

# Helping by Hurting: The Paradox of Suffering in Social Justice Education

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**ABSTRACT:** *Suffering has a complex role in social justice education. The alleviation or eradication of suffering is a goal of social justice education while, simultaneously, students suffer in the process of learning about the suffering of others. Educational theorists have attempted to resolve this paradox in various ways and the author of this paper identifies and discusses four distinct resolutions. First, student suffering is permissible because it is self-inflicted (rather than inflicted by the teacher). Second, the students' pain, compassion, is distinct from the pain experienced by victims of injustice. Third, students should experience the same kind of suffering as the victims of injustice in order to inoculate them against racist, discriminatory and oppressive attitudes. Fourth, the suffering of marginalized and oppressed students is a distinct form of suffering that empowers students by enabling them to recognize their own suffering.*

**KEYWORDS:** social justice education, suffering, compassion, Jane Elliott, Nel Noddings

In 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy proposed a revision to France's fifth grade curriculum: every fifth grader would learn the story of one of the 11,000 French children killed by the Nazis in the Holocaust. The proposal caused a fury, and not only because it was a unilateral decision by someone who was not directly involved in designing school curricula. While some lauded Sarkozy's attention to this devastating historical event, others thought such a plan would harm students' psychological well-being. *The New York Times* reported a quote from Simone Veil, a Holocaust survivor and French politician, who said, "You cannot inflict this on little ones of 10 years old! You cannot ask a child to identify with a dead child. The weight of this memory is much too heavy to bear" (Sciolino, 2008).

It was easy to overlook the fact that Sarkozy's proposal was *not* radical because it would have introduced the Holocaust into the curriculum, nor because it would have exposed even younger children to the tragic event than did the current curriculum. On the contrary, in France students already learn about the Holocaust in schools and the Holocaust is already part of the fifth grade curriculum. The controversy ensued because critics believed that requiring a young student to identify with a single dead child would be too emotionally painful.

That students experience pain in learning about the victims of injustice is unquestionable. It is to the credit of many theorists and practitioners of social justice education that they have recognized and acknowledged students' pain.<sup>1</sup> To offer a few examples: In an article about the

ethical demands of listening to the other in social justice education, Sharon Todd writes, “In the name of justice, then, we create conditions both for pain and response to pain.” She adds that listening to others “occasions, of course, that those who listen will be affected by their own suffering in turn. In this regard, education is fundamentally a violent process in its demand that students be moved to the point of such suffering” (2003: 411). Elsewhere Todd argues that it would be misguided for social justice educators to forego subjecting their students to the suffering of others because, though it may be deeply disturbing, such suffering is essential to social justice projects: “What I do not want to suggest is that educators simply stop teaching sensitive material. Indeed, exposing students to portrayals of suffering seems an inevitable part of any educational project concerned with social justice” (2001: 610). Ann Berlak makes a similar point in an essay about anti-oppressive pedagogy and confronting students who are unreceptive to lessons about the pervasiveness of discrimination: “if a major purpose of teaching is the promotion of students’ abilities to receive information that is dissonant, not just congruent, with what they have learned before, then confrontation with its attendant trauma is necessary” (2004:141).<sup>ii</sup> Kevin Kumashiro writes of the “crisis” proper to learning about oppression: “If students are not experiencing crisis, they likely are not learning things that challenge the knowledge they have already learned that supports the status quo, which means that they likely are not learning to recognize and challenge the oppression that plays out daily in their lives. What is unethical is an approach to teaching and learning that does not involve crisis” (2004: 30; see also Kumashiro, 2000a; 2000b: 44; 2001: 8-9; 2002: 66 ff.). Likewise, Shoshana Felman discusses the value of crisis: “teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis” (1992: 53). Megan Boler presents the most elaborate argument for the necessity of pain in education, calling for a “pedagogy of discomfort” to cause students to question their biases and take responsibility for creating a more just world (1997, 1999, 2004).

Yet there is a tension in recognizing that we cause our students pain to prevent or alleviate the pain of others. This is the paradox of suffering in social justice education and the authors I cited in the previous paragraph are quite sensitive to it. Suffering may be pedagogically necessary or valuable for our students, but teachers have an ethical responsibility to limit their students’ suffering and to help them make sense of their pain.

