

## **BRAVEST GIRL IN THE WORLD: EXPLORING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH ADOLESCENTS' LENS**

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### **Abstract**

As professors of education in an urban community, we wanted to identify mechanisms that would allow young people in the urban core the opportunity to share their unique voices with the world and for us to better understand their views on social justice and social change. The purpose of this paper is to discuss adolescent student perspectives on social justice. Data was gathered from narratives written by students in which they identified the “Dreamkeepers” in their worlds, and how they would define a social justice advocate. Findings suggest that these young writers had deep thoughts about the policies and practices that create socially just environments; were able to recognize, identify, and label characteristics and behaviors of social justice advocates—Dreamkeepers—both in peers and adults; and they strive to emulate these ideals and have a deep desire not only to achieve their dreams but also to enable others.

**Keywords:** social justice, advocacy education, urban student voice, culturally relevant pedagogy

Langston Hughes (Hughes and Hughes 1932/1996) asks us to dream of a world that is limitless and full of possibilities. His poem, "The Dream Keeper," specifically calls on readers to see the power of their own dreams and to envision a reality that might one day welcome them. Knowing the "too rough world" can sometimes be a place where dreams are not allowed to flourish, Hughes offers to protect those who come to him, so that he can "wrap them in a blue-cloud cloth" and keep them safe. He suggests the very seeds of social justice in this powerful poem, and he encourages us to become Dreamkeepers—agents of social justice and social

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change—on behalf of anyone marginalized in society (Rampersand, 2002). As professors of education in an urban community, we viewed Hughes’ important poem as a direct call to action. Indeed, we wanted to identify mechanisms that would allow young people in the urban core the opportunity to share their unique voices with the world. In doing so, we would not only have a better understanding of their views on social justice and social change, but we would hopefully empower them to recognize the power that lies in their ability to speak up when injustice occurs around them. With these ideas in mind, we created an online literary magazine for students in grades three through twelve that specifically asked them to identify who the “Dreamkeepers” were in their worlds, and how they would define a social justice advocate. Ultimately, this paper attempts to illuminate student voice as a vehicle to bring about transformational teaching and learning and that results improved academic achievement.

### **Background/Purpose**

It is commonly agreed upon that a population of underprivileged youth, who experience social injustices such as poverty, homelessness, parental drug use, and unsafe living environments, make up a significant portion of students in the United States school systems.

Student populations that seem the most affected by these inequities include students of color and immigrant/refugee students, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender students (LGBT), and children with disabilities (Harley, Nowalk, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002). These injustices have been associated with school-related consequences such as unequal access to education opportunities, decreased academic achievement, grade repetition, expulsions and suspensions, and higher dropout rates. Further, schools situated in urban settings too often have disproportionate representation of students of color, poverty, and schools that fail them (Kozol, 1991). We believe it is critical to provide access to systems that will confront these injustices and allow all students to reach their full potential. In essence, each of us must become *Social Justice Advocates*, and we must also encourage those we serve to understand and embrace these ideals so that they are able to identify policies and practices that promote injustice and advocate to influence social, economic, political and educational change for the individuals, families, and communities in which they live, work, and serve.

### **Conceptual Framework**

We define *Social Justice Advocacy* as, “the fundamental valuing of fairness and equity in resources, rights, and treatment for marginalized individuals and groups of people who do not share equal power in society” (Constantine et. al., 2007; McCarther, et. al., 2013); in other words, someone who stand up for the rights of others. Thus, *Social Justice Advocates* are those individuals who espouse these ideas. Essentially, for the purposes of working with adolescents and for the online literary magazine, we used the term “Dreamkeeper” rather than advocate and then provided students with our framework’s definition. Students were invited to submit an essay describing a “Dreamkeeper” in their lives, and we explained to them that a Dreamkeeper is someone who works to uplift others in some way—someone who believes in social justice and equity for all and is willing to defend these principles. Further, we looked to the ideals of culturally relevant pedagogy to think about how best to provide an educational experience that

honored what students already knew and could do (Hefflin 2002; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011). We hoped our invitation to submit an essay with the theme of social justice at its core would ignite in them a desire to become change agents—something required in the very tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2003; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011; Sleeter 2012; Ukpokodu, 2011).

