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# Social Justice in

*How can we raise privileged students' awareness of social inequities and empower them to work for social justice?*

**Scott Seider**

**W**e live in a world facing enormous challenges. Across the globe, more than 10 million children in the developing world die each year from diseases stemming from malnutrition (Singer, 2009). In the United States, approximately 37 million people live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). In my hometown of

Boston, Massachusetts, more than 6,000 people are homeless (Valencia, 2009). These statistics are daunting, yet the challenges they represent are not unsolvable. As activist Marian Wright Edelman (2001) once noted,

A lot of people are waiting for Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi to come back—but they are gone. We are it. It is up to us. (p. 29)

One challenge to heeding Edelman's call, however, is that many young Americans are insulated from collective human suffering. Growing up in affluent suburbs with beautiful homes, excellent schools, and little evidence of crime or poverty, these young people often have limited exposure to the challenges of hunger, homelessness, poverty, and illness faced by individuals just a few miles away from them, much less those living across the globe. There is value, then, in considering how educators in privileged communities can heighten their students' awareness of and concern for society's less fortunate members.

During the 2006–07 school year, I studied how a course on social justice issues affected the beliefs, attitudes, and values of 83 high school students in an

affluent Boston suburb. Drawing on surveys, interviews, observations, and student work, I offer here three important (and surprising) lessons for K–12 educators committed to teaching privileged youth about social justice.

### **Lesson 1: Knowledge Can Be Overwhelming**

In a unit on world hunger and poverty, the 83 teens learned that thousands of men, women, and children in the developing world die each day from malnutrition and other treatable diseases. They considered the infant mortality rates of various countries around the world, watched a documentary on malaria in Tanzania, and

by their learning. They needed more support in envisioning solutions to global poverty and the personal roles they could play in addressing these global challenges (Goodman, 2000; Seider, 2009).

For educators outraged by injustice, it is tempting to deluge students with statistics, sermons, and stories about all that is wrong with the current distribution of wealth, health, and resources across the globe. However, positive emotions, such as hope and inspiration, are more effective than negative emotions in deepening an individual's commitment to social action (Rahn & Hirshorn, 1999). It is crucial, then, for teachers to design lessons that not only

deepen their students' understanding of social problems, but also help them envision solutions to these problems (and how they can be a part of the solutions).

