BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS OF A COLLEGE CLASSROOM: 
CONNECTING PERSONAL EXPERIENCES, SELF-REFLECTION, 
AND TEACHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is about one student’s undergraduate experience at Miami University as an early childhood education major – the opportunities she had, the questions she raised, and the answers she found. Through auto-ethnography, narrative inquiry, and scholarly research, the author explores the meaning behind her experiences. The author talks about her transformation from a first year student, who wanted to be a classroom teacher, to a graduating senior, who no longer planned on entering the teaching profession. Throughout the process, she used her ongoing experiences – both in the college classroom and outside “the four walls” – to question the purpose of education. Her answers came as she explored new places, cultures, and ideas.

Throughout her developmental process, social justice was an important value of the author as well as a recurring organizing theme. Given that context, the core of this work explores the following questions: What is the purpose of education? What is social justice? What is the place of social justice in education? What does educating for social justice mean to pre-service teachers? What questions does this raise for teacher education programs? Within those answers – all of which are explored in the paper – the author found that working for and teaching for social justice is necessary in order to break down oppressive systemic barriers in society. The author’s conclusion is that there is a world of education outside of a four-walled classroom. Discovering it, questioning it, and taking action to change it, will make the world a more just place.
Beyond the Four Walls of a College Classroom:
Connecting Personal Experiences, Self-Reflection, and Teacher Education

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This thesis is only the beginning of my lifelong journey of working for social justice. I chose to write it for two reasons. First, I decided well into my four years as a teacher education major, not to graduate with provisional licensure to teach. This paper explores the reasons why, so I will not going into great detail here; however, because I made that choice and thus did not student teach, I needed to do something meaningful in its place. I wanted to spend my time exploring a topic that would make a difference in my life, and in the lives of those around me.

Reaching out to pre-service teachers and teacher education faculty was the second reason why I wrote this. An edited version of this thesis will serve as a chapter in a book entitled *Voices Around the Table: Diversity Issues and Strategies in Teacher Education*. The book will be co-edited by Barbara Heuberger Rose and Ray Terrell, and is scheduled to be published in 2009 by Sage. My chapter will provide the undergraduate, pre-service teacher perspective; most of the other authors are university faculty. My experiences and research illustrate the importance of asking critical questions and challenging the status quo, both of which teacher education faculty and pre-service teachers must do in order to create a more just educational system.

Writing this thesis has provided further proof that no matter where life takes me, I will always be committed to education and social justice. And hopefully, after reading it, whether you are a student, university professor, classroom teacher, or simply someone who is concerned about social justice, you too will make educating for social justice a commitment in your life.
Introduction

What Happens to a Pre-Service Teacher Who No Longer Wants to Teach?

For as long as I can remember, I always knew what I wanted to be. Answering the question “what do you want to be when you grow up?” was easy for me. Time after time, without hesitation, I would confidently answer: a teacher. I came to this decision at the ripe age of eight. I was in second grade and had a teacher whom I believed was the greatest person in the world. It would be an understatement to say that I idolized her. The way she read to us after recess, letting us put our heads down on our desks if we were tired, and how she always stood by the door, greeting us each day by name, was in my young mind, pure perfection. I wanted to be just like her. So from that moment on, I set out to do just that.

I believe that great teachers are often a reason why people decide to become teachers themselves. It is a special quality – a gift – that a select few have. Being a teacher always seemed like a reasonable choice because I enjoyed school. I was good at it. I figured out early on what it meant to be a good student. This characteristic is another reason why some choose the teaching profession. After all, if you feel comfortable at school, why not stay there?

Growing up, I thought that I would be in schools throughout my adult life. I could picture my future classroom – which not surprisingly enough always looked something like my revered second grade room. I could imagine myself having conversations with students and encouraging them to be whoever they wanted to be. Those idealistic images of teaching always stuck with me. On top of my own aspirations, I had always been told
that I would make a great teacher, as if it was naturally what I was supposed to do. And it did seem, until recently, like teaching was my calling.

It was not until I was well into college at Miami University, as an early childhood education major, that I began to question my career choice. For awhile, this questioning scared me, so I pushed it aside, convincing myself that I was on the right path – the path of what I always wanted to do. The natural path. Then, when my junior year rolled around, I realized that I had more and more questions, questions which I could no longer ignore. Midway through the first semester of my junior year I finally admitted to myself and to those around me that I did not want to be a teacher. Part of me always felt bad about saying that. It seemed wrong. I was afraid I was being judged. But that was the truth. And after finally saying it out loud I felt much better.

As a senior, I am just now taking the time to truly figure out the answers to all of the questions I had so often pushed aside. Why did I change my mind? Why did I resent my major? What did I love about my major? How had out-of-classroom experiences influenced my decisions? What else did education mean to me? What happens to a pre-service teacher who no longer wants to teach? What now?

**Self-Reflection, Exploration, and Research**

This paper combines my personal experiences with research about service learning, teacher education, and social justice. The purpose of this work is to reflect on my own experiences, question the challenges I have encountered, and examine what it means to be an “educator.” The underlying theme throughout this paper is social justice –
what it is, what it looks like in the classroom and other educational settings, and what it has meant to me throughout my four years of undergraduate study at Miami University.

The methodology of this paper is based in auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry. The social science research method of auto-ethnography is “a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710). Auto-ethnography “relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible participation, not just observation” (Genzuk, 2003, p. 1). Ethnographic researchers ask questions which examine “the link between culture and behavior and/or how cultural processes develop over time” (Methods). I asked these questions about my own university culture, specifically the teacher education program I was a part of, in order to examine how my experiences contributed to my own development and ultimately how they could also affect the development of others.

I have been examining my own questions throughout the past four years at Miami University. This paper places an emphasis on what the questions were, why I asked them, and how I began to answer them through personal experiences. That is why the qualitative research method of narrative inquiry, “which is the study of the ways humans experience the world” is also used (Connelly, 1990, p. 2). This process focuses on “the process of gathering information for the purpose of research through storytelling” (Narrative).

Writing this auto-ethnography/narrative inquiry has allowed me to make meaning of my experiences and draw on them as the basis for further research. Thus, this paper has created an opportunity for me to reach out to other multicultural leaders and readers
as well as other pre-service teachers and teacher education faculty who are not only interested in learning about social justice, but who are willing to use their own life experiences as a form of exploration and questioning.

Although this paper is drawing upon my own experiences, the research included is applicable on a variety of levels. There is a growing push for service-learning as a priority at universities nationwide. Miami University’s own Office of Community Engagement and Service exists for this very purpose. As a learning tool, engaging in service is an effective and sometimes life changing experience. The Office of Community Engagement and Service emphasizes this in its definition of services learning: an “experiential learning… [that] equally benefit[s] the provider and the recipient of the service as well as to ensure equal focus on both the service being provided and the learning that is occurring” (Defining).

My story does not end with this paper. In fact, in many ways, it is only beginning. I am still learning from my experiences, still examining what further research says, and still questioning what is going on around me. Using the methodology of auto-ethnography and narrative inquiry will allow me to continue to use my own experiences as a starting point for reflection and will hopefully show others how to do the same.

**The First Year of My College Experience**

**Let the Journey Begin**

I came to Miami University in August 2004 feeling like I knew what I was getting myself into. Even before classes started, I had officially and confidently declared myself an early childhood education major. Of course I figured this would be the course of study
that I chose, but I was also advised to come in as a declared first year student because early childhood education requirements start right away. I was never one to get behind – let alone start off behind – so I diligently followed that suggestion.

At first, it seemed to me like I had the upper-hand against many of my peers. After all, I did not have to spend hours huddled over the course catalog, searching endlessly for classes to fulfill Miami’s general education requirements. My courses had already been laid out for me on well-organized pink sheet of paper. I saw nothing wrong with this. In my eyes, I was lucky. I was in the major for which I was destined.

My very first class as a college student was entitled “Sociocultural Studies in Education.” The focus was the social side of education, emphasizing issues beyond curriculum. I loved this class. It looked at education in ways with which I was unfamiliar. We examined issues of class, race, gender, policy, pedagogy, and more. I will always remember a video we watched that showcased two Ohio schools – one whose state-of-the-art classrooms provided current technology for each student, and another whose walls were cracked and leaking, whose study hall was held right above the gym. Seeing the contrasting images and hearing those differing stories stayed with me. The gross disparities in the system seemed wrong and unjust.

I think it was important that I took that class as a first year student. It opened my eyes to the inequalities existing in today’s educational system. My own school looked in many ways like the upper-middle class one shown in the video. I, like many of my peers, had grown up shielded from those inequalities. Reflecting on my own schooling and
watching that video confused me. I should not feel bad that I grew up in a prominent school district and yet it was clear that I was feeling badly about something.

