

BUILDING SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES: USING DRAMA TO MAKE POWER MORE VISIBLE

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If, as teachers, we want to teach for social justice I propose that we need to make power relationships more visible as we build nurturing, collaborative, and fair communities in our classrooms. We cannot teach about social justice in the world outside the classroom if we do not run classrooms based on what social justice means to children on a daily basis: fairness, caring, and sharing. We can use drama as we move toward these aims.

Meet two powerful people. Tracey and Jerome both tend to be reflective and quiet and they're about the same height. She's white and he's black. She's a teacher of fifteen years classroom experience and he's an eight-year-old pupil in her classroom of twenty-four children who come from diverse socio-economic and racial backgrounds. Though both often feel powerless they have both used their power in building a classroom community that promotes fairness and social justice.

When I use the word 'power' I rely on how Michel Foucault (for example, 1977) uses the term in the context of power relationships. He stresses that the actions people take, both in terms of words and deeds, are always powerful in relation to other people but must be understood in terms of how oppressive or otherwise their effects are on people. At the same time I embrace Freire's idea that education should be 'liberatory' (Freire 1972) rather than oppressive, and I'm mindful of hooks' (1994) realisation that 'power itself is not negative, it depends what one does with it' (197). Power can create or undermine community depending on whether power tends to unite or divide people's from their shared focus and ideals. As hooks (1994) puts it, 'community' means that 'there is a shared commitment and a common good that binds us' (40).

I have worked with Tracey Bigler-McCarthy over many years. She recognizes that she has power in her classroom especially in how she develops her relationships with children. Tracey feels less powerful in relation to imposed external requirements. She has become increasingly frustrated with how in the current relentless drive in the United States toward more summative and punitive testing the required curriculum has crowded out more and more of the time that she can devote to what she regards as the much more important (but largely unacknowledged) social curriculum.

Tracey has gradually recognized how drama can be used to achieve her goal of developing a classroom community where power and authority are shared productively, with fairness, and with attention to the needs of all people.

In working with Tracey I have realized that drama can only really be successful in terms of teaching for social justice when it is grounded in a classroom that is actually just. Though drama can foster community growth, drama work is still always embedded in whatever community already exists in the classroom.

When I approached Tracey about working this year in her grade 3 classroom (in the UK this would be a year 4 class) we were interested in how using drama, and in particular the mantle of the expert system (Heathcote & Bolton 1995), might deepen the sense of community that she had nurtured in the classroom and extend it to consider the needs of others beyond the classroom walls. I had to wait until late in October 2004 when testing was over and in the run up to the November 2004 elections, we invented, with the children, the Columbus Community Listeners and Helpers. The children liked the idea of imagining that the CCLH was a group of adults running an office (with a website and a van) who were dedicated to listening and helping anyone in need. The group was asked by a fictional client, Media Voices For All, via a fictional telephone call and follow up FAX, to advise them about who in their community was not being heard and thus whose voices should be given prominence in election commercials on television, radio, and in the papers.

We presented the children with a large collection of photos of all sorts of people and asked the children to identify those people whose voices they would most like to hear. Collectively they chose a woman in a wheel chair, a homeless man, a blind woman, and a man who had been shot. Jerome was most interested in the photograph of the man sprawled on the ground. Over the next few weeks as they created folders for these clients and invented commercials on their behalf the children invented lives for the people depicted in the photographs.

Power and authority in the classroom community

The term power is most often used with negative connotations as power over others – the authoritarian power to control and force others to do what they don't want to do. Teachers can easily be oppressive but so can students. Anyone may use words or deeds in order to dominate, silence, ignore, or exclude others from meaningful participation. Yet as Foucault notes, power circulates through relationships among people and most often power operates without individual intention. 'Individuals are the vehicles of power not its point of application' (Foucault, 1980, p. 96). People, like teachers, may intimidate and silence children because this is perceived as a 'normal' facet of the adult-child social relationship within the institution of schooling.

