusses the challenges of executing a social justice education when

the progressive ideals that form the foundation of such an education are embedded in middle class culture. Because of this, he suggests that students who come from poor and segregated contexts cannot be empowered even in a progressive classroom; they can only learn to operate more effectively in middle class contexts. What is needed, according to Schutz (2010) is for students, especially those from marginalized groups, to learn about collective action, as this is the only way for social change to occur. However, schools generally have little incentive to encourage collective empowerment among their students, meaning that even when teachers are ready and willing to take on these challenges with their students, they are by and large left without support. Nevertheless, despite the very clear challenges teachers are faced with in their attempts to employ social justice education, many continue to try and some are able to find success in small and big ways.

Benefits of Social Action Projects

While social action projects, and social justice education more generally, are certainly not easy things to implement, some case studies have demonstrated that there are substantial benefits to be reaped when educators are dedicated to implementing social action projects. These benefits include students feeling heard, opportunities to take on leadership roles, learning to work collaboratively, increased confidence, and in many cases, positive outcomes from the projects themselves.

Case study: Middle Grades Project.

DeMink-Carthew (2018) completed a study in which they had middle school students carry out a social action project, with one of the goals being to investigate to what extent social action projects promote student voice. One hundred and four students from four classes participated. The students came from a diverse, mid-Atlantic school with approximately 1000

seventh to ninth graders. The teachers participating in the study first solicited information from students about issues that were of concern to them. From this data, they found that two overarching themes were a lack of school community and frequent negative interactions. Therefore, the essential question students were provided with to start their action projects was "How can we promote a positive school culture in our school community?" Teachers led their classes through reflection, brainstorming, and research to assist them in developing their ideas for action. At times, teachers had to remind students to consider the plausibility of certain action projects and the reason that some rules existed. Working in their classes, students eventually created a master list of student-led initiatives to share with the other classes engaged in the project; students from all sections came together to create a dream list of initiatives they wanted to move forward with and the list was presented to the school administration. They were permitted to move forward with four of the eight action projects they presented and were also provided with a fifth project by the principal. At this point, students split into groups to pursue one of the approved projects. These projects had varying levels of success, with one of them resulting in little more than creating posters for an upcoming community day event in the neighbourhood and others resulting in successful collaboration and carrying out of activities, such as spirit week and teacher appreciation week.

The findings of DeMink-Carthew's (2018) study indicate that it was largely successful in incorporating student voice. Although not all projects worked out, students overwhelmingly (18 out of 21 respondents) indicated that they felt that the project had given them a voice in their school. The vast majority of student respondents (19 out of 21) also felt that the project made a difference in their school. These promising results indicate that in terms of students developing

confidence in the ability to make a difference, the final outcome of the project is not as important as the process of participating in it.

Case study: The Youth Uncensored Project.

Another case study worth considering here is The Youth Uncensored Project, a youth participatory action project by youth in Edmonton, Alberta (Conrad, 2015). This project was initiated with the goal of educating service providers about high-risk youth; the lead researchers felt that social service providers in the area, including educators, police officers, health providers, and social workers, did not understand youth well and in some cases even feared them. Students from iHuman Youth Society, a non-profit organization that supports youth impacted by negative outcomes, were invited to participate in the first meeting. Twenty youth attended the first meeting and meetings continued to be held every week for the next two years. Between 10 and 25 youth attended each session with a total of 50 youth participating throughout the project. In these discussions, seven themes were identified as needing attention: relations with law enforcement, educational issues, access to healthcare, the social services system, worker–client relations, family dynamics, and other youth experiences that influenced their encounters with service providers, such as racism, substance use, and personal relationships. The aim was to develop workshops for service providers that addressed each of these themes. As iHuman is an arts-based program, the materials produced for the workshops were also arts-based. With youth as co-researchers, a structure and curriculum for the workshops was developed.

At this stage in The Youth Uncensored research project, the researchers were ready to implement a pilot workshop (Conrad, 2015). Stakeholders were contacted to gauge service provider's interest and availability for attending the workshops. After confirming interest, the first pilot workshop was held. During this workshop, youth opened by presenting songs and

poems related to the previously identified themes. Next, they performed scenarios depicting some of the common negative interactions between youth and service providers. Audience members (service providers) were invited to the stage to identify the tensions being portrayed and enact alternate interactions that would lead to more positive outcomes. The last portion of the workshop involved an opportunity for open conversation between youth and service providers. The pilot was deemed a success and the researchers went on to conduct 26 more workshops in the following year and a half to groups such as Native Counseling Services, Alberta School Boards Association, and the Calgary Youth Criminal Defense Office. Meetings continued to be held weekly to refine curriculum and rehearse for workshops.

