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**Reflective Reactions: Learning What it Means to Read and Reread Self Within a
Sixth Grade Social Action Project**

Joy L. Wiggins

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This article focuses on the ways in which social action can be read and reread through one white female teacher's experience. More specifically, how *I* read my actions and how I was read *by* them illustrates the compelling need to consistently reevaluate our perception of what we believe aligns with the ideals of building socially just and safe communities and what could subvert the very causes we are trying to help. This article originally started as a tribute to the success of my sixth-grade students writing letters to the mayor about the problems with drugs, gangs, and homeless people in their local park. However, as I revisited their letters, our exchanges about this project, and then a letter by the local neighborhood association, I realized that my actions as the teacher could be read in a variety of ways. How people read their actions and how they are read by others can be revealing, intimidating, and quite complicated. Displacing critical fixed spaces of what social justice is and how it is perceived by the actor and the one acted upon is open to a variety of complex and reflexive readings.

In what follows, I unpack three analytical readings of a social action project that took place during the 2004-2005 academic school year in an urban elementary school with a predominately Latino/Latina student population located in Dallas, Texas. The first reading will describe a successful social action project and the events leading up to the involvement of the mayor and other city officials. The second reading will describe the way I was read by the neighborhood association. This reading summarizes the multilayered ways in which what I believed was a spontaneous and bonding social action project with my students was seen as hurtful and subversive by this association. The third reading is a reparative attempt in which I interrogate my own reactions to the project. Here I revisit the descriptions of effective multicultural educators [Bigelow, Christenson, Kary, Miner, and Peterson (1994) and Gay (2000)] and analyze the ways in which I could have addressed this project differently to reflect a more socially balanced approach.

First Reading: Clean Our Parks!—Letter Writing as Social Action in a Sixth-Grade Classroom

“Our local park is filthy and filled with gangbangers!” exclaimed Juan, a sixth-grade student in my language arts and social studies class. In our curriculum-required basal, Open Court, we’d just started a unit on taking a stand. Normally, the stories in this basal are mostly nondescript, with various themes. On this particular day, the students and I read a story about middle school students protesting their school being torn down. The teacher in the story guided a discussion about ways students could convince the school board not to tear it down.

While discussing the story, I asked the students what *they* would like to see changed in their community. Juan immediately stated that their local neighborhood park

was filled with gang members, trash, graffiti, and broken playground equipment. We began to brainstorm problems and solutions on the board. A spontaneous journey began that would change the dynamics of our classroom community for the rest of the year. My job as the *teacher* is to keep their interest and teach according to the NCLB's mandate on test-taking skills and my job as an *educator* is to teach them critical thinking and ways to act in socially just ways.

In order for students to act in socially just ways, we must provide an environment that encourages and shows them *how* to act. As teachers, we must model what action looks like and the variety of ways in which it can take place. Bigelow et al. (1994, pp. 4-5) give eight guidelines for a socially just and equitable classroom: It must be 1) grounded in the lives of our students; 2) critical; 3) multicultural, antiracist, and projustice; 4) participatory, experiential; 5) hopeful, joyful, kind, and visionary; 6) activist; 7) academically rigorous; and 8) culturally sensitive. Expanding spaces of learning for students in ways that allow all students to participate, be engaged, and critically interrogate social issues justifying their work is an integral component to the social justice classroom.

My goal was to address this spontaneous social action project according to these guidelines. The first reading of this social action project outlines the sociocultural context of the community, the concerns and actions of the students and me, and how these concerns were met by city officials.

The Context

This was my first year teaching sixth grade in an urban, low-income school located in north Texas. The school's population is 95.4% Latino/Latina, 90.9% economically disadvantaged, 35.1% limited English proficiency, and 64.5% considered

at-risk. According to the 2006 American Community Survey, the city's population is 1,192,538 with 52.9% White, 43.1% Hispanic, 24.2% Black, and 0.8% American Indian and Alaska Native Asian, 6.3% other race (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

I taught two sections of language arts and social studies. One section met with me in the morning for two hours of language arts and one hour of social studies. The other section met in the afternoon. Most of my students came from low-income households and faced difficult issues such as gangs, drugs, and violence. Some of the students had been held back and were discouraged. A few stated they had already been approached by gangs and talked about drive-by shootings on their streets. Academically, most of the students could neither read nor write on grade level. However, there is a strong sense of community in the neighborhood and when I left school every day I could see them playing outside of their houses with friends and family members. I always found it helpful to touch base by calling every parent at the beginning and middle of the year. Most of them were ready and willing to help their children behaviorally and academically, but I usually initiated contact. Many of them also led very busy lives, sometimes working two jobs. Most of them were supportive in returning their permission slips and any time I had other letters for them to sign.

