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## **Social Justice Education with Law Enforcement: Reflections from the Field**

**Amie Thurber**

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### **Abstract**

The systemic racism embedded in and embodied by law enforcement has resulted in nationwide protests, sparking a call to action that has particular resonance and urgency for social justice educators. While the need for transformed education of police officers is critical, educators may ask: What pedagogic tools are most effective in police departments? How might educators respond to officers' resistance to learning about inequality? And what obstacles might educators have to overcome in order to do this work? In this case study, I draw from 11 years of experience providing consulting and training to a city police department, sharing key insights designed to further discussion about the essential ethical, pedagogical, and practical considerations. Topics include effective assessment, pedagogical design, negotiating resistance, and building relationships. While the needs of each community and police department are highly contextual, this case study is designed to further dialogue among social justice educators regarding our unique role in the struggle to create a justice system worthy of its name.

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The call for radical transformation of the United States criminal justice system at large—and law enforcement in particular—is shaking the nation. Collective pain, heartbreak, and outrage over persistent dehumanization and racial inequality perpetuated by the criminal justice system was sparked by the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and the subsequent acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who shot the unarmed teen. Outrage came to a head with the August 2014 killing of unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. As the nation awaited results from the grand jury investigation of Darren Wilson, the officer who killed Brown, police violence in Black communities continued. By November 24, when the grand jury decided not to indict Officer Wilson, at least six more unarmed, Black youth were dead at the hands of police, the youngest of which was Tamir Rice (age 12), killed while playing in his neighborhood park with a BB gun (Oppel, 2014). Two weeks later, prosecutors in New York announced that Officer Daniel Pantaleo would not be indicted for the July killing of unarmed Eric Garner, though his death by illegal chokehold was recorded and declared a homicide by a medical examiner (Goodman & Baker, 2014). As the horrific video of Garner's last conscious moments—during which he cried out “I can't breathe” 11 times while 4 officers held him face-down on the sidewalk—went viral, protesters took up the charge “Black Lives Matter,” demanding an end to the *criminal injustice* embedded in a system pledging to protect and serve.

The systemic racism that marks Black and Brown bodies as dangerous, justifies intensified surveillance and heightened policing of the places Black and Brown

people call home, and legitimates disproportionate stops, arrests, charges, sentences, and state-sanctioned murder has been well documented (e.g., Alexander, 2010; Lipsitz, 2011; Waquant, 2008). As legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) meticulously describes in her discussion of “the New Jim Crow,” systemic racism is embedded in laws, policy, protocol, explicit ideology, and implicit bias. The racial inequalities produced by the criminal justice system are thus overdetermined; there is no individual cause and no single fix. It is easy to conclude, in the words of protesters nationwide, that “the whole damn system is guilty as hell” (Lowery, 2014). Indeed, protests have sparked a call to action; an appeal to each of us to act within our spheres of influence to confront pervasive racism and White supremacy embedded within our criminal justice system, and in society at large.

This charge has particular resonance and urgency for those who are social justice educators. Specifically, there is a critical need to transform the preparation of future and current law enforcement officers, including police officers, sheriff's deputies, or highway patrol officers. While social justice educators have much to offer law enforcement agencies, engagement is often stalled by important ethical, pedagogical, and practical questions: What are the political implications of bringing social justice education to law enforcement? What pedagogic tools are most effective in police departments? What strategies will help officers critically examine the ways systemic inequalities and White supremacy are embedded in their communities, institutions, identities, and perspectives? How can educators respond to police resistance to learning about inequality,

particularly in a profession that remains 73% White and 88% male (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015)? And what might educators have to overcome personally in order to do this work? The answers to these questions are highly contextual. Interventions appropriate in communities with a history of more progressive approaches to police accountability will differ from those in places like Ferguson, Cleveland, and New York City that are still reeling from specific incidents that have fractured trust and demand accountability. Strategies effective in urban areas that have greater racial diversity, established racial justice organizations, and existing equity efforts within departments may differ from those in rural and reservation communities, which tend to have fewer community and departmental resources.