In this paper, I examine resolutions to the *paradox of suffering* in social justice education that are present, often tacitly, in various theorists’ work. I first consider a resolution to the paradox in which teachers are absolved of responsibility for their students’ pain because the students’ pain is taken to be self-inflicted. Second, I discuss the merits of distinguishing pedagogically valuable compassion from the pain of victims of injustice. I review why compassion has been identified as insufficient or even detrimental to the goals of social justice education, and I respond with a qualified argument in favor of compassion. I next consider a resolution in which students are to experience a dose of the same kind of suffering as the victims of injustice, an “inoculation” against racism and discrimination. I argue that this inoculation model is undesirable. Finally, I identify a conception of student suffering – empowering suffering – in which oppressed or marginalized students learn to recognize the discrimination that they face.

### **The Paradox of Suffering in Social Justice Education**

One can see the roots of the paradox of suffering in social justice education in the following remark by Levinas:

a radical difference develops between *suffering in the Other*, which for *me* is unpardonable and solicits me and calls me, and *suffering in me*, my own adventure of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only meaning to which suffering is susceptible, in becoming a suffering for the suffering – be it inexorable – of someone else. (1988: 159, emphasis in original)

Levinas identifies the conflicting demands of one's own suffering and the suffering of others, and argues that one can embrace the former while decrying the latter. These conflicting demands are particularly challenging for social justice educators. Following Levinas, one could accept that suffering that occurs as a reaction to the suffering of others, and that might lead to action to alleviate that suffering, is a good thing. Further, cultivating an emotional reaction that entails recognizing and responding to the unjust suffering of another, likewise, can be regarded as a good thing. But when an educator exposes his students to the suffering of another, the educator causes his student to suffer. Levinas warns that "the justification of the neighbor's pain is certainly the source of all immorality" (1988: 163). Does this caution not also apply to educators who create circumstances for their students to suffer in social justice education programs?

In order to pursue this question, I identify five assumptions operative in the theory and practice of social justice education from which the paradox arises:

- 1. Suffering is bad.**
- 2. Social justice educators aim to eliminate suffering.**
- 3. To eliminate suffering, students must learn about suffering.**
- 4. Students who learn about the suffering of others suffer.**
- 5. Social justice educators cause their students to suffer.**

If suffering is indeed a bad thing, educators should not make their students suffer. On the other hand, if students may be justifiably caused to suffer in social justice education, then either suffering is not always bad, all things considered, or causing suffering is sometimes justifiable, all things considered. The idea that suffering is not always bad, however, undercuts the first fundamental premise of social justice education, and the idea that causing suffering is sometimes justified undercuts the second fundamental premise. Scholars have not simply argued that some student suffering is justified if it reduces overall suffering, as some might expect. As I discuss next, theorists have proposed, often implicitly, at least four distinct resolutions to the paradox. I begin my analysis by considering Nel Noddings' resolution, which accepts the first four premises, but denies the fifth, that students' suffering is inflicted by the teacher.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Self-Inflicted Suffering**

Nel Noddings articulates a theory of the role of suffering in education which stands up to Levinas's maxim that the justification of another's suffering is the root of all immorality. In *Happiness and Education*, Noddings takes the position that suffering is intrinsically bad and should be eliminated wherever possible. Responding to the question of whether educators should allow suffering and unhappiness to exist if they could do something to prevent or reduce it, Noddings repeatedly gives an unequivocal answer: "suffering is a bad thing – something to be avoided, relieved, and never deliberately inflicted on another" (2003: 25; see also 45, 52, 56, and 260). She adds later in the book, "As parents and teachers, we sometimes inflict pain on our children unintentionally. We are all imperfect beings, and there is no hope of eliminating the pain that accompanies interaction across differences in power. However, we can work at

reducing it, and we can analyze all that we do with an eye toward eliminating it where possible” (2003: 245).

