

For Whom Do We Do Equity and Social Justice Work?

Recasting the Discourse about the Other to Effect Transformative Change

Alberto J. Rodriguez.-

Mary Endres Chair in Elementary Teacher Education,

Professor, Cross-Cultural Science Education

Purdue University

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Introduction

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In the field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, *an openness of mind and heart* that allow us to *face reality* even as we collectively imagine ways to *move beyond boundaries, to transgress*. This is education as the practice of freedom (hooks, 1994, p. 207 emphasis mine).

When we consider these powerful words, “an openness of mind and heart,” “face reality,” “move beyond boundaries,” “to transgress,” we are inspired to take the risks necessary to engage in the on-going struggle for establishing equity and social justice in our culturally diverse society. However, as we seek to transgress—and by doing so, enact our ideological and epistemological positions—we should critically reflect and ask ourselves for whom do we do equity and social justice work? Potential answers to this

question might be more problematic than we think; especially, when our good intentions might blind us and work against our noble efforts to establish a more just and inclusive society.

By recasting the predominant discourse on how *working for* the Other is often perceived, I offer in this chapter an alternative response to the core question, “for whom do we do equity and social justice work?” Given the unique theme and format of this book, we have an excellent opportunity to engage critically with each other (as readers, authors and respondents to chapter authors). In my case, since I already know Professor Lisa Martin-Hansen—the author to whose chapter I am responding--and since I have a great deal of respect for her work, I am in a particularly fortunate position to use examples from her chapter to illustrate the need for all of us (including myself) to more critically reflect on the need to recast dominant discourses on the Other.

Thus, I seek to transgress, to provoke and instigate complicated conversations in which all of us are implicated by our (in)actions and by our unchecked good intentions. I start the chapter by briefly defining--without attempting to essentialize--what some core terms mean to me at this time and moment in my personal history. I am in agreement with North (2008) that the term “social justice” has become the new catchphrase in educational research. This term, as well as the constructs equity and diversity, continue to be readily used without authors making explicit their conceptualization of these terms in their specific ideological, epistemological, and sociocultural working contexts. Therefore, it is essential that we seek to (re)define the core concepts that presently guide our work. This brief introduction to key terms is followed by a discussion of three approaches for recasting the discourse on working for the Other. I close the chapter with some

recommendations for continuing to enrich our equity work and our personal growth as educators/ researchers, and caring human beings.

Some Core Definitions

As Latino, science educator, immigrant to the US, second language learner, single father, and Other, and after living in three different countries, the following core definitions are filtered by the multiple (and on-going) changes in my academic, social, and cultural locations throughout my life, but more specifically they are influenced by insights gathered during my 21 years in academe.

Diversity: Involves the recognition of the visible and invisible physical and social characteristics that make an individual or group of individuals different from one another, and by doing so, celebrating that difference as a source of strength for the community at large. In my work with pre- and in-service teachers, I often hear that they do not need to address issues of diversity in their classrooms because all or most of their students are members of the predominant culture (meaning they look and sound like them). This superficial association of the term diversity with skin color prevents many from appreciating the rich diversity that may already be present in their working contexts (i.e., gender expression, socioeconomic status, multiple ethnic/cultural associations, bilingual or multilingual expression, special needs/abilities, and so on). Thus, in order to truly understand and value diversity, one must take purposeful steps to explore diversity that goes beyond skin color.

