

TEED 540: This I Believe

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*“Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”
—Arundhati Roy*

I believe that a better world is possible, and this simple belief is what fuels my teaching. I believe that a better world is possible, and I know that I'm not alone. At the World Social Forum, which takes place in a different country every year, this simple belief is chanted and sung by hundreds of thousands of global justice organizers and activists, in dozens of languages. In SeaTac, Washington, in 2006, we educators at Odyssey High School made this simple belief the bedrock of our Mission and Vision. I believe that a better world is possible, a socially just world is possible, and my reason for teaching is to help students build the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to help create that world. For my own and future generations, I believe this is our historical vocation, and this is the critical purpose of education, especially in one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world.

For me, working for social justice, seeking to build a better world, means far more than the traditional smattering of cultural sensitivity workshops, or campaigns for more multicultural perspectives in textbooks. It also means more than just achieving equal outcomes in test scores and graduation rates. Achieving social justice is a monumental historical project; it's a process of healing and reweaving human relationships, which have been rent and twisted by centuries of violence and oppression. It is a process of building new social conditions and institutions, so that all people—and even other species—can live and work in dignity, can participate equally in the decisions that affect them, and can have access to their proportional share of social and natural wealth.

This process, as hopeful as it is at its roots, must start with something more difficult. It must start with us collectively facing up to way the world is, and recognizing it, openly and courageously, as a challenge rather than as a final destination. Here is the challenge, as I see it: for countless generations, our society has been ravaged by arbitrary social divisions—of race, gender, nationality, sexuality,

ability, religion, caste, and class—which have allowed for the vast majority of people to be systematically marginalized and exploited, while a very small minority have been showered with vast—and increasing—wealth and power. These social divisions, and the oppressive systems and legacies that they have created, are unhealthy for all of us—even the most privileged—and they are taking a catastrophic and irreversible toll on our planet itself. This situation can change, but history shows that our best hope for positive transformation is for the many, the massive majority of us on this planet, to cooperate together to undo these toxic divisions and oppressions—through persistent, creative, humble, and *non-violent* mass action.

For schools and teachers, the implications of this kind of social justice perspective are radical, and potentially uncomfortable. I don't believe schools should be any kind of training camp or militant indoctrination center, as some might respond after hearing my views, but I do believe schools should prioritize student-centered and constructivist inquiry that speaks the truth about social realities and systemic problems. Historically—especially owing to the legacy of the Cold War, which included the widespread blacklisting of social justice oriented teachers—schools have played the role of patriotic socializers. Their mission has been to sort and guide students into more or less uncritical roles in the adult world, as if the adult world were, as Voltaire discussed, “the best of all possible worlds.” Certainly, technological innovation, charity work, and relatively minor social reformism have been prized by even the most traditional of schools, but the essential message to youth has usually sounded something like, “We adults have things mostly under control, and we want you to learn how we run this society so that you can take this all over when we’re gone.” The truth, however, is that we adults don’t have things under control. In fact, for dozens of generations our society has been inheriting and passing down a systemically oppressive mess, while calling it something else. Authentic social justice teaching must start from that honest recognition.

In my view, social justice education, education for creating a better world, begins with adult and school humility, which then leads toward youth inquiry. In contrast to traditional perspectives, which

are premised on young people's initiation into an idealized adult world, social justice teaching should open up with youth about the adult world's shortcomings, while advocating hope. A social justice premise might sound like, "We adults have tried to make some things better, but we've also made quite a few things worse; we want to share with you what's been tried, but we need your generation's help to improve on it." Using the problem-posing educational ideas of thinkers like Paolo Freire, the systemic—not just surface or symptomatic—problems of our society should be presented to students as intellectual challenges. Real, historical conflicts and struggles for social, environmental, and economic justice should be the foundations for an evolving curriculum of student inquiry.

However, while in these paragraphs I can freely sketch out my social justice teaching ideas, I know that I'm a new teacher entering a highly regulated public school system. I know that I must be patient, tactful, and strategic in actually practicing my ideas. Although I personally believe that activism, even massive civil disobedience, is necessary to win the lasting changes our society needs, like I said above, I do *not* believe that my job is to train activists. My job is to create a warm, positive classroom community that encourages critical inquiry. My job is to raise a multitude of questions and share a plethora of often unheard voices, so that students can form their own judgments about the state of our society and what might need changing. My job is even to propose and defend traditionalist or regressive perspectives if I believe it will help my students develop nuanced and sophisticated ideas. Because I believe in constructivist teaching as well as *bottom-up* social change, I know that students need to generate their own change ideas based on their own values, and that my place is to help them make those ideas and values as rich and well-honed as possible.

One of the best ways to practice the critical real-world inquiry and problem-posing curriculum that I'm discussing is through service learning, or what I prefer to call action learning. Action learning presents real, community-based problems that students have the actual capacity to ameliorate, and it supports them to use their academic skills to confront these problems through authentic action projects. By collaborating to address problems, and then reflecting on both their successes and shortcomings,

students not only sharpen their academic abilities, but they also develop their agency as community change-makers. Unfortunately, for me as a teacher, action/service learning projects are also time consuming and bureaucratically challenging to organize—especially if they involve off-campus work. Thinking practically, in my 3-year professional growth plan I set a goal of creating only one action learning unit in my first teaching year, two or three in my second year, and then hopefully in my third or fourth teaching years, I can move toward a year-long action learning curriculum.

So far, I have discussed social justice teaching in the context of a sweeping, multigenerational endeavor to improve the entire world. As naively utopian as that may sound, this perspective is deeply important to me. However, in my idealism about big-picture social change, I don't want to miss the concrete, daily social justice needs in my classroom. *It is* a vital social justice issue that all my students improve their reading and writing in my classes. *It is* a vital social justice issue that I know and pronounce all of my student's names correctly. *It is* a vital social justice issue that I model a hate-free environment and that I intervene when I hear offensive or disempowering language. These are all fundamental issues of student dignity and empowerment, and they are prerequisites for students to feel the confidence and resilience to work for bigger social changes. As a social justice activist outside of the school system for over 15 years, I have seen time and again how we can lose the details of individual human needs in pursuit of grand changes. I want to use those past learning experiences to help myself keep one eye always on the ground level with my students, while—in the words of the U.S. civil rights movement—having another “eye on the prize” of larger social change.

However, knowing the horror that systemic injustices are still causing across the globe, I simply can't be satisfied with achieving limited social justice and equity only in my classrooms, only for my students. Even my own family experience demands more than that from me. Right now, my wife and I are solely responsible for putting 6 of her siblings through school in Guatemala. These students often do not have desks, have only mediocre, faux-chalkboard paint in their classrooms, and they have to rent manual typewriters to write school papers. Neither their schools nor their municipalities have libraries. They do

not have running water, they are not well-nourished—though we do try to send sufficient funds—and they are sick with fevers or digestive parasites almost monthly. Although I was passionate about building a better world years before joining this beloved family, my responsibilities to them have made social justice issues much more personal to me—especially regarding my teaching. For me, it is not enough to teach my students in the U.S. to be successful in the 21st century world as it is, especially if that success means the continued exploitation of my coffee-picking family members in Guatemala.

Indeed, whether in SeaTac or in Guatemala, I strive to help my students build the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to be successful in a larger sense than traditional school success, in a way that includes solidarity with people all across the world. In each day and each year of my teaching, I strive to help make a better world not only possible, but a little closer to reality for the next generation.