

Researching a Social Justice Course in a Charter School: A Duoethnographic Conversation

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Abstract

This paper uses a dialogic approach following duoethnography to report on a research study conducted in a charter school offering a locally designed social justice course. This narrative approach involves a critical dialogue between two people, each of whom pushes the other to further insights and understandings. The urban prairie school under study focused on gifted learners and was funded as a public school. Multiple methods of data collection included document and policy analysis, field observations, and open-ended interviews with administrators, teachers and students who were directly involved with the social justice program. The results and discussion focus on student engagement in schools on issues of human rights and social justice, inquiry-based approaches to the curriculum, and include implications for educational policy and practice.

Keywords: alternative school programs; social justice; duoethnography; inquiry learning

Editor's Note: This "article" does not follow the APA format, nor does it resemble a traditional scholarly piece. As stated in the abstract it utilizes "a critical dialogue between two people." As such, the work is presented in the form of a conversation including verbal expressions, contractions, et cetera, that one would expect in a conversation. The two speakers are distinguished from each other in text by different coloured fonts. Darren Lund's voice is in italics and Cheryl Veinotte's voice is in regular font.



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Darren: I want to begin our project by introducing the research we undertook at a charter school last year.¹ We're using an approach to this discussion that emerges from the relatively new duoethnographic methodology; I have recently applied this stance in a project I completed with a colleague on antiracism activism (Lund & Nabavi, 2008), and found it to be a fruitful way of recounting and presenting research results. As you know, duoethnography is a research methodology first developed by Rick Sawyer and Joe Norris (2005) and more recently described and defined (Norris, 2008). It offers an interactive and dialogic form of inquiry that includes two participants in conversation, and considers our own lived experiences as pivotal in questioning traditional notions of academic research. It builds on and complements other conversational and even more poetic forms of inquiry such as recent work by Sean Wiebe and John Guiney Yallop (2010). I appreciate that this method helps keep the focus on the topic of our study, and yet allows for an engaged and personal exploration of issues.

Cheryl: I also like the focused but conversational nature of the approach, and enjoy how it seems to allow for more “messiness” in the reporting of findings, and of the researchers’ impressions of the field and site of study. In many ways, it echoes the approach taken by Mary Gergen and Kip Jones (2008) in a recent editorial “conversation” about creative qualitative methods in the social sciences. I think you should begin by sharing some information about how you located the school and program that was the location for this study.

*Darren: I'm not sure if you remember, but the funding for our research was originally for another high school in a prairie city. However, the social justice program I was going to be studying was suddenly cancelled by that school's administration, so I had to scramble to find another. There aren't very many formal secondary school courses that focus on human rights, diversity, and social justice, so this posed a significant challenge from the outset. When I learned of the program we ended up studying, at the school we're calling Crestview Charter School,² the timing couldn't have been better. To give a bit of detail on this research, we focused on students, teachers, and administrators in this school who were involved with a new unique social justice education course entitled, *The Human Condition*. First developed by educators from Crestview Charter School in 2005 and formally approved in 2006, the course has been offered at the Grade 10, 11 and 12 levels. The curriculum pays attention to the resources that individuals, families, and communities bring to personal and social change and to the transformation of educational institutions.³ I was also pleased that you agreed to be the research assistant on the project, considering your own rich background in school-based activism with students. Perhaps you'd like to begin by talking a bit about your own experiences in this field, and how you were drawn to this research project and this work with students.*

Cheryl: Thanks, Darren. My own background in this field began long before I became an educator. I attended Grade 7 at a junior high school in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, during the 1980s and in a time of racialized turbulence in this area. My own experiences in high school came at the same time Cole Harbour High School was being desegregated. This was a time of significant community tension around racialized issues, and our region's national attention made us infamous. It was from this early age onward that I felt a need to become involved in working towards equity and social justice for all, along the lines of the educational work described by Kevin Kumashiro (2009). When I began teaching 10 years ago, it just seemed natural and “right” for me to incorporate social justice teaching into my everyday instruction, particularly as the

teacher in charge of designing and teaching the student leadership program at my junior high school.

