Bridging Social Inequality in the Classroom

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Abstract: *Social-impact educators build bridges across social inequality in the classroom to improve the lives of everyone they teach. The bridge-building metaphor allows educators to use students' social position to deepen an understanding of others' commonalities and differences. For learners, it requires courage to build the bridge from where you are to where the 'other' is. Recognizing social identities in the classroom allows students to see and embrace the privileges that society affords those identities, increasing everyone's capacity to contribute to the development of an inclusive society. As Alexis de Tocqueville perceptively observed, liberty and inequality tend to grow or shrivel in tandem. As a result, it remains challenging for free societies to limit inequality without also constraining freedom.*

Keywords: *Inequality, diversity, inclusion, social-impact teaching*

Research Interests: *How students' brains experience the classroom as a social system and how educators address the social context of the classroom.*

1. BRIDGING SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Social-impact educators build bridges across social inequality in the classroom to improve the lives of everyone they teach. In daily practice, social-impact educators focus their instruction on creating a *context* that helps all learners find the productivity that exists within them to make an inclusive contribution to the development of society with dignity, respect and validation (Kleiner, 2018). The bridge-building metaphor allows educators to use students' social positions to deepen an understanding of others' commonalities and differences. Whatever future awaits today's learners, they will "need human beings being fully human" in order to bring others together in meaningful and productive ways (Wheatley, 2024, p. 8). In the contemporary classroom, social-impact educators are "devoted to awakening and restoring the finest qualities of being human---our generosity, creativity, and kindness" (p. 7).

Whether educator or student, each of us has a social position attached to our identity. Our social positions are most frequently linked to race, gender, socioeconomic class, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, ability status, age, or military status (Singh, 2022). In daily life, students' social positions shape the way that they view the world and the world perceives them. In both public and instructional environments, there is a reluctance to talk about what makes individuals unique. For many teachers and students, "it feels uncomfortable and a little dangerous to talk about what makes us different" (Singh, p. 22). Too often, however, our greatest gifts are hidden in the things that we tend to avoid. We prefer to talk about things that make us the same, "even if it defies logic to avoid acknowledging our differences" and the *privileges* that those differences provide each of us (Singh, p. 22.) Social-impact educators "create conditions that depend upon difference—perspectives and insights unique to each person because of who they are, what they've experienced, what they care about" (Wheatley, 2024, p. 11).

Despite many similarities, humans are infinitely distinct. If one looks beyond the widely-acknowledged instances of white privilege and male privilege, everyone has privileges. In the world of sports, for example, there are privileges associated with a particular body type or size, such as NBA star LeBron James and tennis star Serena Williams. There are privileges associated with "being born with a healthy body and mind capable of study and imagination" (Rinne, 2022, p. 60). There are

privileges that accrue from whom one knows, privileges attached to earning a college degree and from being an alumnus of an ivy-league university (Singh, 2022). In life, there also privileges that are derived from hard work and good fortune. Recognizing students' differences in instructional settings is "not about elevating one group or identity above another or at the expense of another" (Dunlop, 2022, p. 68). Rather, recognizing differences in the classroom allows learners to see and embrace the *privileges* that society affords those differences, increasing everyone's capacity to contribute to the development of an inclusive society. To underscore learners' shared humanity, social-impact educators support students in honoring and embracing the privileges that others' social identities afford them.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) argues that because our lives and our cultures are composed of a series of overlapping stories, if we hear only a single story about another person, culture, or country we risk a critical misunderstanding: stereotyping. The instructional implication for students is that because of its incompleteness, a single story is almost never the definitive story of another individual or culture. Listening to others' stories for emergent threads of meaning speaks to students about who they are *becoming* together (Polman & Winston, 2021; Adichie, 2009). In the classroom, becoming together requires new levels of curiosity about one another as students discover how *creative* they can be working together. Tellingly, in learning to solve complex societal problems, students will discover that difference maximizes understanding: "No single person, expert or group sees sufficiently" (Wheatley, 2024, p. 10).

