WALKING THE WALK: INCORPORATING SOCIAL JUSTICE INTO DAILY YOUTH WORK PRACTICE

By Megan Hartman

I have always had an interest and passion in working with young people, starting with my job as a camp counselor in my late teens and early twenties. Tucked away in the northern woods of Wisconsin, I interacted with a white, homogenous group of young people each week. It was a Midwestern middle-class summer fairy tale: swimming in the lake, canoeing along the river, making friendship bracelets, and waving good bye to little hands sticking out of the school bus windows, hearing cries of "good bye!" or "we'll see you next summer!" My interest in working with young people continued after college and is still one of foundational pieces of what I hope my career to be.

My pursuits led me to a touring children's theatre based out of Missoula, Montana. For almost two years, I traveled around the country to a different city each week, working with local children. Whether it be in small-town, close-knit communities, or larger cities; every group I worked with was unique. The ways in which I knew to communicate with or manage young people did not always work. I realized that there may not be a "one size fits all" approach, but perhaps there are some sorts of "best practices" that I could use in my work. Wanting to expand my toolbox and challenge myself to think critically about working with young people in an artistic setting, I attended the Master of Fine Arts in Theatre for Youth program at Arizona State University. Through academic instruction and artistic practice, I was challenged to examine my own biases and pinpoint lenses I rely on and ones that are inherently present in my work.

After graduating in 2014, I moved back to the Twin Cities and began working as a Youth Program Manager with East Side Neighborhood Services. While my previous work had intersected and overlapped with youth work in many different ways, it was only at this point where I began to recognize and study youth work as a field. At my program site I was interacting with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds on a daily basis. I thought my previous experiences had prepared me to have not necessarily all of the answers, but at least most of them, but a rude awakening occurred. One way in which this presented itself repeatedly was by youth acknowledging injustices or unfairness within the program model. I felt uncomfortable when comments of identity, culture, and injustice were acknowledged. My face would get warm and I would stutter, looking for the "correct" answer to offer in return. I explored ways to respond and interact with young people and open up opportunities for dialogue after these statements were made. To put it simply: I was not the person who the kids needed me to be. I was not showing up right. They were voicing and enacting their resistance, and as I grasped for control, that seemed to add to the tension, rather than ease it.

As I reflect on my first two years as a youth work professional, I wonder what I can do to take a less reactionary or defensive approach: how can I be proactive in incorporating social justice into my own after-school program? How can other youth workers also take a social justice approach to youth work? Social justice in youth work is a reflective and reactive field that relates to a particular time and place. Those of us doing youth work shift between: 1) a more proactive approach of estimating issues and challenges facing youth communities and figuring out how our programs can serve them, and 2) a reactive approach of pinpointing the challenges and issues the youth are facing, incorporating reflective practice into our own work, and adjusting the current model. Both of these are feasible. As we continue into the 21st century, social justice will continue to be a key component of youth work as youth continue to respond and react to their sociopolitical, cultural, and environmental factors. Youth workers have a responsibility to engage more

deeply with young people and try to provide equitable opportunities to allow youth to understand and navigate unjust systems using their own voices and ideas. Looking ahead, it is essential for youth workers to incorporate social justice into out-of-school-time programs with intention, preparation, and reflection. Doing so will allow young people to navigate inequities and develop skills of resistance and resilience while cultivating their powerful youth voices.

THE POWERS THAT SWAY AND IDEAS THAT STAY

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE IN YOUTH WORK?

Before exploring the history of the field, it is necessary to establish a social justice framework on which I will build my argument. Youth work is, at its core, social justice work (Richards, 2015). There are several definitions of social justice, so rather than go through the stress of selecting "the best one," I prefer to list several key indicators of social justice as it pertains to this paper. Social justice means:

- Allowing full and equal **participation** by all parties in order to nurture **partnerships** between youth and adults
- Being **mutually beneficial** to participating individuals and/or groups
- Ensuring physical and psychological security through **equitable** opportunities
- Possessing the strategies, knowledge, and resilience to **navigate through daily and worldly injustices**

All of these are characteristics of social justice practice both in and outside the field of youth work, and these indicators will be unpacked even further below.

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED

In looking at how social justice has been and will be incorporated into youth work, the ideas of one major theorist, Paulo Freire, continue to stay relevant. Freire's book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) had a tremendous impact around the world. Freire identified the world, not as a static and closed order, but a problem to be worked on and solved. In the foreword, Richard Schaull notes that "...the individual can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, become conscious of his or her own perception of that reality, and deal critically with it" (p. 33). Freire posits that the oppressed must view reality as a limiting situation which they can transform. According to Freire, those who are oppressed have their humanity negated and unrecognized. They are striving to be free of oppression and reach their full humanity, although "[their efforts] are thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity" (p.44). The journey/struggle to rid oppression and oppressive acts continues to be ongoing.

