

# Flawed Visions of Democracy in the United States

## Influences on Current Critical Social Justice Research

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### Democracy's Impact on Social Justice

**D**EMOCRACY, IN THE UNITED STATES, is a political system that endows individuals with the myth that society should be run, by the people, for the people, and of the people. As such, certain rights and privileges are vested and granted to members who then decide how they want to participate. However, due to failures and ruptures within this ideal, particular vetted governing principle such as the Declaration of Independence, amendments to the Constitution and the system of law have emerged as forms of reparations to try and remedy any flaws that failed such idealistic conceptions. For instance,

The United States's first belief statement, the Declaration of Independence, asserts that all men [sic] are created equal; however, this promised ideal has failed. All people are not treated fairly, nor are they afforded the equality of opportunity that the Declaration implies. Instead, misuses of power and privilege have oppressed and marginalized people based on differences of ethnicity, age, gender, ability, disability [author added] social class, political beliefs, marital status, size [height and /or weight], sexual orientation, gender expression, spiritual beliefs, language, and national origin. While the American educational system is supposed to mediate differences and provide equal opportunities for ALL students, schools often reinforce and reproduce injustice (Conference on English Education Commission on Social Justice, 2009).

This recent critique offered by the Commission on Social Justice is reminiscent of John Dewey's (1927/1988) words, which have long served as a model for democratic schooling and for the restoration of America as a great model for a global community. In fact, he said that achievement of a deliberative democracy is dependent on how a community communicates in a "free social inquiry" (p. 350) and then collectively enacts change. Although idealistic, Dewey's notion of

“free social inquiry” is a principled struggle we face when considering how to institutionalize critical research about social justice because the principles that govern our current democracy have been flagrantly marginalized from our communal sense of democratic agency. The model of a deliberative democracy once articulated by Dewey is muddied by a matrix of ever-revolving principles, or moral authorities, who determine the model for any current democracy. An unfortunate effect is that critical research about social justice issues must be disguised so that we can make inroads that challenge the hegemonic principles that have mandated and inculcated compulsory, inequitable, and insensitive schooling practices. To date, there are an ever-growing number of scholars who are committed to social justice research in education and who, for that matter, want to make systemic change.

This conceptual piece stems from a larger two-year practitioner action research qualitative study, drawing on grounded theory that highlights the importance of foregrounding critical social justice research by cultivating dispositions for socio-spatial justice in preservice English teacher education. The study centralizes a historical critique of flawed visions of democracy, its origins in the U.S. Constitution as location for understanding how social justice has been (mis)appropriated and affixed to myriad contexts, and pivoting that language toward critical social justice research in education. Findings from this study join the conversation on other recent research in education that have emphasized a call that social justice research must move from theory to policy (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Conference on English Education, 2009; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; McDonald & Zeichner, 2009; McLaren, 2003; Miller, Bieler, Bolf-Beliveau, Charest, George, King, J., Williamson, 2011; Miller & Kirkland, 2011; Moje, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008; Popkewitz, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2009; St. John, 2007; Walker, 2006; Wiedeman, 2002).

Fish (1999) and Mouffe (1993) invite a revisionist critique of democracy by offering reconsiderations for how to substantively change how citizens are controlled. This can be likened to any holiday. For instance, Thanksgiving or Chanukah and Christmas are technically just days, but attachments to those days, such as particular differences in history, family squabbles, or even materialism, shift the connotations altogether. Similarly, Fish (1999) proposes that the principles that govern our democracy, even if we were to ideologically shift them and call them “neutral,” once affixed to ideologies take on new contextual meanings. Once again, moral authority is attached to how things should be. Essentially Fish says that the democracy as we know it subordinates and undermines true social equity:

Because it cannot be met, the condition liberal democracy and the First Amendment is supposed to save you from, the condition of being subject to the influences of indoctrination, is the condition you are always and already in. The choice is never between indoctrination and free inquiry but between different forms of indoctrination issuing from different authorities. (p. 158)

Mouffe (1993) articulates that our current democracy is failing its constituents and that we are encouraged to imagine a new form of democracy that “should be plural and adapted to the type of social relations where democratic principles of liberty and equality are implemented” (p. 104). She is concerned, however, that consensus views will always be the view of dominant culture and that schools will continue to build upon consensus (inculcated) values. John Stuart Mill (1975) reminds us here that if we truly want social and moral equity, then schools should be

a choice among other competitors who also seek to “democratize” youth—or that we should do away with state control of schools.

