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BECOMING: ONE TEACHER'S JOURNEY INTO SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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The Faculty of the Graduate Division of
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The Thesis of Elizabeth Fyffe, in the Master of Arts Program in Social and Cultural Foundations at DePaul University's College of Education, is hereby approved.



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Abstract

This autoethnographic study examines how a first year teacher, self-identifying as a social justice educator, comes to understand the lived experience of becoming a professional. The purpose of the study was to explore the unique challenges, perspectives, and philosophical contradictions that present themselves in the daily life of a social justice educator in a public elementary school setting. Through self-reflective journaling five becomings were revealed to be intertwined in the process of developing as a social justice educator: becoming a classroom manager, becoming a content specialist, becoming an implementation virtuoso, becoming an assessment architect, and becoming a balanced educator. It was clear through this research that becoming a teacher is a process and a journey, and becoming a social justice teacher added yet another dimension of reflection and perspective.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Ever since I can remember I have dreamed of becoming a teacher. I remember taking extra worksheets home from school at the end of the year and coaxing my younger brother into being my pupil all summer. I remember attempting to teach sequentially and developmentally appropriate topics, as well as topics that were light years ahead of what my younger brother had as a foundation from which to build. I inevitably taught with dedication, vigor, and a teacher voice that wouldn't stop. However, fast-forward several years to my freshman year in college and teaching had somehow been removed from my list of options. I now thought I dreamed of being a doctor, a psychologist, an anthropologist, or nutritionist. But no longer did I talk about becoming a teacher. As I now look back and think about the decisions I was making at that time and what I thought about who I wanted to be, those decisions were still tied into teaching people something - doctors teach people how to be healthy, psychologists teach people to take care of their mental health, anthropologists research and teach about cultures around the world, and nutritionists teach people to take care of their bodies. So why was just plain old teaching not on the list? Unfortunately, looking back I thought an education major and the impending profession as not challenging enough, not rigorous work, not something that demanded the mental energy I wanted to be using daily for the foreseeable future. Teaching was off the table because it appeared too easy. Boy, was I wrong.

Instead, inspired by a high school psychology teacher, I began my freshman year at Indiana University with course work in psychology. My interest in the study of people eventually lead me to a social psychology course. I was hooked. My growing interest in studying theory and how people interact as groups eventually lead to further study of sociology in general. A short four years later I received a double major in these two, sometimes

contrasting, social sciences and walked away having studied in Spain for a semester and earning a minor in Spanish. I was ready for the world. But what was I going to actually do?

I moved to Chicago with big dreams and found that an undergraduate degree in psychology and sociology would land me working in sales, an office, or Starbucks at best. When was I going to get to work with people, not just papers, phones, and computers? I joined AmeriCorps after a year of unsatisfying jobs and used the year long service opportunity to reflect on where I was headed. Graduate school was the next logical step and I had a year to figure out what to study, where to go, and how to pay for it all. I began thinking that maybe I could merge my passion for teaching and my background in psychology and study school psychology. I began meeting with universities in the city to determine if that was truly the direction I wanted to go. After meeting with numerous admission directors I realized that school psychology was not the career I thought it would be. Administering tests, observing students, and helping to write IEPs was not working with students directly. It wasn't enough for me. I began to realize that all the years of summer camp jobs, baby-sitting, and nannying were enjoyable because I loved working with kids. Maybe this being a teacher thing would be something worth looking into.

One serendipitous meeting later I was sold on a graduate program at DePaul University. The Masters in Social and Cultural Foundations in Education (SCFE) would be rigorous, saturated in theory studies, and of course challenging. It would give me a strong foundation from which to approach the realm of education and I could certify to teach at the same time. That fall I enrolled and began my journey to *becoming* a teacher.

Graduate school was everything I had hoped it would be. My background and love of sociology made the study of what is education, for what purpose are we educating, in what ways are we educating, who are we educating, and what future will be because of education, the

perfect foundation to becoming a teacher. Teaching was rigorous work, it was intellectually challenging, and it was working with students in a reciprocal and caring manner. I signed up to certify to teach with a new found intention. I would incorporate the social justice philosophies of my graduate program into my practice of teaching. My goals as a teacher would be born from the theories I had studied. I would take what I knew about being a transformative educator and work to open students' eyes to the injustices in the world. I would help support the growth of their abilities to tackle these challenges head on and with an empowered voice. I would be working beside the future world leaders and change makers. I dreamed of becoming a piece of a more just and transparent world built from education that was just on the horizon. I had the title of what I was going to become, a social justice educator. I was on my way.

But I hadn't stepped into an elementary classroom since I was there as a student. Would I enjoy the setting? Is it what I imagine in my head? I was nervous when one of my classes required observing in a public school classroom. I found an observation site, anxious for validation that my decision to take this path was correct. I remember walking into the school, very different from the schools I remembered from my childhood, and quietly entering a third grade classroom on the second floor of a building over 100 years old. I sat quietly at the small table at the back of the room and watched. I didn't know what I was looking for. I didn't know what I should be taking notes on, so I just watched. Two hours later, I quietly thanked the classroom teacher and left the building. I almost cried from excitement. I was hooked. This was it. This was the career I wanted. This is how I wanted to spend my time. I don't remember much of what those third graders were learning that day. I don't know if I was watching math, reading, science, or what, but I know that the feeling of the room, the process unfolding, the relationships forming, were what I wanted to be a part of.

I dove even further into both my practical and theoretical graduate studies. I continued to engage with educational texts that discussed democratic education (Dewey), critical pedagogy (Freire), multicultural education, transformative education, and liberatory education. I knew that these theories about learning, teaching, and creating the world in which we want to live were influencing the way I wanted to teach. The more I read about creating possibilities for the future with my students, the faster I wanted to make it into the classroom. But then I realized that I had no practical view or personal experience of how this praxis would take place in an elementary setting. It was clear that these beliefs and theories would influence my actions in the classroom, but I wasn't sure what it should look like. Ironically, or maybe not at all, that is exactly the way that social justice education, as I will call this all-encompassing umbrella of theories and thoughts about teaching and learning, has to be. Social justice education cannot be prescribed. Social justice education must take place within a particular context, with unique participants, and be directed by the specific interests, needs, and inquiries of those involved. I was scared and nervous as a new teacher, to begin teaching without a concrete plan of where I was headed. All I knew at the start of the whirlwind experience were the big goals that I had for my students. What did I hope for them from our experiences together?

- I hoped they would think critically, consider multiple perspectives, and question themselves, one another, me, and the world.
- I hoped my students would recognize that they had a voice and their voice meant something.
- I hoped that my students would be informed about the world they live in.
- I hoped they would be empathetic.
- I hoped they would feel empowered and could see that they had power and could direct it

in a manner that would make the world more just.

- I hoped they would learn their personal strengths and weaknesses and how that would influence their learning, futures, and goals.
- I hoped they would become collaborators, become more than individuals in a class but a cohort of students working together to come to understandings.
- Most of all I hoped my students would learn more fully how and why they were engaging in the process of learning at all, how their present lives and experiences would slowly influence their futures.

How would this look in a classroom and with whom would I be engaging in this journey was yet to be seen. But, two years of courses, hundreds of observation hours, ten weeks of student teaching, and an anxious summer later I was offered a job at the very school where I had had my first observation. I started my first year of teaching as a special education paraprofessional at Naturescape Elementary School. I was an assistant for three students in the building, and my view of education, the classroom, and teaching would again be altered forever. I spent five months in this role when an abrupt departure in the building opened a teaching position that became my first job with a title of teacher. Of course like most things on my path to becoming a teacher, this position would not be cut and dry. I undertook a hybrid position as I called it, teaching pre-k to 1st grade Spanish, 5th to 8th grade world cultures, and 1st grade math, all the while pushing into 2nd and 3rd grade classrooms once a week to support ESL and Special Education students. My plate was full, the curriculum for Spanish and World Cultures was nonexistent, and there were only 18 weeks of school left on the books. The race to figure teaching out had truly begun. How was I going to become a teacher and stay true to my philosophies of education when I didn't know what either truly looked like? This thesis is a

reflection on my process of creating praxis, how I attempted to make my educational philosophy of social justice come to life. It is a reflection on how I was to become a social justice educator.

Along the way that first year, I realized a lot. First and foremost, I would never stop becoming a teacher. It was always going to be a process where there was no end. I would never wake up one day, have it all figured out, and **be**. Teaching, specifically social justice teaching, was in and of itself a process of becoming. In that short year at Naturescape Elementary School I noticed that there were five pieces to this process of becoming that I encountered daily: becoming a classroom manager, becoming a content specialist, becoming an implementation virtuoso, becoming an assessment architect, and becoming a balanced educator. And for me, all of these becomings were riddled with contradictions to my social justice philosophies. I had to learn to navigate in the reality of our education system and practice what I preached.

Everyday I was challenged by one, if not all of these becomings. Management, content, implementation, assessment, and life balance all intertwined, became entangled, and had to be considered, reflected upon, and altered to meet my students' needs everyday. Clearly I will not pretend to have the answers of how to approach these five pieces of becoming a social justice teacher. I write this paper simply and honestly, only to shed light on the problems I encountered, the philosophical challenges I felt, and the actions I choose to take in order to stay on course of always becoming a teacher who was more, better, and socially just.