**Two Words, One Complex Concept**

That feeling was my first step in questioning the purpose of education. Beyond algebra and chemistry and foreign languages, what was the meaning of it all? At this point I was not too familiar with the term “social justice;” however that would turn out to be the answer for which I was looking. Working and teaching for social justice, as I initially believed, meant “enable[ing] individuals to reveal their unique qualities and, by encouraging empathy with others, opens the door to the peaceful coexistence of humanity” (Noddings, 2005, p. ix). At first, this definition seemed like enough. Who could argue with the ultimate goal of peace on earth?

According to Nel Noddings’ book, *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, the purpose of teaching for social justice is to foster global citizens. Living in an increasingly globalized world, it can be difficult for individuals to recognize what it means to be a global citizen, let alone for educators to teach with this goal in mind. But in order to create positive change locally, nationally, and globally, people must understand what it means to be a global citizen and how to put that role into action. From my first classes at Miami to the very last ones I wrestled with and explored those ideas, eventually discovering how they related to my life and to education in general. And over time, as my thoughts about education changed, my ideas about social justice developed and expanded as well. It is no coincidence that the two went hand-in-hand.
Frustrations and Silences

As my first year began to unfold, I became frustrated with my program. Originally, I felt lucky that my four years of college had been planned out for me so neatly. But that feeling was slowly replaced with resentment from the lack of flexibility in this early childhood education major. I always envisioned myself taking a variety of classes and exposing myself to new topics, issues, and ideas. Instead, I was taking classes that my program required of me – some which I may not have chosen on my own, especially ones like “Math for Elementary School Teachers.”

According to the general education requirements, my Advanced Placement Calculus score exempted me from the Miami math requirement. It did not, however, exempt me from the two early childhood education math courses, which were taught well below my math level, designed for students with minimal math background. With each passing day I became increasingly infuriated that I had no choice and that I had to take four credit hours of this class for two semesters – eight credit hours of being treated like the elementary students themselves, eight credit hours that I could have spent taking women’s studies, or political science, or a foreign language. Eight credit hours lost.

Even though Miami is a liberal arts institution, I was beginning to see that I was not receiving a true liberal arts education. I found myself on a teacher education conveyer belt. Everyone took the same classes, completed the same projects, and wrote the same papers. It would be a while before I spoke up and voiced my concerns. It would be a while before I realized I wanted to get off. Why were courses like this required? Why did I have no choice? Was anyone examining the effectiveness of these classes? Questions
like these went around and around in my mind. But I remained silent, perhaps because I was a nervous first year student or possibly because I did not know who would listen to me. Either way, I felt like I was in an environment that did not welcome the kinds of questions I had.


I was slightly relieved when that first year ended. It was not horrible but I was looking forward to the summer ahead. I was off to a place called the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism which offered a summer program every year called Machon Kaplan. This program focused on Judaism and social justice, and placed its participants in non-profits and non-governmental organizations (NGO) around the city. Going into college, I did not think that having a Jewish community would be something that I would miss; after all I am “culturally Jewish,” as they say, but not religiously so. I grew up in a town with a fairly large Jewish population, had become a Bat Mitzvah, and stayed in Hebrew School through my senior year of high school. Once I got to Miami, where the Jewish population is small – and where organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ are big and ever-growing – I surprisingly found that I missed the Jewish aspect of my life that was part of my identity.

The Jewish component of Machon Kaplan was not the only thing that caught my eye. It was those two words – social justice – that stood out to me. They resonated with me for reasons I was unaware of, but I decided to follow that feeling and sign up for the program because of my interests in education and children’s rights. I was placed at an
NGO called Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an anti-crime organization. It sounded good to me.

That summer of 2005 was a growth experience for me in several ways. As this was a for-college-credit program, participants took two classes, one that focused on the history of social justice in Reform Judaism and another that focused on what social justice in action looks like today. Learning that social justice had historically always been a part of Reform Judaism made me feel proud. Perhaps, I thought, this is why those words – social justice – struck me so much when I saw them. Perhaps not. Whatever the reason, I was glad to be there. Something about being in Washington, D.C. was empowering. It felt like the place a young college student beginning her quest into the world of social justice should be.

Being at Fight Crime: Invest in Kids was a brand new experience for me. I was working in their media department, compiling information for press releases and doing some research on what had then been titled “the methamphetamine crisis.” This crisis caught the attention of Fight Crime because it was causing many children to be taken away from their parents and placed in the foster care system. One day, as I got off the Metro and maneuvered my way around Capitol Hill, I stopped for a moment to take in the enormity of that which I was a part. My supervisor had asked me to go a House hearing about this crisis. I was eager to go. That eagerness and willingness to be a part of something great never left me.

Standing on Capitol Hill and attending that House hearing was empowering. It was teaching me what it meant to be an agent of change. Although I did not associate a
word with it at that time, those experiences were exposing me to oppression against children – children who are being caught in the cycle of poverty and crime, who are victims of a flawed system. Understanding oppression and recognizing how to work against it is not only important to me, but important to everyone who identifies as an educator.

Oppression is a broad term that can seem daunting, and possibly even too broad or distant from someone’s own life. However, in order to bring about change, it must be examined. Individuals must understand that oppression “emphasize[s] the pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. [It] fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society” (Adam, 1997, p. 4).

Oppression is directly linked to power and both lead to an unjust system.

Understanding oppression means understanding one’s role in a system which has allowed for a divide in power. If my co-workers at Fight Crime just took the stance that some parents make poor decisions and there was nothing Fight Crime could do to help those children from falling through society’s cracks, my co-workers would be perpetuating an oppressive system. If a white, female teacher working in an urban school district assumed that a child’s parents did not care if that child was struggling with reading, that teacher would be contributing as an oppressor in this system of divided power. Even if somebody’s actions are subconscious, he or she is still feeding the system. That is why social justice is so importance. It enables individuals to examine their own
place within the system, recognize how they have been oppressors and/or been oppressed, and mobilize them to change the system.

That summer in Washington, D.C., I not only learned about social justice, I was living it. That has proven to be an important step in what continues to be a lifelong learning process about who I am and what I am meant to do. Living in Washington, D.C. took me out of the predictable world of Oxford, Ohio, where in many ways, I was still shielded from the injustices going on around me. Being in that political urban setting opened my eyes to issues of hunger, homelessness, foster care, and educational inequities. It also showed me how people are dedicating their lives to making improvements in all of those areas. Though it can be difficult, I believe that admitting that you have lived a privileged life – realizing when and how you have held power – is important in order to realize that not everyone else around you has lived that way. Recognizing this allowed me to see myself as part of the greater whole and to not look at the world as “us” versus “them”.

In “us” versus “them” discussions, the “us” is often referring to privileged groups while the “them” is referring to marginalized ones. As Kathryn Choules, author of “The Shifting Sands of Social Justice Discourse” from *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* writes, “discourses that avoid an examination of [the] privileged position [are] complicit in maintaining systems [that are] unjust and inequitable” (2007, p. 461).

One of those discourses is the charity discourse. This one, rooted primarily in Christian beliefs, promotes the idea of individual kindness and “moral good.” The charity
model, despite some successes, must be questioned when examining the complexities of social justice. In fact, although charitable work is meant to eliminate suffering, it “can have negative long-term social consequences… [which can] include loss of dignity and powerlessness for the people, the “objects” of the charitable action” (Choules, 2007, p. 466). This discourse perpetuates an “us” versus “them” mentality and rarely examines the deep underlying causes of the injustices.

A more appropriate discourse to examine is the human rights discourse. As opposed to the charity model, this one “challenge[s] the existing status quo,” believing that human rights come from a shared humanity” (Choules, 2007, p. 468). Even more significant is the discourse of privilege, which “places under the spotlight those of us who occupy positions of power in any society and interrogates the systems and structures that operate to maintain the privileged position of certain groups” (Choules, 2007, p. 471).

Privilege is a concept which must be addressed and formally discussed amongst students if there is any hope of challenging it. Often times, members of a privileged class may be ignorant to the advantages that they have innately been given by society. Peggy McIntosh, author of *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, calls this “unearned privilege”--a phenomenon that is imbedded systematically in our societal structure. McIntosh asserts that social systems will not change just because people disapprove of them. She explains that in order “to redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 4). This must happen in the classrooms of teacher education programs as well as the classrooms of the country’s school districts.
No matter which category or class one falls in, he or she must evaluate how that position has influenced her view of the world and her place in it. For example, the predominantly white, middle class women teaching in urban school districts must critically examine how they are teaching their students. They must examine the subconscious effects that privilege has had on them and that it will ultimately and negatively have on their students if changes are not made.

