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Learning to Unlearn within teacher education – transformative professional learning to challenge and re-frame understandings of a social justice mentality.

Social justice, as a term, has become a buzzword for positive intentions towards tackling inequity or inequality (Ladson-Billings, 2023). It can be a slippery term whereby the complexities and realities can be lost, misinterpreted, or underemphasized leading people to lose ‘sight of the big picture and the injustice that prevails’ (Ladson-Billings, 2023, p. 3). Additionally, there is a recent and urgent call for an authentic examination of social justice in relation to schooling (Gandolfi & Mills, 2023; Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021). However, my purpose here is not to state what social justice is, how it works or how it manifests itself in societies. My research actually originated in the exploration of a charity mentality within education, its implications, and potentially transformative methods of professional development to disrupt this mentality and re-frame it with a social justice one.

The misinterpretation of social justice as a charitable, moral or empathetic endeavour has a long history, and the argument against a charitable or philanthropic approach to social justice can be drawn as far back as JS Mill in the 1860’s and, though re-packed for modern audiences via Comic Relief and Live Aid, the principles remain the same: condescension of the ‘Powerful Giver’ and dependency of the ‘Grateful Receiver’ (Darnton & Kirk, 2011). This dynamic ensures the continuation of a colonial conceptualisation of the world or what Andreotti (2006, p. 44) likens to a ‘sanctioned ignorance’ for societies in the global North, what I call a ‘smokescreen’ which prevents critical engagement whilst perpetuating the ‘myth’ of the powerful ‘North’ as responsible ‘good guys’ on a civilising mission for the global ‘Other’. Additionally, approaches such as active global citizenship have possibly deepened the issues by unintentionally continuing imperialistic thinking and reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices (Andreotti, 2006) as well as creating little developers (Biccum, 2010), able to participate in the global economy but without the skills or experience to critically engage with issues such as inequality and injustice.

I would argue further that this pervasive notion of charity mentality is not limited to our perceptions of the global ‘other’ but also with the ‘other’ within our local societies, communities and classrooms enabling the continuation of fundamental social injustices as the status quo.

In response, my research explores ways to remove this 'smokescreen of sanctioned ignorance', to promote a social justice **mentality** as a form of critical pedagogy: a practice in critical thinking and questioning rooted in a commitment to equity which results in ethical action and challenges the status quo (Freire, 1998; Jordao, 2004; Giroux, 2010). To do this effectively I adapted and designed a framework for transformative professional development inspired by Jan Fook (2006) which engaged participants in essential 'unlearning' of the charity mentality or deconstruction of the assumptions and preconceptions of the 'other' followed by re-framing of knowledge through the lens of social justice. The Learning to Unlearn framework was designed to initiate active unlearning and re-framing as crucial deep learning (Illeris, 2003; Mezirow, 1997) by effectively challenging educators' engagement with deeply engrained perceptions or 'difficult knowledge' (Britzman, 1998) to engender a transformative shift in perspective and practice. I acknowledge that the process can be challenging and uncomfortable for the participant and requires careful support and some injection of levity however, Illeris (2003, p. 402) would argue, and I agree, that it is necessary to engage in personal conflict to initiate personal change and subsequently influence professional practice. This is pertinent for teachers as Jordao (2004) suggests they are 'especially resistant to change' (p. 22) and prone to habit formation (Sims *et al*, 2021) which, in general, limits the success of teacher professional development approaches. Additionally, literature suggests that opportunities for educators to engage in social justice either during ITE programmes or CPD are 'generally non-existent or very superficial' (Gandolfi & Mills, 2023, p 575).

In response, I hope to build on and further explore the efficacy of the Learning to Unlearn model as 'research for social justice' (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, p 7) specifically with those beginning their teacher pathway to evaluate the potential in engendering an early social justice mindset, and how it might influence future practice to enable a more equitable education.

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