Our Social Action Projects

Our journey started in December, 2004. I met with the first section in the morning and we discussed the story in the basal reader. It was this class that started the "letters to the mayor" project. First, the students and I discussed the problems with the park. They listed as problems:

- trash was strewn around,
- graffiti,

- gang members had shot out the security lights,
- the slides had been burned and had curse words written all over them, and
- homeless people had been sleeping under the slides.

I asked the students why they thought their park had these problems. Some of them said they really didn't know—maybe it was because there wasn't enough policing of the area. This was an interesting point to make, but I wondered if they saw their neighborhood as poverty-stricken. Over the course of the year, I gathered from students' responses that they were sheltered and didn't venture out of their neighborhood very often.

We discussed racism and they told me about the tensions between the African American section of the neighborhood and the Latino/Latina section. I explained that when two groups are victims of oppression, the dominant group creates an environment that causes the minority groups to fight against each other for power. This creates a sense of struggle for survival. The students equated this scenario to when they were younger and the older kids would pick on them. They would fight against each other to get in good graces with the older kids. They were beginning to understand what I meant, but I'm not sure it was fully recognized. I also asked them what experiences they had with Whites and many of them said they saw only White authority figures. For instance, our mayor, the police officer who visited us, and I are all White. I asked them what message that sent to them. They said, "That Whites are in charge." I told them about Peggy McIntosh's (1990) article on White privilege and how Whites carry around an invisible knapsack of privileges that they may not even be aware of. The students had never heard of that, and I remarked that it was also an eye-opener for me. They mentioned that in Mexico, lighter skin is considered higher class and they sometimes make fun of some of their friends for being dark-skinned. I asked them if they really felt this was the right

thing to do. After some thought, one student, Julianna, remarked, “No, because I know I don’t like it when people say I’m not really Mexican because I am light-skinned and don’t speak very good Spanish.”

They also believed they were middle-class. One student remarked that his cousin lived in a poor neighborhood, but *his* family was middle-class. Another student mentioned that his parents told him it was better than Mexico. Most of the time I just listened to the students’ responses and then asked them questions like, “If we look at our history and the ways we are still affected by race and issues like the border, how are people of color perceiving each other?” The students discussed racism in regards to the experiences facing African Americans, but “not us Mexicans.” When I asked them if they ever felt the brunt of racism, many of the students said no. I was surprised by this and didn’t know how to continue the discussion. I didn’t say: “No, but you are faced with discrimination and have you ever thought about this...?” I remember when I first experienced sexual discrimination—I was fifteen and fired for not going out with the boss. And of course there were countless other messages I received that women were inferior. If my students hadn’t experienced this yet, I didn’t want to be the one who burst their bubble. I was getting somewhere with these students, we were bonding. I didn’t want to alienate myself before we even began.

Another disturbing problem was the assertion by the students that the ice-cream man was selling marijuana cigarettes near the park to the children. Many of them said they heard they could buy it from him and they actually saw him selling it to one of their friends. The students stated that they were tired of these problems. I asked, “What can we do about this? Who can we talk to?” Juan immediately said, “The mayor!” Her name was Laura Miller. I thought we could certainly write to her, but I honestly didn’t think she

would respond. However, I told the students that we couldn't just tell the mayor's office about these problems, we had to come up with solutions and ideas to help make the park a safer environment.

I drew a line down the middle of the chalkboard and wrote "problems" on one side and "solutions" on the other. The students said they wanted more police to patrol the area, a list of park rules, and fines for each infraction. The students posted these other possible solutions:

- security cameras,
- fences,
- park hours,
- more security and picking up stray dogs,
- more lights with unbreakable glass so that people couldn't shoot the lights out, and
- help phones and a help button station to alert local authorities.

