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## Using Their Words: Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design for the Elementary Classroom

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**ABSTRACT:** This article provides a framework of six elements of social justice curriculum design for elementary classrooms. The elements move from students learning self-love and knowledge about who they are and where they come from to learning respect for people different from themselves. Students explore social injustice, learn about social movements, raise awareness, and engage in activism. By addressing all six elements, students develop an analysis of oppression and tools to take action. The elements help teachers visualize social justice education by providing examples of projects, making social justice in K-6 settings accessible, practical, and achievable.

**Element One: Self Love and Knowledge**  
**Element Two: Respect for Others**  
**Element Three: Issues of Social Injustice**  
**Element Four: Social Movements and Social Change**  
**Element Five: Awareness Raising**  
**Element Six: Social Action**  
**Conclusion**  
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Many teachers enter the field with a desire to teach from a social justice or multicultural perspective. Having been exposed to a variety of theories about social justice education (SJE) in their pre-service programs, they may have an understanding of the need for such approaches (Delpit, 1995; Kozol, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999); the purposes behind them (Freire, 1993; Giroux, 1995); teachers who exhibit such characteristics (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Michie, 2004; Nieto, 2003); various frameworks for these approaches (Banks, 1999; Grant & Sleeter, 2002; Hackman, 2005), or words of wisdom from people who have done it (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Salas, Tenorio, Walters, & Weiss, 2004). While these theories lay the foundation for why one would teach for social justice, they often leave teachers feeling overwhelmed when they sit down to plan lessons, keeping social justice teaching, all too often, theoretical. This article serves to complement existing theories of social justice education by providing teachers with a framework for implementing key concepts of SJE into daily elementary school level lessons.

The key concepts and examples of projects provide teachers with strategic assistance as they attempt to move from theory to practice.

For educators interested in providing elementary school students opportunities to engage critically in the world around them, this paper lays out six key elements of social justice curriculum design (See Chart 1). By addressing these six elements of social justice education in the elementary classroom, teachers lead students to value themselves, respect the diversity of the world around them, understand how diverse people have been treated differently and often unjustly, recognize that ordinary people have worked to address such injustice, and take action themselves. Element One, self-love and knowledge, provides students with the historical background knowledge to recognize the strengths and resiliency of their communities. By gaining this knowledge of self, students can move to other elements because they will be able to locate root causes of inequality in social conditions, rather than believe these conditions are inherent within individuals. In Element Two, students gain respect for the history and characteristics of people different from themselves. By building on the natural empathy of children, teachers encourage students to care about “unfair” conditions that have affected others.

Element Three is a critical examination of how identities impact people’s lived and material conditions. Students explore historical and current issues of social injustice, allowing them to identify “isms” and to decide whether they find these “fair.” To combat potential ensuing feelings of hopelessness, Element Four teaches students about how people have fought against oppression through social movements. Students learn that things don’t have to be how they are; unfair conditions can be changed, and students can contribute to that change. Through Element Five, students engage in activities that increase the awareness of others in their community about the social issues they are studying. Finally, in Element Six, students have the opportunity to experience what it means to struggle for justice by engaging in social action themselves.

Often framed in terms of “unfairness” with younger children, these six elements help students care about and critically understand inequalities in the world around them. When students are angry and upset about something they deem personally unfair, teachers encourage them to “use their words” to resolve a problem. The elements support teachers’ efforts to extend the concept of “using their words” to participate in solving larger problems of justice. Together, these elements develop, at an early age, the mindsets and skill sets of activists who “use their words” to stand up for social justice.

Having taught courses on multicultural and social justice education to pre-service elementary school teachers for several years, I was looking for a way to help my students break down what I saw as the various components that should be addressed to teach from a social justice perspective. Based on my own teaching experiences and my observations of other progressive educators, I developed this framework and saw how each element supported my students in feeling less overwhelmed by the concept of SJE. By providing them with a way to break apart and categorize the elements, I watched my students become

increasingly successful at creating units that reinforced social justice themes more clearly.

The elements are not mutually exclusive and need not all be included in every individual unit. Unlike Bank's (1999) approaches to multicultural curriculum reform, which moves from no integration of multicultural approaches to total integration, the elements in this paper do not move from a lower level of social justice to a higher level. All of the elements presented here are of import; they build upon each other sequentially, and all should be addressed throughout the year. Many traditional multicultural educators are more comfortable with Elements One and Two, but as Enid Lee says, the "problem is not that [teachers] start there, my concern is that they often stop there" (Lee, 2003, p. 20). By addressing only these two elements, teachers leave students with the curricular equivalent of "can't we all just get along," ignoring structural and historical causes of how and why people haven't "gotten along."

