Introduction

I have never been gifted at completing puzzles. Perhaps in a large family like my own, where manageable chaos was the norm, inevitably pieces for puzzles would go missing. Eventually, I would become frustrated and simply give up. For the past few decades the larger global community has also been attempting to complete a complex puzzle of its own. Governments, institutions, human rights organizations, activists, and individuals have been trying to finish a puzzle that would see the world evolve into a more dignified place for all. Education also has a role to play in the construction of a more socially just world. Paulo Freire once said that, “if education cannot do everything, it can achieve something in contributing towards the transformation of the world, giving rise to a world that is rounder, less angular, more humane” (Freire). Where we have smoothed out conflicts, where peace and justice would become commonplace and dignity for all would be a goal. However, we have not yet finished the puzzle and struggle to connect some of the pieces.

This philosophy is gaining popularity as consequences of globalization are being realized. While globalization has increased trade, and material wealth in some areas, it is also “characterized by violence, exploitation, domination, and greed” which at times manifests in rare moments like it did on Black Friday (Bowers, 2001, p.2). Therefore, if globalization if a force for methods which seem to lead towards injustice and violence, we require another force to balance and lean towards social justice. That force is education.
Education for Social Justice is concerned with facing the challenges presented to humanity through the process of globalization. Schools may play a pivotal role in this process and must be “tied to a struggle for a better life for all, through the construction of a society based on non-exploitive relations and social justice” (Calabrese-Barton, 2003 27). How would Freire evaluate our efforts towards social justice? Should education be integral in the construction of a more socially just world?

One definition of social justice education states that it is both a “process and a goal”, where its purpose is the “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” (Adams, Bell, Griffin, 2007, p.1). Elsewhere, teachers are referred to as “agents of history, who work towards making the world less discriminatory, more democratic, and less dehumanizing and more just” (Chomsky, 2000, p.12). There are those who would agree with these perspectives, educators who integrate the idea of social justice, within the framework of their courses. The purpose of this study is to examine the perspectives and actions of educators who engage in issues of social justice, human rights and global citizenship. My study will examine the beliefs and personal influences that motivate them in their actions for social justice, to identify if similarities or differences, shared successes, disappointments and challenges may be drawn between subjects. These insights should serve as a guide for those educators contemplating integrating aspects of social justice education within their curriculums. Finally, to reflect on Freire’s words, that education may contribute to the transformation of a more humane, less angular and violent world.
Methods

In this study, one means of determining if teachers practice social justice in their classrooms would be a self-assessment. Clearly, such as assessment is inherently biased. Teachers in this study therefore are well-known in the community for their commitment and actions advocating social justice. Rather than surveying teachers to inquire whether or not they believe they instruct for social justice, certain teachers were directly targeted based upon their model as instructors who engage their students and community. They are individuals working with students towards addressing a variety of issues in social justice, human rights and global citizenship. These public actions qualify these individuals as teachers working in the realm of social justice. This was important for the purpose of this study, as these actions validate their reputations of being instructors for social justice, more than a claim would.

Three teachers were identified that met these qualifications. Dana, is an English instructor for 23 years. For the past four years she had been organizing and implementing a program that involved a large number of students who raised funds and then travelled to an African country. After four years of preparation, the group would at last arrive in Africa where they would live, volunteer at schools and orphanages, and as Dana hoped, become transformed into more aware and dedicated global citizens.

Les has been teaching for 20 years. A number of years ago, he developed a Global Citizenship program at his school, which has been the “highlight of (his) teaching career”. In this program his students studied issues of development, global citizenship and language over the school year. The program culminates with an overseas experience in a developing country.
Once in the community, students and supervisors live with local families and work on development and environmental projects. Beyond the intended outcomes of the program, of culture immersion and volunteerism, what Les appeared very passionate about were the internal and personal insights students might have that they “could never experience in the classroom.”

Kate has been teaching English, Philosophy and Religious Studies for the last 20 years. She also organizes and hosts public workshops melding philosophy with human rights and refugees. Kate’s unique approach to social justice is demonstrated in her dedication and passion towards integrating issues of social justice into the context of her courses.

