Middle School Journal

ISSN: 0094-0771 (Print) 2327-6223 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/umsj20

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**To cite this article:** Dana Hagerman & Suzanne Porath (2018) The possibilities of teaching for, with, and about social justice in a public middle school, Middle School Journal, 49:5, 26-34, DOI: 10.1080/00940771.2018.1509561

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2018.1509561

Published online: 10 Oct 2018.

# The possibilities of teaching for, with, and about social justice in a public middle school

*Dana Hagerman & Suzanne Porath*

**Abstract:** Rolling Hills Middle School has begun the implementation of a personalized learning model with one house of 50 8th grade students. This personalized learning (PL) model promotes collaborative work among groups of students and supports student choice and agency as it fosters learner independence. This qualitative, interpretive case study used student and teacher to focus group data, interviews, classroom observations, and artifacts to document the implementation of PL in its first year. The purpose of this paper is to consider how a personalized, learner-centered environment has authentically led to teaching for, with, and about social justice (Wager, 2008) within the classroom.

**Keywords:** *collaborative learning*, *personalized learning*, *social justice*, *middle school*

***This We Believe*** **characteristics:**

- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- The school environment is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all.

The multiple goals of public education can both compete with and complement each other. Some of these goals include basic literacy, college and career readiness, workforce training, an educated citizenship, character development, and cultural inclusion. These numerous goals demand basic skills and competencies in multiple literacies in addition to critical thinking and problem solving, along with more ambiguous soft skills such as interpersonal relationships, self-regulation, and self-motivation (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010). Furthermore, public education has the potential to "guide students in critical reflection of themselves and society in issues concerning race, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, appearance, and others" (Middle School Journal Call for Manuscripts, 2017). Considering all of the transitions society is currently facing, social justice is even more important and schools can be the center of teaching for, with, and about social justice (Stinson & Wager, 2012). This study highlights the work of a Midwestern middle school that is providing a space for students to become actively involved in democratic decision-making, civil discussion, and civic engagement through personalized learning.

Throughout 2016–2017, Rolling Hills, a suburban school district of more than 8000 students, began the implementation of a personalized learning model with their 8th grade students. Their model was based on the framework outlined in *Educator Competencies for Personalized, Learner-Centered Teaching* through a collaboration of Jobs for the Future and the Council of Chief State School Officers (Wolfe & Poon, 2015). Personalized learning, also known as learner-centered learning, promotes collaborative work among groups of students and provides student choice and agency as it fosters learner independence. The purpose of this paper is to consider how a personalized, learner-centered environment has authentically led to teaching for, with, and about social justice within the classroom.

## Theoretical framework

Social justice pedagogy encourages students to recognize and discuss injustices within their communities and in the larger world, and to inspire and empower students with

the belief that they can be creators of change (Bartell, 2013; Gutstein, 2003; Kumashiro, 2015). Although many teachers wish to promote social justice in the classroom (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998; Payne & Strickland, 2008), some have concerns that administrators or parents may not hold the same views and feel that the teacher's role is to educate using mandated curriculum. Many teachers desire spaces that allow for the opportunity to educate students how to question, debate, and ultimately transform their communities (Picower, 2011). One way to understand how this is manifested in the classroom is through Cochran-Smith's (2004) six principles of pedagogy for social justice, which include (a) Enable significant work within communities of learners; (b) Build on what students bring to school with them; (c) Teach skills, bridge gaps; (d) Work with (not against) individuals, families, and communities; (e) Diversify forms of assessment; and (f) Make inequity, power, and activism an explicit part of the curriculum.