The privilege discourse emphasizes the importance of a re-allocation of resources, fostering more than just equality, but also creating equity. This model “obliges the privileged to take action to change the inequality caused through their exclusive or inequitable over-enjoyment” (Choules, 2007, p. 474). Understanding this model has deepened my understanding of social justice and it is critical for all individuals, whether classroom teachers or not, to examine it.

By the time I completed my internship at Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, I still believed that social justice meant creating a world where individuals could coexist peacefully. That is true. However, I now saw how peaceful coexistence would not be possible unless individuals working towards them recognized their own roles in the system of privilege. I now understood how “social justice looks to challeng[e] and chang[e]… structural and systemic injustice in which certain groups are singled out for less favorable treatment and others are privileged” (Choules, 2007, p. 463). I now carry that idea with me.
Finding Inspiration in Everyday Places

I came back to Miami in the fall of 2005 with a better understanding of social justice, with hands-on experience in Washington, D.C., and with a renewed sense of excitement toward continuing my early childhood education major. This semester would be the first of three that would be completely dedicated to the major, with no flexibility to take other courses. Child development and literacy were the focuses of two of the courses, and as they were two subject areas I was interested in, I was excited to begin. This would also be the first semester I would go into “the field” for some hands-on teaching experience. So I went in with an open mind.

I learned a valuable lesson that semester – the importance of creating positive relationships with professors. There are individuals out there who truly have something important to teach you, whether or not that something includes “traditional” academic knowledge. I never realized how significant those relationships were to my college experience until that semester.

I first met Dr. Karen Montgomery – or Dr. M as I have come to call her – in a course on early childhood development. She was calm and kind and brought experience to the classroom. With that experience came passion, inspiration, and motivation that I still admire today. One day, she was explaining to the class how in the previous year she and two of her students had traveled to El Salvador to volunteer with children. Though some people had zoned out, as it was nearing the end of class, this announcement caught my attention. Dr. M talked to us about an organization called Ambassadors for Children,
telling us to let her know if we were interested in returning to El Salvador with her in the coming spring. During the next semester I was scheduled to study abroad. So I left class that day slightly saddened, knowing I would not be going with her that year. But something about what she said stuck with me, and would find its way back to me in time.

That same semester I took a literacy class with a professor named Irene Kleiman. Irene began the first day of class by passing out lollipops, explaining that in the Jewish tradition honey represented a sweet start, but since honey was too messy, lollipops would do instead. A Jewish professor, I thought. This would be a first for me. It was not the lollypop, though, that made Irene unique. Yes, I do have a sweet-tooth, but it was her personality and passion that hooked me.

In the midst of taking classes which continually frustrated me because of a lack of intellectual stimulation, Irene created an atmosphere of critical thinking. Since playing the recorder in our music class and making paper maché pigs in art class was not doing it for me, her class provided pure relief. She challenged us to think outside of the suburban boxes which many of us had grown up in to truly understand the importance of literacy and the challenges that students face as readers and writers.

One afternoon I stopped by Irene’s office, possibly to discuss an assignment or upcoming project – those details are fuzzy now – and found comfort in the honest and open conversation that we had. I vented to her about some of the frustrations I was having in my other classes. She listened. I told her about my summer in D.C. at the Religious Action Center. She listened. I explained how surprised I was to feel disconnected from my Jewish-self and how the environment I found myself in was likely
contributing to that. She listened. She talked to me. She empathized with me. She was just the person I needed to talk to. Since then we have kept in touch regularly and I can only hope that we will continue to in the future.

**From Oxford, Ohio to Oxford, England**

By the time the semester ended, and I had endured all I could, I was ready to go abroad. So I set my frustrations aside, rationalized with myself that the feelings would pass, that all I needed to do was get away for a bit, and packed my bags. I arrived in Luxembourg in January 2006 with a renewed sense of self, ready to explore, discover, and learn. Each weekend, with my Eurail pass in hand, I hopped onto a train and headed out on a new adventure.

The very first excursion I took was to Brugges, a small town outside of Brussels, Belgium. It was only a three hour train ride – nothing compared to a near twenty-seven hour ride to Spain that was in my future – but it felt longer, as things often do when they are new. I was anxious, nervous, and definitely excited. I printed off a map of the city ahead of time and studied it for part of the ride. Map-reading was never one of my better skills. I always shied away from it, as if the map knew more than I did. It was time for that to change.

That trip to Brugges was the first of many that helped me realize that I not only could read a map but I could explore a city even without knowing the language. It was empowering. Visiting new cities, new towns, and new cultures inspired me to keep going. Travel has a way of changing a person. Some of those changes are small – like learning
how to read a train schedule. Others are grand and often times less noticeable to a passer-by. These changes ignite questions, sending you searching for answers.

Without realizing it at the time, I had been searching for answers from the moment I took my first early childhood education class. I continued searching in D.C. and searched even more through the streets of Europe. At this point, I was still looking – still wondering why I was continually frustrated with my major, wondering how my time in Washington, D.C. and Europe had changed my perceptions about the world I was living in, and wondering how I could continue to explore this ever-evolving concept of social justice in the semesters to come.

**New Country, New Culture, New Inspiration**

Shortly after returning from Europe, I packed my bags again. I boarded a plane and eighteen long hours later landed in Namibia, a beautiful country north of South Africa. I was the first and only undergraduate joining Earth Expeditions, a partnership program between the Cincinnati Zoo and Miami University to provide educators with the opportunity to study inquiry-based education and conservation around the world. I was intrigued by those words – inquiry-based education – and certainly could not pass up the opportunity to travel to Africa to study wildlife and cheetah conservation.

The two weeks I spent in Namibia were captivating, inspiring, and eye-opening. We spent a lot of time at the Cheetah Conservation Fund, learning about what this place was doing to protect and preserve the endangered cheetah. Most of the other participants on the trip were classroom teachers, though there were a couple of museum and zoo
educators as well. It was a wonderful group. My most significant learning experience, though, occurred with one girl at a place called “Warthog Waterhole.”

Beauty was an eighteen-year-old girl, who along with twenty other Namibians joined our group for a day. Our mission was to spend twenty-four hours at a watering hole. Beauty and I arrived at “Warthog Waterhole” at 10:00 AM and the farmer told us that he would be back at 10:00 AM the next morning. And, he assured us, if we had any problems or needed any help, all we needed to do was walk down the road for about a mile, turn left, and then keep walking until we saw a house. Sure. I felt reassured.

For most of the time, we were quiet. Not by choice, but rather by necessity, for our job was to keep track of how many animals came to drink, and if we so much as whispered we would likely scare them away. Our job was to help the Cheetah Conservation Fund keep track of how many animals lived around the farms and used the waterholes. Beyond counting them, we had to distinguish whether the animal was male or female, juvenile or adult. Despite the crash course lesson we all received the night before, I was not very good at that part. Thankfully, Beauty was. I would say, “Oh look, a female kudu.” Beauty would nonchalantly respond, “I believe that is a juvenile male.” At least I could contribute to the counting part.

In Namibia during the winter it gets dark at 6:00 PM sharp, and the temperature drops about forty degrees. It was close to freezing and not even the five layers I brought with me were keeping me warm. After all, we were outside, in a three-walled blind, and the sun was not going to return until 6:00 AM the following morning. The hours ahead
were long, cold, and tiresome. I was thankful for the conversation that Beauty and I began to have.

Once we realized that the animals had stopped coming – except for the occasional guinea fowl hopping by – we started to talk. She told me about her family. I told her about mine. I told her about college. She told me she was waiting to find out about her acceptance to nursing school. In high school, Beauty had been involved in both a polio and AIDS awareness club. A recent breakout in polio and a one in six HIV/AIDS rate in Namibia made this a priority in her life. She also said that being a nurse was a government position which meant more job security.

We talked about music and books and places in the world we wanted to go. Beauty had never left her city of Otjiwarango. Even though the capital city was only about fifty or so miles away, she did not have a car, so getting there would have meant hitchhiking and that was not a safe option. As Beauty explained all of this to me, I could tell that she was aware of her surroundings and what was going on in the world around her. More importantly, I could see that she believed in herself and her ability to make a difference. I have no doubt that she will.

Although I learned a lot – in fact more than I ever knew before – about cheetahs and wildlife conservation, what impacted me most was that hour-long conversation with Beauty. It is amazing how two people can live such drastically different lives and yet have a conversation together and just “click.” There was a willingness on both our parts to get to know each other, to understand and appreciate the lives that each of us was leading. I will never forget that night. And luckily I will never forget Beauty, as we still
keep in touch to this day. I just recently received a letter from her; she is now in nursing school.