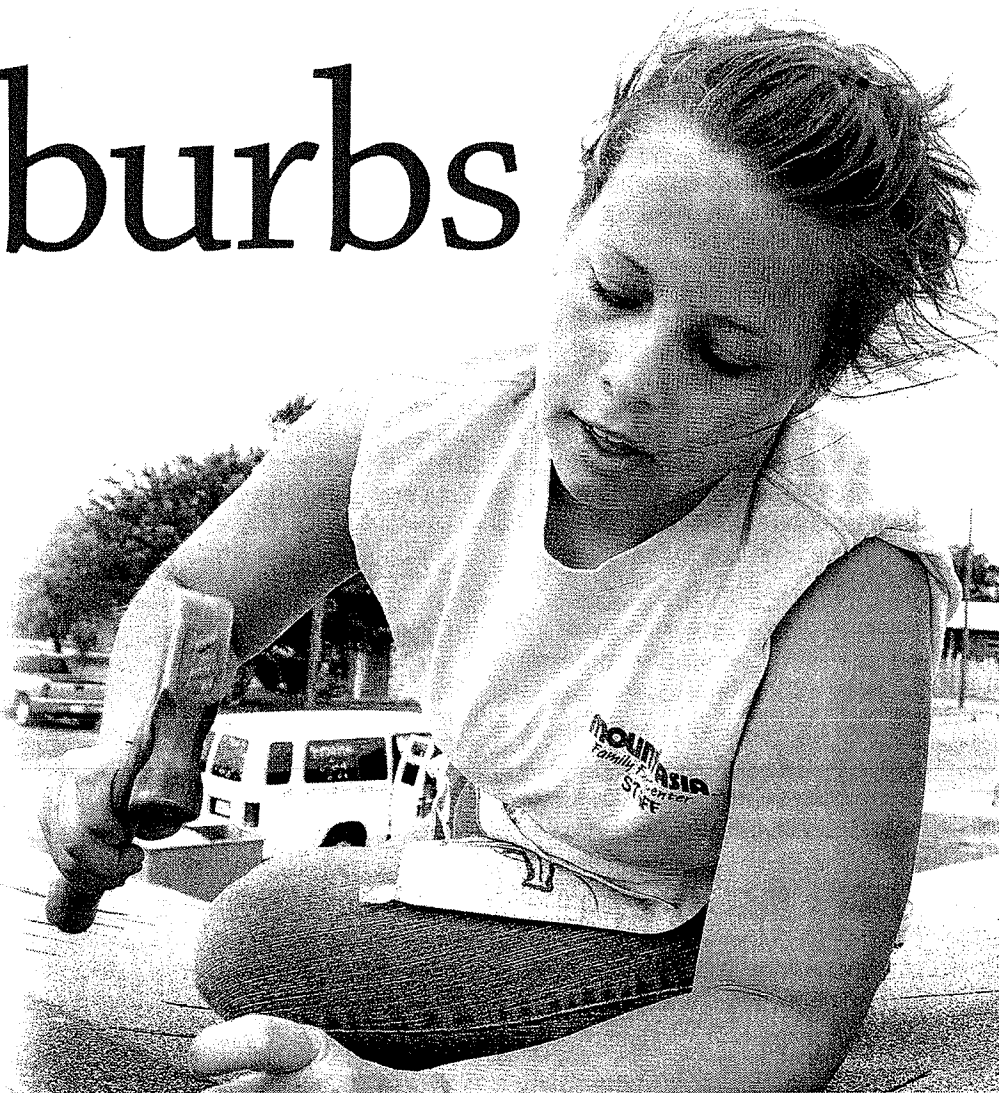
For example, a unit on global poverty might include the work of such inventors as Dean Kamen, who recently invented a portable water purifier (nicknamed "The Slingshot") that has the potential to provide clean water to remote villages in the developing world. Students might also learn about organizations like Heifer International or Kiva, which draw on small donations to help individuals in the developing world become self-sufficient farmers and entrepreneurs.

# The Suburbs

studied hunger in several developing nations.

Unexpectedly, by the end of the unit, a majority of the students had become dubious about the feasibility of combating global poverty. One student, Dan,<sup>1</sup> commented, "It's just the way life is, I guess. Like some people are more fortunate than others. Sometimes there's something you can do; sometimes there isn't." Another student, Liza, characterized world hunger as "a huge issue" but also as "something that's uncontrollable."

Dan, Liza, and many of their classmates had become overwhelmed by the size and scope of the social problems they learned about; they reacted by deciding that the problems were unsolvable. These students had become immobilized, rather than empowered,



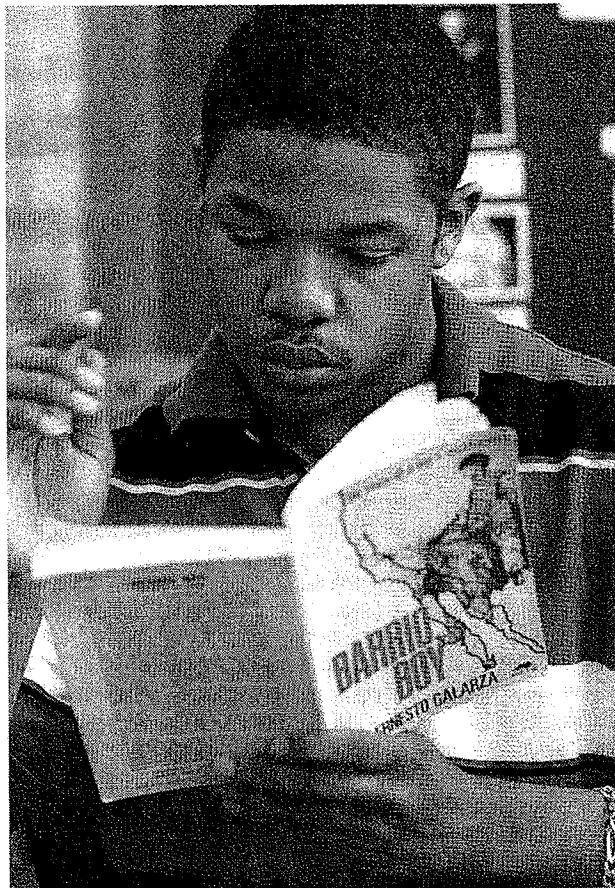
## Lesson 2: Fear Can Impede Social Responsibility