Differences in context notwithstanding, social justice educators working with law enforcement are often similarly pressured to facilitate individual and institutional change in a short amount of time. Given that a single training cannot radically transform the culture of law enforcement, social justice educators must concurrently develop short- and long-term strategies, designing the initial encounter to increase the likelihood of being invited back to continue the long-term work of culture change. Building a sustained partnership requires innovating beyond traditional pedagogical methods, as what works in other settings — particularly in higher education — often fails to translate to law enforcement agencies. Unlike college, where students exercise some freedom in choosing their courses, and expect their professors to have more expertise in the field of study than the students, police officers' attendance in workplace trainings is mandatory, and they may (rightfully) presume that few social justice educators have applied

experience in law enforcement. Officers may identify other training needs they believe to be more pressing, deem the content of the session irrelevant, or simply believe that professional outsiders have little to offer to their professional development. Educators working within a police department may be allotted only one session with officers, have no allowance for supplemental material, and find that rigidly didactic teaching methods are the only expected and accepted teaching approach. While best practices in adult education remain the same across settings (e.g., the content should be relevant, engaging, and recognize learners' preexisting competence [Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007]), the differences detailed above inform the pedagogic possibilities in working with police.

In the present paper, I examine a case study of an extended relationship developing and executing a social justice education curriculum in partnership with a single police department. While the practices described here may not be appropriate in all contexts, the findings of this case study contribute to an ongoing dialogue among social justice educators regarding our unique role in advancing more just and equitable law enforcement agencies, and encouraging more focused, engaged, and effective educational practice.

### **Case Study Context**

In a mid-sized college town in the Rocky Mountain West, conflict between police and community members erupted in the early 2000s. Amidst an overwhelmingly White, rural, and conservative state, homophobia and colorblind racism were normalized. Claims of discriminatory police treatment of LGBTQ and Native American people sparked vigils, protest, angry letters

to the editor, and marches demanding police accountability. Protesters called for improved officer training and gave the city police my name as a training resource.<sup>1</sup> The chief of police contacted me, sparking a relationship that unfurled in ways that no one expected. In the 11 years that followed, my colleagues and I conducted a comprehensive needs assessment within the department; helped design and launch an internal Equity Team charged with leading the department's social justice training, policy, and outreach initiatives; and facilitated that team's monthly meetings. In addition, we provided orientation training for new recruits and biannual social justice workshops for all officers in the department. Over time, we built an internal training cadre of five officers who received additional preparation to co-facilitate educational sessions with their peers. The assessment, training, and consulting were designed to comprehensively address issues of equity and justice, with particular attention to systemic inequalities related to race, gender, sexuality, class, age, ability, and nationality. Though I moved away from the region in 2012, my colleagues continue to provide ongoing consulting and training to the department. What follows are key insights drawn from my work with the department over the course of our extended relationship.

## Best Practices

### *Engage in Assessment*

A deep understanding of departmental and community context is requisite to designing effective social justice education for law enforcement. Conducting formal and informal assessments — which may include interviews, focus groups, and surveys with officers and community members — provides essential information about the departmental history, culture, and perceived relationships between law enforcement and the community. First and foremost, assessments help educators determine whether an educational approach is in fact appropriate, or whether other types of interventions (in personnel and/or policy) may be needed in advance of training. While assessments should be tailored to each setting, relevant questions to ask a department may include: Why is training being considered *now*? Is the department responding to a new external policy, community pressure, or is the initiative internally driven? What do officers perceive as their greatest strengths and challenges in serving diverse populations? What have been their experiences with previous training? In what content areas would they like additional training?

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<sup>1</sup> I was recommended based on my reputation as an educator with more than 15 years' experience designing, facilitating, and evaluating social justice educational programs in higher educational, workplace, and community settings. My work has been greatly informed by my association with the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI), a social justice leadership training that provides needs assessments, training, and consulting to correct racial and social injustice, and has developed a comprehensive training program for law enforcement. For more information see [www.ncbi.org](http://www.ncbi.org).