This list reminded me of the border patrol on the Texas/Mexico border. I asked them where they got the idea for unbreakable glass covering the lights. The responses varied from "we saw it on television," to "the media," to the recent coverage of Minuteman groups—private individuals who take it upon themselves to stop immigrants from crossing the border illegally. A fellow teacher, who was White, had stated in front of my class that she liked the idea of the Minuteman watch. When she left, I asked the students how they felt about the Minutemen. Answers ranged from "it was racist" to "they should do the same thing to the Canadian border." I asked them why it was racist and Jonathan said that he couldn't understand what the big deal was. People were here to

make a better life—isn't that the point of the United States? I found this to be quite insightful.

I was amazed to see these students become so engaged when just the week before they seemed so unmotivated. I had struggled up to this point trying to find ways to get them up to grade level with reading and writing, not to mention getting them motivated and behaving better. This was the first time I felt we bonded as a classroom community. Every single child in the class was involved and proposed solutions. One of my most challenging students, Juan, was the one who suggested contacting the mayor.

As they were writing their letters, I wrote an email to the mayor's office to find out their address and inform them of the letters. The next week, I received a call from the mayor's office asking me to send the letters right away and stating that the mayor was very interested in hearing what the students had to say. I couldn't believe it. I decided that the press might want to follow up on this story. I wrote to a local editorial reporter, Vicki Loe Hicks, for the *Dallas Morning News*. She was very interested in the story. She came to the school to interview and photograph the students. I wrote a letter to each of the parents for permission to speak with the reporter. All of the parents indicated their permission and only one parent called me to ask more about the project. The students' letters initiated a response from the mayor's office and the local media that I never expected.

We ran into one problem: The school district did not want us talking to the press about the local violence and crime problems because they had just issued a report stating crime was down. We were clearly singing a different tune. However, the reporter had already come out to the school, taken our pictures, and was running the story. Two weeks later, our story and letters were posted in the *City Morning News* Sunday editorials

(Dallas Morning News, February 13, 2005).. A big page was dedicated to our cause. I bought a newspaper for each student and distributed them on Monday. On January 25, we had also received an envelope with the mayor's office insignia containing letters addressed to each student, stating:

Thank you taking the time to write to me with your concerns about the safety and appearance of Ledbetter Park. My office has requested the appropriate City staff members to investigate the matter. By taking a stand for your beliefs and voicing your suggestions, you become a part of the government process that works hard to create a positive living environment. It is nice to know that students, such as yourself, are interested in making this city a better and safer community.

(Personal communication)

As each article and letter came, I would copy, laminate, and post them outside our classroom so that the whole school knew what we were doing. It was important for the other students in the school to see how to take action in their neighborhood.

By March 3, I received another letter from the Parks and Recreation department (see Figure 2). The letter stated that the police department had made several arrests, recovered guns and stolen vehicles, and were investigating a possible drug house. They were addressing the trash and graffiti issues and would conduct crime prevention programs in our school. We had a police officer come to the classroom to write down details of the problems the students saw in the park and the neighborhood. We were also instructed to email him whenever we saw another problem in the area.

{Designer: insert Figure 1, "Wiggins Figure 1.jpg" here}

The Parks and Recreation department, in addition to the police presence in the neighborhood, changed drastically because of these letters. Students told me that they

were seeing more police cars and other service vehicles cleaning up the park and surrounding areas. They couldn't believe their letters got so much attention and they were proud of our whole class for standing up for their neighborhood. By contacting city officials with thought-provoking letters that provided solutions to the problems, the students learned that social action can be effective and gratifying.

Second Reading: A Rereading of Clean Our Parks! Letter Writing for Social Action in a Sixth Grade Classroom

Toward the end of the school year, I received a letter that my principal said had been sitting on her desk for quite some time. It had been written by an individual representing the neighborhood association. She gave me the letter and said it came to the school and wasn't addressed to anyone in particular. She told me that she read it, but she didn't want me to get upset by it. I didn't open the letter for a few days. When I finally did, I was deeply upset by what I read and didn't even finish it. It had been a rough year. I was finishing my doctoral dissertation from Ohio State University, but living in north Texas teaching my first full year in elementary school. I had been teaching for many years in different contexts and capacities, but this was the first time I taught under a full-time contract. I had been studying multicultural education and during the years of my doctoral studies I had begun peeling away the layers of my own White privilege, exploring my perceptions of race, class, gender, and sexuality and examining how these undergird many of our institutions. I thought I had learned a lot from reading and writing about social justice initiatives. I was ready to put these ideals into practice. However, this letter stated I had done otherwise:

Ms. Wiggins, you are a White female who is well educated and in a barrio neighborhood where you need to be culturally sensitive and teach children to be proud of what their parents and grandparents have accomplished over the last 10 years. You need to know the history of this neighborhood before you fill the minds of our children with misinformation. Now you have instilled a fear of living in a neighborhood that is safe [sic] than some of the perceivably nicer neighborhoods and beginning to prosper, you have taught them to complain about your perception of what you call a dire situation. They look up to you because you are their teacher and what the teacher says is gospel to them. My question to you is why these children wrote those letters with the complaints when they've never expressed the complaints before. I believe you had to be the instigator. What was your agenda? Was it getting to meet the Mayor or getting your picture in the newspaper? There are more positive ways, instead of teaching the children to "Take a Stand" in a negative fashion—why didn't you teach them to take a stand in a positive way by highlighting something positive in their neighborhood and inviting the Mayor to come to that?

The letter noted the specific changes that local police officers and the neighborhood association had implemented to improve the neighborhood throughout the years.

The letter concludes:

You have set back the community in our efforts to project a positive image and build pride in the community by putting this lie on the news and in the media. You are a disgrace as a teacher. Why is it you taught children to "Take a Stand" in a negative way? West (City) has many occasions when you and the children can witness the power of positive actions in West Dallas. Why don't you bring your

children and their families to celebrate El Dia del Nino with us at Jaycee/Zaragoza park on April 30th? Then you can see what West (City) and Ledbetter Eagle Ford neighborhood is really about. Why is it you set out to destroy the pride and accomplishments in a good and loving neighborhood because I am proud of this community, I am proud of what this community stands for, this community is a community of families who care about each other and their neighbors, they care about their parks and schools, they care about their city, they care about how people perceive the Ledbetter Eagle Ford Neighborhood and so should you.

My initial reaction to this letter was anger mixed with guilt and perplexity. At the time, I read only half of the letter. It was the end of the school year. I didn't want to disappoint the students by reading the letter to them. More importantly, I didn't want them to rethink the significance of the project or its impact on their lives. Finally, I didn't want them to see me as their White teacher that just wanted to get on the news. Even though I knew they respected me and loved me back, I had that twinge of White guilt that had me wanting to remain their favorite teacher regardless of my skin color.

Not until after reading and re-reading the letter (three years later), along with my drafts of this paper, did I realize that I needed to reanalyze the social justice nature of the project. As I read the letter again, I realized that some of it was true—I hadn't done my research about the improvements the neighborhood had already made. However, it was not my intention to get on the news or destroy the neighborhood's reputation. I felt I was doing exactly what social justice educators are supposed to do: instill integrity and empower my students. I loved these students and certainly didn't want to insult the neighborhood. However, in the back of my mind, I knew that part of what the letter

writer said was true. I didn't consult the neighborhood association and I had forgotten the importance of including the community in social justice pursuits. I looked up the community's association on the Internet but didn't find any information. I wanted to contact them and just let them know about my current rethinking of the project. Also, I planned to do more social justice work with the school and wanted to establish a reparative rapport with the association.

Third Reading: Reparative Reactions

A big part of me still believes I did the best I could at the time of the project. After an email discussion with an editor about this article and its gaps in deconstructing poverty, homelessness, drugs, gangs, and what my students had gleaned from the project, I began to revisit that particular school year: my actions, the students, and that one letter that made me rethink the whole success of the project.

As I stated in the first reading, as teachers we must model what action looks like and the variety of ways in which it can take place. I revisited the eight guidelines for social justice educators laid out by Bigelow et al. (1994). Or at least that's what I meant to do, but I left out a few things. I didn't go straight to the neighborhood association and I didn't really see how much my skin color affected the way I navigated the project and my interactions with the city officials and my concurrent inaction with the local community resources. I didn't ground the project in the lives of the students, nor was I culturally sensitive to the local community.