While stopping after Element Two creates a shallow "heroes and holiday" approach (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006), it is critically important that Element One and Two have been addressed prior to embarking on Element Three. Many teachers, excited to teach for social justice, begin at Element Three without addressing the prior elements and end up reinforcing cross-group tension because they haven't engaged students in understanding their own strengths or deconstructing stereotypes about others. For example, a teacher beginning to teach about slavery (Element Three) may unintentionally promote internalized feelings of racism with African American students if the class hasn't yet engaged in Element One, which would deconstruct negative, racist constructions of Black people in our society. Additionally, by not engaging in Element Two activities that teach about the strength and resilience of African Americans, students of other backgrounds may not have the historical knowledge to fully comprehend the atrocities of slavery.

There are two additional pitfalls of omitting one or more of the elements. Both stem from teachers who want students to be active citizens but are uncomfortable addressing the ugly histories in Element Three content. For example, many teachers move to Element Four and teach about the Civil Rights Movement without teaching about the Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and other atrocities the movement was in response to. This leaves students with incomplete understandings of "heroes" because it is unclear what they were actually fighting against (Loewen, 2008).

The other issue that arises when students have an incomplete understanding of Element Three is that social action projects are likely to be based in charity rather than rooted in justice. Take for example a unit on homelessness. When teachers encourage students to take action on homelessness without understanding the root causes of people living without homes, action projects tend to be penny-drives, winter coat drives, or visits to soup kitchens. Such projects attempt to make homeless people more "comfortable" but do little to question or change the structures that cause some people to be living without homes. Teacher Celeste Mason, in contrast, spent

time in Element Three with her third grade students, studying housing costs, foreclosures, minimum wages, and other socio-economic issues that cause people to live without homes. As a result, students' social action was to write letters to the Mayor and join an existing community campaign to raise the minimum wage so that people in the students' own neighborhood could afford to pay rents. By examining root causes, rather than symptoms of people living without homes, Celeste provided her students with a framework of justice rather than charity.

The remainder of this article illustrates the six elements using practical, elementary school classroom examples.

### **Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design for Elementary Education**

#### **1. Self-love and Knowledge:**

- Teachers provide students opportunities to learn who they are and where they come from.
- Students study different aspects of their identities and the histories associated with it.
- Negative stereotypes about student identities are deconstructed.
- *Classroom activities include: Where I'm From poems (Christensen, 2000), self-portraits that include skin tone identification, name poems, family interviews, grandparent guest speakers, cultural ABC books.*

#### **2. Respect for Others:**

- Teachers provide students opportunities to share knowledge about their own cultural background with their classmates.
- A climate of respect for diversity through students' learning to listen with kindness and empathy to the experiences of their peers is created.
- Students deconstruct stereotypes about their peers' identities.
- *Classroom activities include: Sharing cultural ABC books, diverse family structures (including LGTB families), field trips to cultural museums, guest speakers from children's families and cultural centers.*

#### **3. Issues of Social Injustice:**

- Teachers move from "celebrating diversity" to an exploration of how diversity can be experienced as oppression that has differently impacted various groups of people.
- Students learn about the history of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, religious intolerance and how these forms of oppression have affected different communities.
- Teachers make links between the historical roots of oppression and the impact it has on lived experiences and material conditions of people today.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Classroom content can include: Native American genocide, slavery, the Holocaust, anti-immigration policies and sentiment, media (mis) representations, issues that face their own communities such as gentrification or police brutality.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>4. Social Movements and Social Change:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers share examples of movements of iconic and everyday people standing together to address the issues of social injustice they learned about in Element Three.</li> <li>• Teachers help students understand that working together, ordinary people have united to create change.</li> <li>• <i>Classroom content can include: Abolitionism, civil rights movement, the L.A. janitors' strikes, various labor movements, 1968 and 2006 Chicano student walkouts.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>5. Awareness Raising:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers provide opportunities for students to teach others about the issues they have learned about.</li> <li>• <i>Classroom activities include: Newsletters, public service announcements, letter writing campaigns, creating documentaries, blogging.</i></li> </ul>
<p><b>6. Social Action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers provide opportunities to take action on issues that affect students and their communities.</li> <li>• Students identify issues they feel passionate about and learn the skills of creating change firsthand.</li> <li>• <i>Classroom activities include: Letter writing campaigns, petitions, linking with local grassroots organization campaigns, speaking at public meetings, attending and/or organizing protests.</i></li> </ul>