Equity: Refers to the enactment of specific policies and practices that ensure equitable access and opportunities for success for everyone. It is important to differentiate equity from equality. I often hear from pre- and in-service teachers that they “treat all the students same,” so therefore they are fair (or equitable). Others often state that they “love all children;” thus, they “want everyone to do the same work and do well.” While, it is essential to have high expectations for everyone and assist students gain access to the discourse of the culture of power (Delpit, 1995), in order to be equitable, we cannot treat everyone the same. To be equitable, we must treat individuals according to their needs and provide multiple opportunities for success

Social Justice: This is a complicated term and difficult to describe in a short paragraph. Again, without attempting to essentialize, social justice is defined as the conceptual framework guiding the enactment of specific policies and practices to promote diversity and equity. It is important to note that we might be able to observe the presence of diversity and/or equity in any give context without the presence of social justice, but it is not possible to have social justice without the presence of diversity and equity. In other words, while diversity and/or equity may be enacted, for example, as a result of a mandated policy or expectation in a given school district or working context, it is the deep understanding and presence of mind that enables an individual to internalize social justice as everyday practice—as something we must do because it is the right ideological and epistemological thing to do to enable our community to flourish.

Agency: There are many definitions of this term. One useful definition is offered by Basu (2008) “as purposefully considering and enacting both small- and large-scale change in personal and community domains, based on one’s beliefs and goals” (p. 884).

Other: Any individual who is not a member of the predominant culture of power, and as such automatically subordinated into presumed deficit categories. An important aspect of this concept is how negative pre-conceptions of the Other as deficient prevents individuals from recognizing the agentic practices in which the Other might already be engaged. For example, perceiving a second language learner as lacking English language communication skills, instead of recognizing that the individual already speaks another language, so he or she is not *lacking*, but instead *adding* another set of language skills. Gaining the ability to speak more than one language should never be perceived as a deficit. Similarly, the focus of associating low academic performance of children from single parents’ homes or low socioeconomic status with what they lacking at home (their Otherness), instead of focusing on the resources the school is failing to provide (e.g., more flexible times for parent/teacher conferences; access to learning technologies; after school tutoring, etc.). In this chapter, I will be providing arguments in support of re-casting our pre-conceptions about what the Other is lacking, so we might reflect instead on what we can (should) do.

Otherness: The conscious and/or subconscious racist, heteronormal, sexist, ageist, able, and/or classist messages embedded in our dispositions toward the Other, and/or in our

descriptions of the various contexts in which we often place the Other and the causes for their Otherness.

Gazing Inward: Working for Equity and Social Justice for Oneself First

In this section, I describe the first of three approaches I would like to propose for recasting the taken for granted discourse *working for* the Other. While it is challenging to break down these approaches into three different categories due to their close relationship with one another, my goal is to tease out--sometimes-subtle--aspects of the dominant discourse in an effort to encourage critical reflection.

Using Professor Lisa Martin-Hansen's¹ chapter as a springboard, we can appreciate her genuine commitment to working toward equity and social justice with pre-service science teachers. In fact, Lisa's journey as a privileged White² teacher rings true to me, as I have often heard similar experiences from colleagues and experienced and novice teachers. For example, Lisa explained, "most of the experiences that shaped the way I thought about race and culture happened when I entered academia and moved to an ethnically and racially diverse part of the United States" (p. 15). Lisa goes on to share several stories in which she engaged in equity work as a teacher and more recently as a university professors/teacher educator. While I celebrate her efforts and the efforts of many members of the predominant culture who seek to enhance the opportunities for success of underrepresented individuals in science, my concern is the tendency for privileged academics to engage in heroic self-narratives. For instance, Lisa explains,

¹ For simplicity, from now on, I will refer to Professor Martin-Hansen as Lisa.

² Elsewhere (Rodriguez, 2004), I explained that I refuse to use colonial terms to refer to various ethnic groups. The use of skin color-based terms, such as Black or White, are colonial and as meaningless as the use of the term "race" to refer to human beings' phenotypic differences. I prefer to honor individuals' broader ethnic/cultural group than to draw attention to their skin color. However, I respect whatever ethnic label individuals use to identify themselves.

my friend [of Indian decent] said that she sometimes felt invisible (and continues to feel so in those situations). What was even more awkward is if the person knew both of us, but proceeded only to speak to me. I made it my business to actively introduce my colleagues (including colleagues of color) to take away this cloak of invisibility. It also allowed me to draw upon my privilege as a native White person to include everyone socially (p. 17).