Darren: I remember your sharing this history when you were a student in my “social justice activism” graduate course. You’ll recall that I got into this field in the 1980s as well, as a rookie high school teacher in Red Deer, Alberta. A group of supposedly “unmotivated” and “non-academic” learners took the initiative to form the Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice (STOP) program in my English classroom (Lund, 1998). The development and enduring successes of this group over the next two decades were instrumental in setting a new course for my own career. I learned a great deal about racism, sexism, and homophobia from my collaborative experiences with students, and now I focus on these kinds of initiatives for much of my research and teaching. These students really inspired my understandings of how racism works, and fostered my need to continue my own research and activism on human rights issues. How did your own experiences with teaching for diversity prepare you for this project?

Cheryl: I was a bit uncertain of what to expect in learning that a charter school dedicated to serving only students who had been coded as “gifted learners” would be the site of our research. I honestly did not know much about how the charter system worked prior to this project, having spent my entire education and teaching experiences in more “typical” public school systems. I admittedly was a bit nervous about a school where the entire population is coded as gifted because, generally speaking, I am not one for grouping any set of students all together based on a coding system of any kind. In addition, when we were entering into the research, I felt this type of program would not likely be available in the kind of school that I had been accustomed to teaching in; this was mainly due to the fact that lower socio-economic status (SES) schools generally offer fewer program choices. However, I must admit that I was surprised and pleased with the mixture of the students we observed despite this classification that had landed them at the school.

Darren: I agree, and have always resisted the compelling forces that celebrate and promote the concept of giftedness, even within public school models. My spouse and I rejected an offer to have our children tested for giftedness in their early schooling years, as we didn’t want them pulled from their regular classes for any reason. Our guiding values in education are inclusion and community building, and these exclusive programs appear on the surface to promote the opposite effect. I find myself agreeing with Mara Sapon-Shevin (1994) who characterizes “gifted education” as a divisive force that “identifies certain children as eligible to receive particular kinds of educational experiences, often segregated from their ‘nongifted’ peers. These programs speak to us of unequal educational opportunities, racism, elitism, and exclusion” (p. xix). To some extent, this school does perform this segregating function, and I’m wondering if this struck you as well.

Cheryl: Yes, I absolutely agree. Based on recent literature I’ve read, I also feel that charter schools can easily become home to children of the wealthier classes who tend to be more likely to exercise choice and exit the public school system. I am of the mindset of Michael Apple (2004) who stated that one result of competitive programs can see poorer students and students of colour being left behind in schools with fewer specialty programs (p. 26). I personally found, after working for seven years (at the time of our research) in a very multicultural and lower-SES school, that funding cuts resulted in less staffing, leading to reduced program choice; further, there was often a lack of adequate technology and other resources needed to run specialty programs such as the one we were observing. I remained hesitant going into our research, feeling

that a program of all gifted students, and many of a higher SES, was somewhat oppositional to creating socially just educational experiences where all students would have access to this type of opportunity.

Darren: I found that the charter school location for this research also posed some interesting additional layers of conflict to the project for me. At the outset I had a number of negative assumptions about these schools based on my readings in the literature about them (e.g., Bosetti, 2005). I appreciate innovation in the types of curriculum and programming we offer students, but am also tentative with the ideology that undergirds some current educational reform. Since you brought up Michael Apple (2004), he also warns:

Some of the most powerful messages reforms of this type may send is that not only is the world deeply unfair but also that schools themselves are prime examples of institutions that simply respond to those who already possess economic and cultural capital. (p. 38)

My own research into schooling has also helped shape my own biases in favour of public school funding that doesn't necessarily reflect the mandates of many of our current charter schools. Likewise, my own teaching experience has been exclusively in a diverse public high school, and both of my teenaged children have always attended public schools. Do you remember how your thoughts on schools of choice influenced how you viewed this social justice program when we began?

Cheryl: As I wrote above, I was certainly a bit hesitant toward the charter system as we entered into the project. At the time, I was lucky enough to be teaching a somewhat similar student leadership program where I had incorporated social justice education into my curriculum. However, I was only able to have the program established as a course after several years of running it as extra-curricular, as the direct result of other teachers' willingness to give up elective programs, and through the backing of an exceptional administrator who recognized my passion in this area of curriculum and supported its importance in the classroom. I will admit that going into this project I felt as though charter schools had the advantage of being able to pick up almost any innovative program under the guise of a "celebration of difference," whereas in reality, in many charter school settings the diversity is automatically limited by an already existing higher socio-economic status.