So take this piece of work knowing that it is written by someone with a passion for *becoming*, the process it entails, and with the realization that it is continuous. This first year is simply that, the first year. A lot of the literature out there about the first year of teaching focuses on the students, because, let's be honest, teaching is truly all about them. But it starts with all the background noise of who we are, who we want to be, and why we teach. And that can get lost. I

want to take this opportunity to talk about us, the teachers, and how at the end of the day we have to go home and feel good about what we are doing or there is no way we will continue on our journey of becoming.

Chapter II: Review of Existing Literature

As I write this piece, we are approaching teacher contract negotiations in the city in which I work, as well as a presidential election this fall, education is as usual a hot button issue both locally and nationally. The school day and year may be extended and teachers may strike in the school district where I work. Discussions surrounding No Child Left Behind and the accountability climate of high-stakes testing are beginning to take national stage. It comes as no surprise then when I write that education is inherently political.

Yet, education is not only a political *issue* discussed and decided on by mayors, senators, and presidents; as a social justice educator, I “embrace the political nature of education that is situated in the cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions of the time” (Picower, 2011-a, pp. 8-9). This is a critically important deviation from the “notion that teaching itself is a neutral enterprise (Picower, 2011-a, pp. 8-9). How this deviation in belief intertwines with my development as a practicing teacher who works in the current public education climate of a large urban city is the basis for this thesis. Therefore, there are three facets of current literature that I find integral to contextualize here in order to provide a foundation from which to analyze my experiences: the current climate of education, social justice education, and teacher development.

Current Education Climate

Education in the city in which I work, and more broadly the U.S., finds itself functioning in a neoliberal context. “Neoliberalism is an ideology and set of policies that privilege market strategies over public institutions to redress social issues” (Picower, 2011-b, p. 1106).

Neoliberalism also “uses the ideology of individual choice to promote the idea of a meritocracy ‘that presumes an even playing field’ (Kumashiro, p. 37)” (Picower, 2011-b, p. 1106). Picower (2011-b) continues,

By focusing on the rights and responsibilities of individuals, neoliberal policies have resulted in increasing accountability systems that place blame and punishment on individual students and teachers rather than on the inequitable school systems that have inadequately served them. Rather than improving quality of education, this vicious circle creates school climates characterized by compliance, conformity, and fear. (p. 1106)

The lack of strong urban education, and more specifically, strong education of minority children, is being touted as the current cause of deprivation for the denied access to society in an equal and fair manner, since the “playing field” is seen as otherwise equal. This ideology has led to many cities across the country, to take mayoral control of the public schools, effectively eliminating the public’s voice and vote in the leadership and school board appointments (Katsarou, Picower, Stovall, 2010, p. 140). In Chicago, “benchmark high-stakes testing, mandated curriculum for low-performing schools, and massive school closings” as well as “centralized decision-making power when it comes to the allocation of funds to implement policy” has led to many classrooms in which teachers have little control or say in what and how they are teaching (Katsarou, Picower, Stovall, 2010, p. 140). The neoliberal ideology is effectively turning the pursuit of knowledge into a pursuit of a specific, mandated, set of ideas removed from utility and context.

It is this state in which Paulo Freire writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “education is suffering from narration sickness. The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable. Or else he expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students. His task is to ‘fill’ the students with the contents of his narration” (2000, p. 71). Freire (2000) continues:

Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. This is the “banking” concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits (p. 72).

It is believed that with this “knowledge” the students’ test scores will increase and will “serve as a remedy for their incorrigible difference and resultant deprivation and therefore is considered indispensable for promoting their educational and social inclusion” (Kyung Eun, 2011, pp. 100-101). And when the test scores fail to increase, it can only be the fault of the teachers in depositing the knowledge, or the fault of the students in recalling and learning the prescribed knowledge. It is not the system of education, the top-down control, nor the decontextualized nature of the mandated curriculum that is the problem, because these all function for those of whom have had power and inclusion historically. It is the ideology of individual achievement which masks the reality that “[t]he resources with which a person starts, the opportunities open to the person, the circumstances in which the person lives, and the way others react to the person all depend to a significant extent on the groups of which that person is a member” (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, pp. 188 - 189). In an otherwise “even” playing field the teachers and students are the only variables on which to lay the blame.

In this state of the current education system, “teachers are being handcuffed by mandates that are often in conflict with their own desires to work for more just societal conditions for their students” (Picower, 2011-b, p. 1106). Belief that the current way of doing things is not in the best interest of students nor the future of our country, many teachers are seeking alternative

ideologies and philosophies in which to ground their work and action in the world. Social justice education, although not a new concept, has inspired a rich tradition of teachers who approach education” from a very different perspective (Picower, 2011-a, pp. 8-9).

Social Justice Education

Historically the term social justice has been attached to many social issues in reference to actions taking place to alleviate the oppression against groups and individuals in society. The roots of the term are seeped in ideas of fairness, equity, empowerment, and anti-oppression. Yet, a multi-disciplinary use of the term has splintered it’s meaning and made it difficult to pin down one singular definition of social justice.¹ When utilized in the context of education, the social justice orientation continues to hold multiple meanings born from multiple stakeholder perspectives. In *Understanding Education for Social Justice*, Hytten and Bettez (2011), highlight this fracturing:

There are multiple discourses that educators draw upon when claiming a social justice orientation. These include democratic education, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, poststructuralism, feminism, queer theory, anti-oppressive education, cultural studies, postcolonialism, globalization, and critical race theory. While often these are overlapping and interconnected discourses, this is not always the case, and the strength that might come from dialogue across seemingly shared visions can be compromised. Thus it seems useful to tease out more clearly what we mean when we claim a social justice orientation, especially so that we can find places where the beliefs, theories and tools we do share can be

¹ I believe this is both necessary as well as problematic. Social justice should hold multiple meanings, as it is a concept that is undertaken when oppression is experienced and oppression is experienced in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives. Yet, the splintering of what it means can water down the meaning and create the opportunity for groups to misappropriate the concept when it benefits them.

brought to bear on a more powerful, and, ultimately, more influential vision of education for social justice. (p. 8).

In order to tease out more clearly the meaning I ascribe to the term social justice education, I must take a step back out of the classroom and into the theory that was my catalyst for becoming an educator in the first place. I must reference the many theorists and practitioners from which I build this thesis' "working" definition of social justice education in order to ground the principles that guide my work. I say "working" definition because I believe that coming to understand social justice education is a process that has no end or destination. I am in the midst of coming to understand. And on a daily basis I continue to refine and deepen the meaning of what I attempt to be a part of in my classroom. Katsarou, Picower, and Stovall (2010), also argue for the importance of a "working" definition of the term explaining that this "means that it is open to interpretation and connotes a level of praxis (action and reflection on the world in order to change it)... [and] allows space for those concerned with social justice in education to agree or disagree with the concept" (p. 139).

In order to begin to define social justice education as I conceptualize it, I must return to the idea that education is inherently political due to the fact that many in the social justice education community concern themselves with the "elimination of oppression of one group of people by another. Multicultural Social Justice Education, then, is not simply practice, but politically guided practice" (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p. 185). "Like Dewey (1932), Counts (1932), and scholars that have followed them (Anyon, 1981; Ayers, 2004; Banks, 2006; Giroux, 1995), social justice educators contest the notion that teaching is a neutral enterprise, and in contrast embrace the political nature of education that is situated in the cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions of the time" (Picower, 2011-a, pp. 8-9). It is this political nature of the

process education from which my “working” definition of social justice education is rooted. I work as a social justice educator to eliminate oppression by making myself aware of the situational context and systemization of that oppression in order to work against it.

Building on these roots, I would argue that social justice education “starts with the premise that equity and justice should be goals for everyone and that solidarity across difference is needed to bring about justice” (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p. 184). The goal is not only equal opportunity but also “equal results for diverse communities. This means... the various institutions of society will enable diverse communities to sustain themselves, and will ensure basic human rights (including decent housing, health care, quality education, and work that pays a living wage) for all citizens” (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p. 184). It is with these foundations and goals in mind that I turn the “working” definition of social justice education towards the *process* it entails.

Possibly the most widely referenced theorist and practitioner of social justice education is Paulo Freire. Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) eloquently elaborates on three critical pillars to the process of educating in a socially just way. For example, Freire (2000) writes, “Authentic liberation – the process of humanization-is not another deposit to be made in men. Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” (p. 79). This short excerpt describes the humanization, praxis, and transformation that I see as paramount to social justice education.

First, as educators, we must be working under the notion that everyone comes to school with experiences, skills, thoughts, and knowledge that is powerful and valuable. We must humanize the experience of schooling. As Sleeter and Grant (2007) point out, “connecting one’s sense of self with the authority to create and use knowledge for one’s own purposes and the good

of one's community is empowering" (p. 196). Education or schooling for humanization "is liberatory because it operates under the premise of tapping into the under-utilized expertise of students, parents, and families combined with academic skills to address their conditions... and provide a tangible example of what justice looks like in a classroom and the community at large" (Katsarou, Picower, and Stovall, 2010, p. 139).

Social justice educators must also be working through praxis – theory, practice, action, and reflection – cyclically. "Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply "blah, blah, blah," and practice, pure activism" (Freire, 2001, p. 30). It is the presence of praxis that confirms that there is no prescribed way of doing; it is the *process* through which education is undertaken that provides learning, knowledge, and possibility for transformation. Freire (2001) states this tenet clearly in *Pedagogy of Freedom*, "to teach is not to *transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge" (p. 30, emphasis in original). When both students and educators are active in the process of praxis through problem-posing, reading the world, reflecting, and taking action, together in solidarity, education can become a site of "social struggle and social transformation" (Sleeter and Grant, 2007, p. 183).