In my experience, officers overwhelmingly perceive themselves to be professional and culturally competent. Some officers do demonstrate critical self-reflection, as evidenced in one officer's observation: "I have made errors in the past because of a lack of familiarity with the customs or beliefs of those I am dealing with." A number of officers identified the need for additional training, particularly in working more effectively with people with mental illness.

However, many officers expressed open hostility to discussion of difference. In response to the question, "What are the department's strengths in working effectively with diverse populations?" one officer responded: "Considering the worthless people who claim race is the reason we arrest them, we do well." Tension between the police and the local minority populations was also evident in answers to a question regarding the challenges faced by the department in working effectively with diverse populations. Some responses included: "Having to bow down to every group. What about White people?" "None, they need to overcome their feelings [that] they're treated differently." "Having large portions of our valuable time and money for training being squandered on repeated cultural sensitivity training because of a few overly sensitive 'squeaky wheels.'" The responses of these officers represent many others who do not think they need social justice education as an essential part of their job training, yet their answers are illustrative of some of the problematic, normative beliefs within this department that may generate inappropriate interactions in the future. Assessment results can be used to customize the curriculum for the department, addressing both the needs officers know they have and the needs that

become apparent to social justice practitioners when analyzing the results.

### *Consider Resistance as Developmental*

As evidenced in the quotes above, the assessment revealed a high level of resistance to learning about systemic oppression, and racism in particular. This resistance exemplifies *acceptance* (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997), a developmental stage in social identity formation characterized by unconscious incompetence regarding social inequality. People operating from this stage do not know what they do not know (e.g., that the salience of race is real for minority populations in a predominantly White community). Instead, they accept the dominant discourse about racism and other forms of oppression, and remain wedded to the myth of meritocracy so firmly embedded in the White imagination (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; DiAngelo, 2012). Most of White America views racism as individual acts that only very bad people engage in, and that are now "post-racial" anomalies (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Dominant ideology does not provide or allow for a systemic analysis of racial inequality. Thus, those operating from a stage of acceptance reject any suggestion that their beliefs and/or behaviors reflect racism (DiAngelo, 2012).

Applying a developmental lens, Hardiman and Jackson (1996) suggest that White people's resistance to learning about racism is not a fixed position, but rather can and does evolve over the life course. However, what is most pedagogically effective to awaken critical self-reflection in someone operating from acceptance is different from what may be effective for someone operating in a later developmental stage, where people are actively wrestling with the status quo. Thus, interventions will

be most effective when developmentally tailored, and those that are not well matched may have deleterious effects. For example, several years before my work began with the police department, officers had participated in a mandatory antiracism training.

According to several officers, the training began with the statement that “all White people are racists,” at which point a group of officers walked out. Those who stayed overwhelmingly rejected the material. While others actively engaged in social justice work may have found the mandated training to be engaging and valuable, it was not developmentally matched to the officers. As a result of that negative experience, many were now *more resistant* to additional training than they may have been otherwise.

Viewing resistance through a social identity development lens both softened and steeled my pedagogical approach. On the one hand, it provided me greater openness to officers’ experiences, helping me to approach officers with compassion—rather than blaming them for their bias, ignorance, anger, or defensiveness—and to think creatively about how to meet them where they are and create learning pathways that may take them somewhere new. As renowned educator Parker Palmer (2010) remind us, the best educators teach from a place of love: love of their subject, love of teaching and learning, and love of their students (Palmer, 2010). Seeing resistance as a developmental trait made it easier to stay rooted in an ethic of love—particularly when officers expressed sentiments that are hard to hear.

