

Political Autobiography: Reflexive Inquiry in the Preparation of Social Justice Educators

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ABSTRACT This paper is based upon the political autobiographies written by 15 graduate students in education at the Teachers College of Columbia University who participated in a semester-long course called "Human and Social Dimensions of Peace". The researcher first analysed the students' work through the lens of critical pedagogy and praxis (process). The researcher then analysed the political autobiographies through the lens of identity (content). She concludes that the use of political autobiography supports educators' own self-knowledge and (re)construction of identity in relation to early professional life choices. The students' own conclusions show how many of them used this exercise to make sense of their belief system, to clarify their need to care for themselves while addressing problems in their communities, and to affirm their career choice as an educator dedicated to caring and justice.

INTRODUCTION

Within the ranks of teachers are those who are consciously aware of their role in fostering values and practices related to peace and human rights. These individuals recognise that education is a moral enterprise. They have chosen their profession in part to help realise the vision of a more peaceful and just society, and in the early stages of their career are formulating their views about how their teaching practices might contribute to this aim.

These individuals sometimes identify themselves as peace, human rights or social justice educators, though they may carry out their formal responsibilities as teachers of literature, environmental science, civics, history or work in an afterschool or summer program for youth. For the purposes of this paper, the researcher will refer to this group as social justice educators¹.

Many social justice educators associate their practices with critical pedagogy. In the literature, critical pedagogy is seen as a central approach for fostering personal agency and challenging inequality and oppression in society (Farahmandpur et al. 2004; Giroux 1992; Giroux and McLaren 1989; Giroux and Simon 1989; Shor and Freire 1987). Through debate, engagement, a "language of skepticism" (Giroux 2006: 33) and the cultivation of a critical consciousness about dominant beliefs and power structures (Bartolomé 2004), the praxis of critical pedagogy is to foster both *understanding* and *agency* in learners.

The literature on critical pedagogy recognises that education itself is not a neutral field and that teachers require their own critical consciousness about their practice (Bartolomé 2004; Giroux 2006). The self-awareness of educators about their own stance would seem to be a prerequisite for avoiding the indoctrination of students with their own political beliefs (Ayers et al. 2004). Social justice educators will want to identify their ideological and political principles in preparation for their work in the classroom (Bartolomé 2004). Critical pedagogy would therefore seem to have a place in educator preparation in promoting personal understanding and agency through reflective processes.

There is scant literature on the use of critical pedagogy in the preparation of educators themselves (Danielwicz 2001). Reflexive inquiry is a practice increasingly recognised as facilitating teacher development, though not commonly used in graduate schools of education². Drawing on the experience of employing a "Political Autobiography" writing assignment in a peace education class in a U.S. graduate school of education in the spring of 2014, the researcher demonstrates the value of this reflexive inquiry technique for assisting young educators in identifying the influences of race, gender, and socio-economic status in their own life stories and belief systems, and their subsequent commitment to being a social justice educator. Through this small, exploratory qualitative

study the researcher shows that the use of reflexive inquiry techniques such as political autobiography are fundamental praxis for the preparation of social justice educators, by facilitating both critical understanding of the influences on their beliefs and values and agency in their choice to use education as a way to promote peace and social justice³.

Literature Review

Educators committed to the promotion of social justice embody the idea that personal experiences are the grounding for actions and for social change. Being asked to tell one's story, as with a class assignment called "Political Autobiography", invites the educator to select key experiences and create a narrative, while reflecting on her or his own values (Bolton 2009: 12). Such an exercise asks educators to develop their own "historical consciousness" (Kemmis 2011: 14) and to recognise both the ways that they have been acted upon by their environment and, in turn, can act upon their environments – including both their interior psychological environments as well as the one outside of them. The location of one's personal experience within political and social structures is key (Bolton 2009). Consistent with the Dewey (1916) view of education as a constant re-organisation or reconstruction of experience, the writing of a guided autobiography requires educators to make sense of their own life experience (Kemmis 2011) as part of a larger goal to reconstruct society. In the context of a peace education class, participants are supported in their exploration through the lens of "peace" as originally elaborated by Galtung (1971, 1990). Galtung incorporates the concepts of both "negative peace" — absence of direct violence — as well as "positive peace" — the absence of structural or cultural violence, such as racism and sexism — that inhibits the full development of human potential.

