

What Does Injustice Have to Do with Me? A Pedagogy of the Privileged

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In this article, David Nurenberg relates his experiences as a suburban high school humanities teacher struggling to engage students with issues of social justice. His story reveals what happens when a teacher works against the resistance of his primarily white and privileged students to reading “literature of the oppressed” on the grounds that it is irrelevant to their lives. Nurenberg draws on Freirean pedagogy, which encourages socially conscious educators to help make learning authentic and relevant by engaging students with curricula focused on issues of social injustice, and asks us to consider what a pedagogy of the oppressed is for students who do not see their lives as such. He reflects on the dynamics of his classroom using applicable theory and speculates about what is possible in teaching social justice in a place of privilege.

Evan¹ was a straight-A student, one of the brightest minds and most adept writers in my eleventh-grade Rhetoric and Advanced Language class—and at a high-powered, affluent, suburban public high school like the one where I teach, that was high distinction indeed. Last year, according to school records, 92.9 percent of our students went on to four-year colleges, many of them quite competitive. My past class rosters have included U.S.A. Mathematical Olympiad math champions, Olympic-qualifying athletes, and the occasional already-published fiction writer. These children often come from backgrounds of privilege and achievement, counting among their parents doctors, lawyers, CEOs, and college professors. Nevertheless, student writing skills still vary widely, and I had saved Evan’s final exam for last as a reward to myself for grading the entire stack. Anticipating a smooth read, I turned to his essay to find the following opening gambit:

Martin Luther King was one of the greatest rhetoricians and speakers of his day. His words started massive movements and changed the world we live in. How-

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ever, when his speeches are viewed by high schoolers in rich white towns, rather than poor people struggling against oppression, they are not effective. Dr. King had an audience in mind when he wrote those speeches. When the audiences changed, his words no longer inspired courage or great emotion, but instead were merely boring. Because the speeches were not tailored to [us], they were not effective for this audience, just as adults reading *Curious George* are not entertained or taught morals.

I blinked. I reread the passage, skimmed the rest of the essay, and then read the whole thing again. Evan's prose was solid, his case carefully constructed (albeit riddled with more than a few fallacies), all of which I found encouraging. Yet his argument felt like a punch to the guts of my course, which I had constructed to be not just a study of writing techniques in a vacuum but also a study of their use by various figures in history (and by the students now, as the inheritors of that history) to fight for justice, sway minds, and change unfair policies. That a grade-conscious student like Evan was making this argument—was, in fact, wagering his exam on it—could only mean that he believed in it passionately.

It might be tempting to characterize Evan's paper as narrow-minded, naive, or prejudicial, but to do so would be to miss the very important lesson I was beginning to draw from his essay. That Evan, whose every previous discussion comment and written assignment seemed to indicate that he "got" the point of the course, was making this argument now seemed to mean that he was using writing to protest what *he* saw as an injustice: the teaching of writers like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to students like him. The irony hit me like a brick between the eyes. To be effective teachers, we must, as Sloan (2006) and many others write, "listen to the students." This final exam essay was hardly the first place I had seen or heard such a sentiment, but, for whatever reason, it was the tipping point that forced me to begin to reexamine just what we so-called socially progressive educators are trying to accomplish. If we as teachers try to follow in Freire's tradition of using teaching as a method of engaging students with issues of social and racial justice, are we possibly defeating our own aims in the process?

In a trend that began as early as 1882 but that gained critical momentum in the 1960s, progressive educators, particularly in the humanities, have fought to get literature featuring minority voices into the curriculum as a matter of social justice (Banks, 1995). This push for inclusion was seen as a means of validating the experiences and struggles of those who could not claim membership in the dominant group, instead of ignoring them or casting them in the narrative of assimilation (Burnett, 1994; Sobol, 1990). Gordon (1995), among others, sees this mission as "not merely a matter of infusing more information . . . but of reconstituting the conceptual systems that govern models of humanness and modes of being" (p. 184). Whether applauded or decried, this trend has produced significant changes in the curricular content of the humanities.

