

# LIVING OUR CONTRADICTIONS: CAUGHT BETWEEN OUR WORDS AND OUR ACTIONS AROUND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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In a conservative, mostly white, mostly male, mostly-middle-class academic environment, moving beyond the status quo can disrupt a place in unsettling ways. Attempting to redesign a program, specifically a teacher education program, to situate social justice at its core, can even cause further disruptions. Regardless of the environment, change can be burdensome (Fullan, 1991), controversial or thought provoking, but it occurs (Richardson, 1994a). There have been studies that have explored teachers' experiences of change and teacher educators' interactions with the change process (For example, Hargreaves, 1994; Richardson, 1994b). Few studies, however, have turned to the more controversial aspects. How does change occur when potentially edgy issues are involved? Does it? This text offers one modest look, a self-study, at experiences within my institution as we attempted to reform our teacher education program.

While the reform of teacher education programs in this way may be North American in nature, the conundrum of promoting change in the face of unwilling individuals seems universal. Thus, I present a tale that describes my role in this process – how I responded to our (institutional) desire to change, and the ways in which our interactions challenged our thinking about certain taken-for-granted aspects within our Program. I also explore and question the tensions that developed between our thoughts and actions in the change process. In the consideration of this tension, I attempt to explore the basis of possible contradictions between our words and our actions.

## **Setting the Scene**

The University of Kansas (KU) is a well-respected institution of higher education in the United States. Within KU, the School of Education (SOE)

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accepts about 150 excellent students (defined by their GPAs, qualifications, and writing skills in the application process) each year into its elementary and secondary programs drawn from the surrounding geographical area. Over time, the SOE faculty has worked collaboratively with state and federal educators to improve education at all levels, while striving to be at the forefront of providing the best education possible for its students. To support our intellectual growth, reflection and change seem to be consistent elements in our environment.

In the mid-1990s, the SOE engaged in its own self-study. At the same time, our Board of Regents (a state entity that oversees institutions of higher learning) charged all State Regents' institutions to, "become examples of institutions willing to change to meet the needs of America and [the State] in an ever more competitive and complex world." This work generated a mandate for the SOE to reorganize its structure and its teacher education program. By late 1997, the SOE had implemented a new plan that reorganized departments and created a new entity, the Teacher Education Division (TED). The development of the TED afforded the SOE faculty an opportunity to design the best possible teacher preparation program. Consequently, over a three-year period, the TED examined ways to improve its current teacher education program and identified ways to address the state and federal pressures for standards reform.

When we began the redesign process, we had a five-year teacher education program. Then and now, students graduate with a bachelor's degree in education in four years and move into a fifth year that includes 22 weeks of teaching (8 weeks of student teaching in the fall semester and 14 weeks of internship in the spring semester). Students competitively accepted into the SOE begin their professional education courses in their third year at the University. Once admitted into the School, our students identify content areas along with a grade level focus (elementary, elementary/middle, middle, middle/secondary, secondary) and take the appropriate coursework. During their fifth year, the students do their student teaching, plus enroll in a series of graduate level courses focused on research, school law, and assessment. Upon completion of their internship in the spring, the students have 15 hours of graduate work and can be certified to teach.

Along with the redesign initiative, the SOE faculty also engaged in a study of school climate. In response to concerns expressed by a number of ethnic minority students about perceived bias, the Council for the Recruitment and Retention of Ethnic Minorities (CRREMs) decided that a survey of School climate would be the most appropriate course of action. As

a Council, they felt it was their task to examine the general quality of climate before they could respond to the expressed concerns. They asked and hoped to determine whether the issues raised by some students were the concerns among the general student body or specific only to ethnic minority students. Not surprisingly, the CRREMs quickly found differences between the perceptions of the majority and minority students. Simply stated, the ethnic minority students were less positive about their experiences in the SOE than the majority students. Although for the most part the students were still positive, there was often a significant difference between the responses. Most poignant among the ethnic minority responses was the feeling of isolation from and exclusion from students and faculty. Perhaps most significant is the response to the peer question which asked whether the culture of the SOE invited students to participate in the academic community. Fifty-five percent of our majority students experienced an invitation and only 45% of the ethnic minority students experienced that same invitation. For the CRREMs, this was a powerful indicator that the SOE had work to do (Hamilton, 1998).