Self-reflexive inquiry is a form of critical pedagogy, involving both introspection and analysis. Reflexivity is similar to the practice of reflection but goes deeper, involving a process of making sense of attributing value to events of our lives (Rodgers 2002).

Reflexivity implies the ability to reflect inward towards oneself as an inquirer; outward to the cultural, historical, linguistic, political, and other forces that shape everything about

inquiry (Sandelowski and Barroso 2002, as quoted in Ryan 2005: 2).

The outcomes of reflexive inquiry within the context of a teacher preparation program can incorporate the dimensions of both increased understanding as well as agency.

In terms of understanding, in writing a life story the reflexive thinker examines her or his own belief and value systems and uses this information to structure self-understanding, identity and relationship to the world (Bolton 2009). At the heart of reflexive inquiry is a "turning back" in order to attend to how we make meaning and arrive at beliefs (Qualley 1997: 21, as quoted in Gallagher 2002: xvii). Reflexive inquiry, for example, can lead to insights about key influences in one's identity and social conditions influencing one's experiences growing up. There is also the potential for a "meta-cognitive awareness" of the reflective inquiry itself, which can be particularly beneficial for increasing understanding of the thinking process (Garrison 2004: 1).

The reflexive inquiry process helps to locate the educator in his or her own historical moment and life history — in the early stages of their careers, as educators and social reformers. Moreover, asking educators to consider their broad personal, social, cultural and political environments (not just the schools) from a historical perspective facilitates historical consciousness. This "dialectic of consciousness and self-consciousness... is essential in reaching a rich interpretation of history and one's place in it" (Kemmis 2011: 14). Both historical understanding and self-understanding are deepened. Moreover, when infused with values and a critical review, such an exercise may result in "effective-historical consciousness". Such a consciousness involves not only an understanding of one's own history but also injustices related to one's conditions and the consequences of one's own way of thinking and acting. Recalling and creating biography in a self-reflexive manner may reveal (anew) disempowerment and oppression (Danforth 1997).

In terms of promoting agency, awareness of structural violence necessitates a response. There is therefore the potential for educators to more strongly associate their professional choices and educational practices with the goal to promote social justice. Such self-knowledge — and associated racial and cultural conscious-

ness — might be considered key for instructional effectiveness (Gay and Kirkland 2003), as every educator works with students and in educational contexts that bear semblances of discrimination, inequality, status differences and structural violence and the ambitions of educators for social justice in particular. Writing a life story and affirming one's personal values intrinsically presents a fresh platform for decisions related to one's life choices.

This paper was written with two assumptions. The first assumption is that writing, the narrative process and storytelling⁴, allows individuals to identify, reflect upon and share in writing experiences seen as relevant and meaningful.

The second is that the individual educator's identity is in part shaped by life experiences. Such identities cannot be compartmentalised (Maalouf 2003) nor are they entirely static. They can be revisited and shaped to some degree through the self-awareness and agency of the individual (Beckerman 2009). Reflection on one's own self is a mean of self-development, bringing understanding of how we have been "acted upon" and in turn how we are "acting on" (Ryan 2005: 1).

Description of the Course and the Writing Assignment

The political autobiography papers were assigned as part of a course on peace in the international education department of a U.S. graduate school of education. Fifteen students enrolled, half of them in a concentration related to peace and human rights education and the remainder from other concentrations, predominantly international education development. All but one of the students was female. Thirteen of the students were U.S. nationals – with one Japanese and one Canadian student. However, across the class, the students represented a range of diversities, including two students originally from Egypt and Ethiopia respectively, several biracial students (Asian-European) and two African American students.

The peace course took place over a 15-week period and its key themes included identity and narrative in critical self-reflection; identity and diversity; praxis and critical pedagogy; peace education; and nonviolent movements and social change. The content of the course encouraged students to recognise the parallels between

issues of peace at the personal level and those playing out in the wider society. For example, personal identity was investigated as well as identity-based conflicts in society; and the links between critical pedagogy and personal empowerment were explored as well as the role of education in organised social change movements.