Although this was a useful strategy to acknowledge the presence of the Other, by focusing on what Lisa did for the *Other's benefit*, there is a risk of creating a false sense of absolute self-awareness that might undermine opportunities for continuing professional development and effective equity work. To avoid this false state, I would recommend that individuals in position of power who are directly enacting some kind intervention strategy as the one described above should acknowledge that they are taking action for themselves first. That is, taking actions that are congruent with one's ideological and epistemological stances and that are congruent with the kind of social dynamics we wish to establish in our working contexts. In addition, individuals in position of power should always be vigilant and acknowledge that they can never reach an absolute state of self-awareness and consciousness that will prevent them from ever taking an oppressive role. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) brings attention to this issue in her extensive critique of critical pedagogy, "my understanding and experience of racism will be always be constrained by my white skin and middle-class privilege. Indeed, it is impossible for anyone to be free from those oppressive formations at this historical

moment” (p. 308). Those of us in position of privilege can only strive to “be free from our oppressive formations” through constant reflection and *working with* the Other. This topic will be explained further below.

Interrupting Taking for Granted Alliances: Working for Equity and Social Justice within Our Own Ethnic Groups

The second approach for recasting the discourse on Otherness and working for the Other involves seeking to work more purposely with members of our own ethnic group. Again, most of the narratives present in the literature tend to focus on what those in position of privilege (regardless of their skin color) are doing for the Other’s benefit. Take for example Wayne Au’s edited book, “Rethinking Multicultural Education: Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice” (2009). This volume provides a very useful collection of practical and thought provoking chapters written by a variety of inspiring authors. However, most chapters do not include the kind of self-reflection/gazing inward explained above, nor do they provide arguments for purposely seeking to collaborate with members of the same privileged/ethnic group to effect long-lasting change. This phenomenon could be further illustrated by using the same excerpt from Lisa’s chapter explained above. In that excerpt, Lisa mentioned how she sought “to take away the cloak of invisibility” by bringing in her “invisible” colleague into the conversation. Although an effective strategy, it would have been more effective if Lisa had had a one-on-one conversation with her colleague about his/her tendency to ignore the Other. In this way, this individual could have become more aware of how this practice was exclusive. I have often felt invisible in similar academic contexts and even with my partner’s family members. When I pointed out to my former partner—who is an Anglo female,

professor—the same invisibility issue with common colleagues and with members of her family, she took the same steps as Lisa. However, she never directly discussed with them how their taken-for-granted social practices tended to exclude me and made me feel invisible. In some instances, I have directly addressed this issue—especially when it involves a third person coming between me and another colleague or friend and giving his/her back to me as he/she proceeded to talk to my colleague/friend. Giving one's back in that manner is considered to be rude and disrespectful where I come from, so when I have tapped on the person's shoulder when that has happened, the individual is often defensive or embarrassed. I have also noticed that my relationship with those individuals does not improve, as they seemed to become more guarded around me. Therefore, if a member of the same ethnic group were to point out how an individual's actions are inappropriate and exclusionary, I believe this could have a more powerful and transformative impact.

Enlisting the support of members of the culture of power to also do more equity and social justice work laterally, or within their own ethnic group, is essential when we consider the powerful homogenizing and silencing impact of white defensiveness. The tendency of members of the culture of power to take a defensive stance when their institutionalized privilege is exposed (*white defensiveness*) has been articulated at length in the literature (Roman, 1993; Rodriguez & Kitchen, 2005; Ellsworth, 1989). I have also described how either consciously or sub-consciously colleagues' and pre and in-service teachers' white defensiveness often takes a *domesticating* role by which these individuals seek to silence and punish the Other for having made them acknowledge/confront their institutionalized privilege (Rodriguez, 2005; 2009). This politics of domestication makes