### **Methodology**

We were guided by three essential research questions: (1) How do students in grades six – eight define social justice? (2) Who do they see as examples of social justice individuals in their lives? and (3) How can we use student voice on the issue of social justice to transform teaching and learning and improve achievement for urban students? We received 117 essays in all, with 53 coming from grades six through eight, and for this discussion, we are focusing on the student entries from these middle grades. The participants are all students in the urban core in a large, Midwestern city with a history of deep racial and economic divide. Of the 53 participants, 23 were African American; 15 Latino; 10 White; 3 Asian; and 2 Multiracial. They attended public, charter, and private schools, all of which receive Title I support.

Marshall and Rossman's (1999) six phase qualitative method was used to analyze the data. The first phase includes organizing the data and becoming familiar with it. For this study, this meant we individually read all essays. In the second phase (generating themes and patterns), each of us read and examined each essay for patterns, recurrent ideas, or language to create themes. We then came together as research partners to compare recurrent themes and reach consensus on their meaning. The third step was the coding phase and involved the development of a coding scheme. We met several times to discuss revisions of the themes and until all data were coded and final descriptions were created. The next two stages—the fourth and fifth—involved working with the data by testing emergent understandings and searching for alternative explanations; that is, we examined the data as a whole to develop a broad understanding of the patterns, including looking for patterns that did not fit the themes. We reconciled discrepancies by searching for alternative explanations to the data and by modifying when necessary. We also used an outside auditor to review our work and make sure we did not miss any categories, themes, patterns, ideas, or expressions. The sixth stage entailed writing up the report (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

### **Emergent Themes/Results**

Three themes emerged from our data that connect directly to the research questions. Indeed these themes centered on the fact that youth and young adolescents are more than capable of responding to complex questions and are indeed very astute and aware of their ability to bring about change. To be specific:

Theme #1: *Youth and young adolescents understand very clearly issues of equity and fairness.* Nicholas, in Sixth Grade remarked:

I think that everybody should be treated fairly. My mom and dad are my Dreamkeepers because they always encourage me to do what I want and to follow my dreams. Every Christmas my family picks out a couple of kids that are not as fortunate as me, and we get him or her a bunch of presents. Something else that I can do to help others is to donate cans of food to food pantries. At our school, we donate a lot of cans and even socks for people who cannot afford them. I think our school is the most giving.

Clearly, this student recognized not only that the world should be “fair,” but that he had a responsibility to help others in need. Further, fairness and helping others are behaviors that define social justice for Nicholas.

Theme #2: *Youth and young adolescents believe they can have an impact on social structures.*  
Diana, in Seventh Grade stated:

Maybe you can imagine that one day, you get arrested with no evidence, law enforcers are heartless, and you know nothing about the laws. You are absolutely confused, terrified, helpless, and have no money to bail yourself out of jail. The protection of human rights is just one aspect of social justice that promotes the rights for human dignity, impartial treatment, and equitable opportunities. Among the advocates for social justice that I know, my late grandfather stands out. My grandfather was a lawyer who had strongly supported social justice in a world that had none. He may not have been rich, but he was intelligent, kind, and compassionate to compensate tenfold. He fought for people who had no means to defend themselves in court. He gave them hope and rightfulness, representing them with unadulterated wisdom and passion. He stood for truth, righteousness, and fairness.

Jared, in Eighth Grade asserted:

When a basic right is infringed upon, people like Harvey Milk, Billie Jean King, Senator Lynn C. Woosley, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King stand up. We are blessed that there are those who remembered the liberty this nation was founded on and stood up when it was being threatened. Being different should not lead to being ostracized. I want to be among the voices of those whose voice has been stolen: people like that girl or boy in the hallway who walk with their head down in fear. I want to be an advocate for this simple reason—to free those we have imprisoned. I want to stand up, speak out, and be among the past and present Dreamkeepers.

Young people know what it means to sacrifice for others and they welcome the challenge. They are not confused by these ideals and they seem unafraid and courageous as they express the desire to advocate for others. As Diana and Jared reveal here, they see characteristics and behaviors that define social justice, that is to say, Diana - intelligence, kindness, and compassion; Jared – standing up for those who are different; and they desire to emulate individuals who embody these ideals.