The writing assignment took place in a course organised to be learner-centered and to foster community and dialogue. Online discussions encouraging reflection and discussion on a key theme for the week were led by a student and small group discussions in class were organised on the basis of questions developed by the students themselves ("open space technology"). Each class involved a small group activity, guest speaker or some application of a key weekly theme. Interchanges between students were intellectually rigorous and emotionally honest. An atmosphere of mutual trust pervaded the culture of the class. Half of the students had participated in a course the researcher had taught the previous semester on peace and human rights education. These classroom conditions combined to facilitate students' reflexive inquiry in the writing of their political autobiography.

Students were asked to develop their 5000-word (15-page) political autobiography in two cumulative segments. For their first draft, students presented their principles and how they saw them as influenced by their identity and narrative. The final version of their papers included their initial writing plus their ideas about how they saw themselves influencing processes for peace and human rights.

The personal and holistic nature of this exercise was consistent with a goal of affirming the values of social justice educators and their emotional resilience, noting the limitations of having a purely "rational approach" to working for social change (Tinning 2002: 236). The political autobiography assignment was presented in the following way in the course syllabus:

This paper is meant to be a tool for reflection about your system of beliefs and values. In our personal and professional lives, we often make critical decisions about important issues without examining ourselves and our motives, biases, or understandings, or without asking ourselves difficult questions such as: What are the principles that inform my views on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrants, language, education, peace, etc.? What in my

own background and history helped me to arrive at these series of principles? In other words, how have I come to believe/know what I believe/know about the world? What are my weaknesses, strengths, and privileges, and what do I want to do about them? How can I be an effective educator for peace and human rights in my personal and professional life? What are my hopes and dreams?

Aside from these instructions, the students engaged in an otherwise open-ended reflection, deciding what needed to be reflected upon in their life history (Bolton 2009). Students could structure their papers as they liked, bearing in mind the overall writing prompts.

Students were informed that their writing would be read only by the instructor and that all information would be kept confidential. Students were reassured that they should present only that information which they felt comfortable sharing. The inclusion of photos and references to class readings was optional. The papers were graded pass/fail and required for successful completion of the course.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this qualitative study came from the content of the political autobiographies submitted by the 15 graduate students in the peace class⁵. The researcher investigated the results of the students' reflexive inquiry experience by carrying out a content analysis of these papers. This methodological approach drew on phenomenology, which focuses on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. Phenomenology was a relevant approach given the self-reflective nature of the political autobiographies and the potential to use the results as the basis for educational theorising (Van Manen and Adams 2010). As the study was based on the students' own writing, it can be said to have high internal validity, though the nature of the study does not allow the results to be generalised.

The data was coded in three analytical stages. The first level involved open coding of the papers. During the second level, the researcher re-examined the themes from the initial coding and then associated them with the two categories emerging from the critical pedagogy, that of understanding and agency. For the "understanding" domain, the researcher associated themes

from the papers related to key life experiences that students had related to privilege, racism, poverty, inequality, sexism and other examples of structural violence⁶. For the "agency" domain, the researcher associated themes related to their identities as social justice educators moving forward.

The researcher's analysis of the political autobiographies revealed themes that could not be accounted for in the predetermined categories. Specifically, the graduate students had identified numerous supports for their personal well-being. This emergent category was added within the domain of "agency." The data also showed that many of the educators had reflected on the process itself of preparing the political autobiography ("reflecting upon reflection"). The researcher thus added this new area within the domain of "understanding".

For the third and final level of coding, the researcher went back and developed sub-categories for the themes falling within each of the four categories. The results of these analyses are now presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reflexive inquiry experience was guided by the students themselves, who were required to recall, select and present a discrete number of personal experiences in their families of origin, with friends, in school and in the workforce. The students then associated these with themes of personal importance, such as identity, their values and beliefs, and how they saw themselves as educators. The students were able to recognise how the world had acted on them and, in turn, how they intended to act in the world. The link between the personal and political became apparent and professional choices emerged as a response.