Cruikshank (1999), in *The Will to Empower*, builds on Foucault’s (1980, 1986) analysis of how power is used to subjugate people. She suggests that the “technologies of citizenship” (through discourses, programs and other tactics) is a coercive strategy used to sustain democracy and that the tactics turn individuals into complicitous agents who willingly but unknowingly strengthen economic and power relations. She suggests that our democracy is teleological and is dependent on making citizens into objects. As such, it reinforces the morality of a given group of people through its perpetual recreation that is strengthened by the “making” of citizenry through social programs. Schutz (2008) furthers this and repeats that democracy, in fact, conceals a middle-class bias. As individuals are unknowingly turned into objects through schooling and current democratic principles, they lack the will and self-esteem to change the world. Thus this cycle is advantageous to serving hegemonic ideologies.

These critiques of democracy remind educators that we are admonished not to perpetuate cyclical ideologies in our classrooms, which can reinforce status quo beliefs. Rather, we are encouraged to change and to create lessons that can grow students into empowered subjects, not disempowered objects, but those who have the ontological will and desire to seek knowledge from multiple sources and contexts. Cruikshank’s (1999) words are applicable to us here that change can occur through consciousness, knowledge, and action (p. 70). In fact, history has demonstrated that when individuals are empowered and informed, they are better prepared to effect change. It is not to say that we need to overhaul democracy but that we can challenge the ways that the principles in a given democracy, or even the different types of beliefs in a democracy, i.e., a relativistic view of democracy (as well as any type of government) could be coercive and indoctrinating juxtaposed with the idea of ideological absolutism as an indoctrinating nature of the language; that is, the claim of an indoctrinating nature of any form of government is itself a form of indoctrination and how that can hold people from rising to their full potentials. What democratic critiques are calling for is not something that can have immediate effect. It will take time and a further understanding of the totality its impact has to push such ideas forward. Social justice is a continually evolving concept, and though gyroscopically space and time bound, it becomes principled based on who is defining it during any space and time. Whoever affixes particular criteria to it says much about the principles of the current democracy. Therefore, we question, is it possible to shield social justice from being commodified by ideologies that are deemed oppressive to others and should we support it definitionally and offer a fluid definition so that it can have efficacy in multiple contexts?

In *Narratives of Social Justice Teaching* (2008a), Miller, Beliveau, DeStigter, Kirkland, and Rice rise to the nuances of change and suggest a possible methodology to address this principled dilemma through the imaginative concept of fourthspace. Fourthspace is a vertical non-utilitarian space that cannot be reified, or a space that cannot be seen to the visible eye, and is a counter-site that supports preservice teachers in their conceptualization of social justice pedagogy. Fourthspace emerges out of and complements Soja’s (1996) firstspace, the real and concrete spaces that humans inhabit. Firstspace, however, is often disrupted when teachers who try to enact a social justice pedagogy and identity are pushed “into the closet” because their beliefs may not be supported in their schools. In fact, some teachers capitulate and abandon teaching for social justice because they fear retribution. Bullough (1987) notes that it is quite common for teachers to default to more traditional paradigms of teaching when they experience a dissonance between university teaching and classroom space and teach in ways that are

inconsistent and even contradictory to their initial pedagogical beliefs, goals, and expectations. Duncan-Andrade (2005) articulates that many teachers often feel under-supported, and many more abandon their social justice agenda, opting for less controversial and less efficacious pedagogical options. Important in the theory of fourthspace is a fundamental principle that not only buffers teachers from this fallback, but also promotes their agency in the classroom by taking a critical moment to think about a principled response. Fourthspace then is an interzone, or a socially produced vertical space of interdependence between student and teacher and teacher and world, which is already located within the human psyche, a space of dormant agency, and enacted or triggered by the experience in the classroom setting.

The conceptual framework of fourthspace (Miller 2008) aids in addressing this dilemma. As a spatial and imaginative tool, it can provide teacher agency and a way to negotiate one's principles in any context. The genesis of fourthspace is predicated on the concepts introduced by Soja (1996) of firstspace (concrete space), secondspace (or imagined space) and thirdspace (real and imagined space). Fourthspace is a space that is conceptualized by a double helix, a three-dimensional twisted shape like a spring, screw or spiral. The helix is a synecdoche for "critical pause time" (a quick check out) in that, each arm of the helix travels in opposite directions and reflects an emotional, corporeal, and cognitive shift of the teacher as s/he internally transitions from horizontal to vertical space and back again while instantly practicing the 6 "re-s": reflect, reconsider, refuse, reconceptualize, rejuvenate, and reengage (Conference on English Education, 2009, Appendix). This counter-site can help teachers resist against a psychasthenic (Olalquiaga, 1992) state; that is, a state in which we are unable to demarcate our own personal boundaries and become engulfed by and camouflage ourselves in the scholastic milieu. Such a framework might be a way to sustain emerging principles for enhancement of critical social justice research because it is a highly subjective experience which cannot easily be commodified by those who may think that social justice has no place in schools.

