

Shifting Out of “Neutral”: Beginning Teachers’ Struggles with Teaching for Social Justice

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In this article we explore the struggles of 12 beginning teachers committed to social justice to define their roles when facilitating classroom discussions of social issues. We discerned five distinct positions about the possibility and desirability of teacher neutrality. To teach for social justice involves shifting out of neutral, both in terms of a teacher’s orientation to social inequalities and of pedagogy. Our preferred teacher role, *inclusive and situated engagement*, involves spotlighting the perspectives of subordinated groups and providing opportunities for young people to develop their deliberative capacities and to learn to act on their reasoned convictions.

L’article porte sur douze enseignants débutants soucieux de justice sociale et cherchant à définir leurs rôles dans les discussions en classe sur des questions sociales. Cinq positions distinctes au sujet de la possibilité et de l’opportunité de la neutralité de l’enseignant sont examinées. Un enseignement axé sur la justice sociale implique que l’enseignant sorte de la neutralité quant à son orientation vis-à-vis des inégalités sociales et de la pédagogie. Les auteures privilégient *l’engagement inclusif et situationnel*, l’enseignant mettant en lumière les points de vue des groupes marginalisés et fournissant aux jeunes l’occasion de développer leur aptitude à délibérer et d’apprendre à agir à partir de convictions éclairées.

Competing conceptions of the role of the public school are linked to different visions of democracy and the attendant purposes of public schooling in Canada. One view is that teachers should not engage their students in evaluating (or perhaps even discussing) various courses of action on important public matters, with the underlying assumption that teachers as public servants should carry out decisions made elsewhere. They should help children to understand the rule of law and respect traditional authority; the teacher’s role is not to question policies arrived at by elected representatives but to focus on preparing students for the world of work and transmitting cultural traditions (see, e.g., the views expressed in Steffenhagen, 2001). Proponents of this vision assume that

consensus characterizes most of society and the school system, and that preparing democratic citizens means building patriotism and national unity.

A second, and the most prevalent, vision of democracy in Canada today is a liberal/pluralist one. "Within this pluralist conception, the school is an important arena for the expression of diverse values and the teacher must assume the role of a nonpartisan referee, whose dominant interest is to ensure fair competition in the classroom marketplace of ideas" (Kelly, 1986, p. 123). Teachers play an important role in helping students appreciate multiple perspectives. An implicit assumption of this view, though, is that these multiple perspectives compete on a level playing field. Thus, little talk occurs of the need for a critical analysis, for example, of the power asymmetries shaping the mass media coverage of events preceding or following the Iraq War.

Yet a third perspective, which informs the argument in this article, assumes that schools are not apart from the wider society; they are themselves sites of struggle and social change. Both inside and outside schools, societal inequalities (based on class, race, gender, or sexuality) place limits on the actual practice of democracy. Teachers alone cannot overcome the social injustices that currently impede democracy, but they can play an important role in nurturing a more active form of citizenship among young people. In a participatory and deliberative democracy¹ (see Kelly, 2003), teachers should prepare citizens to engage in collective problem solving. Students thus need to learn analytic, communicative, and strategic skills and to think about the consequences for social action based on their analysis of public policy issues. They need to develop capacities such as debate, reflection, and discussion across differences, criticism, persuasion, and decision making.²

In preparing democratic citizens, teachers play a key role in facilitating classroom discussions of social and ethical issues. In the many minute and seemingly mundane choices that teachers make when they facilitate such discussions (e.g., deciding which issues to recognize as social or ethical and worthy of class time), they enact at least a partial vision of social justice (or injustice). Social issues inevitably tap into the conflict among groups struggling for control over resources and ideas. Learning how to discuss and debate these emotionally charged and messy issues is a crucial first step toward working with others to solve collective problems.

The tensions and dilemmas that this facilitation role can produce for even the most experienced educator are felt even more keenly by beginning teachers, who struggle to articulate a teaching philosophy, hone subject-

matter knowledge, select from and improvise within curricular guidelines, and develop effective and equitable discipline and assessment strategies. Because they are continuously observed and evaluated as student teachers, they often can find it particularly stressful to facilitate open-ended discussions of social and ethical issues. They may come, mistakenly in our view, to think that they can remain above the fray and either be neutral purveyors of "facts" or referees of competing perspectives — or at least strive for what we will call "teacher neutrality"³ as an ideal.