On the other hand, my exposure to officer resistance via the assessment process prepared me to anticipate similar sentiments in the training sessions, which inevitably surfaced. For example, in one of my first trainings an officer began his introduction

by saying, “This is a complete [f-in’] waste of time.” I responded, “Thanks for putting that out—I imagine you aren’t the only one who can think of places you’d rather be than here,” and then I moved forward with the material. Framing resistance as developmental allowed me to detach from reacting to this officer in the moment and move forward in a way that kept him (and others that invariably felt the same way) in the room. His resistance wasn’t personal—it wasn’t about me—but it was a big part of why I was there, and keeping people who feel like he did engaged is a fundamental role of social justice educators.

### ***Attend to Positionality***

An educator’s social location—whether perceived by others and/or self-identified—simultaneously facilitates and constrains teaching and learning. For example, I am a White, middle-class, college-educated woman who has never worked in law enforcement. In a department that was over 95% White, my whiteness was a point of commonality with most officers. Drawing unconsciously on assumptions of White solidarity (DiAngelo, 2012), White officers often spoke openly about race and racism with me, allowing many critical conversations to unfold that may not have if they had been more guarded. In contrast, my gender, class, education, and lack of police background marked me as an outsider. At least initially, these identities reduced my perceived credibility and also limited my understanding of officers’ perspectives. Positionality informs pedagogical possibilities. Undoubtedly, I missed opportunities to address instantiations of White dominance that I chose to avoid or simply failed to see. It was also likely there were learning opportunities that officers missed, moments when they were quicker to reject my attempts to disrupt male

dominance than they might have been had those prompts come from a man.

While we cannot change aspects of our identity for a training or course, we can recognize and attend to the enabling and constraining elements of our own positionality. Facilitating in mixed-race, mixed-gender teams is a recognized best practice in social justice education (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). However, in smaller communities or within organizations with limited capacity, this may not always be possible. Given these constraints, I focused on building an internal Equity Team within the department: a multiracial group of men, women, and queer-identified officers of diverse political orientations and seniority. Working together over the course of several years, this team learned with and from one another, deepened their own knowledge of systemic inequality, and ultimately steered the direction of the department's equity and justice efforts. Though group members did not always agree with one another, they had an exceptionally high level of respect for one another and their shared profession, and a mutual commitment to improving relations with the community. They became adept at translating pedagogical practices for their peers, and claimed greater legitimacy within the department than I or other outside social justice educators ever could.

### ***Use the Back Door***

There are moments as an educator when it is appropriate to begin an introductory session by providing an analysis of systemic oppression. Other times—particularly working in settings where the material is new and resistance is high—a back door approach is more developmentally appropriate and effective. I often use an exercise called Frame of Reference (for a full description, see

DiAngelo, 2012). As an introductory activity, Frame of Reference effectively engages participants in beginning the work of identifying and confronting their own biases. The facilitator invites people to identify and explore the different lenses through which they see the world, such as race, travel experience, class, education, gender, sexuality, age, life experiences, and work. At this point in the training few officers would admit to profiling by race; however, this activity often lays the foundation for more difficult conversations. For example, officers readily identify how their work experiences have changed the ways they experience the world, how they scan any room as they enter (on duty or off), or how they sit back-to-wall, facing the door (even on family outings). From there, it is often easy for officers to identify other lenses that impact their daily life. One officer shared how his class background affected his police work, describing growing up in a working-class home with a father who was always coming or going between two jobs. He concluded,

*So yeah, when I'm working traffic and I pull over some guy at seven in the morning with his lunch pail beside him, I'm a lot less likely to write that guy a ticket than I am some lady with a latte in her workout clothes at noon.*

Reflections like these are essential, they create an entry point for educators to suggest that other biases likely consciously and/or unconsciously impact police work. Further, hearing these reflections from one another is much more convincing than hearing it from relative strangers. Activities, such as Frame of Reference, help to build a shared language that can be used to disrupt more divisive concepts, such as the possibility of a colorblind system of justice.