It is this last pillar of social justice education, transformation, that for me is and was the most difficult to envision and enact, yet, education would not and could not be socially just without it. It was upon reading Sleeter and Grant (2007), that the reality of what the word transform needed to embody in education became tangible and real: "Advocates of Multicultural Social Justice Education do not expect children to reconstruct the world... Advocates of the approach view the school as a laboratory or training ground for preparing a socially active citizenry" (p. 201). It is not my job as an educator to guide students in elementary school

through research, reading the world, and taking action to change the world *right now* necessarily (though not to be excluded either). Transformation comes in many forms over time and helping to support others in their journey to “develop the power and skills to articulate both their own goals and a vision of social justice for all groups and to work constructively toward these ends” provides social justice educators a multitude of avenues from which to engage with students.

As such, for this thesis, conceptualized in the current educational climate during this particular time, I will use social justice education as a way to describe the *ongoing process of knowledge creation taking place between students and educators in a politicized context beginning with humanization, working through praxis, and with a goal of transformation for a more just and equal society for all.*

Teacher Development – What about social justice educators?

There are three angles from which I want to approach the literature and research on teacher development: 1. The stages or phases in professional development of new teachers; 2. teachers’ professional and personal identities and their interaction; 3. Social justice teacher development. One could argue that teacher education programs are important to consider as well, but they are not the focus for this thesis. The focus I propose for this piece of research is what happens after leaving the university, during the first year of teaching. This is what I want to concern myself with most.

To begin, there are many models from which to view the phases or stages of teacher development (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Beyond pre-service development, teachers in their first year, or induction year, are described as having “transition shock” (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011, p.109) or being in “survival” mode (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 229). Ferguson-Patrick goes on to describe the common experience during this first year of

teaching:

Commencing teachers often experience ‘reality shock’ (Veenman, 1984) as they juggle the “complex and diverse demands, knowledge bases and contexts for teaching” (Martinez, 2003, p. 8). Multiple expectations including “programming, catering for a range of student needs, assessment and reporting and the overriding issues of classroom management” (McCormack, Gore, and Thomas, 2006, p.96) provide considerable stresses on early teaching experiences (McCormack and Thomas, 2003). (2011, p.109)

Teachers in this stage of their career “are more likely to leave the profession than seasoned counterparts; 14 percent of new teachers leave after their first year, 33 percent leave within three years, and almost 50 percent leave in five years (Alliance for Quality Education, 2004)” (Picower, 2011-a, p. 7). Thus, new teachers need to have support pedagogically in order to transition to the next phase of teaching, described as “mastery” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 229) or “growing into the profession” (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011 p. 110). “Achieving initial mastery even of conventional teaching takes much longer than most people believe... 5 to 7 years” (Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1039). Having a strong support system as well as a strong sense of a developing professional identity is seen to assist teachers through this complex and challenging entry into teaching. “Teachers in today’s classrooms have expanded societal functions within a diverse range of roles” and “[d]eveloping a positive sense of identity requires contextual experiences with others in the teaching profession” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 222). This is where mentoring has the possibility to “help new teachers to assimilate to the realities of the school and the classroom settings” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 230).

“The development of a teacher’s professional identity, though unique, dynamic, and

personal, appears to have many common experiences” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 221). The complex and fluid process of professional identity formation “is the collection of many differing contexts and relationships” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 220). It “includes adopting the larger societal image of a teacher” as well as a feeling of being a part of the larger teaching community (Flores and Day, 2006, pp. 222-224). There is also research that “emphasizes the interaction between the constructs of teacher as a person and as a professional” (Flores and Day, 2006, p. 222). It is within this interaction that I see the development of social justice educators taking shape.

Described by Meeh and Elder (1996) as “service oriented” teachers or “idealistic” teachers, are those who enter the profession to “contribute to positive change in society” and can otherwise be described as social justice oriented educators (Picower, 2011-a, p. 7). How is their experience of the phases of teaching and identity formation different from “teachers who enter the field without this service orientation” (Picower, 2011-a, p. 8)? Some argue that “[w]ith fewer teachers in the field teaching from this perspective to serve as mentors” social justice educators are found to have a higher rate of attrition, leaving the profession before developing beyond the ‘survival’ or ‘reality shock’ stage of teaching (Picower, 2011-a, p. 8). When faced with having to compromise their university training and personal or professional beliefs within the confines of their jobs, some new teachers are left feeling unable and burnout (Ferguson-Patrick, 2011, p. 109). It is thus crucial for these social justice educators to feel supported and be guided in their first year of teaching in order to develop their ability to “implement the kind of pedagogy that is in service to the communities in which they teach” (Katsarou, Picower, and Stovall, 2010, p. 150).

It is this complex snapshot of the intersection between the realities of teaching, new

identity formation, and social justice philosophies, that creates a unique lens in which to consider one's development as a social justice educator. And with these experiences playing out, not only in the complex context of the current climate of education, but in the very real and dynamic public space of elementary classrooms, we can begin to unpack the unique and complicated journey to becoming a social justice educator.

Chapter III: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Conceptual Framework

I approach this research from a critical theory framework. As such, this product “challenge[s] the historic assumptions of neutrality in inquiry and assert[s] that *all* research is interpretive and fundamentally political” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 4, emphasis in the original). From the beginning, the framing of my research as interpretive and political in nature was forefront in the planning and conceptualization. What it means to question, analyze, and report through the lens of educator, as self-researcher, is important to address. I am aware that my position as teacher, my identity as a graduate student, my background as publically educated, and many other aspects of self, add up to create the contextualized environment and projection of this piece of research from beginning to end, and beyond. The critical framework allows me to acknowledge this, embrace it, and share my knowledge unencumbered by the assumptions of being beholden to an objective notion of truth and an unbiased framing of issues. I, instead, am held to the expectations of honesty, taking multiple perspectives, revealing my biases, and sharing not only my understandings, but also my process of coming to understand.

The adoption of the critical frame also expects that the research will be followed with action (Schram, 2006, p. 98). I envision this action as being meaningful through the sharing of my findings and the continuance of my journey as a social justice educator.

Methodology

In order to fulfill the necessities of the critical framework and answer my underlying research question, *how do I become a social justice educator*, the autoethnography, both process and product, was the optimal methodology from which to approach this undertaking (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Wolcott (1999) states “The underlying purpose of ethnographic

research... is to describe what the people in some particular place or status ordinarily do, and the meanings they ascribe to what they do, under ordinary or particular circumstances, presenting that description in a manner that draws attention to regularities that implicate cultural process” (Schram, 2006, p. 95). This purpose fit with my desire to understand what I was doing to become a social justice educator and what meaning I was ascribing to social justice education and my role within this definition. Thus, it was critical to my research that I was a participant observer in the culture of schooling and teaching (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). In this way, I, as researcher, could “discern patterns and regularities in human social activities”, social justice teaching in this case (Schram, 2006, p. 95). This ethnographic process requires prolonged time in the field and my first position as a teacher, beginning in February of 2011 and continuing to the end of the school year in June of 2011, provided the ideal time frame from which to engage in the research.

From the time I set foot in the classroom to become a teacher I wanted to understand how to be a social justice educator in today’s education system. I wanted to know what it would require, entail, look like, sound like, and feel like. I wanted to be a social justice educator, an educator who created the space for rigorous, critical, and caring interaction to take place, but I hadn’t seen it named in action. I would need to name it and research it in one full-swoop. Thus, “the complementary themes contained within an ethnographic perspective: a sharp focus on the circumstances of observed behavior and a holistic breadth of vision that embraces, and works toward making explicit, the shared understandings of culture” (Schram, 2006, p. 97), make the autoethnographic method ideal in this circumstance. The “descriptive aspect” of the methodology and how it “invites consideration of how parts and whole fit together so that ethnographers can ‘present human social behavior as *more*, rather than *less*, complex, to keep

explanations from becoming simplistic or reductionist” aligns with the goals of what trajectory this research should have (Wolcott, 1999, p. 79, emphasis in the original). I realize I cannot define social justice education. I can’t prescribe what it should look like through this methodology. But, I can share the complex, dynamic process of becoming a social justice educator through careful reflection, analysis, and synthesis of my lived experiences during my first year of teaching. The cultural patterns, processes, and behaviors involved are then interpreted and portrayed in the ethnographic text or the final product, the thesis (Schram, 2006, p. 95). Fittingly, ethnography is not an exhaustive, absolute description of a particular cultural process. Rather, ethnographic descriptions are necessarily partial, bound by what can be handled within a certain time, under specific circumstances, and from a particular perspective.

Research Design

With the critical framework and autoethnography as methodology this study clearly states and embraces its limitations. I am one educator sharing an analysis of four months cut from a hopefully long career – I will not have answers – but I will have more questions and thus the cycle of critical research and education will continue.

As an autoethnographer, I would need to document my experiences. In order to chronicle my actions, thoughts, reflections, questions, and changing beliefs I decided to journal. As an important tenet of social justice education, reflection also became a way for me to interact with my philosophical beliefs about teaching on a regular basis. I taught, wrote, discussed, reflected, and learned throughout the research process. I did not make a habit of revisiting my reflections as a means to begin conceptualizing my thesis until the month of May. I wanted to take the four months I had and truly engage with the process of teaching. Overall I wrote in my journal 14 times between March 7, 2011 and May 4, 2011. The entries were added when time allowed as

teaching was a busy endeavor. I reflected on my teaching in unwritten form daily and engaged in conversations with other teachers, colleagues, students, parents, administrators, and professors at all points during the research. These discussions are recorded through my journal entries, as they became a part of the data I used to analyze my experiences.