Although Noddings is quite clear that suffering must be regarded as bad, she does carve out terrain in her conceptual landscape for an acceptable form of suffering in education. She notes that young people “should learn to feel some social responsibility to reduce the suffering of others” (2003: 43). According to Noddings, students should be exposed to the suffering of others, so that they may begin to alleviate it: “we cannot be entirely happy if those around us suffer unmet basic needs. The fundamental aim for education in this regard, then, is a social or civic one – to understand how basic needs are in part culturally determined and *to guide students towards a sense of discomfort when other members of the society suffer*” (2003: 100; my emphasis). Though Noddings is highly attuned to the importance of creating positive student-teacher relations (see Noddings, 1984), she recognizes the value of students’ discomfort at the suffering of others. Furthermore, Noddings identifies another type of pain, guilt, as pedagogically appropriate suffering. She distinguishes healthy guilt from unhealthy guilt, the former being “earned in the sense that we really have done something to harm or wrong another, and we sincerely want to make whatever restitution is possible. Further, there is something we can do; we are not helpless.” Unhealthy guilt is that which “persists even when objective outsiders see no reason for it or when either no attempt at restitution is made or none can be made” (2003: 46). Healthy guilt then would be a second type of valuable pain. Noddings further notes that happy people will possess an “uneasy conscience” that impels them to alleviate other people’s unhappiness (2003: 237 and 261).

In distinguishing the victims’ suffering of unmet needs and students’ discomfort and guilt as conceptually distinct, Noddings would have a reasonable way to resolve the paradox. Noddings, however, seems to be extremely wary of accepting that teachers are responsible for causing their students to feel discomfort or guilt as that is tantamount to inflicting a form of pain on students. She avoids the paradox by insisting that the pain is not inflicted by the teacher but is rather “self-inflicted” (2003: 45); it spontaneously arises in a person who recognizes another’s suffering. Noddings’ claim that such suffering is self-inflicted is an important move in her argument; it allows her to claim consistently that there are never any justifiable reasons to inflict the suffering of discomfort or guilt on others, and that even such potentially valuable suffering should not be glorified, while simultaneously allowing the pain of healthy guilt and discomfort to exist in classrooms in order for students to become aware of and act against the suffering of others. Noddings writes, “if we give up the idea that the deliberate infliction of pain on others is sometimes justified, it will be necessary to encourage the cultivation of healthy guilt” (2003: 46).

To return to the five premises I have articulated, Noddings’ argument hinges on an adamant defense of the first, that suffering is bad. However, since she sees a positive role for students’ suffering, she must qualify that premise so that suffering is bad unless it is self-inflicted, and aimed at reducing others’ suffering. Noddings accepts the second, third, and fourth premises with minor revisions, distinguishing self-inflicted suffering from other suffering; she claims that social justice educators aim to eliminate suffering, that students must learn about suffering to that end, and that students will suffer discomfort in the process. Noddings’ argument resolves the paradox by denying the fifth premise that the social justice educator inflicts suffering; suffering at the suffering of another, which Noddings describes as uneasy conscience, guilt or discomfort, is self-inflicted.

- 1s. Suffering is bad, *unless it is self-inflicted*.**
- 2s. Social justice educators aim to eliminate suffering, *with the exception of self-inflicted suffering*.**
- 3s. To eliminate suffering (*except for that which is self-inflicted*), students must learn about suffering.**
- 4s. Students who learn about suffering *experience self-inflicted suffering*.**
- 5s. Social justice educators cause their students to suffer *only self-inflicted suffering*.**

For Noddings, the resolution of the paradox does not rely on distinguishing the suffering of students from the suffering of others (though she seems to have such a distinction in mind as well in that it is discomfort or healthy guilt). She rather places the burden of identifying pedagogically appropriate suffering on the manner in which the suffering is inflicted. Suffering is bad if a teacher (or someone else) inflicts it on a student, while suffering is permissible or necessary if it is self-inflicted. As a result, Noddings' treatment of suffering seems to be an adequate response to Levinas's concern about the immorality of justifying the suffering of another while simultaneously carving out space for student suffering in social justice education.

Does such a conception of social justice education actually absolve the teacher of responsibility for inflicting the suffering of discomfort or guilt? Noddings argues that a teacher may create the conditions for the self-infliction of discomfort and healthy guilt. Noddings also suggests in another context that coercion is sometimes necessary (2003: 247) and, as quoted above, she mentions at one point that teachers may have to "guide students towards a sense of discomfort." Despite the educator's manipulation of the situation, Noddings suggests that the students' response is genuinely self-inflicted; that is, Noddings believes that students should not merely feel as though their healthy guilt and discomfort are self-inflicted but, rather, that they actually are self-inflicted – they occur spontaneously in the student because of the students' recognition of another's suffering, and not because a teacher has manipulated the student into this perception. Yet, as Sarkozy's controversial proposal reveals, educators and policy makers *must* take responsibility for the school curricula which they design and implement, and the suffering that may be a by-product of it. Students' suffering in classes is never truly self-inflicted – it is a result of a classroom experience for which the teacher is responsible.

