

Teaching for social justice: Education for liberation

Education for Liberation

Black & Latino Policy Institute

How can a focus on teaching for social justice energize teaching and learning in an urban school?

What enables some teachers to reach the same students whom other teachers cannot seem to reach?

The main difference between effective urban teachers and the average teacher came from their focus on student-empowering social justice pedagogy.

These teachers subscribe to Paulo Freire's (1970) idea that effective education for marginalized groups must employ a liberatory pedagogy—that is, one that aims to help students become critical change agents who feel capable of and responsible for addressing social injustices in their communities. One urban educator explains,

“Racial, cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic status has no effect on students' abilities to acquire knowledge. Schools should provide students with the fundamental skills and ideas necessary to develop within the system while also preparing them to transform the system.”

Another urban educator cites a series of problems with the institutional culture of urban schools:

“The first thing I wonder about urban schools is, “Where's the love?” Even a surface-level analysis of our school reveals that students dislike the school; they are unengaged and exhibit resistance. The environment is not child/student-centered. This is reflected in the scripted or mandated programming: a set of de-contextualized academic exercises--learning disconnected from the day-to-day lives of students, and an overemphasis on basic skills. Students have become machines; they are not allowed to question the relevance of what they are learning. They are forced to perform for the sake of the task at hand. In short, our schools reflect a prison system mentality, a lot like the conditions in urban communities.”

Liberatory pedagogy guidelines: The 4Es

Urban educators must consider the idea that they can best care for students by giving them the academic and critical skills to act as change agents in their communities. Teaching students using the "4Es" of emancipatory pedagogy does this.

- *Engage*. Provide culturally responsive teaching that validates students' funds of knowledge.
- *Experience*. Expose students to various possible realities by presenting narratives that show the perspectives of those often unheard in society.
- *Empower*. Use a critical and transformative pedagogy to give students a sense of agency, both individual and collective, to act on the conditions in their lives.
- *Enact*. Create opportunities for students to act out their growing sense of agency, learning from and reflecting on their successes and struggles.

Social justice curriculum and academic achievement

One social justice educator develops traditional academic skills by paying attention to students' cultures, critical thinking, and agency:

“My practice begins with the recognition of the *students' cultural capital*: language, culture, family, interests, and so on. . . . My goal is to offer counter-discourse to the traditional curriculum and to

incorporate this in a fluid, meaningful, and empowering way. It is important that my pedagogy identify forms of oppression—and not ambiguously, either, or else students feel like things cannot change.”

Students’ cultural capital vs. deficit model of children

During a spring 2004 meeting one high ranking IPS administrator, with a doctorate in education, believed the problems with K-2 children entering the system was that their “School Readiness Levels are low.” This was explained as, “Increased numbers of students entering school lacking an understanding of experiential language that is used for the basis of instruction and learning, and lacking an understanding of school culture and socialization.” These students were viewed as problematic: “Lack of experience and unfamiliar with school language.”

Interestingly, urban educators who teach for social justice do not see the situation this way. They see the “language, culture, family, interests” of the working class urban poor as cultural capital—as a strength upon which to build relationships and instruction. The IPS administrator sees this “cultural capital” (this type/level of experiences) as insufficient, inappropriate, or as a deficit. Social justice educators would rewrite the above statement as: “Increased numbers of *teachers* entering school lacking an understanding of experiential language that is used *by students* and *that will be used by the teacher* for the basis of instruction and learning, and *the teacher is* lacking an understanding of *the student’s* culture and the socialization *processes of that culture.*” These *teachers* were viewed as problematic: “*Teacher lacks* experience *with student’s* culture and unfamiliar with *student’s* language.”

Recent brain research (Scherer, 1997) suggests that the brain connects new information to what it already knows. The onus is on teacher to connect to the brain and culture (cultural capital) of the student. The urban poor and minority come to school with a wealth of experiences, etc.--unfortunately they are not the educator’s experiences, etc., and thus are seen as inappropriate. More unfortunately, the stigma is put on the student as deficient. The real question is, “Are schools ready for students?” not just, “Are students ready for school?”