In this article we explore the struggles of beginning teachers committed to social justice to define their role in classroom discussions. We have mapped out five distinct positions with regard to the possibility of teacher neutrality, in practice or as an ideal, and illustrate them with examples drawn from four urban secondary schools.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section we outline the critical pedagogy perspective that underpins our inquiry. Our view of democratic citizenship as more active and participatory generally accords with what has been variously described as critical pedagogy (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 1999; Osborne, 1991; Shannon, 1995), feminist pedagogy (e.g., Briskin & Coulter, 1992; Lather, 1991), social reconstructionism (e.g., Sleeter & Grant, 1994), and critical multiculturalism (e.g., Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). The three common themes emerging from these perspectives that relate most directly to our inquiry into beginning teachers' understandings of what it means to teach for social justice can be summarized as: (a) critical analysis of social and institutional inequities; (b) commitment to "principled action to achieve social justice, not only for those around but for strangers" (Greene, 1998, p. xxxiii); and (c) willingness to question one's own understanding of social justice, in part through listening to alternative perspectives. Important prompts to self-reflection for those working within the tradition of critical pedagogy, broadly defined, have been issued by those influenced by feminist poststructuralist theories, among others (for a review, see Kumashiro, 2000). Ellsworth (1989), for example, called upon critical educators to systematically examine the barriers to dialogue that the existence of "unequal power relations in classrooms" erects (p. 309) and to recognize that they themselves "are always implicated in the very structures they are trying to change" (p. 310).

Those who have written about critical pedagogy are clear that teaching is inevitably political and that teachers cannot be value-neutral. But how

to *teach* this problematic reality to student teachers, many of whom benefit from prevailing economic, political, and social arrangements, is far from easy.

In more mainstream educational discussions, the issue of teacher neutrality is more subject to debate. Thomas Kelly (1986), writing from what we discern as a left-liberal position, outlined four perspectives on the role of the teacher in facilitating controversial issues: exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality (which Kelly concluded is the most defensible).

The latter two teacher roles in Kelly's scheme are the most prevalent; both subscribe to impartiality, an ideal involving the principles of "critical dialogue" (p. 121) and a "fair hearing" (p. 121). The perspectives differ on the issue of neutrality. Teachers aspiring to neutral impartiality try to remain "silent about their own views on controversial issues" (p. 122), breaking their silence only as devil's advocate or when pressed by students. "In short, far from a positive ideal, the mere expression, much less advocacy, of their own point of view represents for the neutralist a practice to be optimally avoided" (p. 122; see, e.g., Cain, 1999; Furlong & Carroll, 1990).

Those espousing a perspective of committed impartiality would agree that teachers should create a respectful classroom where competing viewpoints receive a fair hearing, but they believe that "teachers should state rather than conceal their own views on controversial issues" (Kelly, 1986, p. 130). Teachers should, of course, avoid "heavy handed advocacy" (p. 131) and be "judicious" (p. 130) in deciding when and how to state their opinions (see, e.g., O'Brien & Howard, 1996).

Although we find Kelly's discussion useful and interesting, he did not provide detail about what "critical dialogue" (p. 121) would look like in practice. Further, nowhere did he question the neutralist assumption that ideas compete as equals in the "marketplace of diverse ideas" (p. 118). This, in part, led Kelly to assert that "individuals advocating feminism, ethnic and black empowerment and neo-Marxist social reconstruction" (pp. 117–118) sometimes espouse what he has called "exclusive partiality," whereby they expose their students to a "concentration of oppositional ideology" in order to counter the effects of prior "indoctrination" (p. 118). It is true that writers and thinkers in the critical tradition have emphasized the power of dominant institutions to perpetuate the status quo and have sometimes labelled this as indoctrination. For example, Freire (1972), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argued that "Education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students, with the ideological intent (often not perceived by educators) of indoctrinating them to adapt to the

world of oppression" (p. 65). Among contemporary critical thinkers and writers, however, we discern a commitment to interrogate ideas across the ideological spectrum, while feeling free to express their views (e.g., Zinn, 1994).