Darren: That point relates to an unsettling critique around the relative privileges of parents who send their children to such schools; again, Apple (2004) reminds us that "charter schools and their equivalents...tend to attract parents who live and work in relatively privileged communities" (p. 27), and perhaps it could be fair to apply this characterization to the school we researched. In my view, these educational choices are additional advantages that are enjoyed and exercised by the already advantaged. I have recently read other research on charter schools that targets the lack of inclusiveness of this model of schooling (Dingerson, Miner, Peterson, & Walters, 2008). However, our research experience at Crestview Charter School opened my eyes to a number of new ways of thinking about program options within public education.

Cheryl: I agree, and I promised myself I would keep an open mind in the interests of getting as much good data as we could about this program. Could you share some of the background on the school to begin?

Darren: The Crestview Charter School has its own board, but is considered a public school and is fully funded—except for student transportation grants—by its provincial ministry of education.

This course is part of an expanded social justice education focus at this urban high school that has a mandate to serve gifted and above-average learners. Our research entailed document and school policy analysis, site observations and one-on-one, in-depth interviews over several months. Our participants included an administrator, two teachers, and seven students, and we applied a modified ethnographic case study approach to data gathering and analysis, following Cresswell (2007). This research collaboration has helped form a kind of partnership between the school system, the Metropolis Project that funded it, and the university. I believe these kinds of research projects can inform teachers, policy, and curriculum developers, as well as advance theoretical understandings of social justice. What stands out most for you in looking back on your initial involvement this particular project?

Cheryl: As mentioned, I was not sure what to expect going into our research project, and I appreciated that we began with document and policy analysis. I will admit that as we entered the school setting I had an initial feeling as though this group of gifted students was receiving a specialty program that most students in a public school setting, certainly those of low-SES, would not likely have the opportunity to take. I immediately noted how small the class size was, the tremendous amount of technology available, and the preparation time allotted to the main teacher in order to plan the curriculum. All of my early observations deemed the project a bit unrealistic considering the environment seemed to be one of privilege.

Our interviews with teachers and administrators certainly revealed some helpful understandings, and as we began to interview the students individually, I was amazed at how they are so connected with global issues, and seemed to have an innate sense of justice. I also felt some sense of pride, knowing that I had been working on many similar topics in my own classroom for years—albeit not under an official title of “social justice.” For example, past projects I’ve helped coordinate include the annual March 21st Stop Racism assemblies, a number of Turn Off the Violence campaigns, as well as Random Acts of Kindness, various Diversity Weeks, and others. Our initiatives were collaborative projects that involved students as leaders in planning and implementing activities. Once we began interviewing students at Crestview, I was immediately impressed by their grasp of underlying issues around social justice and diversity themes, and their leadership at creating ways of engaging their peers in taking positive action. What were some of your first impressions of what was going on in Crestview School?

Darren: I agree that this group of young people seemed quite outstanding, and very knowledgeable and insightful around issues of social justice. Students in the Human Condition course we talked to were studying inequities that people experience on the basis of their social group memberships, and through systems of constraint and advantage reproduced through marginalization, cultural inequities and racism. I thought this was quite robust and ambitious curriculum for high school students to tackle.

Cheryl: Yes, it seemed so thoughtfully designed, with a wide range of issues that could be explored by students. Our several months of intermittent classroom observations and individual student and teacher interviews allowed us to see the course taking shape as students selected areas for further study. As my field notes document, topics covered in the course during this study included anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, genocide in the contexts of Rwanda and Darfur, nutritional needs in developing nations, sexism, nuclear proliferation, international relations, global education and sustainability, and ecological and human rights, among others. They seemed to be tackling a remarkably broad range of topics from around the globe.

Darren: They certainly did, and I also recall that some specific issues explored within social justice topics included such matters as the veracity of published sources, the use of technology, the role of the media, the functions and limitations of government, versions of democracy, youth leadership, and a host of others. These teachers really encouraged students to honor the complexity of the issues and their ongoing broad relevance. The educators left the student research possibilities for further inquiry open, but had certainly drafted a clearly established protocol for formulating questions, hypotheses, learning needs, and research sources and techniques.