In comparing his results with a survey of literature anthologies conducted in the early 1960s by James Lynch and Bertrand Evans, Applebee noted that, “over the past 30 years, literature anthologies have broadened their selections to include a wider representation of works by women and of works from alternative literary traditions” and that this is “particularly true in the volumes intended for use in Grades 7 through 10.” Moreover, Applebee’s survey results indicate that, in the anthologies for grades 7 and 8, about 21% of the authors are “nonwhite” (these are the authors who are considered to reflect “alternative literary traditions”), while 30% of the authors are female. Overall, between 26% and 30% of the selections in the anthologies for grades 7 through 10 were written by women. (Stotsky, 1995)

Stotsky’s (1995) later analysis of four major seventh-grade literary anthologies found that “the percentages of selections whose content is clearly ethnic American or non-American” rose “steadily from 43 percent for the series published in 1991 to 59 percent for the series published in 1994” (p. 605). True social justice education, though, cannot merely consist of changing the composition of authors in the K–12 canon; what is needed, according to some scholars of multicultural education (Mehan, Lintz, Okamoto, & Wills, 1995) is “a new narrative of U.S. history, one that focuses on the historical moments in which different groups interacted over, even fought over, issues of justice, equality, and civil and political rights” (p. 141).

But as an educator in a school primarily serving affluent white students, I find that these students resist this multiculturally based social justice approach to humanities education and, furthermore, that their resistance is articulated in terms of the approach’s *irrelevance* to them. Effective pedagogy needs to be authentic; students must see connections between the material and their own lives,

thereby imputing some purpose for their learning . . . from a student’s perspective, academic work that is authentic to the kind of work they will have to do in future study is very important. For example, many a high school student justifies even the most abstract study with “I’ll need this for college.” (Brookhart, 1999, Validity Evidence, ¶1; see also Newman, Brandt, & Wiggins, 1998)

Ironically, the avenue toward authenticity that I have been following for the past eleven years has been the adoption of a multicultural, social justice focus. As the child of two white Jewish social workers who grew up in immigrant families, I was steeped in the Jewish tradition of working for justice and equity (Blidstein, 1997). I grew up hearing stories of my parents’ and grandparents’ experiences of discrimination in Eastern Europe and the United States, experiences that led them to dedicate their lives to fighting social injustice. They passed these values on to me, values whose worth seemed confirmed by my own limited experience with oppression: anti-Semitic slurs, swastika notes in my locker, a teacher who punished me when I denied that the Jews killed Christ, and so on. Although I grew up in a middle-class household and ben-

efited from the privileges of my skin color, my enrollment as a scholarship student in elite educational institutions instilled in me a sort of dual identification: my education granted me a great deal of privilege, even though my class background, vis-à-vis my wealthier peers, nurtured in me a feeling of “righteous rage” against what I perceived to be the insensitivity of the sheltered elite class.

As I grew older and a little less judgmental, I began to see that my experience of having one foot in each of these two class worlds might be useful, especially as I began to consider teaching as a career. I specifically wanted to work with a suburban population, with the young people who would grow into the college roommates and friends I had known and who had frustrated me. I felt that I could act as some sort of bridge between the world to which my parents had exposed me and the one that produced the CEOs and policy makers who I believed unwittingly perpetuated this unfair system. I was heavily influenced by Freire (1974/1998), who put forward the notion that “to teach is not to transfer the comprehension of the object to a student but to instigate the student, who is a knowing subject, to become capable of comprehending and of communicating what has been comprehended” (p. 106). Throughout this process, as in any human activity, says Freire, “it is impossible to humanly exist without assuming the right and the duty to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political” (p. 53), and therefore the teacher has some responsibility and duty to help students become aware of and empowered by their own ability to make these choices. Teaching inevitably involves calling students’ attention to social issues as matters of ethical choice and not merely as the result of some sort of societal determinism. Therefore, Freire says, teachers should work to help students “make concrete connections between what they have read and what is happening in the world, country, or the local community” (p. 34) rather than attempt to fill their heads with certain information as if in some banking exercise. A good teacher helps students realize what is, for Freire, a human truth: “to be in the world without making history, without being made by it, without creating culture . . . without being political, is a total impossibility” (p. 58).