As the SOE entered into the 21st century, we seemed to be at a crossroads with our redesign issues and diversity concerns at a convergence. Could we, would we, facilitate the necessary changes in our Program that would address social justice and diversity issues? As we moved toward reform, we asked ourselves, could we design an effective teacher education program, while preparing our students for a changing world? Could we institute a teacher education program that would place social justice at its core and address the apparent bias experienced by some of our students? Standing at the crossroads, with our beliefs in hand, we seemed to know where we next needed to go.

### Influences of Research

We needed to explore the literature. As we prepared to redesign our program, we reviewed current research literature to insure that we included the most current perspectives on teacher education. We knew that teachers needed considerable subject matter knowledge complimented by instructional knowledge (Shulman, 1986) and realistic views of the classroom context (Kagan, 1992). We also knew that unexamined beliefs could hinder teacher development (Pajares, 1992), that elaboration of practical theories could help young teachers in their development (Hamilton, *in press*), and that students believed that field experiences best prepared teachers for teaching (Munby &

Russell, 1995). We discovered that because a shifting student population (increasing students of color) and a steady teacher population (mostly white, middle class young females), addressing diversity issues are important in the United States (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996). Further, we found that addressing cultural differences (see for example, Cummins, 1986; McLaren, 1986; Ogbu, 1991) and the beliefs that young teachers bring to the profession (Fenstermacher, 1986; Ladson-Billings, 1995) can help prepare teachers for the changing classroom population. In consideration of these ideas, we decided to approach our plans for teacher education reform with an examination of theory through practice using a guided fieldwork component. At the center of the redesigned Program we placed the theme of social justice because we felt that it was a critical element for success in the 21st century schools.

### **Considering my work**

As a researcher, for twelve years I have recorded my academic experiences in letters, journals, e-mail communiqués, interviews, field notes, and observations (Arizona Group, 1994, 1996). Taking a self-study approach, I have developed my notions about teacher education and teacher knowledge. In this latest study, I shifted my view from a programmatic exploration of my classroom to an exploration of my Program. My position as director of the redesign initiative seemed to require that I broaden my scope. During a three-year stint, I worked with colleagues on the redesign of our TED program that encompassed the writing of a mission statement, a conceptual framework, a Program plan, and a curriculum framework. We informed our faculty colleagues via our website (<http://www.soe.ukans.edu/>) and offered opportunities for feedback through open School meetings. As a team we hoped to generate the Program ownership as we sought approval throughout the School.

To document this self-study, I drew on notes written during meetings, documents created during our work, informal interviews with colleagues, and communiqués among colleagues. Colleagues external to my institution also served as critical friends and offered important comparisons. These data sources helped me identify and consider aspects of the process, particularly the aspects of our living contradictions. In reviewing the data, I attempted to escape taking an unrestrained approach to exploring my perspective.

## The Predicament

As we progressed from an idea to a Program, we created various documents. After our first year, we had drafted a Program plan with social justice as a central element that the School faculty approved as a working document. I felt proud that the work we had done as a team of teacher educators recognized the importance of social justice. Finally, I thought, we had a program that explicitly stated the relevance and importance of social justice issues. Finally, I thought, we could confront the concerns expressed by our students. My colleagues seemed to agree. Our working document proposed to offer our students more than just the brief course in multicultural education they currently had. Because we live in a somewhat mono-cultural part of the country, it seemed important to develop our students' consciousness about issues of social justice. How could anyone, I thought, ever state that they were not supportive of social justice?

Yet, within a few months of School approval, the design group itself resolved to table the use of social justice as the Program's central theme. In a contentious meeting where peoples' views of social justice and what might be central to good teacher education were discussed in earnest, we tabled the use of social justice as a theme because the many differing views became apparent and created an impasse.

Prior to this decision, we spent some time reviewing the issues. As a result, the act of tabling disoriented me. Close colleagues had advised me that something like this *could* never occur. Earlier my team had all agreed to support social justice as a theme. Or so I thought! Then, the tabling took place. Perhaps signs of dispute had emerged earlier. Perhaps I missed opportunities to examine perspectives more fully. Or, perhaps, we were just mired in our implicit racist notions where social justice might be a fashion ... but when asked to *live* our beliefs, we could not do it. As explained in Roberts' Rules, tabling an issue recognizes its lack of support. More concretely, it indicated peoples' unwillingness to discuss the issue any further.