Paradoxically, privilege can also blind (Rinne, 2022). Narcissus was so entranced with his reflection in the water, he died of thirst. When one's focus is singularly on one's personal privileges, it limits one's perception of what is invisible in others: Inequalities such as living in a place without access to quality education, health issues such as depression and cognitive decline, severe income inequality, gender inequality, homelessness, and racial injustices (Rinne). What is core to both religious and humanist traditions is that everyone has something to contribute to the development of society and the right to be recognized and rewarded for it (Kleiner, 2018). When certain groups are marginalized, respect and recognition are fleeting and trust in society's institutions is fractured. The implication for educators is that there is a vital need to create an instructional *context* that helps learners "find the productivity that exists within them" (Kleiner). One of the harsh realities of everyday life is that peoples' intrinsic value as humans is linked to their productivity, without which an enterprise or society cannot survive (Kleiner).

The dropout rate in schools in the United States invites the inference that there are hundreds of thousands of students searching for a context that allows them to make a contribution to the development of society. In the year 2019, there were 2 million status dropouts between the ages of 16 and 24. The overall status dropout rate was 5.1 percent and varied by race/ethnicity. While the explanatory variables are demonstrably complex, the challenge for educators remains one of creating an instructional context and that invites and allows all students to make a contribution to societal well-being (Dropout rate, 2019).

2. INCLUSION IS A SOCIAL OBLIGATION IN EVERY STAGE OF LIFE: ILLUSTRATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY

If an educational institution attempts to operate without a social purpose involving aspirational ethical conversations about diversity, inclusion, and racial justice, can it endure? Sojourner Truth, the formerly enslaved American abolitionist and women's rights activist argued: "Truth is powerful and it prevails" (Wilkinson, 2022, p. 17). Following a brief instructor-led biographical account of Sojourner Truth's life, a social studies teacher might, for example, consider inviting students to create discussion groups of four or five students to explore the meaning and societal implications of the question: "Was Sojourner's truth essentially that the individual is only as healthy as a free and just society?"

3. INCLUSION IS A DEEPLY HUMAN ACTIVITY

Diversity is not a goal. Rather, it is simply the nature of the global talent pool (Helgesen, 2021). Inclusion is the means by which this diverse pool is engaged effectively in the development of society (Helgesen). In both the classroom and the workplace, individuals either experience inclusion—or don't—in the attitudes, behaviors, and actions of their classmates and teachers (Johnson, 2020). Because humans are uniquely self-reflective and self-defining, inclusion is a deeply human activity.

Culture shapes our perception of what is possible. At the institutional and classroom level, "only the daily practice of inclusive behaviors can build an inclusive culture" (Helgesen, p. 48). Bridges do not build themselves. Bridging social inequalities in the classroom is a product of inclusive learning activities that honor the spectrum of human experience by creating a space where differences matter (Harris, 2019). In confronting complex societal problems, "difference maximizes understanding" (Wheatley, 2024, p. 11).

Inclusion cannot be instilled by mission statements, value statements, conversations about gender and race, well-meaning intentions, symbolic reform, or by "training programs that promise to surface and root out unconscious bias" (Helgesen, 2021, p. 48). No matter how well-intentioned and intellectually engaging these *activities* might be, they are not *outcomes* driven by human emotion (Harris, 2019). Neuroscientist Donald Calne draws the distinction: The difference between reason and emotion is that emotion leads to action, whereas reason leads to conclusions (Calne). Because social inclusion is deeply ingrained in our brains, it remains a social obligation in every stage of life (Luna, 2022; Gopalakrishnan, 2019). In organizational settings, social inclusion is an emotional calling to lead out of what is in one's soul.