After my final journal entry on May 4, 2011, I began to reread my journal entries. Through my readings I uncovered 5 threads of my development as a teacher that ran throughout my entries: classroom management, content, implementation, assessment, self-as-teacher. These reoccurring themes became the organizing factor in my analysis of my research question, *how do I become a social justice educator*. I coded my data and used these pieces of the journal as a way to create the autoethnographic product that is this thesis.

My experiences in the social and cultural foundations of education program at DePaul University exposed me to the theories of critical education, multicultural education, social justice education, and educational methodologies allowing me to synthesize my knowledge into a strong base of what it means to be a social justice educator. I came to the research with an understanding of the history of critical research. I realize that it “demands an acknowledgment of responsibility to talk about your identity as a research, why you question what you do, what you choose not to report, how you frame your data, on whom you focus attention, and who is protected and not protected as you conduct your research” (Schram, 2006, p. 98). This study is about my process of development as a new teacher. It is not about the students, my colleagues, nor anyone else in the school setting. Therefore, all names contained within are pseudonyms and no IRB approval was needed in order to conduct the research that follows.

Chapter IV: Becoming a Social Justice Teacher

Becoming a Classroom Manager

Any person working in education will tell you that classroom management is an integral piece of being a teacher. Becoming a classroom manager involves setting boundaries, coming up with rules, following routines, designing the environmental climate and space, and gaining buy-in from those involved. Classroom management permeates all actions and interactions that take place within the classroom.

Of course there is not one universal model of classroom management. In some ways I could liken the diversity in styles utilized by teachers to the differences between the governance of countries. I have seen tyrannical classroom managers, monarchical schools, and grade level republics ruled by law. More rarely, I have witnessed democracy in the classroom, with the 'people' or the students, as well as other stakeholders, having a say. Yet the language and discourse typically surrounding the topic from teachers and administrators directly has an underlying tone of control and normalization. Classroom management can be magical, creating a safe space within which students are able to freely learn and grow. But, classroom management can also be based in fear and power trips, impeding the development of those involved.

To me, the words themselves, *classroom management*, seem harsh, controlling, and put me on the defensive. Who am I to “manage” students and their bodies? The corporate language and feeling of authoritarianism makes me cringe. The simple idea that in my becoming a teacher, I had to learn to be a classroom manager, sounded unjust, undemocratic, and out of line with my ideals of creating a space for learning with my students.

Here I was coming into my students' lives more than half way through the year, after they have already had two teachers in my position. Was I going to walk in there and "control" the classroom or "manage" my students? It felt disrespectful, inconsiderate, and impossible. I was going to be pushing into the students' homeroom teachers' classrooms to teach and thus the definition of space and environmental design was set. I knew that I had to do something to set a tone of respect and learning in my 50 minute a week class and I knew I needed to do it fast. With only 16 classes with each set of students, I couldn't lose time for learning on "management" issues.

I began with planning. I wrote a syllabus for my 5th through 8th grade classes and planned a getting to know you day for my Pre-K to 1st grade students. By introducing the classes to myself, and our work together, in a mature manner, I hoped we could begin to build trust and respect for one another. I utilized a frequently asked questions format for the syllabus and answered questions I thought students might have about me, the new structure of the class, and what we would be doing together. I wanted to recognize the fact that I knew they had had two previous teachers but that I was going to be there for the long haul. I wanted to reassure them that I did have a plan for what we would do together but that their input would be vital to the actual content of the class. I also made sure to include explanations, or the why, behind my expectations. I expressed my belief that in order for everyone to learn during every class a few expectations needed to be met. I tried to work within the framework of the middle school system already in place using S.L.A.N.T. (sit up, lean forward, ask questions and respond, nod your head, and track the speaker) for active listening reminders and an attention getting method. I wrote that I would be using the check system leading to a detention for interfering with the learning community. I wasn't comfortable with the punitive and negative reinforcing system but

my colleagues suggested I follow the plan already in place. Plans in place, I walked into the classroom for each class the first time with a mix of my philosophies and the schools system of management as tools to create an environment of learning.

Looking back at my first week of reflections, the questions of classroom management were already being rethought. I wrote:

My classroom control or management - both of which words I dislike when talking and thinking about teaching - is not the most productive for my students. All the advice I'm getting, especially from the V.P. is that I need to be meaner (meaning more strict I assume) and assert my control.

But I don't want to be controlling students. (March 15, 2011)

I think that classroom management was the piece of becoming a teacher that was most challenging and contradictory to my philosophies of education right out of the gate. I didn't want to control students but I also knew that there needed to be expectations for everyone in order for any learning to take place. I decided early on that I would explain the reasoning behind my actions and expectations as many times as I needed. In that same early reflection I also wrote:

I try to explain it to students as being a part of community - you need to respect those in your community by showing them you are listening (both your teacher and your peers), the shouting out during discussions and answers to questions is frustrating - I try to say that it is not fair for all students if some students are shouting out the answers and not taking turns or raising their hands. I want the students to respect each other and know that some students need a little more thinking time to come to an answer or are maybe considering things a different way and will shy

away from making a comment if you shout out ahead of your turn, during their turn, etc. (March 15, 2011)

I had similar conversations at multiple grade levels over the course of the 17 weeks. Focusing a whole group discussion on the topic seemed to help. I also asked the class as a whole to comment on their feelings on the matter. For example, I might have asked my first graders, "How do you feel when a question is asked and somebody shouts out the answer?" My hope was that the students would begin to see how their actions impacted the work of the group and would make more thoughtful choices in the future.

However, I noticed that there were some frequent flyers in this area, mainly in my 1st grade math class that I met with 4 times a week. I pulled those students aside when there was time and individually pointed out the rationale behind the expectations. I would try to have that one-on-one conversation about why they were shouting out, what did they want to gain, what was the actual purpose of raising our hands, and how did they think their actions made others in the class feel. Even the youngest students were able to express that their peers may feel unimportant or interrupted by the shouting out. Of course the shouting out did not disappear in those 17 weeks. But I did notice gentle reminders and redirections were less frequent and more effective as time passed.

Another big classroom management challenge to my philosophy was that students must be quiet in the hallways. This mechanization of students into forward-facing straight lines where students walk slowly and silently down the halls rubbed me the wrong way. These were kids who needed a little conversation with their peers and a little freedom to move their bodies. What I realized pretty quickly though was that the hallway was not the place for that. The *why* we walk quietly down the hallways became the pacifier to my social justice conscious. The lines

were to control the students' bodies if I am honest about it, but the reasoning is shared space and mutual respect. Hallways need to be quiet and structured because there are hundreds of bodies using the narrow pathways and working classrooms lining the walls. Now I think of quiet hallways like driving on a road. There have to be rules about which side of the road to use, how quickly to go, and what noise level is respectful to those utilizing the space around you. I didn't want to lose a student moving from the gym on the third floor to the bathrooms in the basement. Students needed to stay together. I also didn't want our class to be disrespectful and distracting the other students with our noise while they were inside their classroom learning and working. Again I presented the why behind the lines and quiet in the hallways as a request for a respectful community. Students began to take ownership of the expectation reminding those around them that there were minds at work and we should not distract them. I found other places like our individual classrooms and recess in which to honor students' need for discussion among peers and physical movement.

Most importantly to how I responded to the contradiction in my social justice philosophies and the actual practice of becoming a teacher and thus a classroom manager was a renaming of the act. It was not classroom management to me anymore. This creation of an environment, of routines, a schedule, expectations, and buy-in was just that, community creation. I wasn't ever going to become an effective classroom manager. Instead I was becoming a more democratic and conscientious community member and co-creator. I was interacting in this space daily as well as the students and the same issues were impacting all of our experiences. I responded to their needs and concerns as community co-creators and members. And they responded to my needs and concerns as well. I tried to base our interactions on reciprocity and

safety. I had a duty to make sure each student felt safe and able to learn. Beyond that the students and I could be creative in our actions as a community.

Clearly, I would not say that my classroom ran smoothly and effortlessly to this democratic state, if it ever even came close. But again, like becoming a teacher, it is all in the process. Together we trialed and errored. We disagreed and had opposing views. But isn't that what life is really like?

So what would I do in my next experience on my path to becoming a classroom manager? First, I will rid myself of that language. It is tainted in my mind with very negative and oppressive ideals. Instead, I will immediately consider this piece of the becoming a teacher puzzle as a community co-creator. As silly and easy as changing my language sounds, it has truly made a difference in my ability to think creatively, effectively, and in a socially just way about how a community interacts.

I will also discuss the implications of interrupting learning with the students before setting a consequence plan. It is more democratic and just in the approach to accountability. Students can be quite creative and thoughtful in their ideas about consequences. Making sure that the outcome matches the reason for the consequence is also something that is extremely important. It is often difficult to find consequences that match the infractions, but it is imperative to their effectiveness.

Sometimes schools have a system in place that deals with rules and consequences. Naturescape has a system of cards that you can turn when there is misbehavior, but each teacher uses it to differing degrees. I know, that for me, I have to believe in the underlying effectiveness and philosophy of a system in order to use it successfully. And if you are not using something that makes the classroom more successful, what are you doing it for?