### ***Ground Your Practice in Inquiry***

Once a person is open to seeing inequality around them, the teaching and learning resources are almost endless: There are abundant books, films, speakers, zines, blogs, and news reports that explore the complex causes and consequences of oppression, and provide strategies to achieve individual and institutional change (for a robust collection of resources, see <http://www.tolerance.org/>). Yet until a person is receptive, no content—no matter how well reasoned or researched—will be seen as legitimate. Thus, the most important work of social justice educators can be generating a willingness to consider new perspectives, and inquiry is often our most effective tool to create conditions for learning. When we ask questions about officers' experiences and perspectives on race, class, and difference—and inquire from a place of actually wanting to understand—people are more inclined to answer truthfully. And once these perspectives are spoken aloud, educators have an entry point to help officers critically reexamine their beliefs. Time and again, I have heard law enforcement officers say, "I don't profile race, I profile behavior." One officer explained to me, "Look, if I see a carload of Native American kids speeding down the highway, I'm going to pull them over." When I asked, "Do you think you are more likely to notice a carload of Native kids?" he answered, "Absolutely not." While certainly there is ample research suggesting that he is wrong (see Gladwell, [2005] for an excellent compilation) and that our implicit biases operate in ways we are unconsciously aware of, I left the question open, wondering aloud how we would know whether or not we are more likely to notice some groups over others. The next day he called me to say he'd been thinking a lot about that question. While he was not

prepared to say that he was more likely to notice Native kids, he was no longer comfortable saying he was not. He didn't know the answer. His willingness to *not know* was significant: He had begun to question deeply held truths about himself and his profession. Once the dominant discourse cracks even a little, educators have something against which to leverage. As more officers began to demonstrate this openness, I brought in supplemental readings and speakers. I had them read about implicit bias (Gladwell, 2005), brought in tribal elders to talk about the history of colonialization in the area, and encouraged officers to attend trainings and community events to deepen their knowledge and understanding about issues related to history, context, power, and police work in society. Again, once any of us are open to new information, the resources for teaching and learning are abundant.

### ***Check for Usefulness and Relevance***

In order for social justice educators to build long-term relationships with police departments, they must offer materials that are useful and relevant. That means prioritizing resources that officers themselves have identified needing. In my initial assessment, a quarter of the department requested additional training regarding working with people experiencing mental health crises. A significant number also asked for training related to interacting respectfully and professionally with transgender people. In particular, several officers shared that they didn't know how to respond appropriately when someone's gender presentation didn't match the sex listed on their license. Officers greatly appreciated training in these areas, and found simple tips such as asking the question, "What pronoun do you prefer?" to be immediately helpful in their interactions.

By bringing in training and resources that officers valued, I built the credibility necessary to address more controversial content, particularly around racism.

While many officers complained about people “pulling the race card,” few thought they needed training related to race, racism, or working more effectively across race lines. Yet when officers stop people of color for ticketable offenses and are told, “You’re only messing with me because I’m Indian,” they acknowledge bristling at the suggestion that they were being racist. Further, they recognized that when their tone reflected defensiveness, the chance at establishing productive rapport diminished. Given this, my goals were twofold: first, to help them understand the realities of racial profiling, and second, to improve their communication with people of color. I suggested that officers respond to accusations of profiling with the statement, “I’m sorry if that’s happened to you in the past,” and then explain the reason for the stop. I heard from officers who went directly from the workshop to their shift and used that simple sentence in response to claims of profiling and immediately experienced a positive difference in their interactions with people of color. Improving officers’ communication does not address problems of heightened surveillance within communities of color, but it can play a significant role in preventing unnecessary escalations that lead to additional citations, avoidable arrests, and excessive use of force.

