

## The What, the So What, and the Now What of Social Justice Education

reviewed by Alana Butler - September 28, 2020

**Title:** The What, the So What, and the Now What of Social Justice Education

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Structured around the Driscoll (1994) model of reflection, *The What, the So What, and the Now What of Social Justice Education* provides a concise overview of the field of social justice education. Beginning with the metaphor of the traditional three-stranded Jewish *challah* bread, Blumenfeld explains how the three strands of lifelong learning, community activism, and service as an educator have influenced his lifelong passion for social justice education. Continuing the metaphor of the three strands, his book is structured in three parts: terminology, education, and liberation. Part One and Part Two provide the *What* and *So What*, and the final section provides the *Now What*.

The introduction begins with a powerful description of his Jewish family history and the loss of many family members during the Nazi holocaust in Europe. He integrates his family history with his own social identity and provides the reader with insights about why social justice education matters to him. For Blumenfeld, social justice is about ensuring a more equitable society. He defines social justice as the concept that at the local, national, and global level, communities function such that “everyone has equal access to and equitable distribution of the rights, privileges, and resources, and where everyone can live freely unencumbered by social constructions of hierarchical positions of domination and subordination based on social identities and backgrounds” (p. 8).

Part One defines key terminology related to social justice education and comprises the first half of the book. Over 11 chapters, Blumenfeld provides definitions of broad concepts such as culture and identity, socialization, binaries, oppression, prejudice, discrimination, and the many forms of societal oppression. Of particular importance is that he provides a historical context for all definitions and cites key scholars who have contributed to the development of each theory. He cites theoretical models and frameworks that are helpful to the reader and provide some directions for further study in the area. Examples include Erickson’s identity theories, Crenshaw’s intersectionality, Butler’s gender identity theories, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, Harro’s cycle of socialization, Gramsci’s hegemony, Allport’s theory of prejudice, Bandura’s social modeling theory, Pharr’s elements of oppression, Iris Marion Young’s five faces of oppression, Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory, Tajfel’s social identity theory, and Sherry Watt’s Privilege Identity Exploration Model.

Using the *What, So What, Now What* framework to explore each definition, he clarifies why each theory is relevant to the study of social justice education and its implications for society. Blumenfeld clarifies the ways in which our social identities are constructed through historical and contemporary forces that shape our discourses, policies, and laws. Blumenfeld explains the significance of how geographical contexts may shape racial identity. He cites examples of individuals who grow up in one geographical context and become “raced” by moving to another context that classifies them based on their skin color or religion. He devotes a large section of the first part to the study of oppression. Blumenfeld describes oppression at the level of society/culture, institutional, and interpersonal. The many forms of oppression he explores include ableism, ageism, transgender oppression, classism, heterosexism, racism, religious oppression, and sexism. Blumenfeld provides critical arguments about how oppression affects everyone in society, not just those marginalized by their social identities. Blumenfeld asserts that progressive social movements are often met with backlash, which is an attempt by members of the dominant society to maintain the status quo. Resistance and denial by dominant group members is to be expected, and social justice educators need to be prepared to encounter resistance. Part One concludes with a section on the social production of knowledges, in which he connects educational curricula to the domination of marginalized groups. This transitions nicely to the second section of the book focused on social justice education.

Part Two traces the origins of social justice education and draws a connection to multicultural education. In dimensions and characteristics of multicultural education, Blumenfeld outlines the many approaches to multicultural education with a focus on James A. Banks’ approach to multicultural curriculum reform. Blumenfeld concludes the section by noting that educators are excited yet daunted by the prospect of implementing social justice education because of its potential for creating tensions in the classroom. Blumenfeld reminds us that the process toward social justice education is not always comfortable and that we must use critical self-reflection and dialogue to counter these tensions. Engaging in true learning about social justice begins with self-reflection and critical engagement with the content.

Part Three focuses on liberation, which represents the *Now What* of social justice education. Blumenfeld devotes several chapters to social justice activism. Beginning with students who advocated for gun control after the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting in 2018 to Black Lives Matter protestors and Disability rights advocates, this section focuses on activism. The section concludes with

practical actions that one can take to support social justice, such as models of allyship, empathy, the cycle of liberation, action strategies, and anti-bullying.

One of the criticisms of social justice education books is that they rarely provide practical tools for educators. Blumenfeld incorporates “Liberatory Praxis Appendices” with classroom exercises and assignments that are suitable for high school and college level students. The assignments cover topics such as multiple social identities, critical consciousness, religious pluralism, sexual diversity, racism, and human rights legislation.

Blumenfeld’s book is a foundational guide for educators who wish to apply social justice education principles as part of their classroom teaching, curricula, and assessment. Despite the comprehensive scope of the book, I believe that Blumenfeld could have included more scholarly works from scholars representing the minority groups he lists throughout the book. For example, on page 162, he describes culturally relevant pedagogies with no mention of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings. Also, conspicuously absent are robust discussions about Indigenous epistemologies and ways of knowing, critical race theory, the model minority myth, and the impact of globalization.

These drawbacks aside, the rich content of his book underscores the importance of studying social justice education and provides practical strategies and examples for educators. Blumenfeld’s book blends social justice theory and practice in way that supports the goal of liberatory action for educators and practitioners alike.

### Reference

Driscoll, J. (1994) Reflective practice for practise. *Senior Nurse*, 13, 47-50.

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