Once the event occurred I had to step back and consider how to proceed. What could have created this? Was this racism? An attempt to oust me as Director? A backlash in response to right-wing activities within our state government? Because I wanted to get us back on track and because I wanted to understand what happened, I investigated this. I also believed that if I could uncover what had occurred, my self-study might inform others engaged in their own redesign processes.

## Our Living Contradiction

This event seemed a puzzle to me. If we knew

- that our students experienced at least some discomfort in their experience within the School as expressed in the student survey,
- that novice teachers needed to be informed about cultural differences,
- that the current research literature suggested the inclusion of such information, and
- that we were committed to the best education for our students,

why did we table the use of this issue within our redesign? From my perspective, our failure to approve social justice as a major focus of our program did not seem to be in the best interest of our students. Although we said we had our students' best interests at the heart of our work, our actions seemed to contradict our discourse. This, however, was not the perspective of my colleagues.

From their perspective, *not* addressing social justice *was* in the students' best interest. Perhaps, the tension existed only between my colleagues and me. Perhaps, the unwillingness to address social justice was not the blatant act of racism that it seemed – at least to me. I pondered the events and speculated about how they might have occurred. How could we table the issue of social justice? We had all reviewed and discussed the same literature. We had listened to each other's views. We had written our visions of education and selected information to include in our documents. We seemed to have agreed upon or compromised on important issues. I was bewildered by this contradiction and I wondered about how this could happen.

To examine this contradiction and discern whether this was just a problem of my own making, what was at the center of this discontent, and ultimately, establish what might best support our students, I attempted to deconstruct the issues and perspectives involved. I explored the evidence. Using collected data and calling upon colleagues within the experience, I attempted to examine our living contradictions.

## The Meetings

There were two meetings where we focused entirely on social justice. At the end of the first meeting, my colleagues asked me to summarize our discussion. I wrote the following:

At its core, the definition of social justice mirrors democratic principles depicting a just society where every one has the privilege of participating in its ongoing

process. Within this system, individuals treat each other with dignity, humanity, and honesty. They promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and diversity, as well as an elimination of the domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group or class on the basis of race, class, gender, ethnicity, national origin, color, etc. In a socially just world, people are committed to the nurturing all children. Given these ideals, these individuals are committed to change. For them, there is a recognition of social wrongs and injustices as well as a belief that people can change the world. When teaching for social justice, those involved teach what they believe ought to be and display a willingness to take risks in concert with others in order to live in a democratic world ... (Drawn from Ayers, 1998; Hunt, 1998; Oakes & Lipton, 1998)

We also suggested that upon graduation if our students employed elements of the definition of social justice described, they would:

- Work with all children.
- Understand and be responsive to diversity.
- Develop a desire to improve students' lives.
- Advocate policy issues supportive of young people.
- Promote actions and programs that support young people.
- Change situations in schools for working with young people.
- Recognize and have an understanding of the labyrinth of community services. (TED Notes, 9/20/99)

During the second meeting, we presented our definitions and responded to them. One colleague began with a statement that we needed to "look at the precepts associated with social justice from a positive perspective." (Minutes, 9/21/99, p. 1) Other colleagues suggested that our use of the term social justice, "could have a negative effect on the public and some legislators." (Minutes, 9/21/99, p. 1) Even though the SOE faculty had approved this theme the previous fall, the conversation began to deteriorate and my colleagues began to worry. Some simply stated that since KU was a suburban university, the focus on social justice seemed less urgent. Perhaps, someone insinuated, we were only addressing the "needs of a small portion of our population" (Minutes, 9/21/99, p. 1) rather than the concerns of the majority of our students. One colleague even provided a geography lesson, stating "we don't live in Chicago, you know."

As the conversation continued, alternatives were considered. We "might maintain the values of social justice, but not use the term ..." (Minutes, 9/21/99, p. 1), someone offered. Levels of hostility, discomfort, and frustration rose as the meeting progressed. As we proceeded down a negative path, the hope of accepting a definition of social justice around which we could concentrate,

faded away. As a group, we voted to table the discussion of social justice until we, “considered how well the [curriculum] framework [upon which we were working] represented both the social justice theme and the work to which we [were] committed.” (Minutes, 9/21/99, p. 2) We were ready with the support of the full faculty, to move forward with our work using social justice as a central focus and we had little support within the writing group (designers of the actual Program) to take action. In other words, we were living our contradictions (Whitehead, 1993) or at least bumping up against them.