Most people writing about critical and feminist pedagogies appear to have espoused a form of committed impartiality, to use Kelly's terminology, although some would note the difficulty of achieving impartiality given societal inequalities. Their reasoning about the political nature of teaching, however, often stayed at a rather abstract level (see, e.g., Freire, 1985, pp. 188-189; Giroux, 1988, p. 127; Lather, 1991, p. 15). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), writing in the context of K-12 schooling, were more specific about why teaching is inevitably political.

How is a teacher to choose a textbook or how is he or she to decide what knowledge to teach? . . . [Students'] voices and identities are constructed by incorporating and rejecting a multiplicity of competing ideological constructions. Which ones do teachers encourage? Which ones do they discourage? (p. 12)

One of the few writers to demonstrate what critical pedagogy might look like in a public school setting was Bigelow, a high school social studies teacher in Portland, Oregon. In describing a unit he created and taught on Nike and global capitalism, he highlighted in an honest and concrete manner the dilemmas that he confronted.

On the one hand, I had no desire to feign neutrality — to hide my conviction that people here need to care about and to act in solidarity with workers around the world in their struggles for better lives. To pretend that I was a mere dispenser of information would be dishonest, but worse, it would imply that being a spectator is an ethical response to injustice. It would model a stance of moral apathy. I wanted students to know these issues were important to me, that I cared enough to do something about them.

On the other hand, I never want my social concerns to suffocate student inquiry or to prevent students from thoughtfully considering opposing views. I wanted to present the positions of transnational corporations critically, but without caricature. (Bigelow, 1997, p. 14)

Continuing down Bigelow's path, we wanted to counter the tendency of critical scholarship to remain at the level of abstract theorizing, to look at what teaching for social justice might look like inside classrooms, while spotlighting the political aspects of the role of the teacher. We used the writing about critical pedagogy — or more broadly, anti-oppressive education — as a lens to focus on what goes on in schools and to suggest the possibilities for more inclusive, democratic practices.

METHODOLOGY

We have been engaged in an ongoing, qualitative self-study (based primarily on “post-positivist” research interviewing; see Kvale, 1996) of the successes and challenges of the Humanities and Social Justice Teacher Education Program (HSJTEP) at the University of British Columbia, which we helped to co-found in 1998. An annual cohort of up to 36 students preparing to teach social studies, English, or both at the secondary level can opt for this special program. We founded HSJTEP in response to some student teachers’ demands for a more sustained examination of societal inequities (such as racism, poverty, sexism, and heterosexism) as they manifest in schools for knowledge of and what they could do to respond to such injustices.

In year two of HSJTEP, we interviewed nine of the student teachers at the end of their extended practicum. We heard them struggling with what the role of the teacher should be. Could they be caring individuals, subject-matter experts, and change agents, while at the same time steering clear of authoritarianism? From across a range of personalities and ideological orientations, a number of student teachers said that sponsor teachers, students, parents, and even voices in their own heads advising against indoctrination pressed them into a neutral stance. This admission surprised us, given that at least some argued — during classes with us in the preceding fall term — that (to quote one) “there is no neutral teaching position.” We now realize more clearly that part of the paradox is explained by the fact that, in the fall term, the student teachers were reflecting on teaching from a more removed, analytic stance, rooted in their long-time role as students. Wanting to explore the paradox further, we decided in year three to focus on ways that beginning teachers committed to social justice define the role of the teacher. What tensions and contradictions arise between their stated teaching philosophies and the realities they encounter at school during their practicum?