A good teacher, Freire (1974/1998) goes on to say, knows how to work with students’ anger about injustice, about “the denial of the rights inherent in the very essence of the human condition” (p. 71). Freire argues that “the kind of education that does not recognize the right to express appropriate anger against injustice . . . fails to see the educational role implicit in the expression of these feelings” (p. 45). He describes such anger as inevitable once a human being is opened up to the power of his or her own choice, once he or she can “expel the shadow” of self-blame for their condition and gain a sense of “autonomy and responsibility” (p. 79).

These arguments, however, assume that a human being has a shadow to begin with, that he or she lives an oppressed life. Freire’s advice seems geared toward teachers of students from oppressed and underprivileged backgrounds, students with whom Evan, if his essay is any indication, feels little kinship.

If, as Freire says, there is a value, even a duty, to place issues of social injustice at the center of pedagogy, and if good multicultural education, as Gordon and Mehan define it, is synonymous with good social justice education, then how does all of this match up against calls for greater authenticity for (and *from*) students in largely white, privileged environments? The school where I teach has a student population that is 84 percent white (compared with the state average of 69 percent), and these students live in a community where the median income of \$123,302 is almost double the state average (Advameg, 2008; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). One could easily make the argument that such students are, by dint of their near-inevitable college admission and entry into professional, legal, and political ranks, more likely to achieve positions of overt social power than the impoverished sugarcane workers to whom Freire taught basic literacy skills. What use could they have for progressive education? I maintain that, if anything, with their more direct access to the corridors of power, the privileged white suburban class is a natural target group for social justice education, except for the fact that their lack of Freirean outrage at prevailing social conditions makes it all the more difficult for them to see any buy-in.

The suburban teacher's job, therefore, can be to help students see opportunities for participation in the struggle for social justice. Even though race- and class-based oppression are not daily experiences for most of my students, oppression along the lines of gender and sexual orientation do exist. Last year's establishment by our Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) student group of "A Day Without 'That's So Gay'" highlighted the need to raise awareness about the daily social threats faced by GLBT students by examining how the everyday language around the school (particularly the use of the phrase "that's so gay" to express general dissatisfaction) can create a toxic environment for some students. Studying examples like this can create touch points of potential empathy and identification with those who suffer race- and class-based oppression. Similarly, McIntosh (1988) explains how the study of her oppression as a woman, albeit a white one, led to a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by minorities.

But what of the most privileged of my students, those, like Evan, who claim no experience with any form of oppression whatsoever? Even students like him have been known to exhibit pervasive anger in the process of their education, though in a very different form than Freire (1970/2000) describes. As an example, one of my tenth graders, in his written reaction to a text on the 1968 Chicano walkouts conducted by disgruntled East Los Angeles High School students, wrote, "It [does not seem] reasonable . . . for Mexican students to come to America and then demand a better education. You can't control the color of your skin, but you can control your demands [of] another country." This comment opened the door to all sorts of teachable moments (not the least of which was a chance to help my students learn just how California came to be a

part of the United States and how a great number of Mexicans came to be in America) and also serves to reflect the outrage—the emotion is strong enough that I feel comfortable using that word—with which so many of my students often respond to the complaints of those who have been poorly served by the U.S. power structure. Comments I regularly hear or read include:

Stop whining!

I hate when [writers] knock America. People have it so much worse in other countries.

The whole racism/sexism thing got settled in the '60s.

I'm so sick of this same old thing.

My students experience anger—an angered determination to discount the narratives of socioeconomically marginalized Americans. It is an anger that seems to stem at least in part from my students' perception of their education as being inundated with such stories—"We got Holocausted to death in middle school," I was once told—even though a look at the curriculum still reveals a majority focus on the histories and narratives of wealthy white males, particularly in the upper-level English and social studies classes. It is an anger that also stems from a sense that they are learning "someone else's" history, that, in the words of a disgruntled and already-cynical ninth grader of mine, "It seems like it's just one book about poor black southern people after another." The history of, for example, the connections between the demands for textiles in the North and the acceleration of slave labor to pick cotton in the South is a distant abstraction to them. To carry forward that legacy into today's politics is even more abstract and distant, and arguments for (or even against) addressing institutionalized racism on a political scale seldom, in and of themselves, engage my students.