4. BRIDGING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES: SEEING BEYOND SIGHT

Zulu is the largest ethnic group in South Africa. The Zulu standard greeting, Sawubona, is how one says hello. In the Zulu tradition, however, seeing is much more than the simple act of sight---it is the ability to see beyond sight (Rinne, 2022). In daily life, *Sawubona* means I see all of you, your dignity and your humanity. I see your dreams and your fears, your agency and your potential, your power and your pride. As the *Sawubona* greeting melodically rolls off one's tongue, it expresses a resonant sense of: "*I see you and I value you. I accept you for what you are*" (Rinne, p. 58). The customary response to *Sawubona* is *shiloba*: "I exist for you."

As professionals, educators have a social license to lead in the development of society. At its core, professionalism in academic settings revolves around reflecting deeply about what colleagues and students are doing together and how they are in *relationship with each other* as they coevolve a common future (Seidman, 2007). The most powerful form of human influence is inspiration (Seidman). Inspired professional behavior is internal, intrinsic, and sustainable in pursuing something greater than oneself: the development of society. For educators, the instructional implication of the Zulu cultural greeting is evocative: Is the ability to see beyond sight innate in students, or is it a skill that students can be taught? And what happens when students either learn or do not learn to see beyond sight?

5. SOCIAL INEQUALITY: HOMELESSNESS

Social inequality is the condition of unequal access to the benefits of membership in that society. Because students' social orientations fundamentally influence how they see, it often requires deliberate action to make the invisible, visible (Rinne, 2022; Skrefsrud, 2020). Imagine inviting one's students in a social studies class to create a sixty-minute school-wide forum dealing with the topic "Understanding and Responding to Homelessness: If You Can See It. "

In guiding students' thinking and actions in planning the forum, the classroom teacher might, for example, propose three inclusive questions: Who needs to be here to ensure that every person invited knows that this work cannot be done without them? Who will feel heard and valued for their contribution? If invited individuals are absent, what information will be lost? (Nolen, 2021; Wheatley, 2024) In proposing those questions, the instructional intent is one of creating an emergent awareness of what students are often *not* looking at. In an academic environment, "if you can see it" is a capability that students must develop and practice to sustain a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Rinne, 2022, p. 61).

6. THE CLASSROOM AS A VILLAGE

Metaphors create reality. They structure what we perceive, how we perceive it, and how we relate to other people (Lakoff &Johnson, 1980). People have lived, worked, and learned in villages since the dawn of civilization (Handy, 1976). Villages have tended to be small and personal, with their inhabitants having names, characters, personalities, and social positions that have sustained human society through millennia. The village is a metaphor and a model for an inclusive classroom. Its

inhabitants have names, characters, personalities, and social positions. Nobody owns a village; nobody owns a classroom. A village is an ancient organic social organization bound by common purpose and managed by reciprocal trust (Kleiner, 2018). A classroom is a contemporary social organization bound by a common purpose: "The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education and that the object and reward of learning is the continued capacity for growth" (Dewey, 1916, p. 117). Teaching and learning function as societal entities managed by reciprocal trust. A village is a community that one belongs to, with members having rights, responsibilities and social positions that contribute to societal well-being (Handy). An inclusive classroom is a community with rights, responsibilities, and social positions that afford learners distinctive privileges that contribute to the development of society.

7. AUTHENTICITY IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS: AN ILLUSTRATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITY

Because the instinct of community is everywhere in life "only in relationship can individuals be fully themselves" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1998, p. 11). In an inclusive academic environment, there is an existential reassurance that educators and students can be their authentic selves (Younger, 2021). In an inclusive classroom, educators might, for example, ask, "What do you need from me to do your best work?" Implicitly, learners might well ask, "Are you interested in what I can do academically and also who I am and can become?" Each question compels an answer to a deeper question that resides at the heart of social equality in instructional settings: "Who matters?"

Cummins and Early (2011) advocate the use of *identity texts* to make connections between students' authentic life-worlds and their school life. Identity texts are written, spoken, visual, musical, or multimodal socio-cultural artifacts. By inviting students to describe their background, interests, languages, and cultural histories, identity texts create a narrative space that builds and reinforces a bridge of understanding between students and their school (Skrefsrud, 2020). Narratives reveal multiple perspectives. Instructionally, when one changes what others pay attention to, one changes the conclusions others come to.