We can conceptualize other ways that people use power other than to dominate. Using power over others is oppressive when people act as if power is only 'about me' but power can also be used over others intentionally for more altruistic reasons on behalf of those who have been ignored or silenced. Additionally, using power for others is nurturing when people act as if power is mostly 'about you' (for example, Noddings 1984) and using power with others is collaborative when people act as if power is 'about us' (in particular, Vygotsky 1978).

In any discussion of power I can't separate power from authority (see in particular, Bakhtin 1981). When through language we invoke the authority of other people and institutions, we want others to consider our actions as more authoritative and thus more powerful. Authority adds weight to how teachers (and students) use power whether as oppressive uses of power over others, nurturing uses of power for others, or collaborative uses of power with others. As Foucault notes, power circulates and accumulates unequally in relationships among people. Our social, cultural, institutional, and political relationships give people authority that makes every person, relative to one another, more (or less) powerful than they are as individuals. I have power in the classroom in part because of how my authority as an adult and as a teacher is located in how students and teachers expect me to act in classrooms. I also have power as an adult and a teacher because of my authority in the world. Most children assume that I know and understand many things that they don't know about the world; the younger they are the more children tend to turn to adults for facts as well as interpretations about the social and cultural worlds inside and outside the classroom.

How, as teachers, we metaphorically view our classrooms and schools as communities makes a difference to the norms that we turn to as legitimating our authority and thus how we use power and expect students to use power. As Johnson & Lakoff (most recently Johnson, 1993 and Lakoff, 2004) who have been writing for decades about the conceptual and moral power of metaphors stress, people use guiding value-laden metaphors to frame their thinking about relationships, institutions, and how life should be lived. Schools become very different types of communities depending on whether teachers run them as if they were factories, families, or laboratories.

Using power over others

When schools are run like factories, the military, prisons or other highly authoritative systems then adults believe that they have the authority to use power over others to enforce authoritarian rules and to impose meaning, as well as to contain, control, and suppress dissent. Children are regarded as either objects to be controlled and filled with information or as agents of teacher authority over other pupils.

When Jerome arrived in Tracey's classroom he had previously experienced highly authoritarian schooling which from his point of view was often unfair. He had resisted the attempts to contain and control him, had been labeled as a 'trouble maker,' and had often been excluded from the classroom. Though Tracey's classroom was not hierarchically organized, Jerome still treated it as if it were based on authoritarian norms. He must have assumed that despite the surface 'niceness' she was like other teachers he had known: emotionally distant, disconnected with his life outside school, dissatisfied with his work in school, and ready to treat him as less worthy than others. Tracey has worked hard for over a year to show Jerome, and others in her classroom with previous similar negative experiences of schooling, that classrooms can be places where fairness, caring, and collaboration are integral to classroom life.

Though Tracey resists authoritatively controlling children's activities, when the pressure of testing becomes overwhelming this has its toll on how she teaches. As she notes,

‘When I feel stressed I stop listening to them and I start telling them what to do because it seems the fastest way to get the job done’. When she feels external pressures building up, she side-lines more open-ended approaches like drama. Yet she recognizes that in terms of community building, making kids do particular tasks is often counter-productive when a brief town meeting would likely solve a social problem that has arisen or more active approaches would harness their energies productively.

Tracey very rarely uses her power over others through confrontation and as much as possible she gives children choices. She is mostly very subtle in how she controls others relying on the community expectations that every year she cultivates as norms with a group. When she does use her power over the children it is most often used to enforce class expectations that everyone has agreed to when they formed or joined the group and that get renegotiated and contextualized daily in activities and discussions.

