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ARTICLE

Keeping the Passion Alive: The Realities of Social Justice

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Students and Teachers for Social Justice

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In the following essay, a college student in a teacher education program discusses some of the realities in working for social justice as a future teacher. She shares her experiences both in her academic program, and in forming a student action group following a discussion and book seminar with author Jonathan Kozol.

Teachers change lives. This is one of the reasons I chose to become one. Another reason I chose the teaching profession was due to my phenomenal experience in high school as a peer tutor in a life skills setting. Witnessing the growth of students through the course of a year and the changes their teacher made in their lives also changed mine and directly influenced my career aspirations. After this life-changing experience, I applied to Western Washington University due to their highly esteemed teacher preparation program and was admitted, thus beginning my professional development in the field of special education.

One of the first quarters in my major, I took a course in educational foundations with a heavy emphasis on topics related to social justice. This is where I first learned about the distinguished author and educator Jonathan Kozol and his work in inner city schools. Always passionate about improving the lives of children, I became enthralled with Kozol's work and the topic of social justice. Needless to say, I was extremely excited to see him lecture to a packed audience and to attend a small group seminar about his most recent book *The Shame of The Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, when he visited Western in September of 2005.

During the small group seminar, another student in the field of education explained that she felt passionate about issues of social justice, but didn't know what to do with that passion and felt very alone. Upon hearing this, I raised my hand and told her she wasn't alone. I also decided, on the spot, to begin a club dedicated to social justice in education – this was the birth of Students and Teachers for Social Justice (STSJ).

STSJ became an official Associated Students Club, and the first meeting was filled with about 30 students and faculty. People were very excited about the idea of a social justice club, and we all began brainstorming. We drafted a mission statement that included expanding awareness of economic and social inequities, fostering community outreach programs, and exploring options to facilitate social change. We discussed ways in which we would expand awareness of these issues including curriculum development, involving teachers in the community, multicultural book drives, writing to promote social activism, meeting to discuss social justice topics, and collaborating with others to advocate for social justice in education. We also set up an STSJ email account and began an email list to keep people informed on happenings within the club. As STSJ continued to meet and brainstorm, we began planning a book drive, talked about events and groups we could link to in the university community and we held a very successful discussion on the topic of holidays in public schools. Shortly into the life of STSJ, however, the passion seemed to fade as meeting attendance dwindled. Where were the faculty and students from that first meeting? Weren't they getting the email reminders for the meetings? It was very disheartening for me to see this change, but not very surprising.

Why was this not a surprise to me? Let me explain. It was not a shock because this change parallels what I experienced as I continued through my teacher preparation program. At the beginning of the

program, in educational foundations, I learned about and became captivated by social justice. As I continued through the program, however, I saw the social justice aspects of teaching fade into the background as measurable items to be squeezed into lesson plans. Where did the passion for social justice go? It was present as an **educational foundation** and then disappeared, leaving Individualized Education Plans, lesson plan formats, and slight murmuring of diversity. It seemed to me that social justice was important to teacher preparation programs, and that students and faculty had a passion for it, but that professors had a hard time figuring out what **to do** with it.

This is also what I found with STSJ. The club began with passion and faded into questions like: What can we actually do? How can we turn our passion into change? Do we really have time for this on top of everything else? Questions like these arise in my mind as I ponder social justice and shed light on one of the realities I found out about the topic: people have passion for social justice but have a hard time turning that passion into action. I found this to be true in various situations from weaving it throughout a teacher preparation program to figuring out how to use a book drive to illustrate the concept.

As I said earlier, teachers change lives. They advocate for children and have the capacity to truly work toward social change. Isn't the best place to begin this in our schools? Absolutely! However, a disconnect remains between the passion for social justice and ways to turn that passion into enduring action. Whether it's a club dedicated to the topic, the presence of social justice **throughout** the teacher preparation curriculum, or working toward social change as a teacher while knee-deep in paperwork, it falls to educators to find ways to keep the passion for social justice alive through enduring and meaningful action. One way I suggest keeping this passion alive is to actively contribute to the social justice conversation in your school and surrounding community...and if that conversation is not already happening, don't be afraid to start it!