To find out, we conducted semi-structured, hour-long interviews with 12 student teachers (one-third of cohort 3) toward the end of their practicum. Before the students went on their practicum, all 36 of them participated in a theatre exercise that focused on various situations where student teachers had to take a stand and then reflect in writing on the experience. We analyzed the written results of this exercise and sought interviews with students who expressed a range of views on the role of a teacher. The final sample of 12 reflected the demographic profile of the cohort as a whole in terms of sex (6 women, 6 men), age (most in their twenties and thirties), sexuality (11 heterosexual, 1 lesbian), and “race” (9

European Canadians, 2 Indo-Canadians, 1 Filipino-European Canadian). The participants taught in four public secondary schools; three schools were located in inner-city and working-class, multiethnic neighbourhoods, and the fourth was in an affluent neighbourhood.

We began each interview by asking the student teachers to describe one or more incidents where they felt they had "taken a stand" during the practicum. We deliberately used this broad and somewhat vague phrase because, as much as possible, we wanted to determine which arenas for choice and action they envisioned for themselves as new teachers. The two most common ways that student teachers described taking a stand (mentioned by over half of those interviewed) were calling attention to omissions in the socially dominant curriculum and challenging their students' use of demeaning language, stereotypes, or behaviour.⁴ The first type of incident called upon the student teacher, by definition, to diverge from the text being used and launch into a more open-ended discussion of social and ethical issues, which inevitably made a consideration of inequity and power part of the curriculum. Similarly, student teachers spotlighted power imbalances and inequities as teachable moments when they encountered incidents of homophobia, racism, sexism, and ableism. They helped their students "name and deal with individual instances of prejudice as well as structural and institutional inequities by making these issues 'discussible' in school" (Cochran-Smith, 1999, p. 132).

MAPPING THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN DISCUSSIONS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

Although our group represented diverse ideological perspectives, all had elected a program that focused on teaching for social justice. Not surprisingly, therefore, none of them eschewed controversy or argued that public schools do not have an important role to play in preparing democratic citizens. They differed, however, on how best to accomplish this citizenship goal, as the following stories suggest. Only one of 12 student teachers argued that teachers could be value-neutral.

Teacher Neutrality Is Possible and Desirable

Although Rob's⁵ position that teacher neutrality is possible and desirable was unusual among the HSJTEP cohort, we suspect that it is widely held among beginning teachers. Rob felt strongly that teachers should create an environment where students can hear all views and that he should remain neutral even if a student expressed a viewpoint completely at odds with his own. When facilitating discussions of social issues, Rob said, "My

position was to not express views but to allow them [students] to be able to express their views and possibly ask questions. I believe I was pretty balanced in my questioning." Rob considered himself successful when his students had no idea where he was coming from on social issues. "I don't think any of my students could come away saying that Mr. Cook is very conservative or Mr. Cook is very left leaning, and I think that's good."

A position of teacher neutrality is desirable, according to Rob, because it aids in developing students' ability to think critically, which in turn is important in preparing democratic citizens. An important assumption underlying his stance is that high-school students are highly impressionable. "A teacher does have such influence [and] . . . can taint people's opinions and unnecessarily direct students." Rob firmly believed that "strong teaching and teaching with critical thinking and teaching for participatory democracy . . . can occur without [the teacher] taking a stand" on social issues.

Critical thinking did not, for Rob, include raising concerns with students about school district policy voted on by democratically elected school board members. Rob alluded to the controversy in Surrey, British Columbia, where the school district has a policy against sponsoring gay-straight alliance clubs within schools and had banned certain books that portrayed gay and lesbian families. He noted that he might personally "have a different view and see the relevance" of discussing these issues. "However, if I am to work within their school, and . . . I'm an employee, I will carry out their policy. I don't believe that it's my responsibility or my right to object to their policy." His description of the role of the teacher as an agent of state policy marks Rob as unique in this study.

Temporary Teacher Neutrality Is Possible and Sometimes Desirable

Three student teachers (Matt, Sarah, and Sue) discussed the possibility and desirability of temporary teacher neutrality, particularly for discussions of controversial social issues. According to Matt, "I think sometimes the teacher has to remain neutral for a period of time so that [she or he] doesn't persuade or impact kids in any way so that they can truly think for themselves." Because they shared with Rob the assumption of high-school students' overall impressionability, they noted that it was best to wait until the end of a discussion to reveal their opinion, if at all. The conditions under which they mentioned that they would share their view were: if pressed by a student to do so, if they qualified it (e.g., "this is only one opinion"), or in the role of devil's advocate.