Noddings' distinction is valuable, however, because she demonstrates the necessity of respect for the moral agency of each student. An educator can only take a student so far in the course of encouraging the appropriate response to the suffering of others. The moment an educator takes too much responsibility for the student's response, the door is open for abuses that would deny the student the opportunity to come to grips with the suffering of others at her own pace and in her own way (an issue to which I will return in the discussion of inoculative suffering). I want to emphasize, however, that students' suffering, even if it is considered "self-inflicted," is foreseeable in social justice education, as it always is in the case of learning about human suffering. Therefore, whether the students' suffering is a direct aim of the educator or whether it is a by-product of an educational experience, the educator is to a significant extent responsible for inflicting that suffering.

### **Compassionate Suffering**

Noddings suggested that one ought to distinguish students' suffering from that of the victim of injustice, and other scholars have made distinctions along this line as well. Commonly in the literature on social justice education, this type of secondary suffering has been called

“compassion” or “empathy,” two terms I use interchangeably.<sup>iv</sup> Much of the scholarship on compassion in social justice education responds to Martha Nussbaum’s argument that it is central in civic education (1995, 1996, 2001). She argues that compassion “provides imperfect citizens with an essential bridge from self-interest to just conduct” (1996: 57). As the bridge between individual and community, compassion is a necessary condition for justice.<sup>v</sup> Compassion involves distancing oneself from one’s immediate concerns and comforts to direct one’s attention to another’s suffering. Broadening one’s scope of concern is civilizing, as it causes one to be concerned with a greater number of individuals, to recognize their suffering and deliberate about the causes of and remedies for their suffering. The painful recognition of someone else’s suffering might also motivate one to act against injustice. It is therefore incumbent upon educators to present students with texts that arouse this emotion. Drawing on Aristotle, Nussbaum defines compassion as “a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune” (2001: 301) and I will employ this definition of compassion in the remainder of this paper. Central to Nussbaum’s account of compassion is that it is an evaluative emotion that has three cognitive elements: “the judgment of *size* (a serious bad event has befallen someone); the judgment of *nondesert* (this person did not bring the suffering on himself or herself); and the *eudaimonistic judgment* (this person, or creature, is a significant element in my scheme of goals and projects, an end whose good is to be promoted)” (2001: 321).

The primary suffering experienced by the victim of injustice is distinct from the secondary, compassionate suffering of the witness of that suffering.<sup>vi</sup> This distinction provides a viable way to resolve the paradox of suffering in social justice education. In education, primary suffering must never be inflicted upon students (and circumstances must never be created in which the students self-inflict primary suffering). Yet social justice education might entail compassionate suffering in order to relieve or eliminate primary suffering. The five premises would accordingly be revised as follows:

- 1c. Primary suffering is bad.**
- 2c. Social justice educators aim to eliminate *primary* suffering.**
- 3c. To eliminate *primary* suffering, students must learn about *primary* suffering.**
- 4c. Students who learn about *primary* suffering *experience compassionate suffering*.**
- 5c. Social justice educators cause their students to suffer *compassionate suffering*.**

The argument that compassion is students’ ideal emotional response in social justice education has provoked much scholarly discussion and its principal critic is Megan Boler. Boler identifies the following problems with the educative effect of compassion. First, she describes empathy of the sort promoted in classrooms and multicultural curricula (and defended by Nussbaum and others) as “passive empathy” (1999: 156-7). Boler argues that students momentarily feel bad for a particular character in a story or in history, but such curricula “do not radically challenge the reader’s world view” (1999: 157). According to Nussbaum, compassion requires those who experience it to understand themselves as subject to the same possibilities as the victim. Empathy is merely passive, Boler writes, because it has occurred though “modes of easy identification.” The identification problem is significant because the experience “is more a story and projection of myself than an understanding of you” (1999: 159). Rather than making our concern for the other central, concern for ourselves remains our focus. Alison Jones similarly argues that the dominant group unfairly makes use of the other to provide its own education; a student’s profession of wanting to learn from the experience of others is actually a demand that

the other feels compassion for the dominant group, that the dominant group needs to be cared for (1999: 312). Jones specifically addresses face-to-face dialogue, as opposed to Boler's and Nussbaum's focus on literature, but the principle is the same. Both Boler and Jones contend that classrooms in which compassion is celebrated as a key to social justice education actually end up exploiting and consuming the other.