The students also learned about life among the poor in the United States through a radio diary produced by teenagers living in a Chicago housing project; a documentary about the children of undocumented Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles; and Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (Metropolitan Books, 2001).

Unexpectedly, the teens' strongest response to these materials was heightened fear about one day experiencing poverty themselves (Seider, 2008a). For example, one student, Annie, noted that her biggest takeaway from studying poverty was that "it could happen to anyone. Like after I go to college or whatever, what if I can't find a job, and then what if my parents can't help me? And then I could be homeless."

Such fears can be useful if they result in heightened outrage over the challenges of "getting by." Recall, however, that negative emotions are less effective than positive emotions at rousing individuals to social action. Such was the case with these privileged teens. Learning about the challenges of poverty as well as the disparities between affluent and poor communities actually increased their protectiveness of their own privilege. The majority became *less* supportive of policies that would equalize schooling between affluent and poor communities and *more* defensive of their own right to receive a superior education.

For example, Brendan justified the superior education offered by his community with the explanation, "You



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## Teaching privileged teens about societal inequity is a tremendously complex endeavor.

can't really say it's bad because our parents worked hard to get where they are. . . . The American Dream is to succeed and be happy." For many privileged teens, such a defensive response may be an inevitable reaction to learning about the struggles faced by tens of millions of people, especially as these teens reach the upper grades of high school and begin to think seriously

about the independent lives that await them (Arnett, 2004).

One possible response by educators is to *take advantage* of students' fears through formal exercises in perspective-taking (Selman, 1980). Ask students to imagine themselves (and to write about) growing up in a homeless shelter or attending an under-resourced urban school. What challenges would they face? What kinds of support would they need to make it to adulthood, to graduate from high school, to go on to college? What could parents, teachers, schools, communities, and government do to give them the best chance? Then, introduce students to the work of visionaries like Central Park East founder Deborah Meier or Harlem Children's Zone president Geoffrey Canada—women and men who have made it their life's work to increase poor children's opportunities. Considering the levers and supports through

which struggling individuals and families are able to lift themselves out of poverty can raise the consciousness of affluent, suburban teenagers rather than simply increasing their anxiety about the future.

## Lesson 3: "Radical" Arguments Can Be Counterproductive

Finally, these 83 teens considered their *own* obligations to the less fortunate through a number of different readings and activities, one of which was philosopher Peter Singer's (2000) essay "The Singer Solution to World Poverty." Singer argues that individuals have a moral obligation to donate *all* their surplus wealth to hunger relief organizations. He argues that "You shouldn't buy that new car, take that cruise, redecorate that house, or get the pricey new suit.

After all, a \$1,000 suit could save five children's lives" (p. 123). Singer concludes his argument with the assertion, "If we don't do it, then we should at least know that we are failing to live a morally decent life" (p. 124).

The fact that a significant portion of the students critiqued Singer's argument was not surprising; what was surprising, however, was the vehemence of their critiques. For example, Doug said of Singer, "I think he just likes to hear

with condescension or even hostility if they believe that vegetarians negatively judge their decision to eat meat. Monin and Minson (2007) explain that such reactions are "an attempt to defuse this perceived threat by putting down the would-be judge and therefore making the judgment embedded in their choice irrelevant" (p. 5). By derogating Peter Singer as "insane" or "moronic," this study's privileged teens sought to avoid the personal implications of his asser-

provocative perspectives may not be the most effective means of influencing their attitudes. Instead of—or in addition to—such readings, educators might consider offering students more balanced perspectives that recognize and attempt to reconcile the many competing viewpoints on a particular social issue.