Teachers received the invitation to participate in the study by letter, they were contacted by telephone in order to arrange an appropriate time and place to conduct an interview. The method and materials used for data collection were an interview and questionnaire prepared by the researcher. Participants were interviewed individually and letters of consent were signed at that time. All interviews lasted between 40 minutes to 1 1/2 hours. Data was collected by using a recording device. Participants were given pseudonyms and interviews were then transcribed. Fifty-six pages of data were collected. Data was analyzed using a key theme analysis approach, in order to examine themes in Dana, Les and Kate’s responses.

Within the context and variety of experiences shared during the interviews, several trends emerged from the data. These trends are organized into four themes. These are; influences, purpose, both of the instructor and of social justice education, challenges and barriers to achieving social justice in society, and finally recommendations for instructors who hope to implement social justice education within their methods and classrooms.
Influences:

Each instructor identified influence of a personal nature. What must be considered is why certain teachers lean towards the inclusion of social justice while others do not? An examination of influences may also reveal why some of the students in the classrooms seem open to the issues of social justice and why others appear to be uninterested in the idea. To uncover what shapes our world view into one in which human rights, social justice become important, and leads one towards what will be termed, the “got it” moment. As we understand our own influences, our history, perhaps this would provide appropriate insights and methods in engaging students.

Although participants attribute their disposition to a variety of influences, they all have in common that their significant influences are those that carry a human interaction, rather than a specific subject area being studied. Individuals such as parents, teachers, and personal experiences where identified as having the more transformative and powerful influence on the development of their perspective of the role of social justice in the classroom as vital in facilitating meaningful social justice education. For example, Dana immediately named her parents, whose “generosity” modelled an action orientated social justice that reflected doing. She recalls their home as being open to those in need, whether it was “foster children or the elderly.” While her parents set “the model” of action and attitude for social justice, Dana believed that she really ‘got it’ was only after hearing Stephen Lewis speak on the AIDS crisis. This experience expanded her attitude from simply being aware of social justice from her parents and from her experience of “waking up intellectually” at University, into one that had a
pragmatic project to do. She desired to go to Africa, to start schools, to work with the AIDS orphans, and to “go do something to create a difference.”

Kate also experienced developing an intellectual perspective towards social justice while studying philosophy at University. She attributes her current efforts to include issues of social justice within her courses from her desire to “model after (her) own great teachers.” These instructors at University were “absolutely committed to social justice.” Kate found it refreshing and energizing to encounter individuals who “stood for something and defended it”. This readiness led Kate through a transformation where after considering “Nietche, and existential despair,” she concluded the opposite and “realized, it is possible to care deeply about life,” to feel “passion, that things really do matter.” That gave Kate hope and purpose.

For Les, the desire to include social justice within the framework of his courses was a “natural extension” of the courses themselves. In subjects such as, “world issues, current affairs, educating about the world and how it is, and the ills” it was natural and logical to include topics of justice. However, the inspiration to develop the global citizenship program, and of taking students to live in a new culture and community came from personal experiences. Les believed that “travel, was probably one of those things that most affected my worldview”. Les had at one point “thought of changing careers.” Instead he took a sabbatical and travelled to Central America. Following his sabbatical, Les felt his experiences and encounters left him feeling, “rejuvenated, and I realized that’s the place where I am probably the closest to myself and decided I would do what I have always dreamt of doing, and that is give students an experience, in a developing country, to experience a developing world country, not as someone looking at, but being with.” By recognizing and acting upon his own need for change, Les had a powerful
experience and transformation. To this day, his choices have influenced and shaped his teaching philosophy, his classrooms, motivations and actions.

What is most fascinating with regards to the examination of influences is that when the approach Dana, Kate and Les take towards social justice education is explored, it becomes evident that their approach and philosophy is deeply rooted in and reflects their influences. The influences have identified a common intellectual and human interaction as pivotal in guiding these teachers to develop their current perspectives and practice. These individuals ‘do’ social justice how it was modelled or experience by their personal experience. These influences are then echoed as they articulated their own purpose for doing social justice education. The aims are deeply linked to the personal and experiential, however, these traits, while they pose a challenge, might also be why including social justice topics within our courses could potentially add meaning for our students.