Meeting the test of relevance requires educators to work within the structure of the department. While most departments invest significant resources in training, it can be difficult to institutionalize and embed continued education throughout the year, given that police work is not a desk job. When I learned that the department used

five-minute briefings as refresher trainings, I initially scoffed at the idea: What can substantively be done in five minutes? The Equity Team convinced me otherwise. For several months the team had been sharing anecdotes from the street—everyday examples of successes and challenges interacting across cultural lines. For example, one officer shared how poor officer communication had dangerously escalated from what began as a simple welfare check at a homeless camp. Another shared a success addressing the concerns of a transgender woman experiencing acute anxiety about the treatment she might receive from officers. The team decided to turn these anecdotes into five-minute briefing sessions, providing a short description of the scenario, followed by a few key questions to prompt micro-dialogue around core competencies in law enforcement. These briefings helped to create a learning culture within the department and normalize critical reflection. All members of the department can gain insight from hearing what fellow officers have done well and what could have been done better. For many reasons—not the least of which is the litigious nature of law enforcement—police departments rarely admit fault publicly. Thus, even small steps in cultivating reflexive practice represent an important shift in organizational culture. Acknowledging shortcomings is not what makes agencies vulnerable to protests and lawsuits—it is failing to address them.

### *Balance Humility and Authority*

When I was new to the department, many officers expected I was going to tell them what they were doing wrong and how to do their job better. The truth is I knew—and still know—very little about the demands of their profession. To educate myself about their work, I went on several

ride-alongs, participated in the citizen's academy offered by the police department, and attended the diversity training unit at the state-run police academy. These activities provided valuable insight into officers' actual day-to-day experiences, and demonstrated my willingness to learn about the policies and politics that inform law enforcement practice. My humility was integral to building a foundation for teaching and learning. I began trainings by asking officers to share their name, how many years they had been with the department, and one thing civilians do not understand about law enforcement. While simple, this introductory activity positioned them as having something to teach, and allowed me to demonstrate a willingness to learn. Humility and authority are not mutually exclusive.

In spite of the overt racism expressed by some officers in the assessment, every police officer I worked with understood that law enforcement requires community engagement. Police departments have detailed field-training guides delineating hundreds of core competencies officers are expected to demonstrate, many of which relate to communication and rapport building. For example, the police officers I worked with were expected to be able to identify how prejudicial beliefs may affect the provision of service and have the ability to build trust across group lines. It undoubtedly represents progress that many departments have codified these competencies, yet the capacity to help officers develop these skills is still limited, and very few police departments have systems of accountability for officers who fail to put these principles into practice.

In my experience, while officers know they cannot serve and protect if people do not call them, will not talk to them, and distrust them, they do not always understand

the root causes of these damaged relationships. This is where social justice educators have particular expertise that can be leveraged by the police. Through specifically tailored education initiatives, we can offer concrete strategies designed to build relationships and rapport with populations that may not believe that law enforcement has their best interests at heart. Social justice trainings can provide a curriculum that encourages officers to critically unpack their own biases, beliefs, and experiences, while providing opportunities to learn about others' history, context, and experiences. However, social justice education is but one critical component of the changes needed to dismantle unfair policing (for a comprehensive review, see *Building Momentum from the Ground Up: A Toolkit for Promoting Justice in Policing*). Ultimately, it is a department's sustained actions—as manifested in policy, protocol, and everyday conduct—that have the most potential to build trust. Social justice educators can play a key role in building a department's capacity for just action.

### ***Build Authentic Relationships***

In the long run, the quality of the personal relationship between the social justice educator and the police department is irrelevant—far more important is the quality of relationships between concerned community members and law enforcement. Yet, to be an agent of change toward more responsive and accountable relationships between the police and the community, educators must also engage in relationship building. We cannot expect participants to take us or our expertise seriously, or to consider different perspectives, if we cannot do the same in return. As such, I was intentional about building relationships throughout my extended relationship with

the police department, meeting regularly with the chief to update him on the progress of the Equity Team as well as individually with members of the team. Yet many of the most significant moments of connection emerged spontaneously.