Theme #3: *Youth and young adolescents are able to identify and recognize what social justice advocacy looks like in others.*

Diviley, in Eighth Grade wrote:

Education creates the basis of social equality and the people who made it happen. We call these heroes social justice icons or Dreamkeepers. Dreamkeepers are those who stand up to others for others in return for justice for all. A Dreamkeeper has to be brave, determined, and stubborn enough to not care if they get detained or hated. They will not give up no matter what until good is done. A great example of a social justice icon would be the “Bravest Girl in the World,” Malala Yousafzai. She and I are very different. She actually likes school and education. She likes it so much, she would risk her life for it. In 2009, she wrote a blog about how she promotes education for girls (since girls were banned from going to school). Thanks to her courageous act for speaking for herself and millions of other girls wanting to learn, she was awarded the International Children’s Peace Prize.

That reminds me of what someone wise once said: “A dream doesn’t come true through magic; it takes sweat, determination, and work.” Because of those three things, Pakistan released their first education bill, in which all children will be required to attend school by the end of 2015. Now, no kid has to worry if they will be that one kid with books and a bright future or the kid who has to work as a child to help sustain his family. We all owe thanks to one girl who saved many children, jobs, and lives. This girl made a young girl’s dream come true of getting education and possibly becoming a professor, a lawyer, or even a parent who can help their children with their homework at home. She will not give up; not even a couple of bullets will stop her and she is my social justice icon.

Diviley, whose powerful essay inspired our title, as a young adolescent girl, identifies social justice characteristics and qualities in an age-mate who lived far away in a country whose culture vastly differed from her own, yet she valued the extraordinary courage and deep moral conviction displayed by Malala Yousafzai’s steadfast commitment to schooling. From this we can determine that adolescents are quite capable of understanding the complex ideas surrounding social justice, and indeed Diviley defines social justice as one who uses her or his voice and abilities to change the very fabric of social structures in their society.

### **Discussion**

Our university is situated in the urban core and thus we feel an obligation to find ways to provide relevant opportunities for young adolescents to engage in meaningful and empowering endeavors. Indeed our city, like many others, endured decades of racial isolation, separation, and injustice, culminating in a lengthy and painful desegregation battle (Davis, 2004). As a result, there is still great fragmentation within the school systems, and limited and uneven access to quality teaching and learning experiences (McCarther & Caruthers, 2009). With these ideas in mind, our project sought to replace a void and make audible student voices that have long been silenced. Further, we sought to discover avenues to transform not only our own teaching practice, but also to transform the work of practitioners who serve youth in urban settings. Essentially, what we discovered was that these young writers wanted to be heard and had deep thoughts about the policies and practices that create socially just environments. In urban communities and schools, this is necessary and vital to ensuring overall academic and life success. Our findings outlined above clearly suggest students recognize, identify and label characteristics and behaviors of social justice advocates—Dreamkeepers—both in their peers and

in adults. Further, they strive to emulate these ideals and have a deep desire to not only achieve their dreams but to enable others to do the same.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Research in the area of multicultural education and culturally relevant pedagogy make very clear the need to honor what students already know and can do (Hefflin 2002; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011). Indeed, culturally relevant pedagogy mandates the need for teachers to encourage students to become advocates for social change (Gay, 2003; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011; Sleeter 2012; Ukpokodu, 2011). We believe educators must design, develop and implement opportunities and experiences that support and nurture growth and expression of student voice. What we have learned from these students – Nicholas, Diana, Jared, Diviley and their peers – is the importance of structuring our teaching and learning activities to embrace individuality and voice. Our hope is that through modeling this behavior, we encourage our students who are current practitioners in urban schools to do the same.

Students in the first volume of our online magazine are inspiring and full of light and life. When we consider the plight of too many young children globally and how critical it is for us to place value on their lives and thoughts, we believe very strongly in the need to provide access to share exactly what they see, think, and feel about the world around them. In our particular neighborhood, there are examples of social injustice every day, and we believe it is our responsibility to raise submerged voices and to listen to what children and youth have to say about what is done in their name. These are lofty ideals described with impressive and academic terminology—social justice advocacy—but at the end of the day, it really is about providing a space and a welcoming place where children and youth feel safety to voice their thoughts; autonomy to air their dreams; and freedom to grow intellectually. In fact, we believe we must empower our children and youth of today through encouragement and nurturing the passion, courage, and dreams they carry inside so that in their tomorrow, all children and youth will feel freedom to share their voices and know they, too, will be heard.

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