In an era of mass migration and resettlement, classrooms and societies are changing so that the stranger needs to be welcomed as a member of one's community. The instructional implication is that students' ability to understand and interact with the *other* across and beyond cultural barriers is a prerequisite for allowing democratic societies to function (Dewey, 1916). In welcoming the stranger, educators and students share an ethical obligation to recognize and counter inequities, prejudices, stereotypes, and racism in multiple guises (Skrefsrud, 2020; Simmons, 2021). In the most fundamental sense, bridging social inequities in the classroom centers on ethics: "A philosophical practice of continuing to test and retest the consequences of one's actions and their effect on *others*" (Kleiner, 2019).

8. BIASES MANIFESTED THROUGH MICRO AGGRESSIONS

To create academic environments that are diverse, equitable, and inclusive requires personal and structural initiatives to rebuild and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Krishnan, 2019). For educators and students, personal initiatives begin with the need to know oneself and one's conscious and unconscious biases, frequently learned through the media, family, neighbors, and friends (Epler, 2021). Recognizing bias in the classroom is a core part of attaining diversity, equity, inclusion (Geller, 2021).When individuals are unaware of their biases, those biases are often manifested in microaggressions (Epler). In Melinda Epler's *How to Be an Ally,* the researcher characterizes microaggressions as everyday slights, insults, and negative verbal and nonverbal communications that, whether intentional or not, can make someone feel belittled, disrespected, unheard, unsafe, impeded, or feeling that one doesn't belong. There is no higher form of care in the classroom than to make students feel heard and valued. Because learners have an innate desire to be heard and affirmed, a classmate responding too quickly to another student's comment can make an individual feel unheard, raising doubts as to whether or not others have "considered the information's validity or alternative paths" (Younger, 2021, p. 11). When classmates respond to what others say with a dismissive "however" or "but" or by saying why someone's idea will simply not work or has not worked in the past can also make one feel belittled, disrespected, unsafe, and impeded (Helgesen, 2021).

9. TEACHING EMPATHY IN AN AGE OF CRISIS-FIGHTING

Historian Adam Tooze (2021) observes that we live in an age of crisis-fighting: Systemic fallout from the pandemic, shocking inequities of wealth, large-scale ecological destruction, fraying supply chains, rising public debt, the fragility of political institutions, and a demographic explosion of humanity. In a world that is battling poverty, inequality, and injustice, are today's students experiencing values-driven learning bounded by the philosophical question: What does it mean to be empathetically human? (Handy, 1976)

While empathy is innate among humans, it often requires an immersive real-life experience to bring it to the surface. Experiential learning opportunities that provide students exposure to adversity in the cauldron of everyday life is powerfully transformative in inspiring grounded, empathetic learners to build a more equitable, sustainable future (Krishnan, 2019). Giving students opportunities, for example, to serve as volunteers in a food pantry or shelter for the intermittently homeless provides them with the ability to go well beyond in-class discussions centered on a theoretical analysis of the multidimensional phenomenon of poverty (Krishnan). Providing appropriate opportunities to mentor younger students in reading and math in settings like a Boys and Girls club creates an empathetic understanding of the "other." Demonstrating empathy is perhaps the most basic way of integrating empathy into the culture of the classroom. Educators can, for example, use role playing involving stories such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan or simulations involving "responding to incidents of bias as learning moments" (Geller, 2021).

Today, students seek intrinsically rewarding experiences that invite them to make a contribution to society that fits their values (Sethi & Stubbings, 2019, p. 41). Students' immersive experiences involving social inequities inspires them to think futuristically about not just how to make a living, but how to live life in a more equitable, sustainable world (Krishman, 2019). Instructional activities focused on furthering humanity serve to awaken students' recognition that at some moment in the near future each individual will be called upon to lead in some small way and to truly *care* about what Pope Francis (2015), in his second Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, eloquently calls "Our Common Home."