### Element One: Self Love and Knowledge

In Element One, teachers provide students opportunities to learn about who they are and where they come from. A sense of pride in their culture, heritage, ethnicity/race, religion, skin tone, and gender is cultivated in the classroom, e.g., their racial or ethnic identity and some of the historical background about their group. Students learn about different aspects of their identity and the history associated with it. When students are supported to learn more about their own history, they are better able to identify, deconstruct, and not internalize harmful stereotypes about their identities. This allows students to operate from a place of pride about their communities rather than fall victim to messages that claim that their communities are the cause of their problems. Centering their analysis in history, rather than lies, shifts the stage for students to engage in social action against structural barriers. Leslie Morrison, a former first

grade teacher in Oakland, California, engaged in a powerful Element One unit in which her African American students explored the use of the “N-word” in their community. Students studied the Countee Cullen poem, *The Incident* (Cullen & Early, 1991), in which he discussed being called a “nigger” as a child on a trip to Baltimore. Students discussed the use of the word and created a skit mimicking a popular radio show discussing the use of the word. Ms. Morrison wrote and taught the students a poem for recitation:

*This is a very interesting conversation especially among the younger generation.*

*Some people see it as a sign of self-respect, a renewal of self-regard.*

*But the word itself has been associated with such abuse.*

*It associates black people with being inferior, subhuman and subordinate*

*So we ought to have a moratorium on the word itself.*

*We are not going to use the word at all!*

*I know some brothers and sisters will say that it is a word of endearment*

*I say, ok, but I can think of other words:*

*Brothers! Sisters! Companion! Comrades! Homegirl! Homeboy!*

*Can we really use that word when we speak of Sojourner Truth? NO!*

*Or when we speak of Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglass,*

*or W. E. B. Dubois? NO!*

*When we think of our Mamas and our Daddies and our Grandmamas and  
Granddaddies, Oh NO!*

*Like James Brown said, “we say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud!”*

*I am human, not subhuman! So let’s try to rethink this thing.*

*I think that we can all conclude that we’ve got to pump it up and turn it loose!*

*But what do you think?*

By deconstructing the everyday use of a controversial word, Ms. Morrison provided her students with a foundation for understanding how their culture was represented in both popular culture and within their community. This analysis provided students pride as they learned the strength and resiliency of historical African Americans and acquired information to make their own decisions about what language to choose when describing their people.

There are a plethora of other activities that teachers can engage in to address Element One. For example, student-created self-portraits that include attributes of students’ cultures and heritage can be displayed proudly in the classroom. Because of racist constructions of beauty, elementary-aged students

often chose shades lighter than their skin tone to draw themselves. Teachers can engage in activities to help foster a sense of pride in skin color. Derman-Sparks and The A.B.C. Task Force (1989) suggest getting paint sample strips in a variety of skin shades and having students find their match. They can take the strip home and find similar colored items to bring in for show and tell. Element One naturally opens the door to include family members in the curriculum. In an “Honoring our Ancestors” unit that I did with second, third, and sixth grade students, students interviewed family members about relatives they had not had the opportunity to meet and created Honoring our Ancestor books. Units like this do not need “extra” time; they can often be integrated with mandated writing units such as “memoirs” or “all about me.”

### **Element Two: Respect for Others**

Often, simply sharing the products of Element One activities moves curriculum into Element Two. The goal of this element is to create a climate of respect for diversity by having students learn to listen with kindness and empathy to the experiences of their peers. Teachers provide opportunities for students to share their knowledge about their own cultural background with their classmates. Students deconstruct stereotypes about their peers’ identities, and learn more about the history, strengths, and resilience of each other’s cultures. By developing cross-cultural empathy based on historical knowledge and strengths of diverse communities, students can set a foundation of recognizing shared struggles against oppression, rather than being derailed by cross-cultural conflict.