Two key terms developed by Freire are conscientization and praxis. Conscientization, or critical consciousness, is described by bell hooks as "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance" (1994, p.47). This term meaning "consciousness raising" is about understanding the social and political contradictions of the world and taking action against them in one's own life.[1] Freire writes, "to achieve the goal, the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality" (1970, p.52). Praxis is the combination of continued action and reflection. Freire deconstructs praxis throughout his work. At one

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[1] http://tx.cpusa.org/school/classics/freire.htm

point, he writes "On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection" (1970, p. 66). Freire's theories embrace spaces and acts of resistance and resilience. He was influenced by his own experiences in times of revolution, just as young people's acts of resistance are responses to their own revolutionary ideas and beliefs.

SHAPING THE FIELD

In order to understand the value and need for social justice to be an inherent practice in youth work, it is necessary to recognize that ideas and practices that emerge throughout different decades have a major impact on youth voice and how young people react and respond to the stimuli in their lives. It is necessary to examine the larger economic, social, and cultural forces that bear upon the actions, behaviors, and experiences of youth in order to develop effective policy (Cammarota and Ginwright, 2002). Walker, Gambone, and Walker (2011) explain how, during the early 1900s, social activism in youth work was focused on anti-child labor laws and expanded into public education. Starting in 1960, and for the next two decades, youth work developed as a response to moral panic about youth and their perceived potential for trouble. McDaniel (2015) explains how this prevention/intervention model was detrimental and the message it sent was clear: that young people were expected to make poor decisions. The ideas from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* begin to have an impact here as well: young people were dehumanized, with their actions and environment being controlled and predicted by adults in power who passed policies based on the assumption that young people were "delinquents.".Another key idea in Freire's work notes the oppressive structures of education, or the "banking system," in which teachers are the holders of knowledge and students are simply repositories which must take in and memorize such knowledge. By criticizing what were considered to be traditional methods and models of education, Freire paved the way for reform and change to depolarize the roles of adults and young people in educational settings and beyond, including youth work. By the 1990s, a more positive, strengths-based approach began to form, focusing on youth development. Still, this approach was based on the idea that "young people need to be changed and molded by adults into productive members of society." (McDaniel, 2015, p.41). Even today, the field continues to shift and re-mold in response to social, cultural, and political factors. Through jokes, social media posts, and conversations, young people are talking about race, gender or culture as it relates to current social and political movements every day. As indicated by history of the field, social justice movements are reflective of cultural shifts in perceptions of youth and other communities. Freire's ideas support the notion that youth work is a fluid, transformable field. While youth work will continue to change, and the previous social justice movements within it may not necessarily be supported now, they provide a valuable, historical foundation on which to build knowledge and understanding in the present and future.

PERCEPTIONS IN THE PRESENT

HOLDING MYSELF ACCOUNTABLE

I have spent several months thinking about the role of social justice in youth work and how I incorporate it into my own practice. Because my own worldview and experiences may not be the same as those of the youth with whom I work, I feel it is necessary to take a social justice approach so that I may be able to recognize my own biases and create a more equitable experience for young people. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks explains the value of this: "To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin." (1994, p.13). Acts of resistance will continue to happen, and should be expected or even embraced. This empowering act of allowing youth to speak up, speak out, and voice the injustices they

experience cannot happen if the adults in their lives refuse to be vulnerable themselves (hooks, 1994). While recognizing my own biases and background is necessary, my actions and reflective practice cannot stop there.

Each time I came together with colleagues to discuss my topic, I left the meeting perplexed, with more questions than answers. Then, after a particularly in-depth group feedback session, it hit me: the ways in which young people will be empowered and feel a sense of justice or equity will shift and change along with the growing and development of each generation of young people, one after the next. Rather than looking for the answers to putting social justice into youth work, perhaps it really is about sitting with the questions. What questions can I ask of my staff and volunteers that will allow them to include social justice in their work with intention and purpose? Instead of just "talking the talk" of Freire's ideas, I must also "walk the walk." Freire writes that his theories are "a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed..." (1970 p.48). I decided to go to the source: the youth themselves. I wanted to hear their ideas and identify key questions that will provide personal accountability for my own youth work practice. Everyone comes to youth work with a variety of experience and understanding. I hope to use the questions that emerged as a continuous check-in tool for myself and my fellow staff members and volunteers, as well as for current and future youth workers who want to continue to incorporate social justice into their work and need an additional tool for reflective practice and dialogue.