For me, this part of teaching is about building relationships, being honest, gaining buy-in, being willing to trial and error, engaging in positive reinforcement, and having endless patience. The same things do not work for every student and if as a teacher you quit trying, of course nothing will work. But if you are creative, honest, and build a relationship with each and every student, success for all will be possible. Becoming a social justice educator is all about the process, as is the learning in which students are engaging. Students are in the process of *becoming* as well. They are becoming independent, becoming learners, becoming readers, becoming writers, becoming mathematicians, becoming scientists, becoming social scientists, becoming artists, becoming friends, becoming global citizens, becoming digital creators, becoming community members, becoming daughters and sons, becoming sisters and brothers, and becoming critical thinkers. Therefore teachers must be forgiving. Be patient. Be thoughtful. Be respectful. Be honest. Be exemplary. Be creative. Be fun. Be in the moment for what it is, not for what it should have been.

Becoming a Content Specialist

It may sound like a simple task to be a specialist in elementary content. Knowing the information and how to do what you are teaching is clearly not rocket science. But, knowing how to teach something to 30 individual students involves another level of specialty. And, knowing how to teach so that it is relevant, meaningful, socially just, and rigorous for each and every student requires hours of preparation and planning, loads of flexibility, and the conviction to talk about the messy, real issues in an honest and critical way with students. Not rocket science, but definitely challenging and dynamic work. For me, becoming a content specialist has been the component of becoming a teacher that has created the most obvious friction between my philosophy and education in practice.

When I was offered the hybrid position I held for the final 17 weeks of the school year there was no curriculum for the Pre-K to 1st grade Spanish classes, or for the 5th to 8th grade World Cultures classes. The former teacher had left no clear picture of what she had been teaching. The temporary sub that took her place, until I was hired from January until the end of February, had been asked to do ISAT preparation. So, two weeks before I would begin my new position, my principal asked me to submit a unit plan for the remaining classes of the year. I researched teaching culture to middle school students using an anthropological framework. I developed a plan including defining culture, introducing the "universals" that make up culture, and how location and other cultures affect development and change among each other. I then proposed a final project that would be grounded in the students lived experiences. The project would flow from "where I've been", "where I am", to "where I'm going". The project would be an opportunity for students to explore their family history, their developing identities, and who they wanted to be in the future. I imagined a plan in which students would begin to consider culture as flexible, contextual, and something they should consider with open minds. I planned themes and thought about examples I could share of diverse cultures in order to spark meaningful conversations. I wanted the course to be somewhat student driven and more of an exploratory look at culture, the world, and the perspectives we take on about what we see and why.

I also wrote a plan for Spanish that involved vocabulary introduction, songs, games, student sharing, and art. I outlined what I thought would be useful and obtainable vocabulary for the age group and class format. I presented the plans to my principal before I officially took over the position. My principal provided feedback and the plans were reworked from there.

My principal saw my plans as ambitious but also stated that the project would need to be rethought because the students were doing something similar in a different class. He seemed on board for the Spanish outline, tweaking some of the focal vocabulary. In the end I felt that I was prepared to take on the content of both sets of classes.

Upon taking over the courses in mid-February I was required, like all teachers in the building, to submit weekly lesson plans. Wanting to create the best experience for my students and hoping constructive feedback would be useful, I asked my principal to respond to my plans. This is when I began to feel the conflict in my social justice philosophy and the actual practice of choosing and teaching the content.

Friday I completed my lesson plans... and sent them to the principal. I received a reply today saying my objectives weren't rigorous enough. I used the following words to premise my objectives: generate and identify. My objectives, I thought, should be accurate for what I am hoping the students to achieve in the span of time that I see them [on a daily basis]. But my principal's reply stated that I should use words like analyze [and] synthesize... I agree that higher-level thinking and use of new concepts is important and the work towards those ends is on going - but this was an intro lesson. My goal was to help students understand the meaning behind the new concepts and be able to identify their meanings and use. I guess this could be termed analyze but I feel that analysis will be something we do at a later date when the concepts and terms aren't so fresh. He said it was okay to use the same objective for weeks at a time... I understand that he wants the reflection of what the end goal is,

but maybe that should be a unit plan. If I am sharing the lesson objectives with students, as I am, I don't want to overstate my expectations or continue to use the same objectives every time I see them. That doesn't seem like productive or honest work. (March 15, 2011)

Now I realize that this response to my lesson plans and content work may seem like semantics, but the contradiction in what I should be using objectives for and what I need to present to the principal was difficult to reconcile. Was it that my content was great but the objective writing was weak? Which comes first? That same day I reflected these sentiments.

So I'm hoping to do well, play the game of I'll work under your umbrella... yet, I fear that this may affect my teaching adversely. Should I change the way I state my objectives? Should I only change them in my plans to him? Should I create a space on the planning document that allows for long-term objectives?... We also had a run in about the standards... He said that I needed to use the state standards to guide my work, I understand this use of the expectations the state has for what students need to be proficient in but the school is switching to common core standards and there are no social studies common core standards. And if I look to the Illinois current standards, they are geared towards social studies expectations and not necessarily the broad category of cultures. As a specials class, and since I have created the curriculum and discussed it with the principal on multiple occasions, don't my expectation and thoughts on what direction to head, where to

focus my attention, and how to present the information and propose students access the information matter? I was asked to take on a cultures class, make it rigorous, incorporate some Latin America, geography, maybe some Spanish, current events, and use culture itself as a focus, I designed and researched a plan, I presented a plan, made revisions, discussed it more, and am continually reworking the focus towards the needs and wants of my students. But now I need to find the standards and expect to work from them out??? (March 15, 2011)

It is after conversations like these that the frustrations of the expectations and standards become contradictory to my social justice philosophy. No matter my attempt to make the course rigorous and thoughtful, I am beholden to laying out the standards that I am meeting. Do standards drive my teaching or do I fit the standards to my plan? I know that during my course work at DePaul we were expected to begin from the standards, but what about cases such as mine where there are no direct standards? I obviously incorporate writing and reading in the lessons that I teach but those are not what I am basing my lesson plans on. If I began from the standards I would not arrive at my goals for the content.

In my practice during this past year I ended up changing the language I used in objectives I presented in my plans to the principal. If he thought that 'analyze' more aptly described the higher level thinking he wanted my students to do, what difference is it if I accommodate this? I still gave my students my expectations of what they were to be doing in student friendly language. I would write on the board "Today's Goals" and list the things we would do and the things I hoped we would accomplish. I sometimes used analyze, but only when that was truly what I expected that day. I also added the standards to the lesson plans that I sent in realizing

that the plans were already written and I was just fitting the standards in that were going to be met regardless of explicitly listing them. I guess it did make me realize the plethora of expectations I had on what my students accomplished but it didn't change the way I operated.

Yet, a few times I had to make decisions that did change what I taught because of resistance from the administration. In March of that school year, a devastating earthquake hit Japan causing a massive tsunami that resulted in vast destruction. The news was saturated with stories about the tragedy. Since I was hoping to begin incorporating current events into my classes with the 5th through 8th graders, I decided to ask one of my 5th grade classes what they knew about the events unfolding in Japan. I wanted to gauge their interaction with current events at home and in their other classes. I quickly realized that students in all of my classes rarely had the opportunity at school to discuss current events. Furthermore, students expressed that they were encountering the news from some less than credible sources at home. The day of my conversation with the 5th graders I reflected the following.

I asked students what they knew about what was going on in Japan... the earthquake, tsunami, devastation, nuclear power plants, free cell phones, etc. They had a lot of information but when I asked the students and probed for more current event info hands raised and one male student said "I was watching TMZ and saw that the guy that does the voice for Aflac got fired for something he said about Japan" another student (male) "oh yeah, I was watching Inside Edition and this comedian said [muffled, unclear] and he got fired. These comments made me realize that some of my students' current exposure to *news* was pretty limited. (March 17, 2011)

I knew I needed to incorporate these current events into what we were doing in class. I asked students what they thought. Should we include current events in our class work? We voted on my proposed plan of watching CNN student news to begin our classes daily with a follow up conversation. All in all it was planned to take about 20 to 25 minutes each class. Every 5th through 8th grade class had a majority vote to incorporate this new piece into our class. And to be honest, I think most of my students looked forward to it. I knew that in order to do current events I would need to make it relevant, require critical thinking, and expect students to share their thoughts, opinions, and voice. I felt that the lessons we would encounter and the discussion skills we could practice would make it worthwhile. On March 10th I reflected on these new goals for my students.

I want to provide rigorous lessons with deep content and focused discussions to provide my students with the opportunities to express themselves, be heard, listen to one another, and investigate the world around them. (March 10, 2011)

I decided I needed to go deeper into current events, see where the students' conversations lead us and where I could find a tie-in with the broader topic of culture. I didn't want the students to just watch the news and be "informed". I wanted us to unpack what we were seeing, go further with our questioning, and take multiple perspectives. I was sure this would take some creativity on my part, but I was sure it could work. That week I encountered a news article about the lack of looting in Japan after the devastation from the tsunami. I felt that this would be a great connection between a current event that the students were somewhat familiar with and our studies of culture.

I would present the article to the students and facilitate a discussion about why there was an absence of looting after the disaster in Japan. I would use the other examples in which looting was present after a natural disaster in order to create a context surrounding the uniqueness of the phenomena in Japan (i.e. New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, Haiti after the Earthquake in 2010, and Chile post earthquake 2010). This would lead to discussing the differences between the disasters, the responses surrounding them, as well as the culture at large.

I took my idea to my principal hoping to receive approval to amend my lessons for the week and get some advice on how to best present the article to all levels of reading abilities.