This group emphasized the importance of "maintaining a balance" in

what Matt called "the marketplace of ideas." Sue specified that competing political ideologies and "consumer culture" comprised topics about which she would not state her personal views during class discussions. In a unit on government, she did not reveal that she planned to vote for the Canadian Alliance in the upcoming federal elections. She reasoned that, as a class, they had examined the five major political parties, and she had given "equal time to each one." On social issues where "reasonable" people disagree, the role of the teacher is to ensure a fair hearing for all sides and to let students "form their own judgment." On an issue like capital punishment, for example, Sarah said, "My role is to present both cases (pro and con) and then give the students room to come up with their own opinions." Sarah, Matt, and Sue all underscored the idea of their students, as Sarah put it, being on "a journey on their own," an understanding that indicates that knowledge is individually rather than socially constructed, and the role of the teacher is to pose problems for students to think through (Scheurman, 1998).

What separates Sue, Matt, and Sarah from Rob with regard to teacher neutrality is only a matter of degree. Sue pointed out, however, that it was not "natural" for teachers to appear neutral on every issue; a sustained stance of teacher neutrality risked making teachers seem "apathetic." In contrast to Rob, Sue said it was important to let students know that she felt "really strongly" about some issues; this, she argued, made her "more human and not just the person who stands at the front of the room." For this reason, she neither claimed nor tried to maintain a stance of strict teacher neutrality.

Another situation where Sue, Sarah, and Matt broke from the idea of teacher neutrality arose during class discussions of what they interpreted as moral or ethical as opposed to controversial social issues. With the latter, they felt compelled to act as nonpartisan referees; whereas with issues they labelled moral, they more quickly and easily asserted their opinions. For example, Matt reflected on a class that met for the first time after one of the students had committed suicide. A counsellor visited the class but failed to state one of Matt's beliefs: "suicide is wrong." After the counsellor left, the students' comments disturbed Matt because he felt they "glorified" the student who had committed suicide for making "a decision about something" and taking action.

I wanted to focus on the aftermath, all the harm he's done to his family and to his friends, all of the emotions that he could cause them, like guilt. So at that point I did pipe in and make those feelings known: "There are other options to suicide, it's not the best answer, regardless of all the pain that you may be feeling." So at that point I felt it was appropriate

to step in, and I think I have the right to do that, just like anybody else in the classroom has a right to express an opinion that's called reasonable. (student-teacher, Matt)

Matt concluded, "I think we're supposed to be teaching kids a moral lifestyle."

Teacher Neutrality Is an Impossible but Worthy Ideal

Jack, Maddy, and Antoine said they strove for teacher neutrality; they acknowledged, however, that it was not really attainable. Maddy noted, "There are ways in which teachers make their opinions known through the language that they use, all sorts of adjectives that we slip in there to describe this politician or that leader." Jack was concerned about the "hidden curriculum" of teacher neutrality and said he did not want to convey "apathy" to his students. Instead, by taking occasional stands, he wanted to "model" how to think for oneself and form opinions.

Yet teacher neutrality appealed to this group as an ideal, particularly for discussions of controversial social issues. Maddy, for instance, said she "liked to play either the devil's advocate or just to encourage students to look at the issue from both point of views. . . . I may on occasion have stated what I personally felt, but . . . I found my role to be a lot more . . . [than] catching the basketballs and passing them to the next person and keeping [the discussion] going."

Maddy, Jack, and Antoine saw the role of the teacher as a "mediator" or "facilitator" of discussion. As such, they occasionally felt the need — out of a concern for fairness and balance — to supplement the curriculum to ensure that their students encountered multiple perspectives. They seemed to assume, however, that the multiple perspectives, once surfaced, would compete as equals on the neutral ground of their classrooms, as illustrated well by Jack's story about teaching a grade-10 social studies unit on "The Opening of the West." With the aim of balance and "open-mindedness," Jack decided to supplement the Eurocentric side of the "argument" with "the Aboriginal side." To his surprise, he found that his students did not see him as a neutral teacher. "I soon realized a few classes in that the students were actually saying to me, 'Yes, but you want us to see the Aboriginal side.' . . . They knew which way I was steering them." In retrospect, Jack recognized that his questioning, selection of supplementary materials, and overarching goals had exposed what he called his "biases."