Upon reflection, I should have researched the history of the neighborhood and the accomplishments of the neighborhood association, and checked out the students' assertions. I relied on my own cultural assumptions that the mayor was the top person to

go to instead of thinking about the students and their families being the right agents of change for their own community. Had I done so, it would have promoted a sense of empowerment among the children and their families. Gay (2000) states the responsibilities of multicultural educators to be cultural organizers, cultural mediators, and orchestrators of social contexts for learning (p. 42). As a cultural mediator, Gay states that teachers should:

Help students clarify their ethnic identities, honor other cultures, develop positive cross-ethnic and cross-cultural relationships, and avoid perpetuating prejudices, stereotypes, and racism. The goal is to create communities of culturally diverse learners who celebrate and affirm each other and work collaboratively for their mutual success, where empowerment replaces powerlessness and oppression. (p. 43)

By allowing students to take the lead on the project, I allowed space for this, but what I didn't do was help facilitate discussion on who else had power to enact change besides the mayor.

Discussing Issues of Power and Social Issues

Discussions on what causes the formation of gangs, why people sell and use drugs, and the root causes of homelessness should be explored with students. The students indicated that there was garbage strewn about and homeless people too. I'm not sure if the students meant to conflate homeless people with garbage or if this was my perception of what they were saying. Why did students consider their homeless neighbors to be garbage and what were their perceptions of homeless people? How do they think people get to that point in their lives and how is homelessness perpetuated? Why did they

believe that their park was not a normal park—where did they gain the perception that their park had problems? How was it different than other parks they had seen? Discussing the racial tensions between African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, and Whites in order to find common ground for more positive relations could have been explored as well. Discussing the origins of these tensions and how they are perpetuated by individuals, institutions, and society at large would be a starting point to continue the conversation long after the park had been repaired.

By examining the roots of poverty and the vicious cycle it perpetuates, students can begin to appreciate the larger aspects of these kinds of social issues. We began to do this in our discussions about race, White privilege, and the Minutemen, but I don't think we went into as much depth as we should have. Students can begin to deconstruct power dynamics by critiquing images in the media, job structures, and legislative decisions. Students need to examine the alternatives to better facilitate change in these areas.

Involving the Community

I could see that in order to be a cultural mediator and to create a socially just and equitable classroom, I needed to not only help students see the positive role of grassroots organizations in their neighborhoods, but also look at what action we could take as a school and community. We could have gone to the park after school and invited parents, administrators, and other members of the community to look at the park—then assess what needed to be done. We could have started the clean-up ourselves, and then called in the neighborhood association and other community activists. By collaborating this way, we could have strengthened relationships within the community. The neighborhood association's letter discussed all the improvements that had already been made. We could

have traced the history of the park, the neighborhood, and patterns of growth. The students could have held a forum for the PTA in order to address some of their concerns.

Finding out how the students, parents, and other members of the community viewed me as a helper and teacher would also have initiated conversation that could help us converse in more hopeful, visionary, and honest ways. Asher (2007) states, “When both discourse and practice consistently, explicitly, and critically interrogate the historical and present-day intersections of race, culture, [and] gender, and foster a self-reflexive engagement with difference, teachers can open up more meaningful, situated ways of knowing self and other and rethinking extant relations of power” (p. 66). Multicultural educators need to consistently revisit the ways in which we believe we are “helping” these social justice causes. Examining the way we “read” and are read by others in the community is essential to the real change we seek. We cannot live in a vacuum where we believe our training in social justice is enough. These intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender can be messy and complicated.

I believed this project to be a success and, initially (as my principal said), I didn’t take the association’s letter to mean that the project was intentionally damaging. However, with some distance, I see more clearly the mistakes I made in not involving the community and how my actions were unintentionally racist. In some ways, I contradicted what social justice educators do by passing up the one organization that cared the most about the neighborhood. This creates a sense of trust with the neighborhood and promotes this sense of a “safe community.” It is with this self-reflexiveness that I forge on and unpack the project in ways that will help me to grow as a critical social justice educator. It can be painful and embarrassing, but ultimately it opens spaces of revolutionary growth for everyone involved.

Note

Pseudonyms were used to protect student privacy.

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