Understanding: Key Life Experiences Influencing Principles Relating to Privilege, Racism, Poverty, Inequality, Sexism and Other Examples of Structural Violence

The reflexive inquiry process for these social justice educators resulted in the majority of them identifying influential life experiences associated with structural violence, such as sexism, racism and poverty. Awareness of these themes in one's life history is highly relevant for

social justice educators and reflects outcomes associated with critical pedagogy. Writing a political autobiography not only assisted the graduate students in identifying personal experiences with structural violence that had influenced their value systems, but also heightened their awareness of the role that education can play in social transformation.

Below are the themes that emerged within this category of results, each of which the researcher then briefly presents:

- ♦ Gender, sexism and patriarchy
- ♦ Race, ethnicity, religion and other forms of discrimination
- ♦ Poverty and privilege
- ♦ Violence and conflict

Gender, Sexism and Patriarchy

A handful of students linked their feminism and interest in gender justice with personal experiences of gender inequality and patriarchy in their families of origin; growing up in a culture that tolerates violence against women; and personal experiences of sexual violence. As mentioned earlier, the class was comprised almost entirely of women, with only one male student.

My personal associations with feminism and achieving gender justice in my own life have helped me to recognize the often “invisibility” of oppression. The ways my parents conveyed their views on gender relations, the limits I saw women place on themselves, and the ways gender stereotypes became reinforced through everyday dialog and action...

Race, Ethnicity, Religion and Other Forms of Discrimination

Approximately half of the students referred to racism or other forms of discrimination as influential in their life story. Students of color in the class related personal experiences of racism or rejection by friends on the basis of color or religious background. Several of the students of European descent were in inter-racial relationships, which had provided them with additional insight into being a person of color in the United States. For some students, it was the prejudice of a parent or another family member against groups of people, such as African Americans or immigrant groups, which had catalysed their consciousness about prejudice.

All of a sudden I cared about race; my race, the race of other minorities, and the privilege of the white race.

These experiences of discrimination were both personally felt and observed for others, especially youth that the graduate students had worked with earlier in educational settings.

Poverty and Privilege

With the exception of a few students in the class, all had grown up in relative economic comfort and security, with most of them coming from families of middle-class income. Exposure to poverty was therefore something witnessed by most of the students rather than experienced personally.

A substantial minority of the students wrote in their political autobiographies about their discomfort and distress in witnessing the poverty of young people they had taught in the past. The political autobiographies included stories of working in “under-resourced, crowded classrooms”, their awareness of the vulnerability of children and youths, and the disparities that exist in the U.S. educational system. Such experiences had helped to cement the graduate students’ commitment to using their educational skills to promote the wellbeing of their pupils and to promote social equality more generally.

It was during these [internship] experiences, most of which were in low-income, high-minority (and predominantly African American) environments that I came face to face with the large inequities that exist within the American school system...It was through these experiences that I began to realize the different types of privilege that existed within this country and how this manifested into various forms of oppression.

Several of the students confessed that this awareness of the disparity between the privilege they had grown up with and the conditions of the young people they worked with had brought about feelings of guilt and anxiety. Even with their commitment to be social justice educators, for some this discomfort persists.

Violence and Conflict

A small number of students included stories of violence in their personal histories. These incidents included witnessing civil war or conflict

(Liberia, West Bank) and its aftermath (South-east Asia). Two students had grandparents who had been persecuted or put in camps during WWII. A few students related stories of interpersonal conflict in their families, or of being bullied as a child.

I travelled throughout Southeast Asia where I was exposed to the chilling effects of warfare, still very much visible on the streets of Vietnam....I remember seeing innumerable individuals missing limbs.

These experiences, as with others in this section of results, had left a deep impression on the students and helped to instill an interest in promoting peace and social justice in their professional lives.