Jack noted, "Grade-10 students will live under the assumption that the modern conveniences brought by Europeans to this continent is the better

situation to have, and . . . to compensate for that, I had to almost stack the deck in favour of the Aboriginals." When students "called him out" on his effort to compensate for the omission of the Aboriginal perspective from the textbook, Jack acknowledged his "bias." He did not, however, ask students to brainstorm reasons for the omission. Nor did he explicitly share with students his view or his dilemma in answering the question of whether the "exploration and settlement of western Canada by Europeans was clearly to the disadvantage of the Native peoples." He felt constrained by a concern that his students would see him as a "hypocrite." "If I come in as a teacher [of Irish descent] and say the European settlement in Canada was clearly to the detriment of the Aboriginal people and that we had no right coming in . . . and destroying their way of life . . . [then] why don't I go back to Ireland and right the wrongs that my grandparents made?"

The ideal of teacher neutrality is so pervasive in our society that even when it is recognized as impossible, teachers have the expectation that they should be neutral. One symptom of this is the word *bias*, which implies a prejudice or favouritism, something to be avoided. Certainly, teachers have been rightly accused of bias in this sense. But Jack's story showed him striving for impartiality (giving various sides in a dispute a fair hearing) by spotlighting and documenting a crucial perspective marginalized by textbook writers. By going against the grain of conventional wisdom without explicitly analyzing who benefits and who loses from the continued dominance of the textbook's account of history or without locating himself within prevailing power relations, Jack did not reveal his "bias." A better word for conveying this meaning of bias is *stance*, one's location (in terms of values, beliefs) for viewing the world. Feminist scholars, among others, have argued that all conceptual frameworks are partial and value-laden (e.g., Warren, 1994). Jack, Maddy, and Antoine acknowledged that they each had conceptual frameworks that shaped their views and pedagogies. They agreed that they inevitably take a stand on issues as they teach. They did not, however, critically examine these frameworks or their stances with their students.

Teacher Neutrality Is Neither Possible nor a Goal

Jasbir and Hardeep were both clear that teacher neutrality is neither possible nor a goal. According to Jasbir, "If you don't say anything at all, you're actually saying something. So there is no way you [as a teacher] can remain neutral." Added Hardeep, "You as a teacher can express your opinions and still have a fair and respectful environment, just as long as it's understood that your opinion isn't overbearing, that if anybody goes

against it, you would [not] knock them down.”

They explained how their role shifted depending on particular classes and the range of students’ initial perspectives on the social issue under consideration. For example, because Jasbir knew that the majority of her grade-11 social studies students favoured the death penalty, she decided to clearly state her opposition to capital punishment when her class did a Louis Riel re-trial. “You need both sides, and my side happened to be opposing their side, so that some of them afterwards were going, ‘Hey, I can see that.’” More generally, Jasbir pointed out that she was modeling the voicing of a minority opinion: “I have different points of view; you’re allowed to have them, too.” Jasbir was clear about her goal: not to stay neutral but to prompt students to feel and understand the tensions and complexities of a situation before they reach conclusions.

In a poetry unit in a grade-9 English class, Hardeep and his students drew on rap music, which often contained profane or controversial lyrics. When students asked whether he listened to rap, Hardeep freely admitted doing so. Generalizing from this, Hardeep commented, “I think that becomes even more dangerous if the teacher is saying that he has no opinion, but we [the students] know he has one, so he’s just hiding it.” Concealing one’s views behind a neutral stance does not allow students to question or evaluate the teacher’s reasons for holding those views.