When I was a new teacher, I saw an idea in a teacher magazine about creating cultural ABC books. I did this unit with my very diverse ESL second and third grade students. Students broke up into their cultural groups (Cambodian, Latino/a, African American). An alphabet was sent home with each student and families assisted with writing a word for each letter in either English or their home language that represented their culture, such as G is for Guatemala (Latino/a) or R is for Rosa Parks (African American). The cultural groups worked together: choosing their favorite word for each letter, making a letter page with the letter and word, illustrating each page. Once the groups finished, I laminated and bound the books. Students were put into culturally mixed groups where they shared their cultural ABC books, teaching each other with pride about their heritage and history. These became the most popular books in our library! Providing students with opportunities to learn about each other’s cultures, histories and strengths prepares them to address Element Three’s issues of injustice because their understandings of themselves and others are based on love and respect, rather than stereotypes or “isms”. While students are able to learn about what makes their peers different and unique, Element Two also allows them to see the ways in which their values and experiences overlap and are similar-key elements in future movement building.

When embarking on Element Two, it is critical to represent traditionally marginalized groups. For example, units on families should include multiracial, adoptive, Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual (LGTB) and single parent families. Students' family members can be brought in to share about aspects of their culture or language, and field trips to cultural museums or local grassroots organizations can expand students' understandings of their peers. Like Element One, this is an ideal time to invite in family and community members to share their life stories and to go out into the community to get to know diverse neighborhoods and cultural traditions.

### **Element Three: Issues of Social Injustice**

This element moves from "celebrating diversity" to an exploration of how diversity has been used as a marker for oppression that has differently impacted various groups of people. Students learn about the history of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and religious intolerance, and how these forms of oppression have shaped people's lived experiences today. By helping students to understand how oppression operates both individually and institutionally, they are better positioned not only to understand their own lived experiences but also to develop strategic solutions based on historical roots rather than romanticized or missionary notions of social change.

An example of an Element Three unit is former fourth grade teacher Edwin Mayorga's efforts to engage students in the question of whether Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster. Using a curriculum about the event developed by the New York Collective of Radical Educators (Mangual & Picower, 2005) side by side with resources from *Time for Kids* and the progressive student magazine, *IndyKids*, Edwin's students examined the history of funding to improve the levees, compared that funding with other governmental spending (such as toward the war in Iraq), and studied the government's response as it unfolded. Student Fernando expressed his understanding of the situation:

There was nothing they could do about the hurricane. That's coming, that's nature. But I think it's [the government's] fault for two reasons: They could have approved more money for the relief efforts instead of just like using it to buy guns for wars and stuff. And I think that they really, way back when, should have put more money for fixing the levees and stuff so that none of it would have hit so hard.

By exposing his students to a variety of resources, Edwin's students were able to have a critical understanding of the root causes of the "unnatural" elements of this current event that they were watching on the news every day.

Unlike many teachers, who either ignored the event or provided only charitable responses like penny-drives, Edwin provided his students with the analytic tools to understand the issues of social injustice at play. By exposing students to such issues, teachers can ignite children's righteous indignation

about unfair situations. To stop at Element Three, however, is to do students a disservice, leaving children feeling hopeless about injustice. Teachers must transition from Element Three units by providing models of how everyday people have struggled against such conditions and how students can also participate in social change.

Engaging in Element Three can be tricky, and it is at this stage that social justice teachers are sometimes accused of “indoctrination” by their critics on the right (Stern, 2006). The truth is that all teaching is political (Freire, 1993), not just teaching that comes from a social justice perspective. Good teaching, regardless of its ideological lens, should provide students with multiple perspectives about historical events, allowing them to draw their own conclusions based on evidence (Burstein & Hutton, 2005). A great example of this is *Rethinking Schools’ Rethinking Columbus* (Bigelow & Peterson, 1998), which puts Columbus, his men, the King and Queen of Spain, and the system of empire on trial, ultimately asking students to decide who is “guilty.” Teachers should also use this element to provide opportunities for students to understand current examples of injustice that may be affecting their own communities, such as gentrification or police brutality. This often requires teachers to take on a different kind of professional development to learn about community issues and connect with local community organizations. This approach often requires deep re-learning about history. Books such as *A People’s History of the United States* (Zinn, 1999), *A Different Mirror* (Takaki, 2008), *500 años del pueblo chicano = 500 years of Chicano history in pictures* (Martinez, 1991), and *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (Loewen, 2008) are great starting places. *Planning to Change the World: A Planbook for Social Justice Educators* (Mack & Picower, 2010) is an annual publication by NYCoRE and the Education for Liberation Network that helps teachers integrate important social justice events into their daily curricula.