Cochran-Smith's principles of pedagogy for social justice were evident in the development of the personalized learning environment in House E. Although not an explicitly social justice framework, the guiding framework of the implementation of personalized learning at Rolling Hills Middle School included the following four principles:

- Learning is personalized.
- Learning is competency based.
- Learning takes place anytime and anywhere.
- Students have agency and ownership over their learning. (Wolfe & Poon, 2015, p. 2)

Rolling Hills used the term personalized learning drawn from the guiding framework that defines the phrase *personalized, learner-centered* as the "approaches that build on the learner's needs and interests, regardless of age" and acknowledges that the term personalized learning often indicates an "emphasis on the use of technology, rather than on multiple instructional strategies" (Wolfe & Poon, 2015, p. 1). Rolling Hills built their personalized learning model on the "learner's needs and interests." These principles developed an environment that fostered teachers' ability to release control of much of the decision-making for what and how students learned and supported students in negotiating their own learning goals, processes, and products. In addition, the teachers integrated new literacies and technologies to provide for anytime/anywhere learning. The competencies required of teachers within this environment necessitated innovative practices, strong relational skills, and a firm commitment to equity. For the students, this meant a completely different way of learning in a school-based environment. Although student-centered and choice-based pedagogy is not new, in this particular house it was not just an addition to the curriculum, it was the design of the instruction.

As many of Cochran-Smith's principles of pedagogy for social justice (2004) were evident in the classroom environment, we framed the analysis of the first year of personalized learning at Rolling Hills with Wager's (2008) discussion of teaching *for, with*, and *about* social justice. Stinson and Wager (2012) used a Freirean stance in their work in mathematics education, stating:

> Teaching mathematics *about* social justice refers to the context of lessons that explore critical (and oftentimes controversial) social issues using mathematics. Teaching mathematics *with* social justice refers to the pedagogical practices that encourage a co-created classroom and provides a classroom culture that encourages opportunities for equal participation and status. And teaching mathematics *for* social justice is the underlying belief that educators can and should teach mathematics in a way that supports students in using mathematics to challenge the injustices of the status quo as they learn to read and *re*write their world (Freire, 1970, p. 6)

Even though Stinson and Wager specifically focused on mathematics education, their ideas can be applied to broader areas. Using this framing, social justice education is more than just the content of the lesson, which would be teaching *about* social justice. Deep implementation of social justice in the classroom also needs pedagogical practices that model democratic principles of equal participation and status such as supporting student choice and involvement in the curriculum. Furthermore, through the content and practices in the classroom, teachers can support students to not only identify, but also act to challenge and improve the injustices they see in their world.

## Methodology

This study was the first year of a three-year qualitative, interpretive case study (Merriam, 2009) of an upper middle school's adoption of a personalized learning program for one of its five houses. The growing public-school district was located in a suburb of a larger, university city in the Midwest. The district included seven elementary, three middle, and two high schools. Rolling Hills' student

population reflected the demographics of the area with approximately 67% White, 10% African American, 7% multiracial, 7% Hispanic, and 6% Asian students, with 27% eligible for free and reduced lunch.

The concept for this eighth-grade classroom included 2 h of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and 2 h of humanities (reading, writing, and social studies) during each school day along with a study hall where teachers were available for student support. The mathematics instruction included computer-based individualized instruction supplemented with teacher support along with mathematics lessons that authentically corresponded with other areas of content instruction. The approximately 55 students of E House remained in one large classroom for their core studies with movement out of class for specials (such as band, art, and P.E.) and lunch.

Four teachers taught within the personalized learning E House; a male science teacher team taught with a female mathematics teacher, and a male literacy teacher team taught with a female social studies teacher. The responsibility of these teachers was not only to teach their particular block within the personalized learning house, but to also teach a half day with students in the regular education classrooms outside of E house. All four teachers agreed to participate in this study and met with one of the researchers three times during the year. The teachers sent the families of students an email that discussed the study and the informed consent. The packets included a description of the study, parental consent forms, and a separate form asking for names and emails of parents/guardians who were interested in being part of the family member focus group. Among the 55 students that received the packet, 11 chose to participate in the student focus groups held during their lunch period. These students met with the researcher on two separate occasions. During the first meeting, teachers again told students about the study and gave students assent forms to sign if they wished to be part of the focus group. All 11 students who had parental consent chose to remain part of the focus group that included four males and seven females.