The evaluation of the outcomes of the outcomes of The Youth Uncensored Project indicate that the project was successful on several fronts (Conrad, 2015). The outcomes for service providers were evaluated using surveys and a focus group. Service providers reported that their views of youth had been positively altered and many stated that they would be more comfortable working with high risk youth populations after participating in the workshop. The outcomes of the project on youth were also evaluated. Some of benefits of participation in the project that were identified by the youth were feeling a sense of belonging, building relationships with other youth and adult mentors, a better understanding of their life challenges, feeling a sense of accomplishment, increased confidence, and feeling heard by service providers. By participating in this social action project, not only were youth were able to make a difference in their communities by facilitating a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of high risk youth for service providers, but they also experienced personal gains in terms of relationships and confidence, again indicating that it is not only the good done by social action projects

themselves, but also the knowledge and skills gained in the process of carrying out these projects, that bring about social change.

Case study: Student researchers at South Academy.

Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe and Ross (2007) analyze the "lack of impact" (p. 398) made by a project completed at South Academy in Worcester, Massachusetts designed to engage students in making a difference at their school. The Student Researchers Program was a project that engaged student volunteers in identifying and addressing problems in their school communities. The program was one of the initiatives launched at multiple high schools in Worcester following the reception of an eight million dollar grant from a school transformation initiative. The primary focus of the school transformation initiative was youth development, including the promotion of youth voice.

At South Academy, a group of student researchers wanted to create a documentary about their school (Kilroy et al., 2007). After several months of working on the project, including meeting twice each month with their adult facilitator, students had recorded 70 minutes of film but had not been able to edit it into a cohesive film and did not know how to move forward. Due to this hurdle, the adult facilitator refocused the student's energy on a new project. Student researchers began learning interview and focus group tools and used them to facilitate a discussion with their peers about the issues in their school. While the focus groups were successful in eliciting valuable information, the data collected through them remained untouched. The student researchers felt like they were unable to use their findings to make a difference because they lacked recognition in the school community. They attempted to rectify this issue by creating a brochure about their mission to pass out to members of the school community and wrote letters to all the teachers to introduce themselves and seek support.

However, when they were granted a meeting with school administration, they were encouraged to pursue projects that were in line with school leadership priorities rather than addressing the issues they had identified as student researchers. Kilroy et al. (2007) state that the project ended "in a very disappointing manner" (p. 399).

Kilroy et al. (2007) conclude their analysis by asking about "the extent to which Student Researchers have been successful at making changes" (p. 401) and stating that "students' efforts confront several barriers" (p. 401). Certainly, incorporating social action projects can be very challenging, however, despite the difficulties and lack of success faced by the student researchers at South Academy, it would be erroneous to conclude that the project was a complete failure. As was previously stated, a positive project outcome is only one of several benefits acquired by participating in social action projects. Kilroy et al. themselves say that students became increasingly committed to working within their group and improving their school throughout the process. Additionally, they learned and refined several new skills, like interviewing and letter writing. Yes, these students confronted barriers to enacting change and perhaps their ultimate goal was thwarted, however, several benefits were still achieved, and these students now have more tools than before that they can use to make a difference.

Best Practices for Educators

Teachers have three very important roles to play in a social justice program. First, they will initially be the ones responsible for providing opportunities for awareness building to occur. Many students will need significant guidance throughout the process of awareness building. Although some students, particularly those from underprivileged groups, may already have a significant understanding of privilege, marginalization, and oppression, other students may lack even a basic understanding of these concepts. Hackman's (2006) essential components for social

justice education are content mastery, which involves presenting students with content that represents "a range of ideas and information that go beyond those usually presented in mainstream media or educational materials" (p. 105) and critical thinking and the analysis of oppression, which requires educators to demonstrate to students how they can take that content and analyze and critique it. Both of these components speak to the importance of providing students with foundational knowledge and skills about social issues prior to engaging in meaningful activism. Given that many adults, even teachers, struggle with these topics, educators will need to be patient and deliberate in creating these opportunities for awareness building in children.

Second, educators will need to be prepared to teach the core competencies that students require to engage in social justice education. Wade (2001) points out that depending on the type of action projects students take up, they may need to be taught skills such as letter writing, interviewing, or researching. Storms' (2012) study also highlights the importance of skill building. She states that many of the students in her study had great ideas for action projects but initially lacked the competencies to bring their ideas to life. Just because teachers have helped students to become aware of various issues does not mean that students have any idea how to begin taking action. Just as students need to be guided through awareness building, they need to be taught the skills necessary to take action in whatever configuration that might be.