DeStigter's (2008) research extends Miller's imaginative discussion of how to support preservice teachers in developing a social justice framework by coining the new term "principled habits." He bases this on Dewey's (1916/1985) belief that people have habits that incline them to keep learning and growing to productively participate in an ephemeral world. Such habits are emotional and intellectual and include how humans respond to the conditions in their lives. DeStigter suggests that social justice teaching be at the center of an inchoate teacher's conceptual framework and that s/he begin to develop principled habits where social justice can be part of those emerging habits for how to approach teaching. He proposes a model for social justice that is based on what Fish (1999) suggests being a model for democracy wherein cooperation is achieved through the give and take of different agendas and on what Mouffe (1993) calls a radical democracy where there are open conflicts of interests. DeStigter (2008) says:

In accepting this non-deliberative model, then, a teacher who presumes to make social justice among her personal and professional priorities must embrace and tolerate a paradox of values. On the one hand, she must be driven by a communitarian desire to discover and effect strategies that bring people together, and she must seek to establish critically empathic relationships that inform and motivate efforts directed toward ends that all parties agree are humane and just. On the other hand, she must be wary of consensus, guard against its potential to eradicate diverse views and perpetuate injustice, and, in the end, be prepared to organize, dig in, and not budge until she gets her way. (p. 140)

Social justice speech that is germane to our discipline helps make meaning of how it has been decontextualized and used against its potentiality to move forward toward substantive change. These concerns beget the question, do we revisit and renew our thinking around what social justice means and establish new criteria by applying elements of Dewey's framework of a "free social inquiry?" Do we include Nussbaum's (2006) human capability theories, which suggest that all humans should be afforded principles of human dignity, in this revision or employ DeStigter's concept of developing principled habits? As we continue to name the paradoxes which are evident in democracy and which create obstacles for enacting social justice in firstspace, we can continue to forge ahead by revisiting current contradictions in democracy and use them to inform the way we could consider critical social justice research. As we bring these barriers into our discussions with our students, we prepare them to wrestle with the dissonances that can affect them both in their teaching as well as in their personal lives. It is fundamental therefore, that we are well informed about the historical and theoretical roots of social justice as we prime it for policy so that we can make change happen.

### **Institutional Impact on Social Justice**

Beach and Lindahl (2000) ask: Should there be a fundamental right to an education in the United States? Their research reveals that education is not a Constitutional right (or rather a birthright) but it is a human right. Individual states, though, have state constitutional rights to enact mandatory schooling laws but there is no mandatory national law relating to schooling and thereby no national equity effecting schooling. To remedy these "disparities," we see national and regional mandates handed down so states can address these perceived deficits.

One example of this is illustrated through the meritocratic belief in testing outcomes present in *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). The consequences of NCLB result in states' placements of different expectations on schools and schools of education which are determined by various dominant individual and group cultural norms, deficit theories, and historical, political, economic, and social values. Tests have been shown as biased toward middle-class students and lack cultural sensitivity. Many students of color consequently must retake the exams and are tracked into classes for test preparation. Another acrimonious example of inequitable educational practices stems from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and smaller accrediting consortiums that serve clusters of states. The consensus amongst those in higher education is unsurprisingly unflattering toward the accrediting agencies, as many in higher education feel controlled by state mandates that force schools of education to prescribe some, if not all, of the standards for teacher certification that then govern their practice (Newman & Hanauer, 2005).

NCATE's wording of a professional disposition illustrates this latter example. NCATE suggested that social justice was merely an illustrative example for a professional disposition that institutions (Wasley, 2006) *could* (emphasis mine) require that teachers embody (common to popular belief, it was never a standard of measurement). However, this has now been removed from NCATE's definition of professional dispositions (for exact wording, see <http://www.ncate.org/public/102407.asp?ch=148>). The reason behind the removal is that many believe that social justice is a highly ambiguous term, garners political overtones, and is used to weed out would-be teachers based on their belief systems. These critiques by NCATE are

important for us to ponder so we can use them as a springboard to collectively reconceptualize how to build it into our teachings.