Cheryl: Yes, and students were specifically encouraged to take action as a result of their research into specific topics. In addition, the school organized their participation in a number of community events and fund-raisers, school-wide projects, and the school year culminated in an overseas student trip to engage in community development and education in a South American country. With respect to the overseas project, I did again wonder how a student in a lower SES setting would be able to afford to go on such a trip and recognized that this could be a limitation. However, in the time since our project many organizations such as Free the Children are now offering subsidized trips for travel to work overseas on social justice and other children's rights projects. Furthermore, based on my experience, I have also found that often it is the underprivileged who are the most eager to fundraise and contribute to projects that will, in turn, benefit others who are in similar situations.

I also had the pleasure of watching the students present social justice projects in their classes on a wide range of topics from grassroots projects to global issues, and was amazed at the work that had gone into a mainly inquiry-based learning project. A number of the students had plans to continue working on these same initiatives beyond the classroom program. I recently learned that they organized a community-wide youth conference on human rights and equity that was open to students from any school in the region. Although this is an excellent type of forum for addressing human rights issues, again, it may not be as viable an option in a low-SES public school setting. On a positive note, I have been involved in similar conferences in the public system both prior to and after this project and these can be organized within a reasonable budget and with the support of the school board, staff, students, parents and broader community. What did you find most compelling about the student projects?

Darren: As I have outlined in another of the reports being written about this project, it seemed really helpful for the students we interviewed that the teachers employed an inquiry-based approach to student learning. Rather than telling students what they needed to know, the teachers would help the students locate resources in the library, popular media, and online. One student, Alex, described that "sometimes [our teacher] found a website where there were a whole bunch of big-name people... like environmentalists or activists, and they were interviewed for 5 minutes" (D. Lund, personal communication, March 20, 2007). I remember in one lesson we observed, students were invited to watch an online YouTube interview with Noam Chomsky on globalism before working in groups on social justice-themed class projects. The talk seemed to inspire them to undertake further study.

Greg, a 16-year-old, described how that same teacher's lessons incorporated both discussion and time for research:

Half the class we'd just be talking about this new reading that he'd found somewhere and just discussing it in class, and then we'd go off to do our own research which really

helped, because we all got a sense of each other's ideas; [the research] exposed us to ideas other than our own on the same topic. (D. Lund, personal communication, February 28, 2007)

In addition, students really had a great deal of flexibility and guidance in selecting their own specific topics for in-depth exploration through major assignments and activist projects. Cheryl, as a teacher, how vital did you think it was for these students to take ownership and direction of their own learning on these topics?

Cheryl: I think it was extremely important for these students to take the lead in researching this type of material on their own. Social justice issues come from the root of an individual's passion and, therefore, cannot simply be told to the student. Young people often need a starting point to become aware of many of these issues, and once given that impetus, are generally very eager to explore it further. The students in this program continually commented that they respected their teacher for not telling them what opinions to have. Rather, they appreciated that he presented all angles and left it up to them to take charge of their further exploration of the topic, and in deciding their individual stand on their own. These students had trust in their teacher as a direct consequence of his trust in them.

A burning issue I have been wishing to explore since undertaking this research is how a teacher in any regular, more diverse public school setting would go about implementing the teaching style described above. Returning to the issue of the broader range of public schools including lower-SES, this task could prove to be even more daunting for the teacher who yearns to include this type of curriculum, but is extremely limited by a lack of resources, lack of technology, minimal funding, large class sizes, diverse learning needs, limited staffing and tight timetables. All of this is based on my own lived experiences, and I can attest to how difficult it sometimes was to provide the curriculum that I was most passionate about with such a large number of school issues and limitations that presented themselves on a daily basis. Also, I wondered how a university program might foster this approach when teaching pre-service educators in a teacher education program.