He hesitated in a response, said I could amend my lessons but that he wasn't sure that it would be a good focus. He said he was concerned with the racial implications. I explained that the point of the lesson would be about what culturally about Japan created the absence of looting and that it wasn't at all a racial implication, or a superior culture discussion - it would in fact be about differences in culture leading to differences in actions among people. And I would argue that because some may construe this phenomenon to have racial implications, all the more reason to discuss it with my students. He asked me to send him the article but maybe I could talk about the lack of looting with out the comparison pieces. But what context would that be? The idea that they are not looting is only being publicized and talked about because it is an outlier... if you take away the context of the situation, what would be the purpose of discussing? I in no way would imply to my students that the people in New Orleans are bad people, criminals, or lesser than the Japanese... I would facilitate a

discussion around why they thought there may be differences in the reactions the different cultures of people had, I could pose problems, ask questions, and give them the opportunity to delve into the idea of culture in action. But even after I sent a few articles, including one that could argue against the racial and superiority arguments he had, he said I wouldn't want to spend that much time on it - WHY not? And why am I not brave enough to ask him that question? I feel that it could be a powerful, relevant, topical peek into culture... something that would be meaningful, a definite learning opportunity, but I don't want to spend that much time? Can't my lessons go on hold? ... I can assume that he doesn't think discussions like that have a way of assessing students, touching on standards, or following a plan. I'm just bitter, disappointed, and a little discouraged... mostly with myself and my cowardice to not just follow through. (March 15, 2011)

Thinking back on this experience now, I do feel like I passed on an important and engaging learning opportunity for my students. I didn't present the article to the students. I didn't want to ruffle the feathers but I also wasn't sure how best to follow through on the deep level conversations it would entail. I went to my principal excited about a new path of inquiry for my students, hoping to receive guidance and suggestions and I left feeling deflated and discouraged. We teach students about a lot of difficult topics that require critical thinking if taught correctly, did he just not have faith in me?

After I got past the feeling of defeat, mostly through reflecting on my thoughts, feelings, and reassuring myself that it was a great idea. I decided that the next time I had a similar feeling

about changing my plans in such a way, I would just do it. Mine wasn't a set curriculum. I didn't show every piece of content to my principal. I could ask other teachers for assistance. Luckily I had the opportunity to give it a shot sooner than I had anticipated.

In April I read an article about Che Smith, also known by his stage name Rhymefest, a hip hop artist from Chicago, Illinois who was running for Alderman of Chicago's 20th ward. The article highlighted the stereotypes surrounding hip hop artists in the United States that make it difficult for them to be taken seriously politically. It also made connections between the power of hip-hop music and the youth movement in the recent political uprisings in Africa and The Middle East. Rhymefest was quoted in the article as saying:

We have brothers from Libya who are taking an active role in trying to change their government -- even from the United States," Smith said. "We have hip-hop artists in Cairo who are helping effect change. Politics is effecting societal change. I think hip-hop lost its political way, but it's finding it back with a vengeance. (Godfrey, 2011)

This connection between things happening here in Chicago and even larger issues on a global scale sparked an idea about how to bring the current events happening politically into my classroom. As I began to formulate a plan as to how I could implement this inquiry into current events I remembered an NPR piece I heard on the radio about a hip-hop artist/activist from Libya. I knew this connection between our community, the world, and youth across the globe would be an interesting topic to explore with my 8th graders. I wrote in my lesson plans my intention to address these topics but never directly communicated with my principal about it. I knew that, if done correctly, the conversations we could have would be meaningful, relevant, and enlightening. I went for it.

I spent hours planning what this class would look like, how I would present the information, and what I wanted the students to get out of it. I printed transcripts, downloaded audio, printed news articles, and made sure to have a map of the region on hand. The lesson lasted two class periods and could have gone longer. There was so much more to explore. The implementation of the lesson was very important but I also learned that my enthusiasm for a topic or an issue came through to students as well. They knew I was interested and it piqued their interest in a new way.

So what did I learn about becoming a content expert through this experience? I think the most important thing I will take to my next position will be to have a plan, but also be willing to change, adapt, and respond to the students, the world around us, and the dynamics of a class. I am not suggesting that I know the most about what students should be learning and when. And I am not suggesting going behind the administrations back and doing things that you know they would disapprove of. But I do want to suggest that the teacher in front of the students has the most focused grasp on what needs, interests, and capabilities their class of students has. The teacher is becoming the expert and should trust in his or her self enough to make decisions about content, make mistakes, and reflect and revise on the experience of it all.

My 8th graders may not have understood the depth of the topics we were discussing. They were 13 and 14 years old. I may have presented information a little developmentally above their abilities. But, the lessons we tackled together were rigorous, engaging, and when I asked the students, "Why do you think I wanted to talk about this with you?" One student's response made me realize it was worth the planning, effort, and doubt. She said something to the effect of, you wanted us to know that young people, that we, have a voice in the world. I couldn't have it expressed it better myself.

I know that going forward I will not always have the opportunity to create my curriculum from scratch. There may be some curricular requirements that I disagree with or don't understand. Yet, I realize now that I have the ability, in my small classroom, to make decisions that are socially just and are based in the philosophy of facilitating students in their journeys toward questioning the world and finding their voices. As a teacher I do have some control over what I present, and more importantly possibly, how I present it.

Becoming an Implementation Virtuoso

Educational research suggests that student success is influenced by *how* we teach what we teach (Brown D. M., 2003). The content is undeniably important but the implementation of that content determines the amount of learning that actually takes place. Lucky for me, becoming an implementation virtuoso is the element of becoming a teacher in which I feel most comfortable taking risks and having fun.

How we teach, or how we present learning to students, is where the creativity and energy enters the equation of becoming a teacher. It is truly the art of teaching. I believe teachers' methods of grouping, holding discussion, integrating technology, incorporating fun, utilizing student to student interaction, creating the physical environment, providing student choice options, developing routines, setting goals, maintaining transparency, gaining buy-in, and creating a positive atmosphere can all dramatically effect students' experiences with school and learning. How teaching is done is the key to what students learn. My first day I was reflecting just that, "So many more questions about teaching than 'What are they learning?'. The *how* is just as important" (March 7, 2011).

For me, the realization that the process of learning is the key to actual learning rests deeply in my philosophy of social justice teaching and creating a community of learners. I know

that as a teacher, my first responsibility is to create an environment of trust and respect. I want there to be a feeling of community, mutual accountability, and reciprocity in the process of learning. I imagine myself as a guiding facilitator who helps to keep us all on track towards our collective goals. I imagine multidimensional classroom experiences that utilize all the resources at our fingertips to create more meaningful, engaging, and lasting learning opportunities. I strive to discover and highlight the strengths and experiences of each individual in relevant and relatable ways. And during student teaching I learned that having fun, laughing, being open and patient, all required a feeling of comfort in the educational space. This all requires a dedication to the *process* of learning, not only the end result. Because teaching is typically a position in which one works alone in his or her classroom, implementation is influenced heavily by the individual teacher's methodology and philosophy. This personalized stamp on becoming a teacher is so important to consider critically.

During my time as a specials teacher at Naturescape there were no direct challenges from the administration or other outside sources to my implementation of instruction. The challenge I felt in this area of becoming a teacher was more a personal struggle. I knew that I wanted to create a socially just environment. I just wasn't sure that what I was doing was socially just. I wasn't sure what that should look like. I came to realize that the contradictions in my philosophy with becoming an implementation virtuoso were not contradictions at all; they were more aptly questions I needed to address within myself. Reading through my reflections I was struck by the amount of questions posed about the environment and process of learning I was facilitating.

- Were my methods honoring each individual student?
- Was the environment we created together becoming trusting, respectful, and community based?

- Was I being too teacher directive?
- What should socially just teaching look like?
- Can you just start doing discussion-based learning without first teaching methods of discussion?
- Is teaching how to have a discussion in and of itself counter to social justice teaching? This is how a discussion looks and you need to do it this way?

These were just some of the underlying questions peppered throughout my reflections.

Upon analysis, I discovered that I was constantly questioning my implementation methods. This questioning and reflection, I believe now, is the cornerstone to becoming a social justice teacher.

For example, early on in my position I reflected the following.

Do I need to be more obviously teaching the skills needed for discussion and conversation to these 5th through 8th grade students? I don't think that many of their discussions during classes are student directed or lead. The students always seem to be looking to me when they speak - they seem to be looking for affirmation and then they are ready to move on to the next teacher asked question. Or if they have a question, they look to me for the answer. I feel like I need to be more explicit in my expression that in the learning community I am hoping we create together. that the students and I will both be learning, along side one another, with discussion and investigation, and research outside of just 'teacher knowledge'. (March 8, 2011)

Looking back on this excerpt I realize the assumptions I was making about the students' experiences and discussion abilities was unfounded and unfair. I had just begun working with them as their teacher and to expect the relationship and environment to be conducive to discussion based learning automatically was unfair. I had quickly assumed that my students were not capable of holding student lead discussions simply because the discussions weren't happening. But what was I doing as the teacher to assist in creating the environment and expectation of this outcome? It wasn't a deficit on the students' part. The students were learning how I conducted myself in class. They were learning what the expectations were. They were new to this environment and our relationship, just as I was. I had to be clear, open, and honest with my students about what we were doing together in class and why. By reflecting my thoughts and concerns I believe I became more aware of my assumptions and biases. It allowed me to unpack these trains of thought and uncover how I could change my actions to better communicate with students.

This new use of reflection and my discovery of my own locus of control came out a few weeks later.