Understanding: Critical Reflection on the Process of Writing a Political Autobiography

As mentioned earlier, an outcome area not anticipated based the literature review, was the students' own reflection on the experience of preparing a political autobiography. More than half of the graduate students wrote in their papers about the value of having written their life stories. The themes that emerged as a result of preparing a political autobiography were:

- ♦ Recognition of the role of memory and the selection of discrete experiences for inclusion
- ♦ Recognition of what had been influential in their life experiences
- ♦ The emotional component of writing the political autobiography
- ♦ Insight into their personal identities
- ♦ Having a new mindset or re-evaluation of values as a result of the exercise
- ♦ Recognition of their earlier "silence" about their life stories
- ♦ Being "off track" in earlier points in their lives

These first themes reflected the students' "meta-cognitive" awareness of the reflexive inquiry process itself: the role of memory, the identification of key influences and the emotional investment required in this effort. This awareness can be seen as related to their identities as educators and their interest in critical pedagogy. These results suggest the potential for educators to use some version of reflexive inquiry techniques in their own professional practices.

The latter themes revealed that for some students the exercise provided insights that facili-

tated valuable personal development, reaffirming genuine engagement with the reflexive inquiry process. Below are some illustrative quotes:

Insight into Their Personal Identities

I find that the concept of identity is much more fluid, that it is less predetermined and more determined by the experiences that are layered on one another.

To understand my own identity, I reflected on the labels I use to describe myself as well as the labels that have been placed upon me. Having experienced both positive and negative labeling, I understand its limitations and advantages from a very personal perspective.

Having a New Mindset or Re-evaluation of Values as a Result of the Exercise

The task of understanding my own political agency has made me critically evaluate the rubrics upon which I construct value sets to begin with. I feel like I am starting over. I began this autobiography speaking of moments of developed "value sets" and I now conclude this writing with the confession that I no longer understand my own values. I am letting go of some of my most basic mechanisms of meaning making.

Recognition of Their Earlier "Silence" About Their Life Stories

What is most uncomfortable about my story up until now, to me, is my reluctance to tell it. While writing this paper, I realized I have never said aloud or written down all of these things in one place before. I think I have placed a silence on my own story because of how I perceive others might react to my feelings or emotions, or how they might use one event or experience to filter and understand all of me. As a feminist and an activist, that is sad, and I am going to move forward in trying to break this pattern.

Being "Off Track" in Earlier Points in Their Lives

I recently realized that I have spent far too much time and energy trying to convince my-

self that the things I love and the things I find true are not important. I tried to convince myself that words and languages and books and stories are not important as long as hunger and war exist. I tried to convince myself that mental health and emotional well-being are not important as long as material inequities are present in the world. I was telling myself these things as I was consistently feeling and experiencing the opposite.

Agency: Supports for Personal Well-being

Another outcome area not anticipated through the literature review was students' awareness of the extent of support for their personal wellbeing. Love and care, role models, positive experiences in schools, spiritual and religious beliefs and deliberate habits of self-care emerged as foundational for the ongoing work of education for social justice. Such work has high demands in terms of facing structural violence. Educators for peace and human rights need considerable personal resources for maintaining both commitment and a sense of personal efficacy, often in the light of demoralising and difficult situations in schools and an awareness of world problems, which can seem overwhelming. In light of the challenges both for integrating social justice education into schooling and to seeing the outcomes of such efforts on a daily basis, this awareness of one's support systems seems a necessity for social justice educators.

In their political autobiographies students recognised positive people, experiences and practices, as well as attitudes that empowered them: *"True strength is not about overpowering someone but reflecting negativity away from my life."* This category of results suggests that reflexive inquiry can stimulate agency in relation to self-care — an awareness of the supports they need to be able to work as social justice educators.

The themes identified in this emergent category were:

Love

Nearly half of the students wrote that the love of parents, friends or a romantic partner helped them to feel cared for and supported. Experiencing love gave students a sense of self-worth and reinforced the ethos of caring for others.

Never once in my childhood was I ever unsure if I mattered.

Role Models

Over half of the students identified one person — usually a family member — who exhibited behavior that they admired and who they tried to emulate. Examples included family members who were confident and strong (many female students referred to their mothers and grandmothers), valued education, provided service to others, and were activists.

My Nonna [grandmother], until she passed away at age 87, took the city bus to volunteer at a senior citizens' home several times a week...I remember the way she put on her lipstick while expounding her political beliefs.