#### **Element Four: Social Movements and Social Change**

In Element Four, teachers share examples of movements of people standing together to address the issues of social injustice students learned about in Element Three. Rather than leaving students feeling overwhelmed and defeated, Element Four helps students understand that working together, ordinary people have united to create change. While it is natural to highlight leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., it’s equally important to expose students to the movements that provided the base upon which such leaders stood. By exposing students to people they can relate to within social movements, teachers provide not only a sense of hope but also tangible models of what it looks like to stand up on the side of justice.

To help his third grade bilingual students understand the power of people organizing for social change, teacher Sam Coleman used the historical example of the Mexican Revolution and the more current example of the United Farm Workers movement. While both movements centered on a key leader, Sam’s

units pushed students to see the lesser-known people that worked alongside Emiliano Zapata and César Chávez. For the first unit, Sam's students engaged in a role-play, playing the parts of indigenous communal farmers, small-land owners, large land owners, the police, and judges. Sitting in table groups, the desks of the indigenous and small land-owning farmers were taken over by the large landowners, and they were forced to share a small space in the corner of the classroom. They went to talk to the police and the judges who did nothing. After the role-play, students discussed what the displaced farmers could do, given there were so many of them and so few of the powerful. Hector exclaimed, "We could get together and fight back." Sam read from a biography of Zapata (Stein, 2004) about the movement of small farmers he led to struggle for their land. This gave the students the historical background to better understand the United Farm Workers (UFW) movement. Sam printed pictures of recent working conditions of Mexican American farmers in California and hung them alongside photographs of the UFW's strikes and protests. Students did a "gallery-walk" around the classroom, filling out a sheet about what they saw, felt, and thought about the photos. This activity was followed up with a read-aloud from *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003) about César Chávez, helping the students see this important leader as but one member of the broader movement to change unjust conditions. Exposing students to broader movements for justice enables them to identify not only with those who have been exploited, but also those that have, as young Hector declared, "gotten together to fight back," positioning them to do the same.

There are a number of books and organizations dedicated to helping children address Element Four by seeing the importance of people united for social change. *Putting the Movement Back into the Civil Rights Movement* (Menkart, Murray, & View, 2004) is an example of a resource that goes beyond the "heroes and holidays" approach (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 2006) and includes sections on education, labor, citizenship, and culture. Teaching Tolerances' film *Mighty Times: The Children's March* (2005) and its accompanying teacher's guide is another curriculum example that focuses on the role ordinary people, in this case children, can play in fighting injustice. Children's books such as *Si Se Puede* (Cohn & Delgado, 2002), which focuses on the organizing efforts of a young boy whose mother participated in a campaign to unionize L.A. janitors, show children that injustice does not have to be tolerated. While Element Four helps students become aware that social change is possible, it remains something that only "other" people do if teachers stop here and do not move on to Element Five and Six.

### **Element Five: Awareness Raising**

As Betty Powell once said, "When you do know something about the reality of the world that those who stand in ignorance do not know, then you can't not educate" (Bunch, 1987, p. 256). This is the mindset behind Element Five. Once students become passionate about an issue, their drive to tell others about

it is often unstoppable. It's at this stage that many traditional and new media assignments can be transformed into awareness-raising activities. Essays become newsletters; editorials, websites, and blogs dedicated to the issue are created; public service announcements and documentaries are produced. Students can perform plays, write raps, lyrics, and poems, create museums and gallery walks, and more. Providing an outlet for students to present their learning and see people's reactions helps them to see that other people share their concerns. This creates energy and movement for students to take social action.

Former teacher Salina Gray supported her fifth grade students in better understanding the issues that were facing their predominately African American community. During their weekly community circles, students shared concerns and thoughts about issues that concerned them as Black youth, discussing topics such as the importance of African American history, language, and culture as well as challenges they faced, including drugs, poverty, and gangs. The students decided to create a newsletter called "Voices of the Scribe Street Activists" because, as one student said, "We want to put out information to help young Black men and women so they can make the right choices, get a good education, beat the street, and survive the burdens in life." Integrated with the writing curriculum, the paper featured short articles, and the students disseminated their newsletter in various beauty and barbershops, the local swap meet, and community restaurants. As a result, Salina said, "The students saw themselves as having voices and the ability to impact and influence in spite of their young age. They gained a sense of empowerment and developed a critical consciousness about the world around them."