Therefore, we cannot say that social justice is simply having a discussion, standing for truth, starting a school or even living in a cross-cultural community. While it may include all these actions, each approach maybe qualify to model social justice education, therefore the lesson for instructors might be to find encouragement in that. If we look too narrowly for the “results” of social justice that we mirror and recognize, we may miss seeing how our students experience social justice in their lives and in our classrooms. Furthermore, perhaps to effectively engage out students in social justice education we must learn to tap in to the readiness and personal experiences in our students’ lives in order to participate in the transformative power of social justice education.
Aims & Purpose

If we are planning to engage in social justice education, what are the goals and objectives we are trying to achieve? Do we want to transform the world and make it better? If we cannot alleviate all the suffering in the world, what is the point? Why bother, some might ask?

Participants shared a variety of responses.

For Dana, by taking her students to West Africa she hoped to accomplish two goals reflected in social justice education. First she hoped to “create a difference” in the area of AIDS and Africa, along the lines of the influential Stephen Lewis. Additionally, she also had a second purpose. While making a difference “other there” was the central focus of media interested in her story, I believe Dana’s main purpose was to affect not only the situation in Africa, but also her students’ attitudes and behaviours. After hearing Stephen Lewis speak, Dana had an experience second “got it” moment when she returned to school the following day. In her role as a teacher who fostered relationship with her students, she was bombarded with kids whose lives seemed to be falling apart. A girl came to her, who had just tried to slit her wrists and was at school because she was afraid of making a mess on her parent’s carpet. As the day went on she felt the burden of, “two pregnancies, two more abortions, and kids flipping out on meth.” The reality of her students’ lives led Dana to a realization, that there are “kids on the other side of the ocean who are desperate for anything and I have kids on this side, who are desperate because of everything.”

Dana believed that because we have “everything,” we have lost our hope and she believed that if you just “immerse someone (her students), in a lot of love and good, they will
respond.” That response, Dana believed, would to be cured from the “disease of Affluenza”. A disease brought on by the overindulgence of material goods. Her hope and ultimate purpose was to “knock the Affluenza out of them.” While she and her students have received much praise in public for their work, some evidence remains that point out some sadness and disappointment below the surface. In her view, Dana did not fully understand the impact of materialism in her students’ lives, until she began fighting it and she “lost” the fight. One experience according to her, was proof of her defeat. Shortly after visiting an orphanage in Africa, a student returned to their compound and, “read through fashion magazines.” This indulgence became evidence for Dana that “Africa did not phase (the student) one bit.” Dana’s conclusion that some of her students are so engrained within consumerism that they might never get it. While we can see, this might kill one’s spirit it could also present teachable moments.

Dana’s sense of failure influenced and transformed her evolving perspective of social justice education to become more personal. Nearing the end of our open and honest conversation, I asked Dana what she believes her aim of social justice education today, since she felt she failed. She paused and said clearly and firmly that the aim “is to bring social justice to you, in your life.” I asked what that might look like, what the evidence would be, she said succinctly, “you don’t lead the life of Affluenza.” So while she sees social justice as an increasingly personal journey, it is interesting to note that she looks for the same results in others in their personal journey. According to Dana any authentic efforts towards our personal social justice journey would be incompatible with affluence, which is our disease.

Perhaps Dana was a unique individual. In my discussions with Kate she recognized that there are unique individuals “who devote their entire lives on social justice, but they’re the
minority.” For Kate the purpose of including social justice in her classrooms found its roots in the belief that she thought it was a good idea to influence “every student who comes into our sphere, to at least think about their role as citizens and what justice is.” Kate contributes “to the picture” of social justice education by creating a desire to thinking and engaging students to seek “truth so you can defend it.”