Town meetings have been highly significant in making visible the social justice basis of the classroom community. The classroom norms are transparent and are listed on the wall as ‘classroom expectations’:

- respect one another
- listen
- share
- be kind
- be safe
- be fair

These expectations are not empty ideas on a wall, but are lived out in the everyday classroom activities. They are not just words in a list, but living language that is used daily respectfully to evaluate interactions among children and adults in the classroom, in the hallways, on the playground, and in the wider world beyond the school. Everyone knows that these are principles to be applied fairly and that Tracey expects everyone, herself included, to live up to these norms. Yet these expectations are not applied as abstractions but rather are contextualized in every discussion and analysis of interactions in and out of the classroom in the everyday world and in the worlds of literature. Drama work has extended these discussions into additional worlds of imagination where fairness can be examined in other fictional contexts.

Tracey uses her power over the children to insist on standards for all activities whether or not drama is being used. Whether they are engaged in open-ended play or focused sharing of imagined ideas, Tracey will insist that as much as possible children are fair, that they listen to one another, that they are kind and considerate, that they share ideas and materials, and that they respect one another’s different viewpoints and experiences, even when they disagree or argue. She is deliberately open about her own past and present struggles and successes, as well as those of the children, to live up to these expectations. She shows the children daily how power can be used over others, not to oppress but to insist on standards of fairness. She uses her power over the children to allow her and them to use power for and with each other.

Using power for others

When classrooms are run more like families than factories then adults assume an authority to use power for others to support, and nurture, so that all people can develop their strengths and abilities. This is power with less regard for the doer and with most attention focused on the recipients. Students are regarded not as objects to be controlled but as people with feelings, needs, and interests to be acknowledged, accommodated, and extended.

Tracey likes to use the metaphor of a nurturing family to conceptualize the ideal classroom. In families that nurture, people share, listen, care about each other, and look out for one another. Watching Tracey with children is more like observing a nurturing parent than an imparter of information. She's there with a handkerchief for tears and an open ear for stories. She welcomes children with a smile and praises them for their hard work and kindness.

She most often uses her power for others when she mediates the examination and solution of social problems. This happens both informally through brief discussions as well as through more formal town meetings. Anyone can put an item on the agenda for a town meeting when any group problem can be discussed. She has seen these meetings as core for transforming an unruly collection of egocentric individuals into a cohesive group where people more often listen to one another and collaborate daily. Jerome was one of the more obviously disruptive children at the beginning of the year but many more children were just as anti-social. Yet the attitudes of some middle-class white girls who quietly excluded others and refused to share were more corrosive and resistant to change than Jerome's more overt initial lack of cooperation.

Tracey has worked relentlessly to promote a fair classroom community. As she notes, 'When community is working well I hear them asking questions of each other instead of accusing. When someone falls down it used to be common that the class would laugh but now most often someone would say, "Are you OK?" and rush over to help. Rather than shouting out "She called me a name" I hear them say things like, "When you say that it hurts my feelings and makes me sad."

Jerome is most comfortable as an active kinesthetic learner. When he first arrived in the classroom he often used his power over others. His kicking and shoving or just taking up space through his use of large body movements and his taking of other people's possessions meant that his presence was felt, but often resented, by other children. They tended to ignore or avoid him; he was one of those children who was on, and sometimes over, the edge of the classroom community.

Tracey has been able to use drama to give all of the children, including those like Jerome who like to move, opportunities to use action productively through running with others as they pretend on the play ground to showing for others how an imagined person might have acted, for example where a man might have stood and fallen when shot. Through exploration of fictional worlds, using drama has introduced topics into the classroom on which all children are authorities and which they are interested in exploring. Like most

of the other boys in the room Jerome is often interested in images of violence. Though they would not know it, unlike most of the other children he has direct experience of violence in his daily life.

Through the drama work, like all other children in the room, Jerome has been able to make visible, experience, and examine what it might mean to use power for others. One of the draft slogans (with original spellings) for the CCLH was this:

We have helped 3,000 pepole.
We can help you.
Do not worry.
Colubus Community Liseners and Helpers
We will make you feel comfortable.

As the children imagined the lives of people who were the CCLH previous and current clients they imagined, showed, and evaluated how they had been able to help. Through drama they considered how they might help others. For example, when the whole class met the blind woman (represented by a student teacher) they realized that she had needs they had not anticipated (like a dog that needed a walk) and that they had to listen to her and ask her what she needed rather than assume that they already knew.