Because it is difficult to know the “what could have beens” through our contributors’ research, we can provide changing directions for reconceptualizing social justice teaching. Perhaps if education and social justice were Constitutionally bound and hence, institutionalized, there might be greater advocacy for all today—but as it stands the facts corroborate that the ways that the Constitution has been interpreted within democracy have prevented complete and total social equity and it has both robbed and disabled people from meeting their full capabilities. Because the limits of total social equity are ironically bound to a history of oppression, we can work from where we are today based on the political, moral and social advances that are currently in place: *social justice is the desired outcome* and a possible vehicle for how to enact these changes, but such an effort will require an extensive and collective revision.

### Constitutional Impact on Social Justice

Looking more closely though at the actual wording in the Constitution of the United States might illuminate why accreditation agencies have such freedoms to construct their own bylaws. Three areas in particular from the Constitution illuminate some of these dilemmas: the Preamble, and the First and Fifteenth Amendments. The recognition of the wording is applicable to understanding some of the social and economic delimiters that can keep the disenfranchised from rising.

#### The Preamble to the Constitution

The Preamble reads:

We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish *justice* [italics added for emphasis], insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The Preamble, like other sections of the Constitution, is expected to be upheld by the US Supreme Court but as we know, given the bias that can be taught to humans and the varied principles under any given democracy, the way that language is interpreted changes temporally. How then does the word justice take on meaning in the Preamble? The Preamble is basically the abstract of the goals that the Constitution then spells out. It can be inferred that, given the context of how justice is interpreted, it could include different levels such as along racial, gender, religious, and economic lines (currently sexual orientation and language laws are relegated to states’ constitutions) which are expected to be upheld by the law. However, as many of us are keenly aware, when we advocate for social justice causes, it far exceeds this limited laundry list. Such ambiguity and lack of a clear definition of justice lends itself to loose interpretations and opens itself up to an affixment of disparate (and sometimes even oppressive interpretations and limits, such as with the case of Proposition 8 in California<sup>1</sup>) principles.

It is important to note the difference between the concepts of justice and social justice. Justice is a term whose roots originate in an “objective” legal system and which can mean that a

“decision” of some type has prevailed that concomitantly takes into account the law and its interpretations, and evidence. Once said decision is issued, justice determines the consequences of the redistribution of goods, services, and freedoms as a result of the decision. Social justice, on the other hand, is tertiary to the word justice, but it also has broader efficacy for political, ethical, educational, and moral decisions outside of the legal world. Social justice has myriad implications, and is “subjective” to the individual or group that determines if something is unjust or if injustice has transpired. While social justice can certainly occur in legal jargon, it has yet to be legally ratified and, as such, lends itself to encompass broader implications that can result in emancipation and social change for individuals or groups. Social justice can travel and impact others globally in ways that justice may not because it is an ethical mindset, while justice on the other hand, tends to be sequestered to legal jargon. Should social justice become reified it is likely to shift and challenge worldviews.

### **The First Amendment of the Constitution**

This amendment has provided fodder for many a given cause, from the hate-mongers who unite in protest against same-sex marriage, to the anti-abortionists who stand on street corners holding placards showing unborn fetuses, to the eco-greens who tirelessly walk city streets asking for donations to save the environment, and to the academics such as the “Dirty 30” who come under constant attack for their outspoken beliefs. The First Amendment of the Constitution reads:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances. (Bill of Rights for the U.S. Constitution)

There has been much controversy over First Amendment speech rights in public schools and with little wonder when we cannot even come to a truce on what it means in our American university system. While some see censorship as a form of academic harassment, others sustain it as necessary to the success of secondary and postsecondary schools. Recent examples include UCLA’s infamous “Dirty 30” professors, who align teaching with leftist values and are therefore deemed anti-American. Topping the list is equity Pedagogue Peter McLaren, who has written extensively on critical pedagogy and critical theory. The controversy surrounding the “Dirty 30” surfaces issues of autonomy and self-regulation. With a proposed Academic Bill of Rights<sup>2</sup> that challenges academic freedom’s self-regulation and autonomy in the universities on the horizon, it would seem that the First Amendment would be summoned to reconcile these divisive issues in schools in the not so distant future.