Far from Freire's conception of politics as an outgrowth of human choice and interaction, most of my students tend to see politics as an optional pursuit or an activity for enthusiasts (of which there are some among my students) that is ultimately irrelevant unless one chooses to engage with it and downright irritating when one is forced to (say, by a teacher). A teacher cannot ignore this irritation; students will not learn unless the teacher finds a way to engage their willing consent. Kohl (1994) details this eloquently in his theory of the behavior of not-learning:

Not-learning . . . tends to strengthen the will, clarify one's definition of self, reinforce self-discipline, and provide inner satisfaction . . . Not-learning tends to take place when someone has to deal with unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity and identity. In such situations there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger's world. (p. 6)

Kohl (1994), like Freire (1970/2000), focuses his attention on underprivileged children, but his analysis applies just as accurately to the privileged. However, Kohl's solution, like Freire's, involves the inclusion of more material, curricula, and approaches that speak to the experiences of the dispossessed—the very approach against which privileged students rebel!

Why the anger and rebellion, then, if the source is not a lifetime of deprivation and disenfranchisement? Since my students are not by any means stupid or uneducated, one possible explanation is that they actually realize, or at least suspect, that their privilege comes at the expense of those whose voices cry out and accuse people who look like them of unjust conduct. They can, for example, recognize without much prompting that much of their clothing is made in sweatshops, and the good price they bought it for came at the expense of foreign workers' human rights. Often the same students who rail against affirmative action will sheepishly admit that they are eligible for legacy admissions at various schools, and their acceptance might deny a slot to another, even more-well-qualified candidate. But a healthy mind's first impulse is to resist such cognitive dissonance, and so repeatedly holding this sort of mirror up to students' faces may not be the most psychologically or pedagogically sound approach.

For this reason, Stotsky (2000) cautions multicultural educators to

include literary works in which “white” America is portrayed as containing decent, civic-minded people as well as prejudiced or mean-spirited people. An overdose of “white guilt” literature in the curriculum . . . may cause students to associate “multicultural” literature with white-guilt literature and to develop a negative reaction either to “white” America or to the authors and the groups featured in them, depending on the social group in which they may see themselves as a member. (p. 100)

Narratives that promote white guilt (or rich guilt) not only are counterproductive but are also not entirely accurate. The answers to who is victim and who is beneficiary of oppression are not so simple, and in this complexity lies an opportunity for engagement.

While Freire (1974/1998) characterizes a certain kind of fatalistic determinism as “the position of those who consider themselves to be totally powerless in the face of the omnipotence of the facts” (p. 102), it seems to me that it is also the worldview of the powerful, who, perhaps understandably, may look for any excuse not to face the cruel realities that bring about their position of power. “This is just the way of the world,” spoken in one form or another, is a common refrain from my students when issues of social injustice are plumbed, sometimes even with appropriate citations from Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Adam Smith, and others. Paradoxically, my students often simultaneously claim agency and responsibility for their high position: “My parents worked hard to get where we are today” or “I worked hard to get these grades” often dovetail with a critique of affirmative action programs that might threaten the

justly earned products of their hard work by allowing a student of color with inferior grades to gain admission to a college to which *they* are denied entry. Here, again, is the anger Freire says is so vital to learning, although from a very different source than he described.

While Freire spends little time discussing the privileged, he does recognize that the ruling class must also be liberated if society is to be made more just. He explains that “as the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors’ power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 42) and that “this, thus, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well . . . Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 28).

Perhaps by assuming that only people of color or those who live in poverty are harmed by systems of oppression, both progressive educators and my students alike are making a mistake. We may be missing opportunities for authentic engagement that involve exploring feelings of victimization, and anger at victimization, among the privileged.