Because both Hardeep and Jasbir had developed excellent rapport with their students, they more easily were able to facilitate discussions of controversial social issues. Jasbir knew, for example, that her students “could handle me saying that [I was against capital punishment] without them backing off and then saying, ‘Oh, now we agree with you.’ They are opinionated and I could see us having a discussion.” Hardeep explicitly stated that he co-constructed knowledge with his students: “On my practicum I made it clear that I was a part of the class, that . . . we were all a part of the same learning process, that I just had a different role.” He wasn’t worried about exerting undue “influence.” In various ways, Hardeep and Jasbir implied a willingness to decentre the authority of the teacher.

Feigned Teacher Neutrality Supports the Existing Power Structure

Pierre, Mary, and Debbie noted that, in one way or another, feigned teacher neutrality supports the existing power structure. Like Jasbir and Hardeep, this group of student teachers felt comfortable sharing their views on social and ethical issues and were at pains to allow all voices to be heard in the discussion. Yet they explicitly enumerated the ways decisions in teaching

are inextricably political. As Mary put it, "The role of the teacher is always political, because what is emphasized and what isn't [in the curriculum] is very deliberate." For example, when her class discussed the Canadian west, she saw it as her role "to fill a gap in historical knowledge and understanding" by adding lessons on the role of Chinese labourers in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway and on the Indian Act. She was not content merely to supplement the grade-10 social studies textbook in this way, but instead had her students brainstorm reasons why these topics had been minimized. To do otherwise, said Mary, would mean "silencing a whole part of history that is racist but one that very much needs to be told."

Because Mary, Pierre, and Debbie believed that social and institutional inequities were prevalent, they were particularly aware that many choices they made as teachers could and would pose a challenge to existing power relations. Hand-in-hand with this awareness went a more fully elaborated and articulated defence against charges (hypothetical or real) that they were indoctrinating their students. They described a number of strategies they used to, as Mary put it, "deconstruct power dynamics between students and teachers" or the image of the "all-knowing teacher at the front of the classroom." Pierre thought it ideal to express his opinion, supported by "historical knowledge," in the middle of a debate rather than at the end, so that it would not be given undue weight by students. Given a teacher's formal authority (e.g., to evaluate students' work), Pierre stressed the importance of vigilance and reflection because "you never know — what you're promoting [either through action or inaction] may be oppressive." Mary strove to "allow for open discussion before, during, and after I've said anything about the issue. . . . I want the students to hear me say, 'I don't know' if I don't know and that I'll get back to them. I want them to see me affected by a hard issue that we're covering."

One of Debbie's sponsor teachers thought Debbie veered toward indoctrinating the students and advised her to assume a stance of teacher neutrality during a grade-9 media unit in English. Topics in this unit included concentration of media ownership, catastrophe journalism, gatekeepers in the media, and student production of their own media messages. Debbie acknowledged that she rooted planning of this unit in her belief that the mainstream "media is biased in favour of dominant groups."

Responding directly to the charge of indoctrination, Debbie acknowledged the importance of "standing back to a degree and letting students come out with their responses" (her sponsor teacher's stance), but she argued that "sometimes you [the teacher] do have to articulate a

position” because of student power dynamics. When “talking about controversial issues . . . the quieter students might have a criticism of the louder students’ point of view. But if they feel they can’t express it, for whatever reason, the dominant point of view goes unchallenged and students leave the class feeling like somehow that point of view has been validated.” A teacher could, Debbie continued, bring in the minority viewpoint in a very qualified way as “only my opinion” or as devil’s advocate. But she suggested that a more “honest” way might be to “offer an alternative perspective,” because when a teacher plays devil’s advocate, “people know that you’re just taking on a role and in a way, you’re almost trivializing that alternative point of view.”

Debbie’s story points toward the ways that the dominant culture and ideology are often present in the common-sense views that students express. She felt it misguided to assume that the classroom can somehow naturally be a neutral testing ground for competing arguments on important and controversial social issues. Pierre noted that, in the wider society, certain “people’s voices are louder, but in theory everyone should have their voices heard.” Thus, he noted the need to show students that in a democracy, “the only way to move forward [on contentious social issues] is through dialogue.” This more critical group of HSJTEP student teachers pointed to the “huge tension” they felt (to quote Pierre) between the pressure to “maintain the status quo” versus their desire to be part of facilitating positive “social change.”