In addition to exploring the benefits of cultural exchange, another main goal of this trip was learning about inquiry-based education. Although I was familiar with this concept, I had not experienced it. One afternoon, though, in a large field in Namibia covered with termite mounds, that all changed. In order to help us truly understand inquiry-based learning and its significance, we were instructed to get in small groups, walk around, and write down some questions. I began meandering around with two teachers, brainstorming as much as we could.

After compiling some questions, we were told to choose one, investigate it, and come up with an answer. Obviously, from a scientific perspective, we felt we were lacking many of the tools necessary to complete this task, but we improvised and did the best we could. Our question was, “Why are some of the termite mounds red while others are white?” We speculated that there was an association between the color of the mound and its age and we correlated its age with the hardness of the dirt. We further hypothesized that the white mounds were older. We knew that the point of this activity was to go through the steps of inquiry and not necessarily discover the accurate answer to our question. So the fact that we used a pencil, jabbing it one hundred times into two red mounds and two white ones as our form of measurement, did not bother us too much.

In the end, not surprisingly, our hypothesis was inconclusive. Such was the case for many of the other groups and their questions. But what was so interesting was hearing every group talk about how they came up with their question, hypothesis, system of
measurement and experimentation, and conclusion. Each group was different. Each one
was interested in figuring out an answer because they had come up with the question
themselves. They had invested something in it and would get something out of it. All of
the pieces of the “why inquiry-based education” puzzle were coming together.

The philosophy behind inquiry-based teaching resonated with me. It seemed
logical to teach in a way that students learn best. Despite the frustrations I encountered in
some of my early childhood education classes, I did benefit greatly from courses like my
social studies methods course, taught by Dr. Jim Shiveley, which utilized inquiry on a
daily basis. This was an incredibly effective way of teaching us about inquiry by using it
in the classroom. This was refreshing not only because it was helping us understand the
concept of inquiry-based education, but also because it added a much needed element of
critical thinking to the classroom. I looked forward to this class because I was being
challenged. Have high expectations and students are bound to reach them.

The teachers in my group in Namibia talked about the high expectations they held
for their students and about the ways they used inquiry-based education in their own
classrooms or ways they would like to. Unfortunately, despite their own enthusiasm
towards this, they were all too familiar with the ever-present buzzword – testing.
Certainly they wished they could always utilize inquiry in the classroom, but it was time
consuming, and preparing for the state-wide tests was always a priority. I could tell they
were frustrated by this. Testing was not why they had gone into teaching. I too was
frustrated. Would testing be a reason I would choose not to go into teaching?
Knowing that up to fifty percent of teachers stop teaching within the first five years of teaching, I believed that this was an important question to ask (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 2). I was already having second thoughts and was only two years into my teacher education program. Why are teachers leaving the profession after receiving training? According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1994-1995, close to thirty percent of teachers who leave the profession within five years do so because they are dissatisfied (Ingersoll, 2003, p.3). One of the main reasons for this is due to low salaries. Other reasons included student discipline problems, lack of support from the school administration, poor student motivation, and lack of teacher influence over school-wide and classroom decision-making (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 3). Were those teacher adequately prepared to handle those issues? Are teacher education programs providing effective preparation for pre-service teachers who are hopeful about entering the profession?

The primary accreditation organization for teacher education programs is the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE describes itself as “work[ing] to make a difference in the quality of teaching and teacher preparation today, tomorrow, and for the next century” (2007, NCATE). Despite efforts – many of which have been successful – to improve teacher quality, NCATE found itself in a debate after its decision to remove the term “social justice” from the glossary describing teacher dispositions, a criterion on which teacher candidates are evaluated. Why were some against its inclusion? Why were others for it?
Opponents of the inclusion of social justice in teacher dispositions “[argue] that evaluating students based on their commitment to social justice is an inherently subjective practice with ideological undertones” (Powers, 2006). Supporters do not understand why this is a controversial issue at all, arguing that social justice is not a topic from which children should be shielded. I find myself wondering the same thing. I realize that there are certain political ideals which teacher education programs should not endorse one way or the other. However, in the case of social justice, shouldn’t all teachers agree on its importance? And if one did not, I am driven to question whether or not he or she should be entering the profession in the first place.

NCATE has clarified that social justice was only a term listed in the glossary and that there is no social justice requirement. To those who oppose a social justice requirement this may yield a sigh of relief. For me, though, it only sheds more light on this complex, systemically-based issue. When it comes to making significant changes in teacher education programs and ultimately in public schools, who is going to be prepared and empowered to make them? The lack of any social justice requirement by NCATE and teacher education programs nationwide is acting as a barrier to change. In the hope of avoiding a heated debate over the inclusion of “social justice,” this decision is not encouraging future teaching from questioning the status quo.

There is no question in my mind that there is a strong connection between the non-existent social justice requirement and the continued oppression in the public school system. I also believe that that connection is related to my decision to carve out my own path in my teacher education program. Feeling as strongly as I did about social justice
being the core of education’s purpose, I knew I would have to find a way to include it in my own education.

The Third Year of My College Experience

Breaking My Silence

Questioning whether or not minimal exposure to social justice would be a factor in my decisions about teaching stayed with me, especially when I returned to Oxford, for my junior year in the fall of 2006. I was about to begin a year of methods, spending hours learning about standards, benchmarks, indicators, and the infamous No Child Left Behind Act. When I started classes again, thoughts of Namibia remained in my mind. Had my classmates ever heard of Namibia? Did they know about inquiry-based education? Were they concerned with environmental issues, as I now was, enough to teach them as a priority in their future classrooms?

With each passing day, as I was questioning my place in teacher education, I was thinking more and more about social justice, about its place in the classroom and its role in education and in my life. By now, it was clear that my experiences in Washington, D.C., Europe, and Namibia were shaping who I was becoming – shaping me into someone who needed to keep looking for ways to be a part of social justice, someone who realized that she may need to look beyond teacher education.

Even with those thoughts in mind, part of me was ready to be back at school. I was excited to see my friends and once again, I went back into my major with an open mind. I thought that maybe this year would be different. Maybe this year my mind would
change back to seeing myself as a classroom teacher. And so seventeen credit hours of literacy courses began.

My excitement toward these classes quickly faded. I was not only frustrated with some of my professors; I was infuriated with the ways in which we were often treated like elementary school students. The concept of “modeling” was often taken too far. In what should have been a semester of inspiration about the power of literacy in early childhood education, I was becoming someone whom I could not recognize. Once a diligent student who put 110% of effort into every assignment, I was now going through busy-work with a limited amount of effort and a decreasing desire to continue in the direction of becoming a certified teacher.

It seemed to me like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was not only having a profound negative impact in public schools, but it was also significantly impacting the classrooms of teacher education programs. As the year went on, it seemed to me like the standards required by NCLB represented another barrier to change. Although we questioned the effects of standardized testing in our classes, and usually came to the general conclusion that they were not appropriate for the variety of learners in the classroom, we rarely talked about how we, as teachers, could challenge this piece of legislation.

No Child Left Behind is not the only barrier to change in public schools today. It is far from it, in fact. Continued segregation, even in a post-Brown versus Board of Education world, creates a profoundly difficult obstacle. As Beverly Daniel Tatum suggests in her book, *Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of*
School Resegregation, “while race relations in America have changed significantly since 1954…, our public schools increasingly reflect enrollment patterns reminiscent of the 1950s” (Tatum, 2007, p. 16). Living in an integrated society does not seem to be reflected in our schools. If all of the white children sit at one lunch table and all of the black children sit at another, how will these individuals be able to work together both in the classroom and in the future? How will they be able to change the discourse of white privilege and break down the barriers of oppression?

Tatum suggests that two complex solutions which could solve those questions are creating inclusive classrooms and addressing the issue of funding and resources in America’s schools. First of all, “children… need to be in schools that are intentional about helping them understand social justice issues like prejudice, discrimination, and racism, empowering them to think critically about the stereotypes to which they are exposed in the culture” and they need highly qualified, well-trained teachers to help them reach those levels of empowerment (Tatum, 2007, p. 20).

Second, the ability to provide all schools with equitable funding and resources must not only be scrutinized but changed. However, the current system of funding through property taxes along with the added pressure of NCLB makes that kind of equity difficult to achieve. Educational activist Jonathon Kozol refers to these issues as “savage inequalities” (Kozol, 1992). And as Beverly Daniel Tatum points out, “our ability to compete in a global economy is dependent on educating all of our students – including those students of color trapped in poverty – at a high level” (Tatum, 2007, p. 21).
Those two solutions generate a long list of questions. For example, how can teachers empower their students to examine issues of social justice? And how can schools receive equitable resources in a system based on property-tax funding? Questions like these seemed to go around and around, over and over again in my mind. It was clear from talking with my classmates that we were all frustrated by barriers in the system. However, I felt like I was questioning the *why* of my frustrations more, wondering what all of this meant from a systemic perspective of oppression.