As a teacher of literature, I have not backed down from including African American, Latino, and Asian American voices in my reading lists. One of the missions of any literature class is to help students access the universal in human experience, even if the characters look or sound quite different than the students themselves. (How else could one justify teaching, for example, Shakespeare?) But in the service of my focus on racial and social justice, I have also been increasingly drawing on white authors, when I can, from the pool of anticolonial writers. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1999) offers the classic example of the white man corrupted by colonialism, but Kurtz is so grotesque and grandiose a character that students are tempted to dismiss him as mere caricature. I prefer George Orwell’s unnamed colonial policeman in his essay “Shooting an Elephant” (1936), an ordinary, sympathetic individual who on the first page exhibits classic liberal sensibilities: “I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing and the sooner I chucked up my job and got out of it the better,” and “secretly, of course—I was all for the Burmese and all against their oppressors, the British” (§2). But within the same paragraph he admits that “with another part [of my mind] I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest’s guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism” (§2).

As the story progresses, Orwell portrays the policeman, too, as a kind of victim of the Raj, ironically *because* of the power that colonialism invests him with. Despite his moral revulsion at killing an escaped elephant (which he at one point describes as “grandmotherly” [§8]), an act that he feels “would be murder” (§8), he does so anyway because of his perceived need to appear superior in front of the native Burmese. “A sahib has got to act like a sahib,” he laments.

He has got to appear resolute, to know his own mind and do definite things. To come all that way, rifle in hand, with two thousand people marching at my heels, and then to trail feebly away, having done nothing—no, that was impossible. The crowd would laugh at me. And my whole life, every white man's life in the East, was one long struggle not to be laughed at. (¶7)

The policeman concludes that “when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom he destroys” (¶7), and that is a frightening lesson for those with privilege—that the chains of the slave, in an admittedly very different way, also enslave the master. Once you don the mantle of total power, you are forced to become something ugly. “He wears a mask,” Orwell says of the white man in the colonies, “and his face grows to fit it” (¶7).

Such an analysis does not so much forward an idea of white guilt as one of white victimization at the hands of the very system that gives them privilege. Orwell contends that privilege is not so much a source of guilt as a source of horror, a force that impairs not just our ability to be more moral human beings but our free agency in general.

This message is not an easy one, at first, for my students to decode. Their conclusions tend to run something along the lines of, “the poor guy, those Burmese forced him to shoot an elephant when he didn't want to.” But a closer analysis of the story provides an opportunity to engage students in authentic conversation about times when they perceived that, ironically, a position of power actually limited their freedom. Their capacity for self-analysis seldom disappoints. They share stories of their surprise at how being a camp counselor or babysitter, invested with authority, made them act meaner than they had planned to, made them seek to impose limits on younger children that they themselves would have resented. They begin to see that their parameters of the role as someone in power, more than anything the children under their care did, was what made them act contrary to their perceived values.

Does this exercise serve as a perfect analog for Orwell's policeman's situation? Of course not. Young children at an American sleep-away camp and adult Burmese under military occupation are hardly equivalent. But the parallel, imperfect as it is, engages the students and gives them a point of reference that they simply lack when asked to identify either with an African American child growing up under segregation or the often irredeemably cruel wealthy white characters found in such books as *The Bluest Eye* or *Farewell to Manzanar* (Stotsky, 1995).

The problem with those books isn't that the privileged characters are exaggerations—such cruelty as they display is all too real—but that in both texts, privilege is uncomplicated. The characters have every reason to perpetuate the racist systems they enforce (see Stotsky, 2000). The takeaway for a privileged white student cannot help but be mixed. If they were transported into the world of such novels and allowed to inhabit the body of any of the characters, I wonder how many of my students would choose the white ones, despite their villainy, simply because their lot in life seems so much more comfortable.