the work of underrepresented faculty or perceived Other (like myself) so much more challenging when working with pre-and in-service teachers (as well as with colleagues) who often forget that the main reason why we were hired to teach cross-cultural science methods or cross-cultural education courses was to assist in raising awareness about equity and social justice through our teaching and research. Lisa recognizes the importance of providing on-going support to underrepresented faculty when she states, “in my regular responsibilities as a faculty member and department chair, the issue of access, encouragement, and equity is part of my thinking in almost everything that I do. This includes policies, pedagogy and institutional beliefs that may impact students’ access to an excellent educational experience” (p. 21). I really wish that Lisa had described in more detail her efforts to raise awareness about equity and diversity issues amongst her Anglo faculty colleagues. Given her leadership position as department chair, and given what we know about white defensiveness, Lisa is perfectly positioned to instigate the kind of lateral work within her own cultural group that could have long-lasting and transformative impact.

Seeking Alliances: Working for Equity and Social Justice *with* the Other.

The third approach for recasting the discourse on Otherness and working for the Other is best described by Linda Alcoff’s (1992) feminist critique of the tendency of privileged individuals to believe that their locations enabled them to speak for the Other, and/or simply “retreat” from this practice altogether because they could never represent the Other’s experiences. Alcoff (1992) elaborates,

Thus, the attempt to avoid the problematic of speaking for by retreating into an individualist realm is based on an illusion, well-supported in the individualist

ideology of the West, that a self is not constituted by multiple intersecting discourses but consists in a unified whole capable of autonomy from others. It is an illusion that I can separate from others to such an extent that I can avoid affecting them (p. 21).

In my view, speaking for or retreating from speaking for the Other, essentializes the Other as a subject to be either rescued or left to his/her own devices. Similarly, these approaches also illustrate how some members of the dominant culture feel they have the power to choose to speak for or avoid speaking for (retreat) altogether from speaking for the Other. I can appreciate how some individuals—with good intentions—might find some ideologically/morally questionable comfort and safety in avoiding speaking for the Other as a way to avoid misrepresentation and critique. Again Alcoff (1992) makes this issue more clear, “A further problem with the retreat response is that it may be motivated by a desire to find a method or practice immune from criticism. If I speak only for myself it may appear that I am immune from criticism because I am not making any claims that describe others or prescribe actions for them. If I am only speaking for myself I have no responsibility for being true to your experience or needs.” (p. 22).

So, what’s the alternative to speaking for or retreating from speaking for the Other? How about just *working with* the Other? Leslie Roman (1993) and Linda Alcoff (1992) both suggest that *speaking with* “convey the possibility for tendential and shifting alliances between speakers from different, unequally located groups. *Speaking with* refers to the contradictions of voices engaged in dialogue with one another without suggesting that they are reducible to the same voice or epistemic standpoint” (Roman, 1993, p. 82). I

agree that the construct of speaking with provides multiple entry points for meaningful collaboration; however, as a middle-class, scholar who is often Othered just by virtue of my brown skin and Spanish accent (before individuals find out who I am and what I do for a living), I prefer to use the construct of *working with* the Other. I argue that seeking to work with the Other recognizes the potential agency in which the Other might already be engaged. Thus, if I am interested in recasting my role as privilege individual interested in social justice, my goal should not be speaking for, avoiding speaking for, or even speaking with the Other. It should be *working with* the Other by first asking in what ways I can support the agentic efforts the Other might be already advancing.

Returning to Lisa's chapter to illustrate how this notion of working with the Other could take place, it can be observed that some of Lisa's assignments for her pre-service teachers consisted of having them "interview a student from a different race or ethnicity from their own" (p. 23). The goal here was to have pre-service teachers make some modifications to their lessons so that they could meet their interviewed students' needs. This type of "culturally-responsive teaching" is a common practice, and I have used it myself. However, upon further reflection, I have changed this type of activity because I believe it served to reinforce deficit pre-conceptions pre-service teachers might already have. I changed the activity to also include interviewing students from the same ethnic group/language as the pre-service teachers to help them explore diversity and equity issues within ethnic groups (e.g. socioeconomic status, family composition, ethnic diversity within Anglo groups, sexual orientation if students/families are out, and so on). Also to avoid deficit notions, pre-service (and in-service teachers in research projects) are encouraged to find out what's working well for their students, what students or their

parents are already doing to assist them learn English or improve in other subject areas (e.g. sibling/friend tutoring, after school activities, access to learning technologies-such as educational games, reading resources, and so on). In this way, a shift—a recasting—of the privilege individual’s role can begin to take place by first finding out the agency in which the Other is already engaged, and then taking responsive steps to augment the Other’s efforts.