In a caring, sharing, and fair community at different times all voices will have equal weight. Authority is seen as based on what we know and can bring to a group rather than who we are in terms of social groupings outside the room. In a group not based on authoritarian privilege, people have to earn their authority. Jerome had to struggle, with Tracey's help, to learn how to use his power more productively for others than when he first arrived in the classroom.

Drama, and especially the mantle of the expert system, can create fictional contexts in which teacher and students share power by drawing on the authority of all the people in the classroom and do not only rely on the authority of the teacher or of predetermined written texts.

Most significantly, at important moments, through drama Jerome's voice has been given equal weight and prominence alongside the voices of others in the classroom whose authority in the classroom is more secure because it has been accepted for longer.

Tracey identified one time when I amplified Jerome's voice as highly significant for him in terms of his power and authority relationships in the classroom. Everyone had been working on the folders of the CCLH 'clients'. Jerome who had never before written an extended piece of writing, invented a story about the man who had been shot, whom he called Jeff. He did so through mostly individual and some limited cooperative play and writing.

One day when I was in the classroom the children were sharing information about the CCLH clients. Jerome wanted to read his story but as he began to read there was talking

and minimal attention. I stepped in to amplify his voice, lend him my authority, and create an audience for his ideas. He read one phrase at a time and I repeated the words giving them weight and using inflection to emphasize seriousness. Tracey noted that 'It was the strength in your voice which allowed him for the first time to share who he was and to be heard by the whole group.' What follows is the writing that was shared that day.

Jeff and his brother were in jail for stealing candy from the candy store. Jeff broke out of jail for one year and came back. His brother was crying when Jeff came back but he couldn't say anything. The police shot him dead. His brother was crying even more. Could the community listeners and helpers stop this?

Jerome had brought issues to the attention of the class that no one else had considered: theft, jail, police violence, death, sibling loss, and pain. Serious discussion followed about what the CCLH might, and might not, be able to do. Jerome had focused the class, deepened their concern, and activated compassion for a client that others had largely overlooked or dismissed. Significantly, there was a long-term effect on Jerome's power relationship with the group. For the first time he had become a locus for the group and had very publicly used his power for the benefit of the whole group; they had respected his authority. Tracey noticed a significant shift in his power relationship with the group. 'After that day they became much more accepting of him'.

Using power with others

When classrooms are run more like collegial laboratories than testing machines, then teachers will assume an authority to use power with students and other adults in investigations where social and cultural understanding is created collaboratively in meaningful contexts.

In addition, to on the one hand making people do something or on the other hand acting to benefit others, there is a middle position. As well as using power over or for others, we can also think of using power with others. When we use power with others then we use the power of dialogue, of cooperation, and collaboration.

In Tracey's classroom children are most often talking, making, and sharing activities together whether they are listening to a read-aloud as a whole class, reading or writing stories in pairs, or playing outside in groups. And she facilitates their collaboration by assisting them toward sharing ideas and developing richer understanding, helping negotiate leadership and disagreements, assisting one person to hear another, and helping to connect one person's ideas with another. Town meetings are at the core of making visible how to use power with others because they are sites for both collaboratively working out resolutions to any communal problem and to experiencing the power of working together to create an equitable foundation for all classroom work. Town meetings provide the bedrock on which community is built through cooperation and collaboration.

Community is built as people share power with others in shared collaborative activities that can also investigate any required curriculum. Only when children listen to one another can they really build on their ideas and improvise in the way that is essential if children are to use drama productively.

Only in collaboration can we experience and investigate moments when community ties are in danger of breaking down through exclusion of people regarded as 'other' than 'us'. Unless our view of community is based on sharing ideas and co-constructing understanding alongside and with other people then any attempts to examine difficulties in community may actually begin to fracture a group's cohesion and generate oppressive experiences.