More on: Social justice curriculum and academic achievement

Successful urban teachers are keenly aware of the dire conditions in which many of their students live. They believe that they should not ignore these conditions, but instead should talk about them in the classroom. They design their pedagogy to empower students with tools for recognizing, naming, analyzing, and confronting the most acute social conditions facing them: poverty, racism, violence, and inequality.

To these teachers, success means both raising students' test scores and developing students' ability to think critically and act constructively. They insist that one without the other is unlikely to reduce the opportunity gap for urban students. They do not accept urban poverty as an excuse for underachievement by either teachers or students. Instead, they see unequal material conditions as a set of constraints students can and should transform.

Teaching for social justice educators noted that after students participated in these social justice-oriented learning activities, class members significantly raised their scores in three of the reading program's measured areas: applications, strategies, and conventions.

These teachers contend that their students' success is a result of instructional strategies that enable students to apply what they learn in the classroom to real issues in their lives. Here teachers emphasize the importance of letting students come to their own conclusions about the effectiveness of their activities as they studied, planned, and carried out solutions to problems. They believe the real victory

here is that students felt empowered to apply the lessons they learned in school when challenging the immediate conditions of their lives.

School success: To leave or return to the community?

Less successful urban teachers tend to have more modest ambitions, such as wanting their students to study for tests, behave well in class, and persist in school—go to college, get good paying jobs and move out of the hood to the suburbs. Here education is seen as a vehicle to escape financially impoverished communities.

However, the philosophies of social justice embraced by these urban educators go beyond this traditional narrative. These teachers view education as a vehicle to invest in that can improve conditions in urban areas. They want their students to become college graduates who will come back and transform their own urban communities.

What this means for teachers

All of this implies that teacher must ask themselves and answer this question: “How can urban schools create a formal space for teachers to investigate and question their philosophies and beliefs and learn from colleagues who provide relevant, socially transformative instruction?”

In summary

This emphasis on "naming and transforming" negative ideological and social conditions provides an open classroom dialogue that encourages students to identify and critique non-democratic structures in their lives. As students expressed their strong opinions about problems, they were empowered to "be dynamic, intellectual, and critical of what is going on."

In conclusion: Teaching for social justice as student self-actualization

It is no coincident that the “4Es” approach is reflected in the accelerated learning model “Rigor/Relevance Framework” (Dagget, 1998). Using this paradigm encourages and allows students to use/apply the higher order thinking skills of Bloom’s Taxonomy side of the framework—Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Thus, as students are encouraged to *Empower* and *Enact*—apply knowledge at higher stages, they are moved toward the higher end of the framework’s Application Model—Apply Across Disciplines, Apply to Real-world Predictable Situations, Apply to Real-world Unpredictable Situations, and Innovation.