Although in many ways I felt like I was going crazy with my incessant questioning, I found sanity in the face of a seven year old red-headed boy. As a requirement for one of my courses that first semester, I was tutoring him three days a week in reading and writing. When I first started working with him, he lacked letter-sound correspondence, even though this was his second year in first grade. I did my best to come in each day with new activities to keep him excited and engaged. I loved the one-on-one interaction and the relationship we developed over the semester. For weeks, he worked on writing and illustrating his very own book. When he finished it, the pride I had in him was nowhere near as great as how proud he was in himself. He was a reader. He was a writer. I truly felt as if I had made a difference and I enjoyed every minute of it.

Tutoring this young boy for all of those weeks was exactly what I needed at that time. I was constantly wrestling with my feelings about classroom teaching and my growing frustration with my other courses. There was something missing. A spark or instant connection I suppose. I noticed this as well during my two week field experiences in various elementary school classrooms. I did a very good job, and my ability to actually
be a teacher has never been called into question. I know I could do it. In fact, I know I
would be good at it. But as that first semester of my junior year went on, I realized I did
not find as much joy in the classroom as I did working one-on-one with that young boy. I
knew it was time to make a change. And I knew that change would be my decision about
student teaching.

The fact that someone can graduate with a degree in education without student
teaching is a secret within the School of Education. It makes sense, I suppose, that an
option not to receive certification would not be highly publicized. So when I learned
about this possibility, I questioned it. They say it is okay not to student teach. But is it
really? I asked this question to education adviser, Phyllis Mendenhall. From the moment
she said, “If you do not want to, we do not want you to,” I knew I was about to drastically
change the course of my previously well-laid-out path, the one that seemed so natural
only a couple of years before, on that well-organized pink sheet of paper. By the middle
of my junior year, my petition to graduate without student teaching – and thus forfeit my
opportunity for certification – was approved. I began second semester with a new, and
renewed, mindset.

**The Language of Social Justice**

About the same time I was finally answering questions about my major instead of
just asking them, I was also getting involved with a new student organization called
Ambassadors for Children (AFC), the one I had learned about during my class with
Karen Montgomery (Dr. M) at the beginning of my sophomore year. My involvement in
AFC actually began when I was studying abroad in Luxembourg. I knew something
about this organization seemed right. So when I was abroad I remained in contact with Dr. M through email and told her that I wanted to be involved with AFC. The timing was perfect. She was just beginning to draft the by-laws for an official chapter of AFC to be established at Miami University. AFC is a national non-profit headquartered in Indianapolis, dedicated to serving children in need around the world through short term humanitarian trips and long term sustainable projects. We were about to set up the very first chapter in the country. So even with an ocean between us, I began to get involved.

My involvement escalated and transformed into passion when I returned to Oxford and became AFC’s 5K Walk/Run chair. I was in charge of planning our first fundraiser – our “How Far Will You Go to Help a Child?” 5K. Even though I had no idea what I was doing when I started, I came out of it with confidence and inspiration. The fundraiser was a success and I loved being a part of it. It was a lucky coincidence that just as I was deciding not to go into classroom, I was learning about another way to be involved in education. With the hope of exploring this new idea of education further, I signed up to travel with Ambassadors for Children to El Salvador on an alternative spring break trip.

After arriving in San Salvador, we drove outside of the city about fifty miles to an orphanage called Orphanage Inmaculada Corazon de Maria. The young girls and boys – about seventy of them – gathered together on the patio to welcome us. In varying pitches and differing volumes, they sang. It may have been one hundred degrees outside, but it was the voices of these little ones that warmed my heart, that moved me in a way that I can still remember, and still feel. I do not speak Spanish and did not know what they
were saying, but it did not matter. For in that moment, I realized that there is a universal
language – a language of hope, one which is understood by all, one that changes you
permanently once you hear it. That is the language of social justice. And there is no better
way to learn that language than to hear it firsthand from children.

All of the children we spent time with in El Salvador – those in the orphanages, in
the oncology ward of a low-income hospital, and in the villages still recovering from the
2001 earthquake – taught me a lesson I had been looking for quite some time. They
taught me that education can mean more than classroom teaching. They showed me that
sewing curtains for a bare window, giving a six year old a fluoride treatment for the first
time, and dressing up like a clown in the hopes of cheering someone up, are all forms of
social justice. They are all examples of education.

**Redefining Education**

Reflecting on how much that experience affected me only reiterated the
importance of devoting time to service; I believe it should be a part of everyone’s life.
Furthermore, it should be an explicit component of liberal arts learning, especially in
teacher education programs. In an article entitled, “What Teacher Candidates Learned
about Diversity, Social Justice, and Themselves from Service-Learning Experiences,”
author Sheila C. Baldwin describes the profound impact that service learning can have on
teacher candidates.

The article states that “the inclusion in the curricula of multicultural theory
through service-learning foregrounds diversity and emancipatory pedagogy” (Baldwin,
2007, p. 315). With increasing diversity found in school classrooms today, there is little
argument about the need for multicultural education. The question, therefore, is not
whether or not teachers should focus on diversity, but rather how they can effectively do
so if they did not grow up in a similarly diverse atmosphere? With the majority of pre-
service teachers being female, middle class, and white, this question cannot be ignored.

This article describes a case study in which students from different regions of the
United States, with similar middle class, white upbringings, benefited from service-
learning experiences in racially, ethnically, and economically diverse neighborhoods.
Baldwin explains that many students were apprehensive to enter these environments – as
some had notoriously been labeled “bad neighborhoods” – but “once they did enter the
setting, what they learned from these students grounded what they had been reading and
discussing in their teacher preparation classroom” (2007, p. 322).

My experience as a teacher education major at Miami University did expose me
to courses emphasizing multicultural education, focusing especially on literature used in
early childhood classrooms. However, in order for theory to mean anything to the learner,
it must be experienced. Perhaps one of the reasons I connected with the service
experience provided through the Ambassadors for Children programs was because the
kinds of service learning experiences I was yearning for were missing from my academic
classes.

There is no doubt that I benefited from the two week field experiences I had over
the course of three semesters at Miami. But it was not enough. I do believe there needs to
be more service learning built into teacher education programs – more experiences for
hands-on, eye-opening experiences that make you question yourself and the world around
you, both in and out of the classroom. Service learning exemplifies what it means to teach for social justice. It is through those experiences that individuals “engage actively with communities different from their own, … interact with diverse sociocultural groups, and… reflect on those experiences as an ongoing transformative process” (Baldwin, 2007, p. 325).

Beyond the fact that service learning is a way for individuals to engage in social justice, research supports the cognitive developmental benefits of participating in service learning activities, specifically ones which explicitly include aspects of social justice. Results from one study in the National Association of Student Personnel Journal stated that “the combination of service-learning and social justice education appears to have a greater impact on student cognitive development than service-learning without a social justice emphasis” (Wang, 2006, p. 17). For college students who plan on entering the field of teaching, these findings are significant. This made me wonder: was there a connection between the limited service-learning experiences I had in my teacher education program and NCATE’s removal of the social justice requirement? I would not doubt it.

Teaching for social justice is a complex topic that takes into account the importance of experiences like service-learning and reflection. At first glance it may seem like the ideas associated with social justice education are too utopian for the realities of today’s classrooms. However, it is the hope and passion of working for social justice that has brought about significant changes in our country’s history, including the historic Supreme Court ruling of Brown versus The Board of Education and significant
social movements surrounding women’s rights, gay/lesbian rights, and even children’s rights. Educational activist Paulo Freire spoke about hope and the necessity of what he called “critical hope” that individuals must have in order to promote change (Weiler, 2003).

Freire has long been known as a progressive educator who “[sought] ways to use education to build more just societies in settings throughout the world” (Weiler, 2003, p. 33). Educators around the world have found meaning in the kind of “critical hope” for which Freire advocated. This kind of hope is different than “utopian hope,” which lacks analysis of the core, systemic issues and causes disillusion. Freire and other progressive educators alike recognize that hope alone, whether critical or not, is not enough to create to change. However, as Freire believed, “those who reject hope, who discount human agency and the possibility of a better world as utopian idealism are themselves actively contributing to an oppressive world”… a world run by privilege, inequality, and inequity (Weiler, 2003, p. 34). No matter what you do or where you work, this is a concept that social justice educators must carry with them. It is an idea they must pass on to others. It has the potential to be transformative.