By providing her students the opportunity to raise the awareness of those around them about issues that they cared about, Salina helped develop student mindsets that they have the power to educate others as a stepping-stone to creating change. She added, "They learned that we don't have to wait to build a mass movement in order to effect change."

Projects that fall into Element Five often feel like culminating activities; be forewarned, however, that in some cases raising awareness does not necessarily translate into social action. Plenty of people are aware of global warming, but are they actively engaged in activities to stop it? So while raising awareness feels good, it can also provide a false sense of completion if not accompanied by activities in which students' efforts have the potential to actualize change.

### **Element Six: Social Action**

It's one thing for students to learn about social movements in books and videos and to tell others about it; it's another to participate in creating change first hand. In Element Six, teachers provide opportunities to move beyond raising awareness to supporting students to take action on issues that affect them and their communities. Students identify issues they feel passionate about and learn

the skills of creating change firsthand. Students can learn how to improve the material conditions of their lives by learning how to do research, analyze who has the power to change particular situations, write letters and speeches, use new media such as blogs, Twitter and Facebook to organize, direct public service announcements, do street interviews, create documentaries about their cause, and learn other skills with which to struggle for justice.

The following example incorporates Elements Three through Six. Two former student teachers, Christina Vizquete and April Van Lighten, engaged their first and third grade students in a unit about gentrification in their community. By linking with a local grassroots organization, they taught students about the city's Economic Development Corporation (EDC) plan to redevelop and gentrify the area's waterfront without community input. Starting at Element Four, the teachers read *Wangari's Trees of Peace* (Winter, 2008) and *Harvesting Hope* (Krull, 2003), books about social movements led by César Chávez and Wangari Maathai to change unfair conditions that affected their communities. The student teachers then engaged in an age-appropriate role-play to help break down the sophisticated concept of gentrification. First, they took a field trip to the waterfront and asked the students to get into poses of things they generally do with their families while at the park, like having picnics or playing baseball. Their pictures were taken and put on a mural in the classroom. Christina, dressed up in a suit and fedora, became the character "Ms. Gentrification." She covered the pictures of the students at the park with photographs of typical gentrifying businesses like Starbucks and commercial banks with accompanying dollar signs. The children quickly understood that gentrification would make their neighborhood more expensive, and they wanted to do something about it immediately. The teachers quickly moved to Element Six by having activists from the local grassroots organization come to class to get the students and their families engaged in their ongoing campaign to have community input in the EDC's plans. Students wrote letters and postcards to the EDC and invited their families to their publishing party in which they educated their parents on the issue. The activists were on hand to answer parents' questions and get them involved in the campaign even after the project officially ended in the classroom.

Another powerful example of a social action project can be found at *Projectcitizen405.com* (Schultz, 2003), a website that documents former teacher Brian Schultz and his fifth grade students' efforts to research the process and engage in a campaign to get a new school building because of the inadequacy of their facility. Other helpful resources for elementary school actions include *A Kid's Guide to Social Action* (Lewis, Espeland, & Pernu, 1998), which breaks down some of the specific skills. Although students may not "win" some of the campaigns that they engage in during Element Six, they are developing the mindset that when something is unfair, responsible and caring people do something about it. In contrast with most mainstream ideology that tells students "that's just the way it is," or "life isn't fair," engaging in social action instills the response, "I can make a difference." Elementary teachers may not have students who will be able to read *War and Peace* (Tolstoy, 2006) by the end of third grade; rather, they are providing the skills that will eventually enable their

students to be able to read and comprehend such a text. The same is true with social justice education. Elementary students may not *end* child labor across the globe, but they are building the mindset and the skill set needed to eventually engage in social activism with winnable goals.

### **Integrating the Elements with Standards, Testing and Mandated Curriculum**

Teachers today face numerous mandates on how they spend their time. Previous research (Picower, 2011) has shown that because of testing, standards, and mandated curriculum, individual teachers often have little say over how they organize their time in the classroom. In order to provide culturally relevant, social justice education within this context, it is critical to develop strategies for integrating the elements into the curriculum that teachers are required to teach. One of the most straightforward ways that teachers can achieve this is through the strategy that I call “camouflaging” (Picower, 2011). Through this strategy, teachers can integrate the elements into the mandated curriculum or substitute alternative materials while still teaching required skills. This also allows them to teach SJE without raising the attention of administrators who may be unsupportive of such aims.