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As our analysis of the struggles of beginning teachers to define their role has shown, taking up issues of social justice in the classroom is difficult and complex. It involves shifting out of “neutral,” both in terms of student teachers’ orientation to social inequalities as well as to pedagogy. Teacher neutrality is not only undesirable but impossible. The data from our study prompts us to agree with Bigelow (2001), who argues that “teachers who claim ‘no politics’ are inherently authoritarian because their pedagogical choices act on students, but students are denied a structured opportunity to critique or act on their teachers’ choices” (p. 299).

Because the student teachers in our study were all committed to teaching for social justice, they hoped to prepare students for a more participatory democracy. They recognized that they would need to encourage students both to think critically and to act on their reasoned convictions. Some of our participants, however, felt they could not achieve this goal during the constraints of a practicum, given the political realities of public schools.

Others tried to approach the goal. They did so by thinking of action in modest and student-appropriate ways that unfolded in local contexts. Some examples of how student teachers considered linking deliberation and action through generating a sense of agency in young people included: (a) prompting students to think through alternative courses of action and their consequences (e.g., Hardeep had students brainstorm how they might intervene in incidents of racism at school); (b) advocating in wider public spheres (e.g., Pierre planned to have students prepare posters publicly displaying their research into historical and contemporary figures who had helped bring about social change); and (c) involving students in producing meaningful artefacts (e.g., Debbie asked students to create their own media messages that countered commonly used stereotypes).

Teaching for democratic citizenship is a crucial aim of public schooling; therefore both student and veteran teachers ought to provide students with opportunities to acquire and hone the skills necessary to participate fully in public deliberation and decision-making. Participation in class discussions — where opinions are expressed, analyzed, and critiqued — is essential as students experiment with forming their own opinions and clarifying the areas where they would like to take a stand.

That said, it is important to reiterate that societal inequalities currently reduce the possibilities for democratic citizenship and, thus, for teaching democratic citizenship in the schools, where powerful, conservative social forces are at work. In a world saturated with corporate-dominated media messages, social-justice-minded teachers have to work extra hard to enhance their students' ability to be literate in the perspectives of subordinated groups. Young (2000) explains why educators cannot assume that an open "marketplace of diverse ideas" exists.

If group-based positional differences give to some people greater power, material and cultural resources, and authoritative voice, then social norms and discourses which appear impartial are often biased. Under circumstances of structural social and economic inequality, the relative power of some groups often allows them to dominate the definition of the common good in ways compatible with their experience, perspective, and priorities. (p. 108)

Given that only some interests and perspectives appear to dominate in our society, Kelly's (1986) recommended role for those teaching about controversial issues (committed impartiality) seems inadequate to describe the interventions that teachers would need to make in order that competing points of view get a truly "fair hearing" (p. 121). In this sense, our preferred teacher role is one of *inclusive and situated engagement*: "inclusive" to signal a concern to attend to the perspectives of excluded minorities;

“situated” to signal that all teachers (or knowers) are located within a particular landscape of identities, values, and social situations from which they view the world; and “engagement” to signal the need to make their viewpoints open to critique as well as to model reasoned inquiry and action.

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NOTES

- 1 We define deliberative and participatory democracy as a process of communication across differences that aims to solve collective problems (e.g., Young, 2000).
- 2 In Canada, liberal theorist Eamonn Callan (1997) has written about the need to teach “liberal soulcraft,” that is, political virtues associated with “the ideal of free and equal citizenship” (pp. 5, 7). From a participatory (radical) democracy perspective, Ken Osborne (1991) has also written about the importance of teaching for democratic citizenship.
- 3 We use the term *teacher neutrality* to refer to the idea that teachers should not express their views to their students or weigh in on any particular side during class discussions or debates of social issues. The focus is on pedagogy or “the how” of teachers’ modeling and encouraging democratic practices. None of the teachers in our study espoused or aspired to neutrality with respect to the aims of schooling; they expected schools to teach a set of values and capacities associated with democratic citizenship.
- 4 For a discussion of the ways that beginning HSJTEP teachers translated a concern for social justice into their teaching practices, see Brandes & Kelly, 2000.
- 5 All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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