We collected multiple types of data in the first year including observations, focus group spoken data, and classroom artifacts to ensure triangulation. We completed observations on three separate occasions during both STEM and humanities periods of the school day. We conducted focus groups with teachers (three times) and students (twice). Focus groups that we audio-recorded included group directed questions and a ranking activity. Artifacts included photographs and video clips of student-created projects and assignments selected by the teachers and researchers. We collected artifacts from 11 of the students; however, the entire class of students participated in all of these activities.

We first analyzed data using a grounded analysis of coding transcripts by naming codes line by line, allowing for an inductive, contextual, and process-based nature of exploring the data (Charmaz, 2006). We then analyzed grouped and/or regrouped these codes to reflect themes. In response to the issues identified as salient during the initial coding, the researchers became particularly interested in the themes of social justice that emerged from the data. After consulting the literature on social justice, we analyzed data a second time using a priori codes through a lens of teaching *about, with*, and *for* social justice (Stinson & Wager, 2012). Examples of student activities under each category are found in Figure 1. Once the researchers identified each activity, they wrote descriptive and conceptual memos that led to a reconstruction about the ways in which teaching about, with, and for happened in this classroom.

Being the first year of implementation of personalized, collaborative learning, the goal of the broader study was to understand the perspective of the students and teachers as they came to know the personalized learning environment. The term social justice never surfaced in the interviews. However, as we analyzed data, the grounded code, social justice, became evident from student comments and the students' own choice of projects. It was particularly noteworthy that researchers did not specifically include questions surrounding social justice or about projects that fostered a socially just agenda.

## Findings

In E House at Rolling Hills Middle School, there was evidence of teaching *about, with*, and *for* social justice through the personalized learning framework. Social justice issues were taught *about* using current events, skill-based projects that required argumentation and critical thinking, and activities that required students to consider multiple perspectives. Teaching *with* social justice was accomplished through design principles of student choice and agency and developing positive relationships between students and teachers. Teaching *about* and *with* social justice led to teaching *for* social justice, as students took active roles in creating change in their classroom, school, and community.

**Figure 1.** A priori codes for teaching about, with, and for social justice

| **Teaching *About* Social Justice:** Content specific | **Teaching *With* Social Justice:** Co-created classroom | **Teaching *For* Social Justice:** For change within students' worlds |
|---|---|---|
| Student choice debate assignment | Relationship building | Environmental change: Fresh Start |
| Debate on climate change assignment | Safe Spaces for Learning | Book Clubs: Advocacy Fundraising |
| TED talk assignment | Voice | TED Talks: Advocacy within peer groups |
| | Choice | |
| | Authentic/ purposeful projects | |

## Teaching *about* social justice

When teachers infuse social justice issues into the daily curriculum and lessons, Stinson and Wager (2012) considered this teaching about social justice, which "refers to the context of lessons that explore critical (and oftentimes controversial) social issues using" (p. 6) the content area. Through project-based applied learning, E House supported students in learning about social justice issues grounded in their own interests. We recognize that a limitation to this study is that it is only a brief glimpse into the first year of implementation focusing on a small group of students that volunteered to participate in the focus groups. We will continue to follow personalized learning as it develops through its expansion into an eighth and ninth grade house and as it stabilizes into an entity within this particular middle school.

In general, teaching *about* social justice would focus on past and present events that occur in the local community, the nation, or throughout the world. At the most basic level, students would encounter curriculum content that included topics such as the civil rights movement, democracy, global awareness, and human rights. In traditional middle school environments, social justice subjects are woven within curricular units and include pre-determined topics that teachers prepare for within daily lesson plans.

Contrary to this type of planned and sometimes even mandated curriculum, conversations about social justice topics in E House occurred among students and teachers organically throughout the day. The broad goals of the social studies state standards for students in eighth grade required that students use historical contexts to think about and discuss viewpoints about important political values such as freedom, democracy, equality, and justice. The standards did not specify particular topics, which allowed the teachers and students to co-construct the major topics examined in the classroom.