A turning point in my work with the department occurred in a meeting with a patrol captain. I had known him for several months, and on this day he seemed particularly ragged. His shoulders were slumped, his head low, and exhaustion was written across his face. At the end of the meeting I stood and said, “You look like you could use a hug,” and I wrapped my arms around his uniformed body. I didn’t give it a second thought, but the next day I received an email saying how much that hug meant to him. While demonstrating physical warmth and compassion is commonplace in many of my work environments, I learned that this kind of a caring presence doesn’t show up very often in a paramilitary organization. Yet the moment of humanity mattered to him and it shifted our relationship. From then on, I was viewed less as a consultant the department *should* access and more as someone who actually helped things go better. I demonstrated that I was willing to partner with police rather than persecute, to challenge rather than condemn. And when I offered critical feedback, they took my concerns seriously. Many of my recommendations related to changing the quality of relationships officers have with one another, as well as transforming relationships between the department and the communities they serve.

**Building relationships among one another.** Solidarity among law enforcement is legendary. At its best, this solidarity manifests as an international network of brother- and sisterhood, supporting officers and their families through a sometimes

dangerous and often thankless career. At its worst, solidarity manifests as a blue wall of silence that condones, protects, and at times promotes officer misconduct, corruption, and brutality. While officers had existing relationships with one another, part of our work was to change the quality of those relationships. The Equity Team expanded the notion of “backing each other up” to include challenging one another to critically reevaluate officer behavior in the field and having open discussion about the experiences of officers who are women, LGBTQ, and People of Color. These discussions can be difficult to facilitate within many workplaces, as they reveal deeply embedded ideologies that are difficult to recognize or admit to, much less disrupt. Social justice educators often open up heated conversations that expose points of contention that cannot be immediately bridged. Members of the team did not always agree about the degree to which gender bias was operating in the department, or whether a particular stop was motivated by racial profiling. In these moments, I claimed success — however partial — in that the conversation was happening at all. Yet other times facilitating difficult discussions can produce real-time shifts.

I was best able to observe the changing the quality of officers’ relationships with one another within the Equity Team, as we met monthly over a period of years. When one member of the team was adopting a child, I brought him the children’s book “And Tango Makes Three” (Richardson & Parnell, 2012). Sitting in a circle with ten officers in full uniform, their guns and Tasers awkwardly pinched in chairs not designed for duty belts, I read the story aloud. Holding the book outward-facing so they could all see the pictures, I recounted the true story of Roy and Silo, gay penguins at the Central Park Zoo, and their journey to

raise a penguin chick (years later, I cannot recall this scene without smiling). At the end of the story there was a long moment of awkward silence, and then one officer said, “Jeez, I wish I would have had a story like that when I was a kid—that would have helped me understand a lot.” We went on to have a sweet, unexpected, and not totally comfortable conversation about boys, men, and homophobia that they had never before had with one another. Over the course of years of planned curriculum and spontaneous conversations, this team slowly changed the norms of what was talked about, and how, within the department. Building new types of relationships internally provided a practice ground for officers to have uncomfortable conversations with one another, a first step to engaging more openly and honestly with the community.

**Building relationships with the community.** As history has made painfully clear, there are many cases where a community’s trust toward law enforcement has been damaged—if it ever existed at all. Repairing these relationships requires sustained, ongoing efforts on the part of law enforcement to understand and address community concerns. An educator cannot do this relationship building and accountability work for the department, but we can provide guidance. We can caution departments away from token gestures, suggest key community members for officers to sit down with, provide information about events for officers to attend, and foster open discussion about community conditions and their import for police work. For example, when I asked White officers to think about their contact with People of Color outside of work, most often they had none. I encouraged them to consider how their views of People of Color, and particularly the Native Americans in our community,

were constrained by only interacting with Native people as suspects, victims, and perpetrators, and what they might need to do to widen their lens. As a result, the department made an increased investment in outreach, sending officers to participate in community events and visit local organizations. Officers began setting up recruitment tables at the tribal college, participating in tribal-led conferences, and attending local pow-wows. Unsurprisingly, they reported that these experiences expanded their knowledge of the diverse communities they serve and sometimes helped them confront stereotypes they were not aware of carrying.