What happened here? How could we support social justice but not support social justice? And, how could we not view social justice as a key element? In the next few paragraphs, I explore possible explanations for decisions made.

### **Figuring it out**

As I reviewed my collected data I considered a variety of possibilities about what might or might not have influenced the decisions made. Elsewhere (Hamilton, in press) I have considered whether or not colleagues were attempting to oust me from my position as the Director of the redesign process. While this idea may hold some merit, there was little evidence to suggest that this was a serious possibility. Additionally, I considered whether or not the conservative politics within our state might have influenced decisions made. Given that Kansas had become center of ridicule because of decisions made about our science curriculum (Our state legislators had voted to remove any discussion of evolution from our State science curriculum generating quite a furor within our education system. This was later rescinded), this was a realistic query. As I reviewed my notes, worries about the state legislature did emerge in our conversations, but they only seemed of peripheral import rather than central interest. I considered other possibilities as well, including internal politics.

Yet, nothing seemed to explain the contradictory nature of the situation as well as racism. This is not to suggest that the event was a conscious and deliberate act. Rather, it was a dysconscious act where awareness of actions is implicit. As I searched for explanations, I reviewed documents and conversations. First I returned to the comment about geography – “we don’t live in Chicago ...” Superficially, the distinction is accurate. The University is located in a suburban, not urban, area. However, the comment alludes to a belief that social justice is only relevant in urban areas. Further, the comment suggests that areas of greater economic stress need social justice while areas of greater economic opportunity do not. What, then, does this mean for the

students we prepare that might teach in urban settings? Will our students be prepared to teach all students?

Here we were, a group of white, middle class, middle-American teacher educators making decisions about teacher preparation without apparently conscious consideration for the diversity of our students or the future students of our students. Certainly we knew not to encourage racist views among our students, but were we being the best models possible for our students? Were we simply accepting the status quo or were we seeking to respond to the challenges of the 21st century world?

As I asked myself hard questions, I looked to find answers that did not evade honesty. I returned to my notes, to the literature, and the meeting minutes to jolt and challenge my initial responses. My concern about the possibility of institutional racism seemed verified. When I informally interviewed colleagues, they stated with certainty that racism was not involved. However, the content of the discussions during the meetings could not be avoided. As I reviewed the minutes of the meeting, the evidence seemed clear. Since we worked with our select student body, we apparently felt that our students did not need to explicitly concern themselves with issues of social justice. The data seemed to indicate that, from our perspective, our students would select suburbia for employment after Program completion. From my review of the data collected, we seemed to be living our contradiction – acting in a socially unjust way when we discussed issues of social justice.

My own notes indicated that I felt some level of frustration and discouragement with my colleagues when they voted against social justice as a Program theme. Their behavior and their language dismayed me. In my mind and in some discussions, I accused them of enacting their white privilege. Initially, however, I did not challenge myself or look at my own part in this event. I recorded my colleagues' comments that were salted with comments like, "I don't want you to think that I don't support social justice ..." or, "... maybe if we just use other terms ..." (After these meetings, I contacted various colleagues outside our design group but within the SOE to discuss what occurred. Some were surprised by the decision. However, no one attempted to influence the decision.) I had greater difficulty locating my own perspective on this event. I expressed disappointment with my colleagues, but my disappointment should not, would not excuse my own behavior. As an advocate of social justice, what was my own part in this? Clearly privilege, if not race, was a factor. How did my privilege and that of my colleagues come into play? It seemed as if we were just dealing with the various levels of the typical white liberal response.

## Exploring the Contradictions

Our University had a “blueprint for diversity” and expressed interest in diversifying our student body as well as our professorate. Yet, over the years the diversity within our institution changed little. While some researchers assert that “... education must start with community and student needs ...” (Lempert, 1996, p. 6), our institution and School seemed to focus only on a small portion of our community. (Within 30 minutes of KU there are two metropolitan areas with at least a 30% population of people of color.) We seemed to be missing the needs of some students as well as not preparing our students for a changing world. Theorists suggest that universities can be too liberal and fearful of being attacked for those views (Lempert, 1996). Although evidence suggests that my colleagues and I were not worried about the liberal nature of our stance, we did worry about challenges to our views. We said we wanted to offer the best teacher education program possible, but it seemed that our actions belied that.