Through camouflaging, teachers first identify the social justice content that they want to teach. Then, after considering their school priorities, required standards, curricula, and formats, they identify the desired academic skills to be reinforced. At this point, teachers plan a lesson that reinforces those skills using the social justice content. I like to visualize this process using a Venn diagram with “SJE content” in one circle, “required standards/skills” in the other and “lesson” in the center. Using this process allows teachers to teach to the elements while never sacrificing the need for their students to be proficient with the skills that they will need to be academically successful, particularly on the standardized tests to which they will be held accountable.

I recently used this process with a group of teachers working to prepare students for the New Jersey State Exam. Working on Element Four, the teachers watched the Howard Zinn film, *The People Speak* (2009), in which actors read aloud speeches of ordinary people throughout history that stood up for freedom and justice. The teachers were moved by a speech by Sylvia Woods, a pioneer in the struggle of African American and women trade unionists, who reflected on her childhood refusal to say the *Star-Spangled Banner* because segregation impeded her freedom. Using “camouflage,” we replaced a reading comprehension story from a sample state exam with the text of Woods’ speech. We then went through the test questions associated with the original passage and identified the skill being assessed (main idea, supporting detail, inference), and made our own multiple-choice questions for the speech that assessed the same skills. This process ensured that students were prepared for the format of

the test questions and the requisite skills while still being exposed to Element Four, learning about a freedom fighter who stood up to issues to oppression.

### Conclusion

The six elements support teachers to teach for social justice in three main ways: they make SJE practical, they make it easier to find resources, and they help teachers to avoid common pitfalls. First, the elements create a practical framework that breaks down the often-theoretical ideas of social justice into smaller components that can be integrated into elementary classrooms. When social justice education is presented solely as a theory, without a clear framework of how to actually “do” SJE, it begins to feel like one more pressure that teachers struggle to bring into their classroom. Because teachers feel overwhelmed by the multitude of other pressures exerted on them by high stakes testing, scripted curricula and state standards, such a framework helps them to keep the eye on the social justice prize in the midst of the blizzard of external mandates.

Second, the framework helps relieve an additional pressure of finding and creating materials to teach from this perspective. Teachers are busy and don’t have time to reinvent the wheel. The six elements help teachers to break down the big idea of “social justice” into themes that are easier to find resources for. For example, it is difficult to find children’s literature on “social justice” writ large. Barnes & Noble doesn’t have a “social justice” section, at least not yet. It is less challenging to find books, however, that focus on specific elements, such as Element One (i.e. books that teach an appreciation of skin color or hair) or Element Three (books about slavery or the Trail of Tears). There are a plethora of resources, listservs, books, and materials that address one or more components of these elements. My teacher education students have compiled an annotated bibliography blog of K-5 literature for each element, which is available at <http://www.usingtheirwords.org> and by following the “Children’s Literature” link. Because these kinds of SJE resources are easily found and used, the six elements framework relieves the pressure teachers feel when they don’t have time to create curricula from scratch.

Finally, this framework helps teachers avoid some of the pitfalls associated with poorly implemented SJE and multicultural education. Often what counts for social justice or multicultural curricula are shallow celebrations of diversity such as food fairs or cultural dance assemblies. The six elements deepen the examination of diversity to recognize the role that power and oppression have played within our diverse histories. By carefully addressing all six elements, teachers can avoid the pitfalls of either increasing children’s internalization of negative beliefs about themselves or reinforcing their stereotypes about each other, which can occur when students study injustice without an appropriate understanding of self and others. While many curricular programs provide lip service about developing students into “active citizens in our

society,” the six elements are structured to do just this by making students aware of injustice, motivated to create change, knowledgeable of how change happens, and skilled in how to take action.

Systematically, integrating these elements of social justice within the classroom is a critical part of being a social justice educator; however, it is only one part. The other necessary component is to engage in working for social justice outside of the classroom, in coalition with students, parents, communities, other teachers and activists (Picower, 2012). There are teachers who have incredible and inspiring classrooms where students are engaging daily with critical issues, but they are located in under-resourced schools in communities that are under attack by political and economic forces, which are limiting the opportunities of students as they walk out the classroom door. Leaving things the way they are, while teaching that they should be different, undercuts the viability of these projects. It is the responsibility of social justice educators to walk out the doors with their students and take on these larger challenges so that both students and teachers struggle for justice by “using their words”.

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