Academic freedom is an umbrella term that encompasses the constitutional and professional rights of teachers (Flygare, 1976). Freedom of teaching is one of the four elements that is embodied by academic freedom.<sup>3</sup> One of the plaguing questions of our time within education is, can a teacher be dismissed for actions or discourse used in the classroom? One might ascertain that the First Amendment guarantees the teacher the right to say or behave according to her/his beliefs but this is not the case. The courts have never fully agreed that freedom of speech is absolute (Flygare, 1976). However, when a teacher is dismissed from a position the courts must assess each situation case by case “to determine whether the school board properly restrained the teacher’s freedom of speech” (Flygare 1976, p. 9). The courts

examine several factors such as the age of the students exposed to the objectionable speech, the relevancy of the objection, whether policies or regulations about classroom expression exist, and whether any alternative for free speech exists in the school. The courts may also examine if the speech was symbolic, that is, if a teacher wore an armband, button, or badge.

As we unpack some of the issues facing our profession, it is also important to update where we stand now on censorship and think forward about how the First Amendment continues to affect teachers. Public school teachers need to understand that First Amendment rights of academic freedom accorded to university professors are much more limited in public elementary and secondary schools. Tierney (2006) in his review of current texts on hate speech in American universities asked a poignant question: “Who decides whether speech is hateful or how academic freedom is defined?” (p. 33). Answers to these questions have yet to be fully reconciled because school districts vary on what can and cannot be said and on how the First Amendment is interpreted. In fact, demands vary from state to state, district to district, and school to school, which makes it all the more difficult to achieve consensus on how the First Amendment is upheld in particular cases. Currently, fewer than 10% of postsecondary institutions have adopted policies that challenge First Amendment principles (Tierney, 2006), so it is with little wonderment that we are faced with what it means to be socially just in schools.

### **Fifteenth Amendment**

The second section of the Constitution that is taken into question is the Fifteenth Amendment, Section 1, which reads: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” Were this true, we might retort that there is a larger socio-political dilemma that often thwarts the actuality of voting based on access, privilege and economics. In fact states vary on voting laws when it comes to felons and ex-felons. Of those ex- and incarcerated, a disproportionate number are of color and equally troubling, 1%, or one out of every one hundred of the adult population, is incarcerated (Sentencing Project, n.d.). As of 2007, 10 states bar inmates, parolees, probationers, and ex-felons, although there are restorative procedures; 20 states bar inmates, parolees, and probationers, but they can vote upon completion of supervised release; five states bar inmates and parolees, but they can vote upon completion of parole; 13 states bar inmates from voting but they can vote upon being released from prison; and, two states, Maine and Vermont, have no restrictions and felons can vote from prison (ProCon.org, 2010). Although we have recently experienced a victory for the work undertaken by the civil rights era of the 1960s, consummating with the election of President Barack Obama, statistics (ProCon.org, 2010) still show that institutional racism is perpetuated by felony disenfranchisement laws (entwined with the war on drugs). Roughly 7.5% of people of color in the United States did not vote in the recent election (of whom a disproportionate number were registered as Democrat), as compared to 1.5% of all whites. The boundedness of class to race sustains itself with this glass ceiling and perpetuates economic and socially based-violence. When we review how justice is bound constitutionally, it is important to keep in mind that the disadvantages people have succumbed to can bear direct consequence on political wins and losses. The very politicians who may run and who want to impact systemic change are also caught in a catch-22, as some of their constituents are entrapped in a vicious cycle out of which it is difficult to break.

Kozol (2005) illustrates a different type of class violence using alarming statistics about educational fund distributions in New York City. Kozol cites that New York’s Board of

Education spent \$8000 yearly on the education of a third grade child in the Bronx while \$12,000 would be spent on a child in a suburb, and \$18,000 would be spent in a wealthy, white suburb (p. 45). He also notes that the teachers in the Bronx are paid \$30,000 less than the teachers in the affluent suburbs. It seems that our economic system rewards those who are already advantaged. How can we have true justice when we have class and racial disparities that continue to sustain themselves in a system that thinks it's socially just? Money by no means is an end to a problem. While it can help on a material level, it does not solve the institutionalized socio-cultural and economic inequities that students bring with them from home to school. Teachers inherit these social injustices and those who teach for social justice often try to remedy the egregious misdeeds of how inequities are handed down. Yet, many are not financially rewarded for their thoughtful and careful work to undo the Constitutional wrongs that have been handed to them. They are, however, rewarded in other spiritual and emotional ways.