For example, a unit on moral obligation might also include the perspectives and stories of businesspeople like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, individuals who have sought to grow their respective fortunes while simultaneously donating large sums to charity. In these individuals, students might find less polarizing models whose principles they can seek to emulate.

### Many Tiny Pushes

Teaching privileged teens about societal inequity is a tremendously complex endeavor—but also tremendously important. As Marian Wright Edelman said, the challenges facing our world are too large and too pressing to simply wait for another Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi to come along. Another powerful activist, Helen Keller (1903), once wrote,

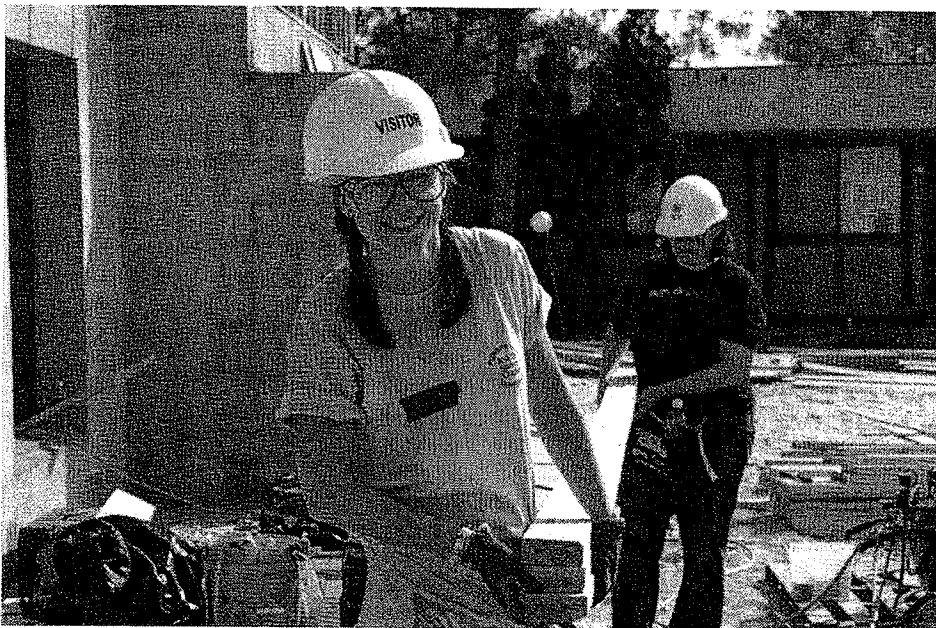
The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker. (p. 21)

Deepening the commitment of privileged youth to social justice must come about, in large part, through the tiny pushes of many committed educators. The lessons from this study provide some important insights about how (and how not) to push. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>All student names in this article are pseudonyms.

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himself talk and say how great of a person he is and the rest of us don't help out enough. He should not have the right to tell people what to do." Britany characterized Singer as "quite insane and moronic." And Frank admitted that Singer's assertions "made me mad" (Seider, 2008b).

Reactions like these are predicted by recent research on *do-gooder derogation*—the tendency of individuals to react with suspicion, trivialization, or resentment when they feel threatened by someone else's moral behavior. For example, Monin (2007) reported that meat eaters are likely to treat vegetarians

tions about what it takes to live a "morally decent life."

In short, Singer's essay on moral obligation actually seemed to have the opposite of its intended effect on the students. Rather than convincing them of their obligations to the less fortunate, Singer's "radical" assertions triggered their suspicion, resentment, and desire to trivialize his perspective (Seider, in press).

Educators should consider this reaction as they seek to engage students in discussion of important social issues by means of "radical" readings and viewpoints. Although such a strategy seems reasonable, exposing students to

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### EL online



For more on the need to raise privileged students' awareness of social justice, see "Unlearning the Lessons of Privilege" by Adam Howard in the May 2009 *EL Online* at [www.ascd.org/el](http://www.ascd.org/el).

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