Texts like “Shooting an Elephant,” however, raise the question of how it may actually be in the best interest of the privileged to not become the kind of person who gains that comfort at the expense of others by showing examples of characters who at least feel the yearning to part with their unfair advantages.²

It reminds me of David Foster Wallace’s (2006) argument:

We who are well off should be willing to share more of what we have with poor people not for the poor people’s sake but for our own; i.e., we should share what we have in order to become less narrow and frightened and lonely and self-centered people. No one ever seems willing to acknowledge aloud the thoroughgoing *self-interest* that underlies all impulses toward economic equality. (p. 113)

South African writer Athol Fugard (1984) is another author who argues for a self-interested approach to dismantling privilege through his character of Hally in the one-act play *Master Harold . . . and the Boys*. Hally, a teenager, may prove a more readily accessible character with whom high school students can identify. He, like many of my students (Evan included), expresses distaste for conditions of racial and social injustice while simultaneously resigning himself to their inevitability: “I oscillate between hope and despair for this world” (p.15), he says, decrying the unfair conditions of apartheid. But after a phone call that reminds him of the power his racist, alcoholic father has over him, he declares, “We’ve had the pretty dream, it’s time to wake up and have a good look at the way things really are” (p. 51).

Hally struggles over his anger and shame with his father; the two serve as symbols, respectively, for the young generation that might not have committed the egregious acts of oppression that planted the seeds of the unjust system but that now benefits from its fruit nonetheless. Thanks to apartheid, the mantle of the oppressor—the “mask” Orwell (1936) describes—is always waiting for Hally should he, in a moment of weakness, decide to claim it. And claim it he does, particularly in the latter half of the play when he takes out his anger at his father on Sam, the adult black employee of the family store who has been a father figure to him since childhood. From barking orders to hurling insults to actually spitting in Sam’s face, Hally demonstrates that he has the power to abuse Sam at any time without fear of consequences.

Before reading these scenes, I conduct an exercise in class where I ask my students to ponder and then debate if it would be a good thing to have the power to overrule their parents and teachers. After some initial enthusiasm, the class consensus always seems to gel around “no.” Students talk, however grudgingly, about the need to have limits, to benefit from the voice of experience. By wielding his unfair privilege unchecked, Hally cuts himself off from all of this. With the exception of one near-explosion, Fugard’s (almost unrealistically) patient Sam endures the abuse and responds with pity for Hally: “You’ve hurt yourself, Master Harold. I saw it coming. I warned you, but you wouldn’t listen. You’ve just hurt yourself *bad*” (p. 56). Sam laments that he has failed in his mission to save Hally:

It would have been so simple if you could have just despised [your father] for being a weak man. But he's your father. You love him and you're ashamed of him. You're ashamed of so much! . . . And now that's going to include yourself. That was the promise I made to myself: to try and keep that from happening. (p. 58)

It is not just that Sam does not want Hally to become the face of apartheid, although he clearly doesn't; he also knows that *Hally* does not want to become the face of apartheid, does not want to turn into a teenage version of Conrad's Kurtz. By exerting his unfair power, Hally becomes the very monster he loathes in his father and thus has a clear *self-interest*, as Wallace (2006) would say, in resisting that process. This is a powerful statement worthy of examination and debate in a humanities classroom, and I have found that my privileged students really do engage with it.

Furthermore, without the voice of Sam, Hally cannot even recognize this problem with his own privilege. It is Sam who reveals to Hally how a delightful childhood experience of flying a kite together was cut short when Sam had to leave the bench on which he and Hally sat. Sam explains:

It was a "Whites Only" bench. You were too young, too excited to notice then. But not anymore . . . you don't *have* to sit up there by yourself. You know what that bench means now, and you can leave it any time you choose. (Fugard, 1984, pp. 58–60)

Through Sam, Fugard makes his own argument for "multicultural/social justice education," and it makes a natural on-ramp for my students to see that, yes, there might well be value for them in reading works by minority authors; that those voices, contrary to Evan's argument, might really have something to offer them.

Hally's story can be seen as a thinly veiled explanation of Fugard's (1984) own decision to, as his character Sam says, "get off the Whites Only bench" and challenge apartheid. In doing so, the author can become an alternate model of white behavior to be paired or contrasted with the unrelentingly negative (although not necessarily inaccurate) images of white characters in so much multicultural literature. Engaging privileged white students with the cases of white antiapartheid activists like Fugard or Donald Woods or Helen Suzman—or with American white civil rights activists like Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, who laid down their own lives for the cause of racial equality—opens up an on-ramp for them. Suddenly, the cause of racial or social justice is not just something espoused by people of color (and Abraham Lincoln), and the role in the story for people who look like my students is not just that of the oppressor; it is both covictim and coagent of change.