Spring's (2001) research threads these Constitutional issues yet even further into public schooling. He suggests that public schools were originally constructed to be the great levelers of social, cultural, moral, and economic reproduction, and the reinforcement of dominant ideological principles, i.e., reinforcing the status quo so that students (identities) would reinforce democratic ideals. In fact, the same was true for all public school activities (sports, clubs, extra-curricular events). The idea for lesson plans, which came out of the Germanic Herbartian movement, were appropriated into American schooling in the 1880s and 1890s with the same intent in mind: they became ways for principals and school districts to micro-manage and assure that commonly held beliefs were playing out in classrooms. So if a common belief was that slavery was good for economic and cultural reproduction and that women should be the dominant caregivers for children, thereby staying home all day, such beliefs were indoctrinated and reinforced in school. The idea of social justice was not a dominantly held belief.

Though only some of the Constitutional language regarding justice was unpacked, it provides a slalom course for extremely incendiary questions and an important place for provocation about social justice in the schools and the accrediting and standards movement that governs it (the Fourteenth Amendment is also important to explore). For instance, would schooling today be as inequitable as it is had it been a Constitutional right, and second, if the framers of the Constitution had been aware of how power, language, and oppression would eventually play out in society and hence, the schooling process, might social justice have been upheld and inscribed as a common value, especially since the notion of the social contract has similar time origins (for more on social contracts, see contractarians Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau)? As we continue to bring such issues into the forefront in our classrooms and repose these moral dilemmas, we can continue to make meaning of how to build bridges and prime social justice for policy.

### **Critical Social Justice Research**

Appropriating the critiques herein, a critical social justice research framework (re)conceptualizes a critical review of language and literature that supports both social justice methods in the classroom and research methodologies (Miller & Kirkland, 2010). It includes creating new methodologies that speak to the languages and literatures that are juxtaposed with the counter-narratives of participants. Sometimes the distinction between methods and methodologies may be vast and at other times they may be one in the same because methods can

become methodologies, and vice versa. Social justice research also (re)interprets data within a framework that draws from this literature and its methods. It includes (re)presenting data that values its constituents' perspectives as they challenge master narratives. Lastly, it includes the possibility of its efficacy becoming drafted as social justice policy for fair but effective education.

A critical social justice research framework can benefit its constituents (if we are trying to revitalize Dewey's vision) around a threefold theory of social justice: (1) reflection, (2) change, and (3) participation (Miller & Kirkland, 2010). Taken from the beliefs statement:

*Reflection* refers to unpacking personal truths from people, ideologies, and contexts to help explain how hegemonic hierarchies are oppressive. *Change* refers to becoming more socially aware of how power and privilege that arises from within institutions in relation to social class, ethnicity, culture, gender, religion, national origin, language, ability, sexual orientation, gender expression, political beliefs, marital status and/or education, can be oppressive. *Participation* teaches how action, agency, and empowerment can be used to transform ideas, contexts, and may even lead to systemic change. (Conference on English Education, 2009)

Critical social justice research can benefit others when it challenges and intercepts prejudice and oppression and has the power of upholding human dignity for all (Nussbaum, 2006). Were social justice to become policy in education it would no doubt impact a matrix of constituents: state and local school boards, college and universities of education districts, teachers, students, and their families. The reification of social justice has the potential to set forth a politics of equitable schooling practices that have long been absent from our schools. What this could potentially do is impact students to graduate school with affirmed recognitions of their multiple skills, no longer entwined with oppression, and help them enact their agencies of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986)—or how their skills translate into economic and social capital, and are capable of impacting systemic and global change. Such a wealth of varying capabilities could have the potential to renormalize and recalibrate a more fair and just society. Such changes are possible, and as we recognize the Constitutional and moral flaws that we have inherited, we can turn that into an agenda to enact agency for all through critical social justice research.

### Notes

1. Proposition 8 is a proposed amendment to the California State Constitution that clearly defines marriage between one man and one woman. The proposition emerged after gay and lesbian couples received the right to marry under a decision by the State Supreme Court.
2. The Academic Bill of Rights is a document that calls for universities to maintain political pluralism and diversity. The Bill requires that "no political, ideological, or religious orthodoxy should be imposed on professors and researchers through the hiring or termination process." It also seeks to enforce that "faculty members will not use their courses or their position for the purpose of political, ideological, religious, or antireligious indoctrination." This grows out of the Academic Bill of Rights originally drafted by David Horowitz and which has now been proposed as House Concurrent Resolution.318, 108th Congress, 2003.
3. Academic freedom also includes freedom of research, freedom of outside utterance and association, and academic due process (Flygare, 1976).

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