Through real-world application and project-based learning, which were two guiding structures of instruction in Rolling Hill's personalized learning environment, social justice content emerged in the classroom through both teacher and student-selected topics. Within the data, we noticed three activities that illustrated this structure, including two different debate projects and a TED-talk-style presentation.

Typically, the teachers introduced eighth-grade students to argumentation writing through a research project. However, early in the school year in the Humanities block, the teachers introduced the students of E House to the process of debate, which included not only the traditional researching of a topic, but also the procedures of publicly debating current issues. One recognized approach to social justice education is "to analyze current events or controversial topics using either a single-issue or integrative focus" (Bell & Griffin, 2007, p. 68). Students

chose a debate topic from a teacher created list or determined one of their own. Students self-selected into groups of two or four. In contrast to traditional research papers, the debates not only required students to conduct research, but to consider counter arguments and have a live debate with the opposing side.

Some of topics students debated included the legalization of medicinal marijuana for medical use and the utilization of biological weapons to solve conflicts between countries. Both of these topics were real-world issues debated through social media, in the news media, and by governments. The "debate-style" added an element of competition, therefore the students were more invested in the research. According to one student, it was one of his favorite projects "because we got to work with other students to create something that was competitive without being competitive at the same time." Developing arguments and counter-argument for a live performance provided an environment for the students that motivated them to deeply know the issues and develop additional communication skills.

Building on the experience with debates in the Humanities block, the students later in the semester debated climate change during the STEM block. This debate separated students into teacher-formed groups that debated the existence of climate change. Through the debate format, students had to consider multiple perspectives on the topic. One student commented, "I really liked the debate that we had on climate change, because it really pushed us to find different facts." Some students assumed that everyone felt climate change existed and were challenged to find information about the opposing side. This particular debate continues to rage in public opinion and governmental policy. Through participating in the debate in the STEM block, students not only become more educated about the facts of climate change, but also stated that they became more aware of the perspectives of those who do not believe in climate change.

For both the Humanities and STEM debates, students in the audience voted on which side they felt "won" the debate. One student conveyed mixed emotions stating, "My classmates said that I won the debate, but that bothers me because I don't actually believe in what I was arguing for." This helped students to recognize that facts do not necessarily win arguments or public opinion. As students talked about the debate in the focus group, they not only focused on who won or lost the debate, but also highlighted the importance of forming and articulating their opinions about topics and what they learned from the process of preparing for and participating in a formal debate. With all the debates during the 2016 election cycle, this was a relevant learning experience that exposed the students to a process of civil discussion.

Drawing from the popular TED talk format, students created their own TED Talks to meet English/Language Arts and speaking and listening standards. Teachers encouraged students to design talks based on current global issues. Topics were chosen solely by students. Parameters for the talk included creating an outline regarding the message they wanted to speak about, writing a short speech, and presenting in front their peers while being video-recorded. Three of the student-produced videos illustrated content or themes of social justice.

Two of the student TED Talks focused on topics of discrimination: one on disabilities and the other was about gender identity. The third talk illustrated the predominance of sexual assault in the United States and around the world. Students cited statistics, shared research, and gave personal accounts as they informed their peers about topics that were authentic and relevant to themselves and society today. When we consider teaching *about* social justice, which was content that specifically addressed injustice, the students took the lead in teaching the content. However, using the TED Talk format, they were also teaching *for* social justice to promote change, which we discuss in a later section.

When teaching *about* social justice topics, or the content of social justice issues, there are multiple instructional strategies that teachers may implement. They might lecture, show film, or hold discussions. Within the personalized learning classroom, it was the students rather than teachers that completed the majority of research and the dissemination of information. Teachers facilitated the discovery and sharing of content by students with their peers. Students not only learned content specific information, but teachers also encouraged them to research, ask questions, and think critically about what they found as they prepared to present what they learned to the larger group. They also learned that people can debate a topic and not actually believe in the stance for which they are advocating. This illustrated an important feature of public discourse where the same facts can be used to tell very different narratives.