Darren: Good questions, Cheryl. I taught for 16 years in a public high school and I think there are all kinds of opportunities allowed by the curriculum to include more inquiry-based learning in the classroom. Certainly, your reminder about the tremendous challenges often faced by teachers in low-SES schools is timely. More broadly speaking, teachers often feel restricted to using more traditional practices that they've seen as students, or that their more seasoned colleagues on staff are using. I don't think it is a simple process to move suddenly from a standard model of giving notes to students and testing them on factual material, but there is definitely room within most school settings to begin this shift from teacher-centered to student-centered. I feel very fortunate that I actually teach in a teacher education program that has made inquiry-based learning a focus for its BEd program for almost a decade now. Collaboratively with colleagues, I have analyzed and written about some of the challenges and rewards of being involved with this student-centered inquiry approach (e.g., Lund, Panayotidis, Towers, & Smits, 2006; Smits, Towers, Panayotitis, & Lund, 2008). We note that there are inevitably ongoing tensions and discussions about how best to enact inquiry in a classroom, but adopting this approach has been exciting and rewarding for me as a teacher educator. I am a bit apprehensive as our faculty is introducing a revamped teacher education program in the coming year, and am hopeful that our focus on inquiry will not be diluted or replaced by more technical and instrumental approaches to teacher education.

Cheryl: I am also sure that I will continue to find meaningful ways to engage students in their learning in active and empowering ways. It only makes sense to excite them about the issues we want them to learn, and to help them become self-motivated to ask questions and find the best sources to answer them. Probably the most exciting aspect of this approach is the additional difficult questions that inevitably emerge from engaging students in such meaningful activities. The project at Crestview has allowed me to think more deeply about how I create lessons, and how I plan to bring the curriculum alive in my own classroom in the future. Do you think that our reservations about the elitist aspect of charter schools, and of gifted programming more broadly, can be overcome somehow within a range of school settings?

Darren: I do, and I recall that the original cited purpose of charter schools was to allow schools to innovate in ways that could later be used to inform education in a broader variety of schools. I'm still left a bit unsettled by the notion of separating students by intellectual ability, and at providing enhanced educational options only to those students whose parents have the resources to take advantage of the choices out there. As Sapon-Shevin (1994) notes:

Gifted education is certainly not the only example of meritocratic, inequitable educational programming within schools, but its tangible, blatant nature can provide us with an entrée into the discussion, a window of opportunity for understanding more pervasive inequities. (p. xxvii)

In many ways, I hope our study can help open up an important, critical conversation on these issues in the months to come.

The fact that this charter school had adopted so purposefully and successfully an inquiry approach really created the ideal conditions for staff and students to embrace it and keep working at improving it in a collective manner. We hear of many new teachers who attempt student-driven research projects in their teaching practice, but then don't receive much ongoing support from their colleagues or administrators with the challenges that arise. My recommendation is for teachers to "sell" the inquiry approach to colleagues and administrators before beginning, and then receive the support that's needed to make it work, just as these teachers received in this particular setting. Educators have a lot of options in designing programs, selecting resources, shaping lessons and interpreting curricula. Like you, Cheryl, my observations and experiences through this project at Crestview Charter School have helped solidify my commitment to an inquiry-based approach to education at all levels. Thanks for your participation in the study, and for your sharing in this discussion.

Cheryl: I know we have additional work to do in interpreting our data from this study and in thinking about the possible implications for other school settings. On another note, I also recognize that the curriculum developed through a charter school can be borrowed and utilized by public boards (with permission), and I believe that the Human Condition Course at Crestview would be an excellent starting point for teachers in the public system who wish to implement this type of educational material into their daily teaching practices. It will be interesting to see if this happens in the near future. Thank you for the opportunity, and for arranging for me to have the last word!

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Endnotes

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²In accordance with the protocol that was approved by our institution's ethics review board, the name of the school has been changed and all student and teacher names are pseudonyms.

³According to the school's documents: The Human Condition courses provide a continuum of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the area of social, economic and environmental factors that influence the Human Condition well beyond the introductory issues outlined in Social 10, 20, 30. The courses will: a) provide an opportunity for students to explore and immerse themselves in meaningful activities within the realm of Human Rights; b) enable students to develop a firm grasp of human rights, protection systems, international law and factors that influence the human condition such the environment, the economy and culture; and c) provide students with an opportunity to become involved in leadership and volunteer activities in areas of human rights and environmental sustainability.