Other theorists suggest that globalization, despite encouraging people to think more openly about the people and the cultures, causes a reactionary response regarding social justice issues (Botstein, 1993). While there is a “... need to combat racism, nationalism, and inequality all over the world ... [this] requires new theoretical and practical reflection ...” (Botstein, 1993, p. 21), and demands something more than my colleagues and I seemed willing to provide. Perhaps the problem was that we could promote social justice in theory but could not enact it.

In academia the pursuit of social justice seems to clash, on some levels, with the academic culture (Martinez, 1998, xvii). Theoretically social justice may be appealing, but practically, the application of social justice seems to be discounted for the sake of other issues. And those issues are all quite European in perspective. Macedo (1998) observes that “cultural, gender, ethnic, and racial unrest across university and college campuses” has increased. Further, he asserts that “diversity on university and college campuses is, at best, debatable and, at worst, a figment of our imagination” (Macedo, 1998, p. xxxviii). From his perspective, some white liberals may “willingly call for and work for cultural tolerance but are reluctant to confront structural issues of inequality, power, ethics, race, and ethnicity” (Macedo, 1998, p. xxxv). In other words, taking a perfunctory view does not help address the contradictions between our beliefs and our actions. In our case at least, Macedo seems to be right.

While not taking a deliberately malevolent approach to the issue, we did act in a dysconscious (King, 1991) way; that is, without a critical consciousness.

Using our language to conceal our behavior, we engaged in racist activity and pretended that it was something else. To some degree I tried to alleviate myself from guilt in the situation, because I felt that I was at least aware of what had transpired. However, that does not serve as a real excuse. In retrospect, there were ways to challenge the situation and I did not do that. For example, once we tabled the issue, it was never discussed again – not at meetings and not within small group discussions. Although the words were written in certain documents, the topic was never mentioned during any meeting. I could have attempted to bring the topic forward. I did not.

My rationale seemed solid at the time – I thought I could bring the group around to the topic in another way and I thought I might sabotage the prospects if I brought it forward. At the end of our academic year when we planned to again address the issue of social justice, the meeting ended early (without discussion) because of low attendance. (Unfortunately, although we later brought the terms social responsibility to the discuss and this was approved for discussion, the entire Program was tabled by the SOE faculty because of faculty disagreement. Eventually the new Program was dismantled and returned to its former 1986 structure). While there may have been other aspects involved in our exploration of social justice, the evidence clearly suggests that racism was a powerful element.

### **Valuing Self-Study**

As I attempted to analyze my experiences, I found self-study to be particularly helpful as a methodology for constructing and deconstructing events and ideas. Self-study need not be classroom-bound. As teacher educators we can model our role as teachers and include both classroom and program. Using self-study encouraged me to critically explore and honestly examine my role within the experience and the School. Encouraging other colleagues in higher education to engage in self-study may help them grapple with controversial issues. Deconstructing my experience and exploring the various aspects of the events was not a simple process. Commitment to truth-telling, at least from your own perspective, when engaged in self-study is critical. Revealing the living contradiction may only be the first step in the process.

If as teacher educators and role models for our students we do not engage with difference and confront these issues, we offer our students few ways of constructing meaning for the situations they experience. Further, the hypocrisy of engaging in the rhetoric but not the action of social justice can be quite confusing (Padilla & Montiel, 1998). Certainly our decision to withdraw

support for social justice as a theme seemed to reflect, in some way, our view of our program and ourselves. What was that view? Wanting to present a positive, socially conscious view we offered to support social justice in theory. However, when pressed into the actual undertaking, we stepped back. We needed to take ownership for our own privileges and prejudices. Because white people often do not recognize their own biases, we needed to probe issues of white privilege and racism and ask ourselves critical questions about our own behavior. Writing up self-studies can encourage others to identify their own mostly implicit biases and privilege – bringing these contradictions to consciousness and encouraging change.

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