Conclusion

The unique format of this volume urged chapter authors to engage in a meaningful and poignant conversation with one another in order to advance our equity and social justice work with honest solidarity. While none of us can claim to have a formula, guidelines, or any other essentializing tool of “best practices,” it is through this kind of meaningful form of engagement that we could find multiple entry points for collaboration across difference.

Given the various meanings for core terms, such as social justice, equity, diversity, agency, Other, and Otherness, I began this chapter by exposing my own epistemic and ideological locations in regard to these terms at this moment in time in my 21 years in academe and as a Latino Other. I also provided three approaches that might help us reflect and hopefully re-cast taken-for-granted notions of working for the Other. For the first approach, *working for equity and social justice for oneself first*, my goal was to encourage all of us (members of the predominant culture and Others) to consider the question, *for whom do we equity and social justice work?* I have argued that in order to do our best work, the answer to this question should be a selfish one. That is, we must do equity and social justice work for ourselves first and foremost. In fact, the more selfish

we are in our response to this question, the more effective we might become with our work because it will cause us to be more reflective and ideologically honest. By being more reflective, we could also move away from the missionary and well-intended notions of “rescuing” the Other. This tendency of *working for* the Other often positions the speaker in a superior stance that might inadvertently prevent him/her from recognizing the agency in which the Other is already engaged. This positioning also shifts the attention from the Other’s struggles and accomplishments to (often unintended) heroic self-narratives that do little to advance the Other’s condition. I am of course not saying that members of the predominant culture should not share their struggles and/or successes regarding their equity and social justice work. I am simply asking for more reflection so that those engaged in social justice work do not (perhaps inadvertently) project heroic images or a false sense of hyper consciousness that somehow enables them to disembodied their institutionalized privilege at will. As Ellsworth (1989) pointed out that’s simply impossible.

The second approach draws attention to the transformative role those in position of power could play by more directly engaging in social justice work within their own ethnic groups. While those of us who are positioned as Other are often furthered catalogued as “abrasive,” “difficult,” “not a team player,” “having a chip on his shoulder,” “polarizing” and so on, when we take the risk of interrupting discriminating social and/or institutional practices directed at us or others, members of the predominant culture are often heard differently by their own peers when they are the ones taking the necessary risks to bring about change. Therefore, I urge those committed to social justice

work to spend as much time working within their own ethnic group. In this way, new alliances with their own peers could further their collective work with the Other.

The third and final approach, *working for equity and social justice with the other*, involves recognizing the agency in which the Other may be already engaged and taking steps to augment these efforts. Taking the time to understand what family members, friends, other teachers, community members and many others might already be doing to enhance the educational opportunities of the Other first might enable us to abandon the altruistic desire to *work for* the Other. *Working with* the Other instead could open up multiple entry points for more meaningful and responsive collaboration.

Lisa Delpit (1995) summarizes this third approach well by indicating that true dialogue can start by

seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one's own power, even if that power stems from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness with people of color, and to listen, no, to *hear* what they say (p. 47).

I am thankful for Professor Lisa Martin-Hansen's efforts, and for the efforts of all those committed to working for social justice in our increasingly culturally diverse society. I am hopeful the three approaches suggested in this chapter will stimulate reflection and conversation as we seek to grow and collaboratively continue to transgress, provoke, and instigate much needed social change—working across difference and in solidarity *with* the Other.

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