## Teaching *with* social justice

According to Stinson and Wager (2012), teaching *with* social justice "refers to the pedagogical practices that

encourage a co-created classroom and provides a classroom culture that encourages opportunities for equal participation and status" (p. 6). E House illustrated teaching *with* social justice because the teachers and students built positive relationships and created a safe environment that encouraged co-construction of knowledge and risk-taking. According to the student focus group responses, students in E House felt that they had voice and choice, and learning became more of a co-constructed process.

Teaching with social justice was embedded in the guiding principle of "students have agency and ownership over their learning" (Wolfe & Poon, 2015, p. 2) that framed the implementation of personalized learning at Rolling Hills Middle School. This did not mean that teachers were abdicating their authority in the classroom, but rather than taking an authoritarian role, they developed a more authorial role—helping students to discover their own interests, facilitating resources and materials, and supporting collaborative work. Much of this work was predicated on the shifting dynamics of the traditional teacher and student role, or as Freire would say, the teacher became one who was taught in "dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (1970, p. 80). Several students and the teachers noted this change in power dynamics throughout the year.

One student noticed, "I think that the relationships in the room have also changed. We've become a lot closer to teachers and students now. We get to choose a lot more … so the teachers aren't telling us what to do, we're kind of equals now." Another student commented, "I think we've also been branching out more and meeting more people as a whole with the students and the teachers, we've gotten to know everyone a bit better." During teacher focus groups, teachers wholeheartedly agreed, naming building relationships and collaboration as strengths of the personalized learning environment.

This classroom environment created safe spaces for learning and risk-taking. These risks were as simple as asking for help and were as large as telling personal and vulnerable stories during presentations in front of large groups of peers. During a focus group, one student discussed how she felt about asking for help in her previous classrooms, saying, "everyone was going to look at me and everyone will know that I am not as successful as they are." She compared this to how she felt in her current personalized learning classroom stating, "Here, I know I can ask for help without people staring or judging me harshly."

Personalized learning as a framework for teaching *with* social justice also provided opportunities for students to choose topics for learning, and quite often, the student grounded their selected topics in injustices. When asked what students felt was the most beneficial outcome of being a part of this type of learning environment, they listed having voice and choice as being most important, along with learning that is relevant to today's society.

One activity that capitalized on student ownership and choice was The Passion Project. Occurring at the beginning of the year, teachers used it as an introduction to personalized learning for the students. Plus, it supported the development of student-interest focused learning and provided opportunities for students to take leadership roles in the classroom. For this project, teachers allowed students to study, research, and present on whatever was their passion at the time. This resulted in a wide range of projects including the election, the history of alchemy, qualia philosophy, Christianity, special education, self-defense, dance, journalism, and Korean culture. The final presentation was a Science-fair type of event that included multimedia, displays, and presentations.

Some students took the lead in organizing the parent event to celebrate the passion projects, because event planning was their passion. They created the marketing materials and organized timing and placement of over 30 passion projects and then invited parents and staff to the multi-day event.

During the student focus group at the end of the year, students referenced this project as an assignment that promoted developing relationships with each other and the teachers and their wide variety of interests. It also helped the students envision how the personalized learning model could be relevant for their future plans. One student explained, "The passion projects were probably my favorite because I got to learn about things that I might see as a future career, and things that if we were sitting in a classroom learning one of the core subjects I wouldn't get to be learning about." His peer agreed, sharing, "If we were in a traditional learning environment we would be learning facts, but here we're learning how to take standards and take things that people want us to meet and create a unique project that will meet those. And so, it's stuff that we may need for

college and jobs, more than just facts that we will forget over time." Although they did not phrase it this way, the students were clearly aware of the banking model of education (Freire, 1970).