When appropriate, social justice educators can also facilitate opportunities for authentic dialogue across group lines. In response to requests from the local LGBTQ community, I convened an open forum with two officers at the local queer community center. For one officer, it was his first time in a room of out LGBTQ people. While he wanted to be present, his discomfort was literally written on his face, which remained scarlet for nearly two hours. At one point, he addressed the attendees, saying, “It’s an uncomfortable feeling I have when I’m in an environment I don’t know much about. I don’t want to offend you—how do I refer to you? How do I communicate?” Community members appreciated his honesty and expressed compassion, while still asking for greater accountability. As one attendee remarked, “I learned a tremendous amount about what your limitations are . . . it’s not always about the police department personally. I still want to know how we can address homophobia within the department.” These sorts of exchanges can be mutually beneficial, as officers and community members gain greater understanding of one another’s experience. They are also foundational to the department committing

to sustained, targeted community outreach and greater responsiveness to community concerns.

Ultimately, this police department aimed to be representative of and responsive to the diverse populations they serve. While changes in policies and protocol are essential to this goal, on their own these are insufficient. So called “race-neutral” polices can be—and are—deployed to produce racist results (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2012). Operational changes matter little if they are not seen and felt in the everyday lived experiences of officers and community members. Because of this, transforming relationships lies at the heart of social justice education. As Michelle Alexander (2010) concludes, “there must be a change within the culture of law enforcement. . . . Law enforcement must adopt a compassionate, humane approach . . . a method of engagement that promotes trust, healing, and genuine partnership” (p. 233). While social justice education involves cognition—changing the ways officers think—a great deal of the work involves affective and embodied dimensions of learning—changing the ways officers *feel* toward and *interact* with one another and their community.

## Conclusion

Over 11 years I witnessed notable changes to the culture, demographics, policies, and protocols of the police department that occurred in direct response to ongoing efforts to integrate social justice initiatives into the essential training and practices of the officers. Officers became more reflexive, more willing to ask questions of themselves and one another, and less resistant to examining their own biases. The agency significantly increased the number of women they recruited,

retained and advanced, and the number of officers of Color has also increased, though more slowly. They created and staffed an LGBTQ Liaison position, and as a result of sustained engagement with the Native and LGBTQ communities, the lines of communication are more open today than ever before. The department improved the complaint process—creating an online option so that community members did not have to go in person to the department to file a complaint—and implemented a new mechanism for anonymous or confidential reporting of bias-motivated crimes. In combination, these changes are a testament to possibility: Social justice educators *can* play a key role in shifting individual attitudes and organizational practices within law enforcement.

However, I am cautious not to overstate success. Social justice educators who occupy different social locations may well question the conclusions I have reached, and I recognize that my analysis of the strengths and limitations of these strategies is necessarily limited. Moreover, one can easily critique this case study: *This isn't good enough. I'm glad you made friends with the cops, but they are still killing our children.* I agree—the processes recounted here within are not, on their own, good enough. Oppression, in all forms, is systemic and pervasive (DiAngelo, 2012). Without a doubt, racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia continue to manifest in and through this department—just as it does in every police department and in institutional settings across the country. Pedagogic interventions cannot serve as a substitution for widespread judicial and legal reform and a commitment to holding the state accountable for misuse of force, both of which are requisite to any meaningful and sustainable equity in the criminal justice system. While we collectively advocate and

agitate toward that goal, social justice educators have to answer the questions: Where are we positioned to make the most change? As people equipped with the tools of teaching and learning, how can we help a damaging system be a little less harmful? Our time is finite. In this case, I chose to

leverage my resources as a social justice educator and to recognize these as important and incomplete contributions within a larger struggle. I offer these reflections in the spirit of continued learning and with the hope and commitment that together we will create a justice system worthy of its name.

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