That 8th grade class is a little quiet but they are pretty adept at answering questions in smaller groups. I wonder how I can tap into this in a larger group setting? The students obviously all have ideas but seem a little reluctant to share their thoughts... maybe because the topic isn't so concrete? Does that make it harder for people to discuss their thoughts and understanding? How can I bring that out? I try and reiterate all the time that there are no right and wrong answers, I just want to have discussions. (March 17, 2011)

The difference in this reflection, as compared to the last, positions the questioning around what I can do versus what is lacking for the students and what they can do. How are the students receiving my implementation of instruction? How can I make it more effective and meaningful? These questions are much more rooted in seeing the world through a lens of social justice.

I also began to notice that the longer we were together as a class, the more responsibility and choice I gave the students in both content and implementation. Because both of these social justice teaching tenets require building relationships and a clear community environment, the shift in both my own, and the students' willingness to accept and undertake these challenges suggests our success in this endeavor.

Tomorrow will be interesting though... introducing both CNN Student News and our project rubric and example. I'm looking forward to it and hope the students are engaged, interested, and thoughtful in both the current events work and project! I have a great feeling about it and feel like I have buy-in due to the fact that they voted to implement the current events work and they have a lot of personal choice in their project focus, presentation, and research! (March 22, 2011)

Looking back on the entirety of positive and negative experiences I felt about my becoming an implementation virtuoso I realize that there will always be highs and lows. There will always be questions. There will always be times when I could have done more, better, differently. But, if I take the time to think critically about the art of teaching and be willing to adapt my practice, I will be succeeding on some level as a social justice teacher. It is questioning the world that I want to develop in my students and it is my ability to engage in that process as well that allows me to do so genuinely.

Of course I will not pretend that I have the answers to all the questions I posed about what encompasses social justice teaching. I believe that each decision I made in the classroom was very connected to the students in front of me, the community we were becoming, and the goals we had set. Again, like I tell my students, it's not always about the right and wrong answers, it's about asking the questions and having the discussions.

Becoming an Assessment Architect

For me, assessment is a complicated and infamous piece of the education system as a whole. The word is used to represent many different ways of determining what students know, have learned, and what skills they have developed. Assessment in education is not solely the standardized tests that are so often the focus of debate. Assessment, as defined in educational terms, refers to measuring of student understanding (Kauchak and Eggen, 2008). It is often thought of in reference to tests, quizzes, assignments, and grades.

Honestly, I went into teaching with a chip on my shoulder that was linked directly to the word assessment. My philosophy of education did not seem to align with the testing of students' knowledge and scoring them in comparison to the rest of the country. How do standardized tests assess anything authentic or useful? Yet, actually stepping into the role of teacher, I quickly realized that assessment would have to become an intimate part of what I did in many respects. Not only did my principal ask about assessment during my first observation, it was definitely an expectation. I realized that I needed to know what students were gaining during our time together in order to prepare for the next time we met. I needed a way to gauge whether I was getting the information out in an accessible manner. Were students grasping the new concepts I was introducing? How could I know what they were learning? Can you and should you really measure learning and understanding of the process of learning? The discussions? The opinions?

The participation? What are you measuring their learning against? Each other? A standard expectation? Individual growth?

One aspect of becoming an assessment architect that I realized quickly was that I didn't need to assess in a formal way all the time. Assessment should be flexible in regards to what you are hoping to do with the information upon gathering it. Am I assessing the classes grasp on the definition of culture (1) because I want them to be able to recite it back on a test or (2) because I want to see that they understand the deeper meaning the concept entails in order to move forward with analysis of culture? These two types of assessments would look very different and would be used in very different ways. Thus, becoming an assessment architect, being able to compile useful information in multiple ways in order to inform your teaching, is a critical piece of becoming a teacher.

Again, thinking back on my first year as a teacher, the arch of development of my own thoughts about assessment is apparent. I can see myself learning as I go and eventually developing a socially just plan to make assessment useful. On March 8th it was still just the beginning and that comes through in my reflections.

Assessment was something that my principal also pointed out during my post-observation meeting. How did I know the students got out of the lesson what I intended or anything at all?... I am trying to improve - but sometimes the lessons that I'm hoping students walk away with - like they are people who have opinions, have skills in noticing things, and are capable of solving problems... seem abstract and hard to assess. (March 8, 2011)

To me this excerpt highlights the question of whether education is truly about the content or the process. Personally I believe that it is both and that each element must be attended to and discussed explicitly and honestly with students. In order to make this philosophy of education apparent in my classroom, I decided that I would include students' own assessments of their learning processes and an assessment of their peers as well.

I am using the best seat in the house opportunity (a medicine ball) for which students vote for someone at the end of each class to receive the seat the next time we meet. They are supposed to choose someone whom they felt did an excellent job participating, asking questions, sharing thoughts, and working with the group... I also have students rate themselves daily 1 to 5 - 5 being I did amazing, participated, was focused... 1 being oh man I wasn't even mentally in the room today. I hoped this would allow students to continually evaluate themselves but don't know how meaningful it is to the students. Maybe I should ask them what they think - is it helpful? (March 10, 2011)

I thought that this assessment would be an opportunity for students as community members to refocus their attention each day to their experience in school, not just with content but also with discussion. I did bump into some problems of course. Students were voting for friends instead of more accurately assessing who was working towards the learning process most effectively that day. When I did encounter these issues, and surprisingly it wasn't that often, I would have a quick review of what the best seat was supposed to mean and why their honest and thoughtful input was important. I also had other students who were willing to share their reasoning behind their choices to give students concrete examples of what I was looking for.

Yet, even if the results seemed skewed, I followed through and let their assessment stand. I think giving the power to the students really allowed them to take ownership of the class. Although, with all this information to sort through for 160 different students weekly (self assessments, focus questions, peer assessments, any in class assignments, etc.) I quickly ran into another challenge of becoming an assessment architect - how do I respond?

An abundance of nights I found myself as the last teacher in the building being kicked out by the custodial staff that was ready to head home around 7 p.m. It was taking me hours to respond to all the students individually about their questions, class work, and ratings. Grading was taking over my life. I was feeling very overwhelmed and quickly realized that something had to change. I decided I would bring up my concern with my mentor teacher at our next meeting. I reflected about our conversation on March 21st.

We talked about my being overwhelmed with grading and she had great suggestions. She said it was impossible to grade everything but that just because you don't grade everything doesn't mean that the students aren't getting anything out of doing the work. They are doing important thinking and processing by doing the work I assign, as long as it is thoughtful work. We discussed how the process of giving feedback is very important for students' learning. It is impossible to not want to give feedback to everything but we came up with a plan of not ALL or NOTHING... I am going to give feedback. (March 21, 2011)

I toned down the amount of response to everything we did and decided to focus on specific work I felt needed a response or specific students who needed it that day. I was concerned about having the students do work for works sake but after my conversation with my

mentor, I realized that giving students writing prompts and questions didn't always require a response directly in writing from me. I could respond to the whole class or to a few students, and the others are still taking the opportunity to think through their responses and practice arguing them out in writing.

So, I mixed it up and tried to spread around the feedback. In my view, a socially just classroom would be full of this give and take, reciprocal learning. I wanted to make sure I was honoring that as best I could without making myself crazy in the meantime. But, the beast of assessment never sleeps and the ultimate reflection of assessment was just around the corner. It was almost report card time and I was having serious doubts about attaching a judgment to my students in the form of a letter grade.

The difficult task of assigning grades is looming for me. I began this quarter halfway though and ISAT testing ate two of my weeks up. Now with only about 6 weeks under my belt... I am supposed to say whether they have an A, B, C, D, or F... I still feel it unfair to judge (if that is what grading is) some student on the few times we've seen each other. I find grading to be so challenging in general. How is it that there is the comparison of students to one another to see who is best. Why are there even grades? Why do we tell some kids, yes you are intelligent and can and will do well in life and yet we tell others, you're not good enough, you aren't smart enough, you're not fast enough? What kind of set up is that? I have trouble feeling like any student is a D or an F - isn't my job as a teacher to assist them in their process of learning and if they don't succeed isn't it partially my fault? And the standard to which we are measuring

children is so flat... you can do x, y, or z because you can give me the right answers on a test, but what about other skills students are learning in school?... ugh I hate grades. So arbitrary. So subjective, and yet, especially in [our city's] middle schools - so important. Selective enrollment or you're not going anywhere is the impression I get from the students at my school. And to get [into a] selective enrollment [school] the grades are crucial... testing is crucial for that matter. (March 30, 2011)

I struggled all year with the grading process and am still trying to become the assessment architect for which this task is simple. I know that I have expectations for my students. I know that my students are intelligent, capable, and driven (hopefully I help to inspire the drive). Thus, I expect a lot out of them. My grudge with grades is that not all students should be held to the same expectations and outcomes. I tried to account for this difference by allowing students to choose the manifestation of their final project for the course. I had a rubric of expectations that I called my non-negotiables but the product could be anything the students desired. I just wanted them to express their learning, their research, and their organization skills. I thought that if they could use their strengths whether it is essay writing, dramatic play, poster presentation, song writing, power point, or a web based work, the final product would be more meaningful. Show me what you learned any way you like; just make sure you include the non-negotiables. The students were excited that they had a choice in their final product and I had several different presentations formats at the end of the course.

I also made myself available to students to assist them throughout the process. I was willing to help research, fine tune writing, give suggestions, check progress, and provide general support. In the end, when it came time to do the deed and give final grades, the rubric and my

openness with my students about my support, expectations, and desires made the process so much simpler. The students would have come up with similar grades for themselves based on the rubric. Overall I think the lesson I learned about grades is to be transparent, supportive, and allow students to show their learning in a multitude of ways.