Transformation

One week in El Salvador began a truly transformative process for me, one which reminded me that I had made the right decision not to student teach. I know my eight-year-old self would have been surprised with this decision. But I never could have foreseen the experiences that I would go through at Miami, the ones that would re-shape my views of education. This examination of social justice as the purpose of education
continued on during the following summer. Once again, I packed my bags, this time heading to Chicago for ten weeks to live and work in an urban setting.

I ended up in Chicago in summer 2007, participating in Miami University’s Urban Leadership Internship Program (ULIP). This selective program of about twenty-five students places students in Cleveland, Columbus, or Chicago; students work as interns and serve as volunteers. Luckily, receiving a monthly stipend from ULIP made it possible for me to live in downtown Chicago and intern for free at a nonprofit organization called Changing Worlds.

Changing Worlds is dedicated to enhancing cross-cultural awareness through literacy and the arts. They focus much of their attention on the Chicago Public Schools, especially in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations. Literacy specialists and artists spend time in third through eighth grade classrooms, taking children through the writing process as they write about their personal histories and cultures. Doing an accompanying art project helps the children develop a strong self-identity, aiding them in appreciating their own culture as well as the cultures of those around them.

I was intrigued by Changing World’s mission because it was another way to be involved in education without formally teaching in a classroom. Right away, I started my own oral history project. Every year Changing World honors five Chicago immigrants and refugees who have made significant contributions in their communities. It was time for their stories to be heard. My supervisor had been video-taping interviews she had conducted with each honoree over the years, and it was my job to begin to transcribe and write their stories.
In many ways it seemed like this project was meant for me. I loved learning about these individuals – who they are, where they are from, what they are doing now. I never got bored doing research about their native countries, including Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Mexico. It is amazing how much we can learn when we take a moment to listen to each other. And in that moment, chances are, you will be inspired.

Changing Worlds is working for social justice every day – in every school and with every child, they are making a difference. By now, I was confident with my decision to explore new paths. For so long I had thought that I wanted to be a teacher. Then I entered a major that restricted me at times, and opened doors at others, causing me to think otherwise. Finally, I was seeing for myself all the ways that education makes a difference in the world of social justice – a world of which I was now a part. There are organizations out there – like Ambassadors for Children and Changing Worlds – that work tirelessly and passionately to be advocates for children. Advocacy is a form of education which spoke to me in ways that I could not imagine… ways I had hoped for, but was not experiencing in the classroom as a pre-service teacher.

Even though as a pre-service teacher I was sometimes frustrated, I was being exposed to learning experiences that were infused with social justice ideas. Understanding more about social justice education has made this clearer to me. A book entitled *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* says that there are five areas in which educators must be prepared in order to teach for social justice: support, passion, awareness, knowledge, and skills (Adams, 1997, p. 279).
Recognizing those areas and setting them as goals will enable all educators to be lifelong learners. Social justice is a complex and often times controversial topic to engage students in. However, “excitement and humility about continuing to learn about one’s own social group memberships, one’s access to privilege, and ways to empower one’s self, not only make for better social justice education but also keep one in touch with the learning process in which students are engaged” (Adams, 1997, p. 280).

Teaching for social justice means teaching individuals – including oneself – how to be lifelong learners. That is not only an important step in improving one’s own life, but more importantly, in improving society by combating oppression. My experiences in teacher education have started that lifelong learning path for me. I don’t regret being frustrated at times because they ultimately became learning opportunities. And I certainly do not regret the experiences, like Earth Expeditions and Ambassadors for Children that came my way because of my early childhood education major.

**Being an Educator Means Being a Leader**

Before going back to Miami for my senior year, I participated in a week-long leadership development institute called LeaderShape. One of the main goals of this program was for participants to develop a vision. Since I had been elected as Ambassadors for Children’s Miami Chapter 2007-2008 president, I set out to develop a vision for AFC as well as for myself to be a leader and advocate for children around the world.

Setting goals and creating stepping stones for my vision made it realistic and got me excited to get started. I planned to increase membership in AFC and by doing so,
enhance awareness on campus about issues of poverty concerning children worldwide. Hosting educational events on campus and encouraging students to travel abroad for the purpose of service were two of my vision goals. From the moment I returned to campus I got started right away. Another more personal goal of mine was to continue to make a direct impact on the lives of children and to do this by traveling with AFC to Malawi, Africa, one of the poorest nations in the world. I was empowered to make this goal into a reality as well.

The Fourth and Final Year of My College Experience

A Fresh Start

I started my senior year with a level of excitement and determination that was lacking in previous years, but that I would not have had without the experiences and opportunities of the preceding years. With each passing day I became more comfortable and confident with my decision not to student teach. As AFC’s Miami chapter president, I was ready to dedicate myself to building this organization and empowering other students to become a part of it. I was taking a limited number of credit hours, since I did not have many requirements left. I even registered for a couple courses simply because I chose to – a privilege I had been without elsewhere in my academic program. I was also devoting an enormous amount of time to applying for a Fulbright research grant to New Zealand and a Miami University-sponsored grant to India. Needless to say, I was busy, but busy with what I was passionate about, busy exploring my new-found path.

Ambassadors for Children became, in many ways, one of the focal points of my senior year. With over eighty people attending our first chapter meeting of the year, I
knew that I needed to make this organization all that it could be for the Miami students who were eager to get involved. As a leader of AFC, my philosophy is to lead with integrity, by example, and with honesty. Following that philosophy, I have helped our chapter grow and have increased the amount of racial and gender diversity among our student members. Seeing people become motivated to make a difference in the life of a child inspires me to keep going and shows me the significance of what I am doing and what we are doing as an organization. With around fifty students traveling with AFC this year to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Malawi, I know that we are creating positive change. I know we are working for social justice.

Part of working for social justice means teaching for it – educating yourself and those around you on local, national, and global issues. But, what does that really mean? How does teaching for social justice impact a teacher’s philosophy of education as well as their students’ learning? Why does learning about social justice need to start in pre-service teacher education programs in order to be truly effective? If it does not start there, are we at risk of losing highly qualified teachers?

Teaching for Social Justice

An article by Heather W. Hackman in *Equity and Excellence in Education*, defines social justice education as a pedagogical approach to learning that “encourages students to take an active role in their own education and supports teachers in creating empowering, democratic, and critical educational environments” (Hackman, 2005, p. 103). More specifically, “social justice education does not merely examine difference and diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to
social inequality, and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search for opportunities for social action in the service of social change” (Hackman, 2005, p. 104).

The article also explains what social justice education means in the classroom, taking theory into practice. This author cites five components of teaching for social justice: content mastery, tools for critical analysis, tools for social change, tools for personal reflection, and an awareness of multicultural group dynamics (Hackman, 2005, p. 104). These components are significant because they build on one another. Students cannot critically analyze information without first acquiring it. Analyzing it allows the students to understand how they can take action and enact change. Reflection is then a key fourth step because students must take the time to understand everything they have learned and see their place within it in order to realize the significance of social justice education. The fifth and final component is especially important for teachers because it allows them to assess the cultural backgrounds of their students, allowing for student-centered teaching within a social justice education curriculum. Using those components as a starting point for how to teach for social justice can assist educators not only in helping their students create an equitable world but helping to create an equitable classroom for their students.

Understanding the pedagogical approach of social justice education requires the attention of teacher education programs. In order for teachers to utilize this approach in their classrooms, they must both learn about and experience it in their university classrooms, thus learning through theory and personal experience. However, in today’s
No Child Left Behind world, is that realistic? If teacher education programs are not incorporating the ideals of social justice into their programs are they at risk of losing pre-service teachers who believe in the power of that approach? Are schools at risk of losing teachers if they are not supportive of teachers utilizing social justice education practices in the classroom? Is social justice education really *that* radical or does the educational climate today simply not support it?

In a book called *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives*, author Jeff Schmidt asserts that the process of selecting professionals, including teachers, is “a process that weeds out most of those whose attitudes are not appropriate and molds the survivors into a narrow political mindset” (Martin, 2001). I thought about this, wondering if my thoughts about social justice education were inappropriate. I do not believe they were; however I do believe that they did not always fit in with the course work I was encountering. Completing assignments, such as writing lesson plans, is important and should not be overlooked, as it is a formative part of teaching; however, there are other aspects of education that could be strengthened within teacher education programs in order to create the kinds of educators who truly have the tools to impact the system.

One of those aspects is asking critical questions. Raising questions does not mean one will immediately find an answer. It will, though, show that he or she is examining the status quo and questioning the need for change. For example, why is social justice not a requirement of teacher education? Why aren’t there more radical teachers? Why aren’t teacher education programs more radical? Why do some individuals decide not to
become teachers? Why do others leave within their first five years in the classroom? Why
do barriers to change, such as the No Child Left Behind Act, still exist? How can they be
broken down?