Schooling

Nearly all of the papers referred to high school or college experiences, perhaps not surprising as the political autobiographies were written by educators. Life stories included references to courses and books that inspired and influenced their values and engagement in human rights and humanitarian activities. These experiences had facilitated the students' self-discovery and development.

It was this class [Alternatives to Violence] that first introduced me to the methods, theories, history, and details of Peace Studies...I was inspired — mentally moved to the point that inaction seemed criminal.

Many of the students also described their initial experiences as educators, which helped them to recognise personal qualities they still bring to their work: compassion, selflessness, solidarity, understanding and fearlessness.

Church or Spiritual Beliefs

A small number of students identified their religious communities as an important source of personal support and a reinforcement of their humanitarian impulses. In addition, two students referred to a spiritual belief system that they had carefully crafted through personal reflection.

I was taught to love anybody, including people who try to hurt me, in my church.

Self-care

A small number of students wrote in their political autobiographies about personal practices they carry out regularly in order to promote their wellbeing. These include athletic activities as well as other forms of introspection (meditation, therapy, critical analysis). Two students wrote about their specific approaches to self-care:

Looking after your body and having fun is not selfish; it is necessary for my effectiveness as a practitioner. I will be able to best achieve my career and personal objectives by making sure that I am healthy and happy, and can really commit all of myself to my work.

Without this critical academic lens, I do not think that as a practitioner in this field I would be able to practice the self-care that this realm demands. For me, self-care in this arena means allowing time to reflect on my own role, as well as the structures that can shape so much of an organisation's agenda.

Agency: Identities as Social Justice Educators Moving Forward

In the concluding section of their political autobiographies, students were asked how they anticipated contributing to peace and social justice processes moving forward as educators. The attitudes, approaches and practices identified were quite diverse but some key themes emerged:

- ♦ Care and compassion
- ♦ Addressing social injustice
- ♦ Educational practices

Care and Compassion

Half of the students identified compassion as a key ingredient to their work. They possessed this prior to taking the course, but its importance was affirmed through the experience of writing their personal stories. Some illustrative quotes:

It is compassion, for others and finally towards myself, that truly drives my interest in education and informs the impact I hope to make.

In one semester, I became an educator. In one year I became a peacemaker. And over the span of a lifetime of lessons learned, realisations, dialogue with family and friends, and a

moment of self-acceptance, I became someone who cares.

Addressing Social Injustice

Nearly half of the students stated explicitly that their educational practices moving forward would be directed towards overcoming social injustice and inequities. This is unlikely to have been a revelation to students, given their decision to enrol in the peace course. However their commitment to addressing structural and cultural violence in schools was reaffirmed in the context of writing their life histories, with a heightened awareness of the connection between their stories and the conditions they work in. Some representative quotes:

As an African American woman, I think racial equality will always be at the heart of my work, however I now take more care to note where addressing important intersectionalities (be it class, gender, ability, etc.) would create a more powerful and meaningful experience for individual students.

I want to work with vulnerable and disempowered populations because I am dissatisfied with the unequal distribution of opportunity and choices in our world.

... [A] pledge to be hyper-vigilant about interrupting racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, and any other acts of hatred and injustice... This is my personal praxis that I hope to translate to students.

Educational Practices

Most students identified specific educational practices that they intended to carry out in order to promote agency in their students and wider social transformation. These strategies included:

- ♦ Being a daily example of love and peace
- ♦ Empowering students to seek out their own opportunities for activism, strength and service
- ♦ Sharing stories of greatness, including lives of unsung heroes and sheroes
- ♦ The use of storytelling, creative writing and personal expression
- ♦ Using culturally relevant curriculum that allows students to recognise their historical and personal contexts, including the social injustices they face

- ♦ Integrating human rights education and LG-BTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning) topics in the classroom
- ♦ Founding an urban charter school

