What is Social Justice? Reflective Practices in Education and Beyond

March 19, 2016

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What is social justice? Reflective practices in education and beyond.

At a time when the term social justice has gained a degree of ubiquity at educational and related academic conferences, and savvy rhetoricians motivated by strategic political and commodity-based interests appropriate themes of social justice with an almost predictable level of confidence, it needs be asked: What do we – educators, researchers, practitioners – mean when we deploy the term? Does the term still possess relevance or has it fragmented into an empty signifier (Lévi-Strauss, 1950)? How may the work of ethically-conscious social justice within the academy, schools, and greater society be foregrounded in a manner that imbricates the role with the soul (Freire, 2000), and what may this term come to mean for 2016 and beyond? Alternately stated, how can we speak authentically of justice in and for social contexts that are often pressing with regards to human and environmental urgency and gravity?

At the heart of such questions lies the need for a merging of practice with reflexivity (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 1997). How, for instance, do our social practices and the manner we reflect – or fail to reflect – on these reify not only prior ideological assumptions but also co-constitute a particular ethical stance? Of particular interest here are the reflective methods and strategies that practitioners daily employ as forms of an “ethics of suspicion” (Bernasconi, 1990) that seeks to question both world and ‘self’ so as to bring about modes of action characterized by greater degrees of equality, justice, and relationship.

Hence, this conference theme calls for a revalorization of those often taken for granted assumptions that undergird practice and action through the interrogation of the terminology – ‘social justice’, ‘critical’, ‘activism’, ‘transformatory’, and ‘advocacy’ to mention but a few – which has come to characterize substantial parts of educational research and practice.

Papers may be submitted to the following conference strands:

• Teaching and Learning for Equity and Social Justice
• Critical Race Studies
• Critical Youth Studies
• Women’s Studies
• STEM
• Educational Reform in the 21st Century
• Beyond education

Strand Descriptions for Teaching and Learning for Equity and Social Justice

The conference invites papers that address issues of equity and social justice in the practice of teaching, learning, and research. Presentations that address the following areas are welcome:
Teaching and Learning for Equity and Social Justice

This strand seeks to engage educators from a broad range of education practitioner contexts: K-12, urban education, higher education, adult education, and teacher education. Examples of ideas in this strand include: Does ‘politics’ have a place in the classroom? How are attempts to seek equity and social justice not only factoring into educational reform movements but being taken up in local classroom contexts as well? How are themes related to equity and social justice being grafted into curriculum, pedagogy, and hands-on instructional practices? How can collaboration between community-based projects / initiatives and formal education contexts embellish equity and social justice work? Finally, what is the ‘role’ of the learner in equity and social justice work?

Critical Race Studies

In a society marked by the tension between the illusory consolations afforded by post-racial discourses and movements of civil protest and resistance like Black Lives Matter, the question needs be posed: ‘What is the role of the educator/researcher/practitioner – as a racially constituted being – in the work of equity and social justice?’ In particular, this question hints at the potential importance of reflexive practices surrounding the race-entrenched themes of power, positioning, and privilege as these co-constitute the subjectivities of both teachers and learners. Papers would also do well to wrestle with the transposition of reflective practice into action.

Critical Youth Studies

This strand invites scholars from a wide variety of disciplines whose research explores contemporary discourses about childhood and youth, and especially as these intersect with popular culture and researcher reflexivity. In particular, it is asked: ‘What are contemporary forms of youth civic and political engagement that bypass conventional (some may say, sanitized) understandings of civic and political engagement, and what are the advantages of educators/researchers/practitioners becoming more literate in these?’ In addition, this session invites scholars whose focus of inquiry explores the cultural practices of young people across cultures or rigid identity boundaries.

Women’s Studies

The intersection of gender with race, ethnicity, colorism, sexual orientation, and disability is the focal core of this strand. How can conceptual and theoretical insights from within the field of Women’s Studies aid in the deconstruction of contemporary systems of social brutality and work to demystify the range of social practices that constitute cultures of exclusion? Furthermore, how can feminist theories speak to contemporary local and/or global trends in migration and the affective political reactions and responses these evoke? What is the role of emotion in the reflective work of educators/researchers/practitioners, and how can emotion be harnessed in the work of agitating for social change and transformation?

STEM

The question of what social justice looks like in STEM education has been an important one for practitioners and researchers alike. For this particular strand we invite contributors to consider the ways in which they have either incorporated social justice in their research or practice as educators, or to trouble the notion of what social justice education may look like for those in STEM fields. We believe that this particular strand should allow contributors to submit papers that help us to re-conceptualize what it really means to be committed to social justice in fields that often seem removed from this conversation. Additionally, presentations highlighting the relevance of quantitative research approaches and methodologies for equity and social justice work are encouraged.
Educational Reform in the 21st Century

Proposals in this strand might grapple with themes similar to the following examples: From which enabling personal and communal resources do teachers draw in the attempt to mitigate the effects of the blame often imputed to teachers once a mismatch between policy directive and classroom practice becomes apparent? What are the dominant ideologies that inform recent and contemporary instances of educational planning and policy, and how can educators/researchers/practitioners exercise an influence over educational planning and policy through collaboration? What are appropriate ethical responses to the commodification and standardization of education, and how can these ethical responses be translated into concrete action? Of course, these are merely three examples that demonstrate contemporary tensions inherent in the relationship between planning, policy, and practice. Presenters would do well to further explore this relationship.

Beyond Education

This strand aims to provide an open platform for both interdisciplinary work and research conducted in fields not directly associated with education, but nevertheless within which themes of equity and social justice take on timely relevance. Alternatively, presenters whose research themes do not substantially intersect with any of the six focus areas strands are welcome to submit to this strand. Again, the relevance of the theme of reflexivity and its relationship to equity and social justice work needs to be engaged.

Proposal Formats

Individual Proposal: (75 minutes)

The Conference Committee welcomes individual paper proposals, with the understanding that those accepted will be grouped together around common or overlapping themes. Presenters will have approximately 15 minutes to present or summarize their individual papers. A 250-word abstract of the paper will be peer reviewed for acceptance to the conference.

Symposium Proposal: (75 minutes)

The Conference Committee welcomes proposals for a symposium. A symposium is typically composed of a chair and discussant and three to five participants who present or summarize their papers. Each symposium is organized around a common theme. A 250-word abstract of the symposium will be peer reviewed for acceptance to the conference.

Panel Proposal: (75 minutes)

The Conference Committee welcomes proposals for a panel discussion. A panel discussion is typically composed of three to six participants who discuss their scholarly work within the context of a dialogue or conversation on a topic or theme related to the conference. Typically, each panelist is given 10-15 minutes to discuss the topic, present theoretical ideas, and/or point to relevant research. A chair should be identified who introduces the panel and frames the issues and questions being addressed. In addition to the chair, we encourage (but do not require) organizers of panels to include a discussant who responds to the comments of the panelists. A 250-word abstract of the panel discussion will be peer reviewed for acceptance to the conference.
Alternative Format and Special Interest Groups (75 minutes)

Alternative proposals that do not fit into the above categories, such as workshops, performances, video and multimedia presentations, and round-table dialogues, are encouraged. We also welcome proposals for the organization of special interest groups. A 250-word abstract of the panel discussion will be peer reviewed for acceptance to the conference.

Proposals must include the following information:

- Names and affiliations of presenters
- Conference strand
- Presentation format

SUBMIT ALL PROPOSALS TO: equitysocialjustice2016@gmail.com

The ESJ conference is committed to accommodating individuals with disabilities.