Coming into college as a first year student, I did not have those questions. They
are a result of the experiences – both inside and outside of class – that I have had. I
believe that questioning is a sign of growth, so I am glad that I am asking them. However,
I can’t help but wonder why they have not yet been answered. Some argue that “on
entering professional training… students are optimistic and idealistic. On leaving they are
“pressured and troubled” because they have gradually submerged their ideals and become
willing to join the occupational hierarchy” (Martin, 2001). Do I have these questions
because I was unwilling to join that occupational hierarchy? Can I question the barriers to
development and still be optimistic and idealistic?

I believe that questioning is the job of any educator. Optimism and idealism can
be results of teacher education. In fact, that is continuously what I see from my pre-
service peers. There are ways to infuse social justice into the curriculum for classroom
teachers and into other aspects of life for those, like me, who will not find themselves in
the classrooms. It might mean teaching students how to use statistics to question and
understand injustices, like learning about the number of children working in sweatshops
around the world. Or perhaps it will mean working for a non-profit organization and
being involved in the field of education outside of the classroom. It is not what you are
doing. It is how you are doing it.
There are a variety of ways to be involved in education. This means there are also many ways to be a teacher. Individuals who assume that title of “teacher,” though, must realize the responsibilities that come with it – responsibilities that include questioning the systems around you, empowering those around you to do the same, exposing yourself and others to new ideas and different ways of thinking, and creating opportunities to bring about change.

How I Am Embracing the Responsibilities of Being an Educator

After my experience in El Salvador, I made a commitment to humanitarian travel, to be an advocate for children. During the final semester of my senior year, I trained to be an Ambassadors for Children trip leader while in Guatemala in March and Malawi in May. Becoming a trip leader means that I will be able to take groups of volunteers to countries around the world and open their eyes to how they too can make a commitment to social justice. I believe that so much of educating for social justice means inspiring others to do the same. That is how the work gets done. That is how we make a difference.

Halfway through my senior year, I was getting ready once again to leave the country. In January 2008, I was on my way to Israel, participating in Birthright, a national effort to help young Jews travel there for free. I fell in love with the country – the land, the culture, the people – and was relieved to personally experience a side of Israel that is often not depicted in current media. As with all of my travels, I am still digesting everything that this trip meant to me. I am certain, though, about one part of it that meant the most. The part was the eight Israel soldiers – four young men and four young women – who joined our trip.
In Israel, all high school graduates (except for certain religious exemptions) are required to join the army. These eight individuals, all members of the Israeli Intelligence, were my age. In many ways they seemed exactly like the forty of us who were on the trip. In other ways, though, they were leading completely different lives. Lives mixed with both uncertainty and hope. Lives that continue to inspire me.

When I asked one of the twenty-one year old girls if she enjoyed her time in the service and if she felt it was her duty, the answer to both questions was yes. The responses of the others were the same. They served in the Israeli army because Israel is a small Jewish country surrounded by larger Arab countries that wish Israel did not exist. Each of those eight soldiers, with extreme maturity and poise, talked about how this country was not a reality for their grandparents, how it was not something their grandparents even dreamt to be possible. But the possibility became a reality and now men and women my own age are devoting themselves to making sure it stays that way.

Service is not just a part of their life, it is their life. It was clear that the two were not separate. By the time I left, it was clear to me that service and my life’s purpose were not separate either. I may no longer feel like classroom teaching is my calling, but I will continue to fulfill my role in the world of education in other ways, through service and social justice.

When I returned from Israel, I learned that I received neither the Fulbright nor the Miami-sponsored grant. Despite some initial disappointment, I was proud of the ideas I had come up with and know that someday, somewhere, I will put those ideas into action. Inspired by my internship at Changing Worlds, I came up with an oral history project to
undertake abroad – in one case to tell the stories of the increasingly diverse population of New Zealand and in another to tell the stories of children living and going to school at an orphanage in India.

Coming up with those proposals showed me how much I had grown since my first year at Miami, when I confidently arrived as an early childhood education major determined to become a teacher. Story telling as a way to raise awareness is an example of education in action. It is learning about yourself, about those around you, and about others halfway around the world. It is social justice.

**Social Justice from the Perspectives of Other College Students**

My learning continued when I traveled to Guatemala with Ambassadors for Children in March 2008. Even after traveling to the beautiful city of Antigua for another week-long humanitarian trip, I still found myself thinking about the children. My mindset going to Guatemala was different than it had been last year when I traveled with AFC to El Salvador. This year I was going in with a deeper understanding of the complex nature of social justice. And it is through that social-justice-lens that I looked through this experience.

I approached this trip with a more holistic understanding of what we were doing and how it was truly making a difference. Our group of twenty-four volunteers spent the majority of our time in the rural town of Osuna working on a project called Vamos Adelante. My fondest memory comes from our very first day there. After a long and considerably bumpy bus ride, with two policemen following in a car behind us, we were greeted with the hugs and smiles of over two hundred children. They lined the streets,
holding a welcome sign, and clapping upon our arrival. *This is why we are here,* I thought. *They are why we are here.* I was ready to get started.

In front of us was an empty piece of land. Over the next few days, we would start to build a school. This project meant so much to me because the effects would be long-lasting and far-reaching. Change happens through education. So any opportunity to be a part of building a place where such learning can – and will – happen was an honor. With shovels in hand, we began to dig, leveling the ground so that the foundation could be laid.

It was hard work. And in the near ninety degree heat it was even harder. It did not matter, though. All of us kept on working, with some of us digging and putting the sheet-metal walls together, and others painting the near-by library or playing soccer with the children. Everyone was making a difference. Often I would step back and observe everything that was going on around me. I needed to take it all in. What I saw was that everyone around me was completely absorbed in what they were doing – the volunteers, the children, the moms helping us carrying bricks. This was cross-cultural exchange. This was vision being made into reality.

Near the end of the trip, I sat down with thirteen other Miami University students who were with me. We had all experienced so much in such a short period of time. It was important to come together, take it all in, and debrief. I developed a list of questions to spur conversation and get everyone thinking. The responses were heart-felt and moving, answered with passion and understanding.

I began this discussion by asking everyone why he or she decided to come on the trip. Some had worked with children in the United States and the idea of doing so in
Guatemala was appealing. Miami University senior, Kimbra Dent, said that she had not had any other previous travel abroad experiences and felt that this was a unique opportunity to do so. Brittany Wheeler, a sophomore education major, commented on how her schedule did not leave time for her to travel abroad for an entire semester, but she knew she wanted to have the opportunity somehow.

I then asked them how this trip had affected each person so far. In my opinion, I believe that there are long-term effects that you do not even realize until weeks, months, and sometimes even years after you return from such an experience. But I knew that in the handful of days that we had been there, all of these students, including myself, had gone through changes.

Miami University senior Sharon Rogers said she honestly did not know what to expect. After being there, though, she sees the reality. Now she is wondering how she can help even more. She talked about how some might think little changed since we arrived. But she saw beyond that. She knew that even though there was a small amount of visual change, there was an immeasurable amount of change that we had done. She said something which will always stay with me: Guatemala is different because we were here.

Other students commented on those remarks, talking about how they now can see why change can take so long. They were not saying any of this out of frustration. It was instead a realization that every little bit does count.

Sophomore Chris Kelleher reflected on his experiences at Miami. A good school, he said, with many resources. But you have no idea what a place is like until you actually go there. This is more than classroom learning. At this point, I thought back to the
research I had done about the impact of service learning on students’ cognitive development, and how what the students were saying supported that work.

Since I was viewing this trip through the lens of social justice – examining the systemic reasons that poverty exists and the ways in which we can go about changing them – I asked my peers some related questions. I was not sure if any of them were thinking about this or whether the term “social justice” had even crossed their minds. I began by asking them what they thought social justice was. *Closing the gap between the rich and the poor. Equality and opportunity. Education and freedom of expression. Giving children a chance. Having basic rights. Working towards awareness. The option to advance in society.* After hearing that, I asked them if this service-learning trip was an example of working for social justice. Unanimously they responded, yes.

One student went on to explain that it is easy to be ethnocentric, but in order to learn from others we must open our eyes beyond that. We cannot project our culture on another. The judgments that follow will only hinder progress. Another student, sophomore Lauren Smith, said that we must also be aware of our thoughts and how they are influencing our actions. *Don’t pity,* she said, *that does not change anything.*

I was empowered and inspired by everything that I was hearing. I wondered, though, how all of us would continue to make a difference when we returned to our safe haven of Oxford, Ohio. Miami University first year student Ann Marie Ferry told us how she wants to learn to speak Spanish. I appreciated this comment because it is something concrete that she can do to continue to appreciate the exchange of cultures. She reflected on how in the past she found herself becoming frustrated with non-English speakers in
the United States. This time, though, she was the non-native language speaker and it put her thoughts into a whole new perspective.