As Kate continued to define and articulate her purpose, an underlying assumption seemed to emerge. If she engaged students, by creates those spaces in her classroom where topics are “aimed at making them think for themselves, their own convictions, and their own place in the world,” that they will automatically find the natural validity of the social justice position. She hopes to “make students excited about how to think, and knowing what to think, that I’ve succeeded if I make them feel passionate about something, that things really do matter.” Just like Dana, Kate practice social justice education is mirrored by her experiences. She experienced her social justice moment intellectually while at University, and therefore that is how she hopes students will experience it, and how she understands her purpose. She recognizes success when students “go to where I wanted them to go,” that is an intellectual destination where “there should be a minimum level of equity, that is due every human being and we should all be interested in.” The purpose of thinking and truth seeking for Kate, is to actually do the work of social justice, where students conclude that we all should “work towards not making each other wretched, and to not participate in the wretchedness of others.”

For Les, social justice education is not something that we do to students, with students, or for them. It is how we are with them. It is a “recognition that while you are teaching that you are engaged in a very human activity, that you’re feeling human together with the other, with
students in class, and you engage in something that is important to all of us”. There is little
distinction between this belief and Les’s purpose or aim in taking his students to “live in
community.” By having his “kids, experience another country, not as a tourist but as a
participant, not as someone looking at, but being with”, Les believes students will “transcend the
idea of the Other.” This transcendence is, social justice according to Les. Once we no longer see
difference as foreign, only then are we “able to be who it is we are, and to live in a community
that is more humane,” Les believes that it is this realization of our true selves, will allow us “to
see the injustices of people around us and speak to that and defend them.” That we tend to see
separation as a problem yet teachers may fail to recognize this separation between themselves
and their students as a mini reflection of the divisions that are inhumane in the world.

Les believes individuals and students will authentically and most effectively stand for
social justice, not out of guilt, or top-down mandated pressure from their teacher, not for
themselves, but for the other to which they now belong. That is Les’s experience, his belief, his
purpose and he emphasizes “it is the only way we can address the global.”

Whether the purpose is to create a pragmatic difference, to think or to become more
human, what these three individuals share is the acknowledgement that the aim of social justice
should begin with our experiences with our students. Whether that be in the classroom, or living
beyond borders. While Kate and Les, seem to have developed this approach from the beginning,
Dana has come to this conclusion after some painful experiences, and now believes that
ultimately “it is the students’ responsibility.” These educators see themselves as facilitators who
“create the environment” where things can happen. For Kate, her students is to foster an
environment to think, to discover truth, “to reflect with” her students. For Dana, it is her
responsibility to model one who no longer lives the life of Affluenza, limiting her resources, choosing to live more simply and cutting consumption. For Les, it is “being with” his students, by “living as a respectful human being and by seeing students as responsible unique individuals, free and able persons.”

Although our educators where responsible, and some might say in control of creating in the environment to be with their students, all had to be willing to reduce control of what might happen in that environment in order for these experience to lead to certain ideas for social justice. Likewise educators intent on engaging in social justice education with students, must be willing to let go of traditional approaches. Taking the risk of allowing students to arrive at destinations that you may not always be able to control direct, but which may in the end provide rich, authentic opportunities to explore social justice.

**Challenges**

Working to foster such environments is not without its challenges. For Dana and Kate, a significant challenge is the concept of injustice itself. For them, the injustice is consumerism. Dana named it Affluenza, that we are desperate “because of everything” we have. Kate believes that rather than becoming who we are meant to be and finding truth, we are reduced to the label of “consumer... which is undignified, trivial and wrong.” She points to the “abuses of mass communication” which stand in the way of people “getting there.” Rather than living in a world where we are encouraged to care and think, we are “chuted, like cattle towards certain behavioural directions that have everything to do with capitalism and very little to do with really living.”
The assumption underlying these perspectives is that we are living in a way that is unnatural, that is making us “desperate.” Consumerism and Affluenza, are unnatural behaviours present in society which stand against humanity achieving social justice both globally and within ourselves as individuals. As a result we remain separated as we become consumed by “greed.”

On the other hand, Les did not blame media, consumerism, nor wealth as the challenges we should focus on. Rather, it is our inability to “transcend the idea of the Other,” which prevents us from belonging to the other and therefore paralyzing our ability to engage in social justice. Perhaps this reflects his own deep recognition that there are many sources that separate us from the Other. For example, what of fear? This would be an interesting question I would ask in a follow up conversation, what he sees as those forces which we hold on to that prevent us from transcending the idea of the other. However, what he, Dana and Kate share is the belief that we care less about suffering so long as we remain focused inward.