Further, if we are concerned to build a sense of community that extends beyond the classroom walls into wider social and cultural worlds then promoting bonding as a group will be insufficient. People can bond as a group yet use their power collectively to exclude others verbally as well physically. Additionally, people not actually present in the classroom but represented through literature or other media, may also be excluded as 'not us.' In other words, what may look like collaboratively using power with others may conceal an oppressive use of power over others.

Classroom discussions about other people can create an 'us vs. them' divide when 'we' are assumed to be the 'normal' ones and 'they' are different and thus 'not us'. Boys can reinscribe their male privilege by talking over girls. Whites who have never been discriminated against can assume that racism is only historical and not a contemporary social reality. Everyone can be silent about other cultures. Only when people's assumptions are made more visible in particular contexts, and then questioned or investigated can oppressive norms be disrupted rather than reinscribed.

On the day when we shared the photographs of people that the CCLH might have helped I noticed that one photograph was causing some laughter; I overheard words like 'weird.' Some boys were giggling as they looked at a photograph of two Muslim woman with their entire bodies covered with burkas. Jerome, often on the edge of the community, was joining in the giggling. I had to confront this 'othering'. I intervened, held up the photograph, and focused the entire class attention asking what was amusing them. The giggling continued. So I negotiated that I would speak as if I were one of the woman. I said that I would try to answer any question they had though I stressed that because I was not Islamic I would step out of role to tell them if I was unsure of an answer. As I spoke and as questions were asked about why she was dressed that way everyone listened as I talked about different religious and cultural customs. When some people stopped listening and laughed again I went to leave their office but was emphatically called back. Now everyone wanted to hear the woman's story. In only a few minutes I was able not only to give the children information about Islamic culture and religion but more importantly I was able to give a voice to someone who had been excluded through laughter and words from being considered part of their community. Someone who had been an object of derision for some and an unheard voice for others became a person who though very different from them was listened to and respected.

As Tracey noted, 'On that day another person joined our community. She became a client, a story, and a member of the classroom.' Her photograph was put up on the wall alongside those of the other 'former clients' of CCLH. Many students spontaneously wrote to and about her and later did some research on Islam.

- Don't do something to someone that you don't want them to do back to you. Treat people the way you want to be treated!
- Please stay we can help you
- We all want you to stay
- Stay lady
- I love you
- People should not be left at if they wear something that covers their face (People should not be laughed at if they wear something that covers their face)
- The reason why people laugh at other people's religion is because: somebody did that to them
their probably jealous
their probably just like that
God made you that way for a reason. Don't let anyone make you change your ways. you wear what you want to wear.

Conclusion

As teachers we need to become more aware of how we use, and might use, our power both to create and undermine community: we can use our power over others but also for and with others.

If we want to use drama in teaching for social justice we must see drama within the larger context of how teachers and students can use power and authority to build very different types of communities. Authoritarian uses of power in the classroom will not create social justice communities, though using power over others is necessary at times to remind children of their own classroom expectations. Only when we have nurturing and collaborative uses of power can we create classroom communities in which people experience fairness in everyday contexts and create fictional contexts through which we can investigate just and unjust actions in the wider world.

As teachers we can use drama to make the power relationships between people more visible. Drama however can only supplement the transparency that ideally needs to be integral to classroom activities. Making power more visible means that everyone in a classroom can expose how power circulates to give some people more authority and others less both in and out of school. We can then become more aware alongside the children about how to promote fairness in the classroom and social justice in the wider community.

Perhaps teachers who resist using drama do so because of how it makes more visible power and exposes the reality that power relationships are more malleable than adults tend to admit to children. Yet the children in Tracey's classroom have shown that

knowledge of how power operates can lead to a desire to create more socially just communities. As the Columbus Community Listeners and Helpers, they collaboratively wrote the following poem, which they adapted from 'Listen Children' by Lucille Clifton.

Listen people
Keep this in the heart
You have for keeping
Always keep it always

We have never hated others that are different
We have always loved people all ways
Pass it on

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