WALKING THE WALK

I conducted two group interviews, one with a group of six 6th grade students, and one with a group of seven 8th grade students. I explained that I was writing a paper on how to use social justice in our afterschool program. Based on the four components of social justice I described earlier, I provided the basic definition of social justice: *that everyone has access to a variety of opportunities and will be treated fairly in order to create a safe place to grow*. I asked seven questions about social justice, how students perceived it, how they felt it was or was not present in the afterschool program, and how they'd like the adults to prepare or respond using social justice as a foundation for their work. Each group interview lasted about 45 minutes.

The young people provided valuable insight that helped shape my next steps of analysis. Both groups felt that the after-school program tried to be fair in several ways, such as offering a snack to everyone, accepting people from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and allowing youth to choose the activities in which they participated. One student also felt support from the adults, noting "if they're struggling with something, they try to help out the best they can." When asked about the role of the adults through a series of questions, the youth indicated they wanted adults to act as role models using a variety of adjectives: active, "respectful but not too hard-headed," responsible, funny, relaxed, "like they care," and chill.

I took the students' responses and did an informal content analysis of their thoughts and ideas. Combining this feedback with my own preparation for this paper as well as my reflections from each meeting, I identified four themes for the questions: worldview (of the program leader), distribution of power or control, relationship-building, and intentional reflection. *Worldview* will allow me to continue to check in with any biases or lenses I may be using in my practice. When asked how adults can create a fair or just program, one student's response was "don't be racist," which is easier said than done. Using Freire's method of critical consciousness, I need to examine the injustices present in young people's lives and whether or not I am contributing to them based on my own status and circumstance. The *distribution of power or control* was influenced by Freire, as well as hooks, in order to make sure the power held in youth work is not static or polarizing, but rather shared and fluid. *Relationship-building* came from several responses from the youth. Students stressed the importance of adults getting to know them. "Talk about things going on in life...good *and* bad things too," explained one youth. *Intentional reflection* developed from my current

model as well as the youth responses. Based on suggestions from the youth as to how adults can support them and "show up right" for their programs, I developed questions that can be posed at different points of a youth program, whether it's during the preparation, implementation, or reflection portion of programming. The questions are listed in the table below.

Worldview	Power/Control	Relationships	Reflection
• In what ways are you different from the young people in your program? • What are some similarities between the youth and yourself? • How will you acknowledge differences in backgrounds or experience?	• What opportunities are there for youth to make personal choices in your program? • What sorts of consequences will you provide and how will they be explained? • What sorts of variety is there in the program? • In what ways are you modeling the behavior that you'd like the students to follow? • How is power shared during your time?	• In what ways will you connect with the students? • How can you help out a student who is struggling? • What sorts of questions can you ask to understand why a student might be struggling? • How are you providing encouragement to students during the program? • What did you learn about a young person today? • Who is someone you'd like to follow up with later?	• What are some of the current issues affecting young people today? • What areas or topics can you learn more about to better understand your work? • In what ways will you try to understand why a student is showing resistance? • Were there any moments of resistance? Describe them. • What is something you struggled with during the program?

LOOKING AHEAD

Social justice is a necessary component of youth work. Young people have responded and reacted to political and cultural events of time throughout history, and they will continue to do so. Paulo Freire had an immeasurable impact on youth work and beyond, influencing how we look at the distribution of power and create solutions to local and global injustices. Within youth work, that means looking first within ourselves as youth workers to examine biases and recognizing how social justice is or is not present in our daily practice. In order to put into practice what Freire writes, it is necessary to think about the components of social justice and the themes listed above so that roles may be depolarized and young people will feel more empowered. Social justice in youth work acts as a spotlight to a variety of injustices and inequities, and rather than ignoring or overlooking it, I must be open to moments, spaces, and voices of resistance. If I close myself off to these ideas, I will only be adding to the tension, exacerbating the resistance further. I may not be able to rid the world of all its injustices, but I now have a tool, or compass, to help me navigate through the tough stuff. While I may not have control over how the young people act or behave each day, I can think introspectively and make sure I am trying to control and adjust to my own actions and beliefs using the sets of questions developed from this experience. As youth workers, it is our duty to continue to continue to incorporate social justice with intention, preparation, and reflection. While we may not have the solutions, sometimes it might still be enough to sit with the questions themselves and think critically about our practice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MEGAN HARTMAN grew up in Wisconsin and moved to St. Paul in 2007 to attend Macalester College, where she majored in Theatre and French. Megan spent a few years touring around the United States and Canada with a children's theatre in Montana before attending graduate school at Arizona State University. After earning her MFA in Theatre for Youth in 2014, Megan moved back to Minnesota and is currently a Senior Program Manager at East Side Neighborhood Services. Megan supervises an after school enrichment program at Venture Academy, a charter middle school, and lead a cohort of East Side's 6-12 program managers. In her free time, she enjoys spending time outdoors with my dog, Teddy, as well as my husband.