I do not support Evan's position that multicultural voices, after years of hard-fought inclusion in curriculum, should be jettisoned from the classrooms of the wealthy white suburbs. I do think they should be supplemented and

paired with authors of all races and classes who represent roles with which privileged white students can more immediately identify. These types of identifications and understandings are not the goal of progressive education, certainly, but they are an important first step toward really understanding the “interlocking patterns of privilege” that McIntosh (1988) wished her own formal education had helped her to see:

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will . . . we need to do more work in identifying how [systems of privilege] actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not people of color . . . [but] all of the oppressions are interlocking.

By selecting texts and materials that explicitly feature white, privileged characters who recognize (and who are themselves harmed by) their privilege and pairing these texts with those of multicultural authors, I am attempting to meet McIntosh's challenge. I am attempting, with some success, to create a more workable space in which to address issues of racial and social justice so that privileged students will not immediately dismiss the topic or merely parrot back what they feel the teacher wants to hear while inside hardening all the more against the whole prospect.

Explicit instruction is only part of the solution, however. As Freire (1974/1998) describes, not all education is explicit. In *Pedagogy of Freedom*, he recalls the “respectful and appreciative attitude” of a teacher of his who “had a much greater effect on me than the high classification of his work” (p. 47). The very nature of and unspoken assumptions about the way in which a teacher conducts class can be liberating. As he explains in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/2000), “The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 67). Kohl (1994) echoes this vision of

a continually emerging and self-renewing curriculum, with a constantly evolving and shifting core and a critique informed by student voices and the voices of their communities—that is, with a curriculum that is part of the struggle to make a democracy out of the United States. (p. 125)

This is the process by which I have been attempting to engage with my students and which has led me to the conclusions I discuss here. The difficulties of engaging a privileged population in the process of critiquing and dismantling its own privilege stem from issues far larger than what can be surmounted in a high school humanities classroom. However, a democratic classroom where students are free to critique the curriculum in a marketplace of ideas, and in which a teacher must continually reevaluate the merits of what she or he is try-

ing to teach instead of wielding his own power and privilege autocratically, no matter how noble his intentions, is a good environment for addressing these issues. In this paper, I have described how I changed my selection of texts in response to student needs, but further transformation may be necessary in order for students to gain firsthand experience in what it is like to construct a just and representative society using one's own classroom as a model.

As the teacher, I was still the sole determinant of what was read in the classroom (although I was changing the reading list in response to student complaints). But enlisting students as partners in the selection of materials may be the next step.³ The use of literature circles and other mechanisms for students to differentiate by preference can free up a teacher from the constraints of a single common reading list with which not all students easily identify. A class where, for example, various small groups of students each read different texts, focusing on the experiences of Americans from different cultural and racial backgrounds (and here the teacher has a vital role in helping students locate such texts), could help students understand the interlocking patterns of privilege and power from multiple sides as everyone comes together and shares what they have been reading with the rest of the class. The reading list probably also should include the students' own experiences when, even despite their privilege, they felt they were treated unfairly. Even the anger they feel at having large parts of their lives controlled by their parents and the school system can provide the beginnings of an empathic link with others in the United States and around the world who must fight the controlling forces for their own self-determination.

Exploring and discussing the similarities and differences in how issues of social justice affect different social, racial, and economic constituencies could help students to see how injustice is not just a "poor black person's" problem. Providing students with the chance to play a transformative role in their own classrooms may, in turn, give them valuable practice in transforming the larger communities and societies they inhabit. Moreover, it could also help them to see that systems of power are not fixed but are, in fact, changeable. But, at root, helping each and every student see "what injustice has to do with me" is a necessary first step toward building the kind of just world that Freire, Kohl, and others invite and challenge us to create.

Notes

1. A pseudonym.
2. I am not advocating the removal of texts such as Morrison's or Wakatsuki-Holmes's from the curriculum in favor of Orwell's but, instead, that the latter can help white, privileged students find a means of access into works like these, which at first may seem alien to them.
3. That was one of Sloan's (2006) recommendations regarding his *underprivileged* students.

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