The challenges posed to teachers who hope to include social justice are not found in society alone but also from within. With each of the participants, there was an acknowledgement that “to be human” with students, to “reflect with them” requires a willingness to be vulnerable, and to “let go” of control. This is challenging for many teachers, particularly new teachers whose minds are often focused on classroom management techniques, which can be very easily interpreted as methods to control.
Recommendations

Les, acknowledged that teaching for social justice includes high degrees of “unpredictability,” but that it is precisely in the unpredictable moments that “learnings happened with students that I couldn’t have shaped.” Often these are the most powerful and memorable events in students’ lives. Therefore, Les recommends that teachers continue to “learn, stretch yourself,” essentially let go of control. The bottom line is this may be very risky and uncomfortable. It is not surprising then that there may be some reluctance, and teachers may resist, preferring to remain comfortable, in a classroom where content is controlled, predictable, and easily measurable.

Dana and Kate both believe, to acknowledge that to do social justice education, you “must have confidence,” that you have to “know where you are going so you can relax.” Only when we are relaxed are we better able to recognize and respond to students needs in order to be the “catalyst” they require to draw their own conclusions about social justice.

In spite of these challenges however, teachers who consider engaging in social justice education may be encouraged by the insights of our educators. None of the participants mentioned the requirement of expertise and unlimited knowledge of human rights. While Kate emphasized that “it is incumbent on all educators to be informed” about their world, the overall recommendation was that educators who hope to do social justice education, in some way experience and become it. This is why both Dana and Les recommended that “you must, you must travel.” Travel includes experience, human interaction and place. This is absolutely vital, as Dana eloquently concluded, if you want to do social justice education you “must go understand
at a human one to one level, what it is that you want to engender, and if you don’t, you can’t.” I believe she is implying that teachers, who fail to make such a commitment, will ultimately fail to connect with their students.

These experts do social justice education out of a desire that was born from their unique influences, which led the formation of a specific purpose within their careers as educators. Ironically, Dana, had mentioned that she failed, that she “lost the fight,” and that she reeled against the “bad metaphor that she planted seeds.” In her view, with some of her students, she was “growing weeds.” As weak and shallow this metaphor might be, it still resonates some truth, even within Dana’s own life. Her experience, built on previous experiences seemed to have “prepped the soil” a bit. It is ironic that she hesitates to acknowledge this process within her students not willing to acknowledge that even though the experience did not produce her desired result that it may be a part of the students’ personal journey.

To conclude that we cannot influence opposes what these educators attribute as their significant influences. In fact, Dana reveals that in spite of her disappointments she will continue to hold on to the idea and ability to influence. She maintains that one should “never stop being a part of the war against Affluenza,” and believes educators could be a part of creating a “change is inside,” but that part of the desire to teach for social justice is “natural,” and therefore difficult to train or teach.

As Les concluded, “people talk about one’s beliefs that can actually shape ones actions, I think it is often the other way around, one’s actions begin to influence what one thinks,” therefore, part of teacher training should focus on taking teachers through those actions that
might shape their beliefs. Teachers might be encouraged to travel, learn beyond their subject area, examine their beliefs from other perspectives, and perhaps then teaching for social justice might emerge, quietly, unpredictably yet meaningfully.

**Conclusion**

Our educators all share a common purpose, a desire in their own way of making, in Freire’s words, a world that is rounder and more humane. While consumerism is on the rise, the environment on the decline, and humans are still capable of wars and hatred, some might argue that there is little point in attempting to fight for human rights and social justice. Yet, if you cannot change the world, then change the world around you. That is what I believe these educators focus on in their minds. It is through our one on one human relationships and interactions that we move towards a socially just world. Individuals and educators must continue to strive to know ourselves and the other, in order not be anesthetised by an often disconnected world. That is the way of social justice. These individuals through their methods, experience and actions serve as a model of those who can resist and who believe that to become more human means to become more involved in a socially just world.
References