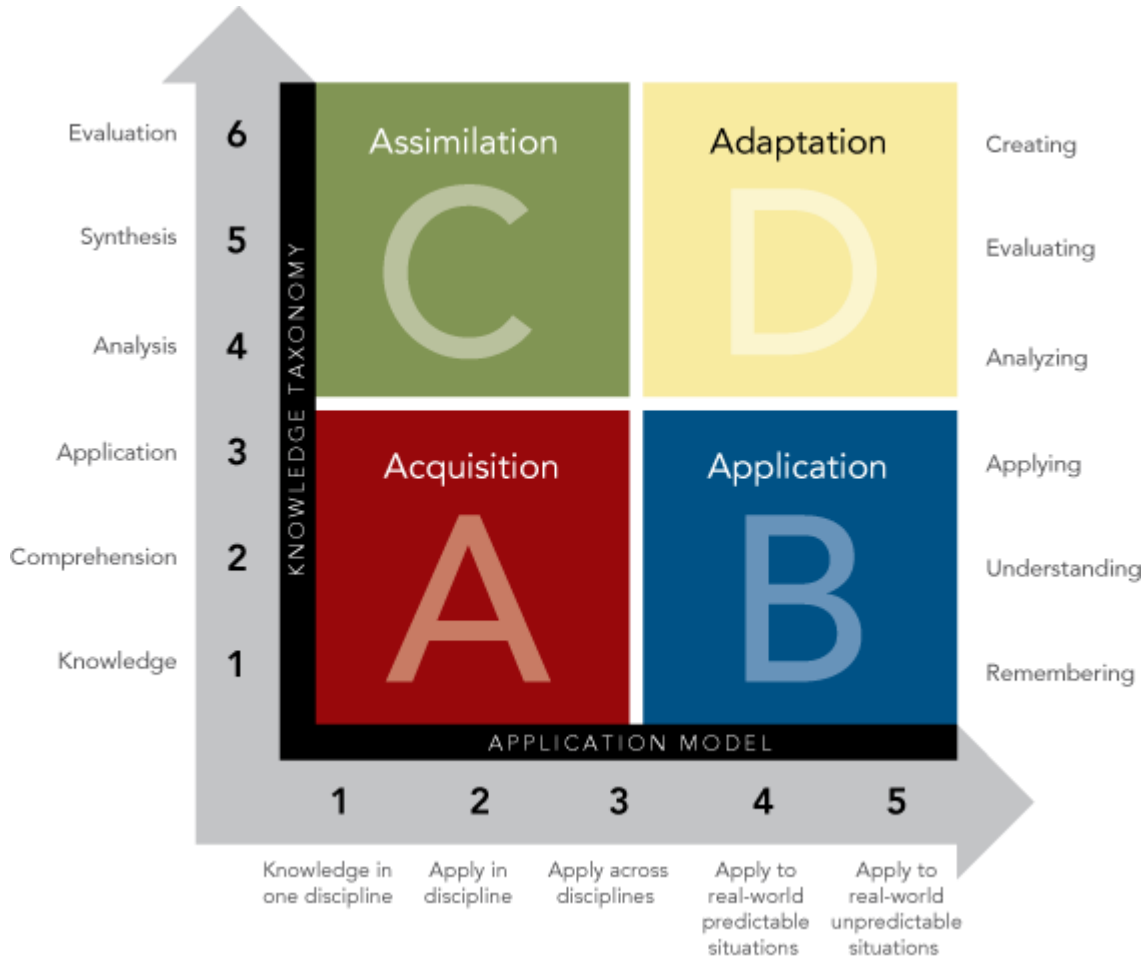
The 4Es outline keep students oriented toward the D quadrant where they are applying what they have learned using higher order thinking skills in real-world situations with real-world outcomes—challenging and changing the very issues of poverty, politics, and inequality that affect school success. This is self-actualization. This is teaching for social justice.

* A compilation of ideas and quotes from “Developing Social Justice Educators” by Jeffery M. R. Duncan-Andrade in *Educational Leadership*, March 2005, Volume 62, Number 6. Dr. Duncan-Andrade holds a joint appointment as Director of Urban Teacher Development, Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, UCLA and Assistant Professor of RAZA Studies and Education and Coordinator of Educational Equity Initiative, Cesar Chavez Institute, San Francisco State University.

References

- Dagget, W. (1998). *Facilitating Learning*. Schnectady, NY: Leadership Press. p. 21-58.
Scherer, M. (Ed.). (1997). How Children Learn. *Educational Leadership*. 54, 6. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Dagget's Application Model: "Rigor/Relevance Framework"



A	B	C	D
Students gather and store bits of knowledge and information. Students are primarily expected to remember or understand this knowledge.	Students use acquired knowledge to solve problems, design solutions, and complete work. The highest level of application is to apply knowledge to new and unpredictable situations.	Students extend and refine their acquired knowledge to be able to use that knowledge automatically and routinely to analyze and solve problems and create solutions.	Students have the competence to think in complex ways.