Brianna Romane, a junior social studies education major, said that this experience motivates her to teach her future students about global issues. Once again, this resonated with the research I had done prior to the trip about the importance of new experiences for pre-service teachers – experiences that take you out of your comfort zone, but ones that are bound to change the way you think and act. *If only trips like this were mandatory for all education majors, I wonder how different our country’s classrooms would be.*

I know that this group of student volunteers will continue to raise awareness and make a difference in the lives of children worldwide. I know this because I saw them working, I saw them interacting, I saw them reflecting on all of those questions. I heard them say things like, *this re-emphasized how universal the human being is and this gave me a sense of what it means to act socially responsible.*

When that conversation ended I found myself smiling, as I looked around and realized the difference we were making – in the world and in our own lives. I know that my reflection for this trip has only just begun. But that is one of the things that I love most about experiences like this. Once you have been a part of social justice in action, it changes you in such a way that you are always thinking and reflecting. And it is that thought process that allows for continued progress to be made.
The Beginning of Another Journey: Reflections and Final Thoughts

I realize that in some ways I have taken “the road less traveled” over these past four years as an early childhood education major. Many people have asked me why I did not change my major when I realized I was changing my mind. The answer is quite simple. I know that I belong in the world of education. I know that I will make a difference. And I know that teaching does not only mean K-12 classrooms.

Questions and Reflections for Pre-Service Teachers

Finding value, meaning, and questions in my experiences has allowed me to grow in ways that I never could have expected. I know that growth is possible for others. I am not the only teacher education major to have changed her mind nor will I be the last. I realize that some of the most profound changes for me came from international travel. I feel lucky that I have had the opportunity to travel extensively. For me, immersing myself in new cultures is how I can continue to learn more about the world and more about myself.

What if, though, you do not have the opportunity to travel? Or as a pre-service teacher, you do complete your certification and find yourself teaching in a classroom? Is exploration still possible? Is discovery? Is questioning? Is social justice? The answer, stated simply and firmly is yes. You do not need money. You do not need to be well-known. But do you need power? The truth is that you already have all of the power that you need. Power only exists to be used; to have it and not use it is, in fact, a misuse.

In order to make a difference, in your own life and in the lives of those around you, all you need is passion, dedication, and devotion of time. I believe that with the right
professor and the right course, students can begin to achieve their own passion, dedication, and devotion in the classroom – whether this classroom is confined to four walls or not. I also believe, though, that students must seek learning experiences outside of the four walls of a college classroom in order to truly discover that passion, dedication, and devotion. There is so much out there if only we are open to it.

For college students, understanding how to engage in that discovery can be both exciting and terrifying. How do you know if you are making the right decisions? Are you taking the time to critically examine the world around you? Are you asking challenging questions? Are you challenging yourself? These questions rolled through my mind during my four years at Miami. Sometimes I would come up with an answer, only to realize that soon I would come up with a different one. Or, as the case often proved itself to be for me, I would come up with more and more questions.

There is no one right answer, just as there is no one right question. Knowing, though, that you are going through the process of asking and answering, and asking and answering again, is proof that you are on the right path, whatever path that might be. And as you maneuver your way across that path, through that path, around that path – in all of the directions that you choose to go – my advice is to do so with flexibility and with intentionality. That is how I approach everything that I do. I am incredibly task-oriented and if I do not have a goal in mind, I tend to feel out-of-control. However, I constantly remind myself that if I do not allow myself to step outside of my controlling self, I will likely miss whatever it is that I set out to do in the first place, and that is to learn.
Questions and Reflections for Faculty of Teacher Education Programs

I believe in the potential power that teacher education programs hold. There are increasing reports about the ineffectiveness of many of our country’s schools, and sometimes I fear that the public attitude toward schooling has become cynical and pessimistic. To be a teacher, though, requires a combination of optimism and realism. And to be a teacher within a teacher education program requires the ability to encourage those qualities in tomorrow’s teachers.

The optimist in me believes that teacher education can change. The realist in me understands that in order for change to happen, some critical questions must be asked. For example, how is the structure of teacher education programs impacting the values of pre-service teachers? I realize that there are certain state-mandated requirements; however, in my own program there were so many requirements that I often felt restricted rather than guided. Instead of requiring teacher education majors to take all of the same courses, why not encourage them to branch out and explore new subject areas? I believe teacher education programs could help pre-service teachers enhance their critical thinking skills if the students had the opportunity to be exposed to a political science course, or a women’s study course, or an environmental science course. Continuing the current rigid structure, I fear, will foster increasingly narrow-minded teachers who aren’t prepared to question the status quo.

Which potential teacher candidates are being left out of these programs? Why are teacher education majors as well as in-service teachers still overwhelmingly white, female, and middle class? Why are so many teachers leaving the profession after only a
few years? Why are some leaving even before they enter the classroom? Our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Aren’t we doing our students an injustice by not fostering a more diverse population of pre-service teachers?

I also wonder which pre-service teachers are dropping out or are feeling pushed out. There are reasons why I became increasingly unsatisfied by my experiences in my major. Certainly there are ways I benefited greatly; however, why did I always need to look elsewhere to seek out social justice? What will happen to other pre-service teachers who are committed to social justice, but cannot find this commitment infused throughout their academic program? Are teacher education programs losing teachers who would potentially be the ones to challenge and change the systemic injustices in today’s educational system?

How is the current climate of the education world affecting the attitudes of teacher education faculty? Many, if not most, are opposed to No Child Left Behind, but why are they only teaching their students how to live in a world dictated by this piece of legislation rather than empowering them to challenge it? Would teaching students how to take action to challenge the status quo be too radical? Why aren’t teacher education programs more radical? Why aren’t changes being made? How can teacher education faculty bring about change?

Anyone can stand in front of a classroom of students or travel to a new place without setting goals or reflecting on the experiences. But that will not bring about the kind of personal and systemic changes that this world needs. Teacher education programs and pre-service teachers alike must see everything as part of a learning process, a process
which likely has no end in sight and provides a variety of paths to take. Take one. Take several. Take them all. Learn from them. Walk through them and away from them with intention. Give yourself time to reflect, to see the big picture, which is the meaning behind it all. If we all do that, I do believe this world can become a more just place.

Questions and Reflections for Me

It is through my own social action experiences that I have developed an understanding of what social justice is, what social justice education is, and why it should be utilized. Stated simply, “social justice education is both a process and a goal” (Adams, 1997, p. 1). From a philosophy standpoint, this means working towards “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Adams, 1997, p. 1). Social justice education means more than teaching for equality. It means teaching for equity. Approaching education from this perspective will help educators shape individuals who are not only change agents for their own well-being but also for the well-being of society at-large.

I used to feel somewhat ashamed when I told someone I had decided not to go into teaching. I would imagine them thinking, “Why not? Don’t you like children? Don’t you believe in education?” Of course I do. I just needed to find a new way be a part of those things without solely committing myself to being a teacher in the classroom. This is not the decision for everyone, nor should it be. I admire everyone in the field of teaching and I have nothing but the utmost respect for early childhood educators. Even though I did run into frustrations in my teacher education program, I became a stronger and more confident person because of it. I was being challenged to figure out who I was and what I
really wanted to do. I do still consider myself a teacher. It is just that now, the environments of places near and far and the cultures both in my backyard and thousands of miles away, have become my classrooms. And it is in these rooms that social justice, above all, guides me through education.

As I continue through my own journey, I can see how far I have come, which only makes me excited about how far I have left to go in my lifelong pursuit of social justice. I can now look back and understand how many “people make… the assumption that if we just began to appreciate differences, and treat each other with respect, then everything would be all right, and there would be no oppression” (Adams, 2000, p. 15). I was one of those people. I did not understand the significance of the systemic influences that guide society, and in many ways, create a framework in itself – one based on a division of power and white privilege.

As individuals begin to think critically and question the reasons for the oppression of marginalized groups, they begin to see that even though appreciation and respect are important, the necessity lies in acknowledging the systemic barriers to oppression and taking action to break them down. Now I must ask myself, what can I do to break down those barriers? How can I continue to work for social justice when I leave the university setting? How can I continue to inspire others to do the same? What will I do when I run into opposition? How will I overcome my own barriers?

These questions are only the start of another journey. Now as I set out, I can reflect on where I have come from, and remember the questions that I used to have. I had thought that since I no longer wanted to be in the classroom, I was no longer going to be
a teacher. But I have found that anyone who is committed to social justice is a teacher. So once again, when asked what I want to be when I grow up, I still say with confidence and pride: a teacher. It’s just that now, the world has become my classroom. And my subject is social justice.
References