With the Passion Project and other learning activities, E House was teaching with social justice because "pedagogical practices that encourage[d] a co-created classroom and provide[d] a classroom culture that encourage [d] opportunities for equal participation and status" (p. 6) provided opportunities for students to co-create their learning with the teachers. As illustrated previously, the teachers provided the students with opportunities to unveil the work of teachers, which included teaching to standards, and apply it to their own work. Students had the autonomy to select the topic and how they were meeting standards with it. By opening the black box of curriculum planning, students were doing teacher-like work in aligning standards to learning.

**Although content is important, this student-led curriculum created opportunities for students to articulate their belief in a cause and to fight to create a better world.**

They viewed themselves as equal participants in the learning process. Each became experts in their own topics and taught others, including parents and teachers, about their topic. They showed engagement and their teachers empowered them to shape their own learning trajectory with the support of their teachers and peers.

## Teaching *for* social justice

Teaching *for* social justice looks to the future of students and their communities, and students can contribute to changing and improving the world—both locally and globally.

Agency, in the personalize framework that Rolling Hills Middle School has adopted means, "the initiative and capacity to act in a way that produces meaningful change in oneself or the environment" (Wolfe & Poon, 2015, p. 20). This directly linked to the idea of teaching *for* social justice, which according to Stinson and Wager (2015) meant that subjects "can and should be taught in a way that supports students in using mathematics [content areas] to challenge the injustices of the status quo as they learn to read and *re*write their world" (p. 6).

As previously mentioned, the content of the students' TED Talks were an instance of teaching *about* social justice or the specific content of social justice issues. For some students, these talks shifted from a method of content delivery to an example of teaching *for* social justice and to promote change. Many students shared personal and vulnerable stories as a way of communicating and advocating for the need for change within their peer groups and society. Because teachers and students built relationships within a co-constructed environment, the students felt comfortable telling risky and personal stories of their own experiences with discrimination and harassment. This was an illustration of how personalized learning at Rolling Hills became an example of teaching and learning *with* social justice.

One student discussed discrimination of students with disabilities; asking peers to stand up for students with disabilities in their school. She cited real-life examples of students not displaying tolerance and acceptance of their classmates and called for change. Another student began by sharing an experience of being touched inappropriately at the mall by a man while at a drinking fountain. She used this story to display how common it was for females, even in the United States, to be sexually assaulted. After sharing her story, the student shifted the discussion to sexism around the world, adding statistics surrounding rape, violence, and oppression against women. A third student shared personal experiences within the transgender community and coming out to family and friends.

Although content is important, this student-led curriculum created opportunities for students to articulate their belief in a cause and to fight to create a better world. Another example of this was the creation of a student group for environmental advocacy, specifically the planting of trees. After watching a video at the beginning of the year during their STEM block about helping the earth, they were inspired to do something within the community to promote tree planting. Going beyond the requirements of the STEM block, a group of 12 students were motivated to create a movement to plant trees in the community. Initially, they researched how to gain authorization to plant trees within their community. The teachers supported student autonomy as they contacted both the city's mayor and Parks and Recreation Department to receive permission to do the planting. This initial project became a year-long interest group that continued to explore environmental issues and created T-shirts for group

members to market their beliefs about improving the environment. Eventually, they also completed their goal of planting trees in the community.

Multiple examples of teaching *for* social justice occurred toward the end of the year during an assignment for the Humanities block. Students formed book clubs based on their interests, selected their own texts, obtained the texts, set a reading and meeting schedule, and selected the ELA standards their group would address in their final group project. This contrasted sharply with traditional book club activities in which the teacher decides the possible book choices, sets deadlines, and determines assessments. Because of the co-constructed nature of this activity, many student groups selected texts that addressed social justice issues and their final projects advocated for addressing injustices. During students' final book presentations, several groups were inspired to create change within the school and larger community. Teachers invited parents and staff to visit book displays to hear not only about the texts that students' read, but also the themes that emerged from the students' learning.