Finally, teachers have the role of carefully leading students through awareness building and into action in such a way that their students take up allyship rather than saviour complexes. Social justice education should never be about teaching students to be "charitable" to those who are "less fortunate" than them, which is a way of thinking that elevates students above those they seek to help (Wade, 2001). As Freire (1970) says, "attempting to liberate the oppressed without

their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building" (p. 52). This type of thinking is antithetical to the aims of social justice education. Instead, teachers have the important role of ensuring collaboration between their students and the groups impacted by the issues they wish to work on.

One final feat for teachers trying to implement social justice education is keeping their own agendas out of the classroom. As Wade (2001) explains, teachers do not bring the issues that they care about to students; instead, they are responsible for helping students brainstorm and identify issues and actions that are of personal interest and value for the students. DeMink-Carthew (2018) reminds us that it is critical to place student voice front and centre from the very beginning to ensure that they are the ones informing the actions. This will ensure that students feel ownership over their projects, increasing the probability that they will put in the work needed to make them successful.

Tools for Teachers

There are various tools that teachers can use to aid them in providing opportunities for activism, teaching the required competencies, and promoting allyship. This section will provide a brief introduction to two of them.

Practical activism projects.

Practical activism projects are rooted in decolonial pedagogy, which is a pedagogical approach that "challenges the dominant practices of schooling and makes schools concrete sites for developing critical consciousness in the interests of working class, indigenous and non-white peoples" (Buttaro, 2010, p. 2). According to Silva (2018), "decolonial pedagogy can facilitate student interest in social action through course projects and raise students' critical consciousness on issues of social justice" (p. 375). Silva (2018) explains that practical activism projects require

students to work together in a whole-class group to identify an institution in need of social change. Students must then facilitate some type of action in pursuit of this social change. Students are entirely responsible for deciding where the need for change is and carrying out the action(s) that they believe can meet that need. Although this type of project can be very challenging due to the diverse identities that are present in most classes, with proper guidance students are able to improve communication and collaboration skills while pursuing social change. Furthermore, practical activism projects, largely because they require a large group of diverse students to commit to one project, can help students learn to decenter themselves in the social justice conversation (Silva, 2018). Allyship is a requirement for success, so students, especially those from privileged groups, must learn to listen to the stories of others to understand why they value different projects. Importantly, through participation in practical activism, students gain a sense of empowerment, increasing the likelihood that they will continue with activism even after the project or the course ends.

Youth Participatory Action Research.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), which was used in the previously discussed Youth Uncensored Project, involves giving young people the power to research the issues that are important to them and when used as an instructional tool is meant to be student-led, student-centred and action oriented (Welton & Bertrand, 2019). YPAR involves the use of "strategic, youth-driven research methods that then lead to activism that addresses issues young people care deeply about" (2019, p. 49). In this framework, youth are trained to conduct research on the issues that impact them in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues. With the knowledge they gain, they are better equipped to take action for change. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) helps to address the common problem of teachers and other adults who

do not want to share power and are resistant to youth activism by putting decision making power into the hands of youth (Welton & Bertrand, 2019). By using a YPAR framework, educators can ensure that their students are building up their awareness about the issue at hand through their research. Furthermore, they can ensure that the opportunities they are providing for activism are relevant and important to the students they teach.

Findings and Implications

While there is great work being done in the sphere of education to address social and racial inequalities, there is still a lot of work to do before schools will be considered safe and just places for all students. Much of the research completed on social justice education and social action projects, as presented in this paper, is promising in terms of benefiting students and school communities in working towards the lofty goal of socially just schools. Moving forward, we need more rigorous empirical data that can speak to whether social justice education and social action projects have a significant effect on student attitudes, behaviour, and achievement (and to what extent). However, in order to collect this data we need educators who are implementing robust social justice programs in their classrooms. Therefore, it is my hope that upon reading this, educators feel motivated to begin using social action projects in their classrooms.

Conclusion

The status quo of education is failing many of our students and communities and it is up to all of us to stimulate meaningful change. Education is one of the most powerful tools we have to achieve social justice, but it is also one of the most useful tools in the hands of those who seek to maintain the often oppressive status quo. That is why it is critically important that educators ensure that the future lies in the hands of those who stamp out oppression and seek out justice. Social action projects may be one way that we can work towards this goal. We as educators often

feel overburdened and under-resourced, however, beginning to implement social action projects is one thing that all of us can do with the encouraging knowledge that whether or not the projects are successful in fully realizing their goals, the kids will be better for having participated in the process.

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