10. THE TENSION BETWEEN LIBERTY AND INEQUALITY

Concerns related to the inherent tension between liberty and inequalities arise, for example, when school districts propose eliminating academic honors such as class valedictorian or disbanding advanced placement classes to address social concerns related to the concept of equity. Decades after it was first published, Ayn Rand's 1,100 page magnum opus *Atlas Shrugged* offers instructive lessons regarding the current debate surrounding inequality and liberty (Akst, 2020). At a time when success is often dismissed as "privilege" the novel's message is one of self-reliance and success without guilt. From the author's perspective, "getting rich through innovation and commerce, honorably conducted, is an unalloyed virtue" (Akst). To school districts contemplating doing away with "privileges" such as being named class valedictorian, for example, the author's message would likely be "But, you earned it."

Atlas Shrugged offers one particularly evocative insight that educators likely ignore at their peril: "In the modern world, liberty and inequality will tend to grow or shrivel in tandem" (Akst, 2020). That human abilities differ is a truth made obvious when individuals and their talents are relatively unfettered in instructional and organizational settings (Kleiner, 2018). As a result, "it will be challenging for free societies to limit inequality without also constraining freedom. That challenge is magnified by technology which allows the most talented to have the widest possible impact and reap the greatest share of rewards" (Akst).

In *Democracy in America*, the nineteenth century Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the United States was marked by a "legitimate passion for equality that spurs all men to wish to be strong and esteemed. This passion tends to elevate the lesser to the rank of the greater" (Akst, 2020). In an uncanny insight into the American character, Tocqueville warned of "a depraved taste for equality, which impels the weak to want to bring the strong down to their level, and which reduces men to preferring equality in servitude to inequality in freedom" (Tocqueville, 2022).

11. DISCUSSION

As educators, to whom are we accountable and for what? Schools need educators who are adept at bridging differences and building relationships across students' social identities to enhance the development of society. For students, it requires courage to "build the bridge from where you are to where the 'other' is" (Singh, 2022, p. 22). Creating a space where differences matter in better understanding students' complex backgrounds requires engaging in an ongoing dialogue with the unfamiliar, and learning from it. The essence of dialogue in academic environments is the ability to connect with the perspectives and emotions of others to better understand them. The bridge-building metaphor allows educators to use students' cultural and social experiences to overcome what is often perceived as the strangeness of others (Singh). Identity texts, for example, serve to create a safe, supportive learning environment in which students can explore the thoughts of others and engage in dialogues regarding personal experiences of otherness, power, and marginalization (Skrefsrud, 2020).

In preparing educators to work in culturally and linguistically diverse instructional environments, perhaps the most vital part involves the stories that we tell ourselves related to: "What are the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are essential in bridging differences across social inequities in the classroom?" Storytelling is a form of reflection going back centuries to attain a deeper more inclusive point of view. When educators' stories are informed, thoughtful, and ethical, they spark confidence and creativity in bridging inequalities in the classroom. For educators and students, stories express how and why life changes (McKee, 2003). Because educators create their own stories, the good news is that they have the power to awaken their inner voice and rewrite their script to reveal multiple perspectives related to bridging social inequalities in the classroom. In instructional settings, resonant stories teach, inspire, and motivate students by engaging them emotionally and intellectually (Bowman, 2018). Stories have a compelling force. When one changes what students pay attention to, one changes the conclusions that they come to (Simmons, 2021).

A LAST WORD

What are the skills, knowledge, and *mindsets* that are essential in bridging social inequalities in the classroom? What is the story that I am telling myself?

BACKGROUND

My current research interests mirror two themes: ¨Preparing Students for a World of Continuous Societal and Workplace Disruption" https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2023.2245202 and ¨Inspiring Students´ Moral Imagination: Mission and Process.¨

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