When discussing their book groups' goals in the focus groups, several students indicated a specific focus on intervention or advocacy. One student described her group's final book project as providing a safe space to advance knowledge for people who might want to be an LGBTQ ally or just need more information. She commented, "I'm reading *The New Gay Teenager*, and I'm focusing on the topic of being gay with three or four other books. And my group is just going to kind of set up an open environment where people can ask questions about a topic and maybe take some stuff to show that they support [the gay community]." Not only was this group sharing their comprehension of the texts read, but they also recognized the importance of advocating for tolerance and diversity.

Through their reading of self-selected texts, groups entered the worlds and perspectives of people different than themselves. This led some groups to take action. One group was inspired to fundraise for homeless families because, as one student shared, "We read three books, but the main book we're focusing on is the first one of the series of three, and it's *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Woolf. And for ours [project] we're using our exhibit as a fundraiser and so we're going to sell lemonade to raise money for [a local women's shelter], because the book is based off of being a single mother, and [this organization] donates money to single mothers." Through the awareness of social action, these students began to *re*write their world.

## Discussion

The position paper, *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010) outlined the significance of students and teachers being engaged in active, purposeful learning, curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant within a school environment that is inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all. This specific classroom experience illustrated the successes students and teachers found in an environment that fostered these beliefs through their model of personalized learning. This article focuses on the emergence of social justice within the personalized learning model that Rolling Hills adopted. As compared to their peers in other Houses, the students in House E continued to perform adequately on traditional measures of school success such as report cards and standardized tests.

**Although every classroom has its own body of learners with diverse personalities, needs, goals, expectations and ambitions, educators must create and support learning environments where students can learn how to learn and feel empowered in doing so.**

The personalized learning model that Rolling Hills adopted went beyond just being student-centered and choice-driven, although these two components were essential parts of the environment. Grounded in Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky, student-centered instruction focuses on the active nature of learning. Choice-driven instruction emphasizes the importance of incorporating student interests and knowledge. In E House at Rolling Hill, students learned collaboratively, actively, and about topics that were of interest to them. However, elements of social justice emerged because of the re-defining of the roles of student and teacher. Teachers invited the students to be co-constructors of the learning environment, learning projects, and assessment. The students, along with the teachers, examined the learning standards and determined evidence of achievement of the standards. This co-construction led to a more democratic classroom environment that supported the students' recognition and discussion of injustice, inequality, and community issues, and this inspired and empowered them to create change.

Although every classroom has its own body of learners with diverse personalities, needs, goals, expectations, and ambitions, educators must create and support learning environments where students can learn how to learn and feel empowered in doing so. Social justice is not a set of facts to be explicitly conveyed, but instead a way of living and being, an identity that is always changing and growing. Teaching *about, with*, and *for* social justice sounds complicated and may make some students, teachers, parents, and administrators uncomfortable, but within collaborative, supportive environments these discussions and learning opportunities emerge organically and naturally. The adolescents in this study *wanted* to be agents of change. They were motivated and empowered to make a difference while the teachers were facilitators to guide and support them along the way.

From this research and the students' experiences, the three components of teaching *about, with*, and *for* social justice built upon each other. Educators can teach about specific social justice content outlined in a textbook or through children's literature. However, it takes a shift in power dynamics within a classroom to allow students to take the lead regarding what is taught and how they learn it. Teachers must recognize the importance of teaching *with* social justice, on a daily basis, even minute by minute, to ensure that students feel safe within the classroom and feel they have a voice. Teachers must empower students to be autonomous and believe that what they think matters. In this study, the classroom community that developed over the course of the year included a trust and acceptance that fostered the ability to have difficult conversations. Students deepened their learning through practical applications grounded in personal interests. However, more importantly, they felt empowered that they could challenge injustices and promote change. This can be the most difficult aspect of the three components. Students need to learn *about* and *with* social justice first, for without these two components, teaching *for* social justice, to promote change and to re-write their worlds, may not occur.

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