Nevertheless, I don't truly believe that assigning a letter to a student is an affective means of communicating to stakeholders what students have learned and what skills they are developing. Yet, letter grades are the confines from which we as teachers currently work. In order to counter balance this measure of success I believe in giving more anecdotal and narrative feedback with the letter grades. Communicating with the student and their guardians in a more authentic and useful manner creates a space where the grades themselves don't have to mean everything. Being explicit about strengths, weaknesses, and goals is extremely important and is the underlying reason for assessing students at all. This way, students can ask, where did I come from? Where am I now? Where do I want to go from here? And most importantly, how do I get there?

I can't single handedly change the system of testing, grading, and assessment. But, I can utilize the data and tools that they each provide to communicate with my students and create learning experiences that are more directed, focused, and meaningful. I am continuing my journey to becoming an assessment architect and I think I have diminished the size of the chip impeding my growth.

Becoming a Balanced Educator

What drew me to the teaching profession as an adult was the necessity of working with such a diverse group of people on a daily basis. Teachers interact with students, parents, siblings, families, community members, administrators, building engineers, office staff,

professional development personnel, other teachers, district administration, donors, and any one else who chooses to be a part of our education system. I enjoy working towards a common goal, sharing ideas, and being a part of something greater than its parts. And to be effective as a teacher, these relationships are key. The great thing about building and developing relationships at these multiple levels is that it allows you to balance your teacher identity with the other identities in your life.

It is so easy to lose yourself in your work when you are a teacher. On March 15th I reflected on the demands of the position.

Teaching could be a 24/7 job. I literally could fill all the hours in a week, and still not feel like I had enough time. There is so much to research, so many resources to find, so many graphic organizers to make, so much to grade, so much paper work to keep track of, so much to mull over, so much to reflect on, so many lives in my hands, so much pressure to do well and then do better... there is just so much! (March 15, 2011)

Going in, I knew that the research estimates that 50% of teachers will leave their position by their 5th year of teaching (Picower, 2011, p. 7). Yet, I was still shocked by the amount of work, dedication, and commitment the job actually required. I continued my reflection...

It is clearly easy to feel overwhelmed. Is it because I'm new? Because of my wacked out schedule? Because of the range of grades I'm teaching? Because of the number of students I'm teaching? Because of my insecurities? Is it because I have a need to consider the just environment I want to be creating with my students without really understanding what that looks like when

I'm entering someone else's territory, in the middle of the year? Or is this just teaching? (March 15, 2011)

Looking back, I think my final statement is the truest about why the profession is so easy to become overwhelmed by. That it is the nature of teaching, to throw yourself in wholeheartedly. It is one reason I love what I do. The challenge to continually better myself, continually develop my craft, and continually confront new challenges keeps me on my toes and engaged with what I am doing. I feel that becoming a social justice teacher requires this rigorous work, but it also requires that as a person we continue to be balanced and true to our other selves. By mid-March I was beginning to see a problem develop.

I worked literally 12 hours that day - I had to overhaul the office corner I was left and purge the previous teachers things from my tiny bookshelf and find a space for all my things - I was going a bit crazy. I thought once I had myself organized - the student[s] with cultures notebooks, a grade book, a communication log, a lesson plan format, a feel for the position - then I thought I would feel a little in control. I still didn't. Then I realized that it may be because I didn't have space to put all my organized things. So yesterday I spent almost 4 hours after school cleaning, moving, organizing, removing, recycling, lysoling, etc. Thus I came home, had dinner, graded a test, and HAD to sleep. I feel like I'm putting in 150%. I am constantly staying after school until 6 or even 7 sometimes. I get to school by 6:45 or 7 everyday, and I still feel like I can't get everything done. (March 17, 2011)

Luckily, I realized that this was not healthy to continue.

But, I refuse to bring much more than one assignment home to grade at night. If I'm putting in the hours and dedication I am to the position and I still can't get it done, I can't bring the pressure, stress, and overwhelmed feeling home. Luckily I feel like I have been pretty good at that... possibly because of the hours I spend at school. I just feel like I can't let work take over my home and personal life - I wouldn't like that if it was my husband and I wouldn't like that if it was me. Do I work to live or live to work? Not that it is mutually exclusive - I LOVE what I do. Teaching is my passion. I enjoy going to work everyday. I don't mind staying late to put the best lesson in front of my kids. But I also know that a happy person, a well-balanced person cannot be fully encompassed by their work. I have to take a mental break, a physical break, and an emotional break. I don't apologize for that feeling of letting go or removing myself - half because I still constantly have it in the back of my mind - the wheels churning with ideas, but also half because I know that I am a better teacher, a better colleague, and a better person because of the little separation I partake in. In the end I am happy all around and not feeling like it is due to a lack in any area - isn't that the goal? (March 17, 2011)

All in the same days reflection I came back to this idea of balance. I myself have many other identities that, as the school year progressed, I worked hard to keep in balance with my new teaching identity. I see myself as a wife, a friend, a student, a sister, a reader, a traveler, a daughter, an aunt, a social butterfly, a researcher, and a colleague. As I waded through the first few weeks of my new position I realized very quickly that I needed to set boundaries for myself

in order to continue to be the best of myself in all areas of my life. One thing that worked for me was to leave work at work when possible. I went in early and stayed late at school, but when I went home at night and on the weekends, I was able to be fully present in my other life roles. Of course there were the occasional things that had to get done and needed to be taken care of outside of school hours. However, I made sure to contemplate the necessity logically and, more often than not, the issue could rest until the next day of school. I continued to reflect about balance and I believe that the reflection itself helped me to keep a grasp on this important piece of becoming a teacher.

The days are long, always with more to do, which some how can wait or just be pushed aside if need be. I could probably leave around 4ish everyday and still function in my role as teacher, but I could also stay over night and still be perfecting my craft. It is a hard balance to find and it is easier to find some days rather than others. (March 30, 2011)

Allowing myself the honesty of seeing the reality of teaching, there is always more you can do. But, also allowing myself the reprieve of leaving some things on the table for the next day created the necessary boundaries between my intertwined identities. The challenge of this part of becoming a teacher is self-awareness, needs assessment, and honesty. I wouldn't have felt okay with leaving things to do later if I didn't truly believe that I was working 100% when I was working.

I appreciate that becoming a balanced educator will be actively developing as I continue on my journey to becoming a social justice teacher. The profession is dynamic and both my teaching identity and other identities will continue to grow and change with time. It will require a vigilant reflection and revision in order to continue to be my most authentic self. I am just glad

that I realized it before I followed the path of 50% of teachers who burn out in their first few years. I hope to be blessed to teach hundreds of students and in order to do so, I must balance my life and happily go to work everyday. It is pivotal to becoming a teacher.

Chapter V: Conclusion

What Now?

Like I have stated before, I do not pretend to have all the answers on how to become a social justice teacher. I am still not sure what it will look like in the years to come in my classroom. A new year, a new position, a new school, a new community, and new students will all intertwine to create a new context from which my teaching must emanate. I do know that the lessons I learned the first year of teaching will be invaluable to my continued journey of becoming a social justice teacher.

What I will take most from this first year in the classroom is the power of reflective teaching. I will always continue to reflect on my practice, my feelings, my questions, and my successes. But ultimately, I must take it further. Reflecting gave me the ability to think through the challenges of becoming a social justice teacher but I feel that using those reflections, as a way to change my path and try new things in a more immediate way, will add a new level to their power. Essentially the reflections pay respect to the idea that we are always becoming. We are not there yet. And really, there is no there. Becoming a teacher is a process and a journey that is fluid and infinite.

The five pieces that I found to resonate throughout my first year in the classroom will also be a place to consistently ground myself. These five pieces may also transform as I continue on my path but currently provide a manageable foundation from which to develop my practices. It is a work in process becoming a classroom manager, becoming a content specialist, becoming an implementation virtuoso, becoming an assessment architect, and becoming a balanced educator. Sometimes a piece may feel quite stable, while another piece feels like you have begun again at the ground floor. The important element to remember is that each piece is

intertwined with all the others and is dependent on one another to create a whole picture of becoming a social justice teacher.

I hope that from this personal narrative the reader gains a feeling of relief. You are not alone in feeling unsure, overwhelmed, challenged, and concerned. I walked away from my studies of education full of philosophies that I held dear to my heart and ideals about education that I felt destined to create. But I also walked away with insecurities and doubts. I wasn't sure I was capable. I wasn't sure I knew how to do what I dreamed. Despite all those feelings I took a job as a teacher and after working tirelessly, reflecting diligently, and analyzing my experiences through this thesis, I realize that my exit into the real world of teaching could have been no different. You must do for yourself to know how to do. You must struggle yourself to know how to come through. And you must be passionate about becoming a social justice teacher to begin your journey along that path.

And so...

This writing, grounded in the context of the current public education climate, phases of teacher development, and social justice philosophies, provides a glimpse into the complex lived experiences I had as a first year teacher. I share my story, my reflections, and my analysis in the hopes that I can inspire others to continue on their own journeys to becoming social justice educators. It seems that the further along I find myself in my own journey, the more questions I encounter. Yet, having written this thesis and come to understand the crucial importance in the *processes* of teaching and learning, for both teacher and student, I realize that I am honoring my dreams of social justice education everyday. I still will not claim to be a social justice educator. I will not claim to know any best path to follow to arrive at a state of feeling successful in your endeavors. I will only provide a listening ear, a shared goal, and a personal story. I am

becoming and I invite you to join me on this journey.

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