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researcher presents the results of a study of the use of a reflexive inquiry tool as a form of critical pedagogy in a graduate school of education course attended by young educators interested in peace and human rights. The outcomes confirm the effectiveness of political autobiography for cultivating both understanding and agency in students with regards to their role as social justice educators. Through the praxis of writing their life stories using a “peace lens”, students developed their historical consciousness, one that linked their personal lives with the cultural and social conditions they lived in. Consistent with the reflexive and analytical aims of critical pedagogy, the influences of race, gender, socio-economic status and other social structures became evident in the political autobiographies of the students, heightening their awareness of these influences and their own beliefs and values. The educators were therefore better prepared to embrace their own agency and to foster reflection and agency in their students. Moreover, they became more aware of their own biases as well as the method of critical inquiry.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the emergent category of reflection on the political autobiography exercise itself showed that the students remained aware of their identity as “teachers” throughout the writing, analysing it as a learning technique. The other emergent category of self-care similarly revealed a self-awareness on the part of the student teachers about their need to foster their own wellbeing – heart, heart and body — so that they could fulfil their roles as social justice educators.

Of particular interest were the ways in which this reflective inquiry exercise succeeded in cultivating agency in the graduate students. Their value systems were reviewed and reaffirmed, a useful outcome psychologically, politically and socially. Their commitments to being social change actors were emotionally and cognitively reaffirmed. The students were able to offer concrete examples of the ways in which they intend

to promote “positive peace” and social justice moving forward: through care and compassion, conscious efforts to overcome oppression and inequality, and strategies in the classroom. Possibly these young educators will incorporate some version of reflexive inquiry techniques in their own educational practices.

Based on the experiences of this class, it can be concluded that reflexive inquiry is both informed by and contributes to an understanding of critical pedagogy. Political autobiography, specifically, is a promising tool for use in graduate schools of education. In fact, reflexive inquiry of some kind might be considered a requisite for all educators, not just those interested in social justice, as school systems everywhere mirror the challenges of the societies in which they are based. Which teacher will not have to address racism, sexism, able-ism or other forms of discrimination in their classroom? How much better will schools be able to address such challenges if educators are supported in their understanding of these underlying forms of cultural and structural violence and validated in the ways that they try to actively address these? Social justice work is not only for those who see this as part of their vocation but anyone paying attention to the inequities in their society and recognising that acts – both small and large – can make a positive contribution to peace.

Facilitation of reflexive inquiry practices, of course, will require skill on the part of teacher trainers. Such exercises should not be undertaken lightly and without adequate awareness and commitment to critical pedagogy as a general approach. Reflective practices that genuinely affect practitioners’ lives and those around them need to be well facilitated, so that the process is genuinely meaningful for the students. Reflexive inquiry and political autobiography need to be “safe” so that students open up to critical reflection and storytelling and do not end up feeling helpless, frustrated, demoralised or resistant.

To then return to a familiar question in peace, human rights and social justice education: who will teach the teachers?

NOTES

- 1 In this paper the researcher has chosen to use the umbrella term “social justice educators” to incorporate those educators who may self-identify as

- peace educators, human rights educators or educators for democratic citizenship. The researcher recognises that these specific identities are both distinct and overlapping. Moreover, not all educators who are integrating a values and social transformation framework into their professional work will be making use of such labels. For the purpose of this paper, the researcher therefore uses the term social justice educators to encompass all educators who associate their professional work with processes that are values-oriented and promote personal agency and social transformation.
- 2 See Cole AL and Knowles JG 1999. *Researching Teaching: Exploring Teacher Development through Reflexive Inquiry*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
 - 3 The researcher would like to express her admiration for and thanks to the graduate students in her Peace Education class who privileged her with their final papers and allowed her to analyse them for the purposes this paper. She would also like to acknowledge Jennifer Turner for her assistance in the background research on critical pedagogy.
 - 4 Although this paper is based on a writing assignment in a graduate level course, the researcher will not be addressing critical literacy, composition or other forms of literature that address the process of writing as a mechanism for self-reflection.
 - 5 Other classroom processes that likely contributed to the willingness of students to authentically invest in the reflexive inquiry of their papers – including online and in-person discussions – are not incorporated into this analysis.
 - 6 The category of “principles” – a key prompt for the first version of the political autobiography – turned out to be closely integrated within presentations of life experiences and professional applications and was therefore not used as a separate category of analysis.
 - 7 For practical suggestions on how to facilitate critical reflection in pre-service teacher education, see Gay and Kirkland, 2003: 184-185.

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