Second, Nussbaum's conception of compassion entails judging the victim's pain. Boler argues that by allowing the student who suffers compassion to serve as judge, one makes two related errors. First, one supposes that one can know the other and what the other requires in order to flourish; to make such a judgment "is an exceptionally complicated proposition not easily assumed in our cultures of difference" (1999: 160). Similarly, Jones argues that understanding the other is unlikely and that students, teachers and scholars must come to recognize that they "work within epistemologies of uncertainty and multiplicity" (1999: 316; see also Kumashiro, 2000b: 31 and Ellsworth, 1997). Second, Nussbaum's compassion entails "a binary power relationship of self/other" in which students judge others while failing to judge themselves: "Passive empathy produces no action towards justice but situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection" (Boler, 1999: 161; see also Kumashiro 2000b: 35). The safe distance at which one holds oneself from the victim, Boler contends, is a type of voyeurism; one's position of power as judge is not reflected upon (1999: 163).

The two central elements of Boler's critique, (a) self-centered judgment based on a false sense of complete understanding and (b) insufficient self-reflection and reflection on power relations, are each valuable. Yet I believe that Nussbaum's account can accommodate the critique in the case of attending to power relations and that her emphasis on the student as judge is an advantage of her account.

Boler argues that the kind of emotion aroused in learning about primary suffering needs to entail recognizing one's "complicit responsibility within historical and social conditions" and recognizing the way that power impacts and continues to impact social relations (1999: 164). I believe that Nussbaum's version of compassion can, and indeed must, accommodate this demand if compassion is to avoid the condescension of pity, and this condescension is something that Nussbaum explicitly states she wants to avoid (1996: 29; on the condescension of pity, see also Blum, 1980: 512). Boler is correct in arguing that Nussbaum neglects to draw significant attention to how compassionate suffering will lead to reflection upon relations of power relations. While Nussbaum does not explicitly use the terms "power relations," "privilege" or "complicity," she does state quite strongly that the compassion that arises from literary accounts of suffering must lead to genuine reconsiderations of the values that one holds most dearly: reading "disconcerts and puzzles. It inspires distrust of conventional pieties and exacts a frequently painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions....Literary works that promote identification and emotional reaction cut through those self-protective stratagems, requiring us to see and to respond to many things that may be difficult to confront—and they make this process palatable by giving us pleasure in the very act of confrontation" (1995: 5-6). Boler writes that Nussbaum's compassion does not entail fundamental reflection on power, and the pleasure experienced lets readers "off the hook... free to move on to the next consumption" (1999: 164). Nussbaum, however, clearly intends for compassion to be a starting point to further reflection and public deliberation and therefore it is not merely "passive" or detached, nor does it offer "a voyeuristic sense of closure" as Boler suggests (1999: 169). When Nussbaum talks about compassion serving as a "bridge," she explicitly argues that it must be a starting point for further

reflection and deliberation, not a sufficient experience in itself.<sup>vii</sup> Thus Boler's objection about reflection on privilege, responsibility, and complicity, I argue, could be accommodated within Nussbaum's conception of compassion, if one grants that "painful confrontation with one's own thoughts and intentions" entails reflecting on the readers' role, and complicity, in their own social relationships.

Further, it seems to me that Boler has not distinguished "passive empathy" from a more robust version of compassion but rather she distinguishes two pedagogical responses to students' compassion. That is, when students feel compassion, Boler would have teachers encourage students to reflect on their privilege as reader and in their own social relations rather than allowing the mere experience of compassion to be sufficient. She is therefore closer to Nussbaum's idea of compassion as a "bridge to justice" than she recognizes and her response ought to be read as useful caveat to Nussbaum's account of compassion rather than a rejection of it.

On the matter of Boler's objection that the experience of compassion involves judging the other, I believe that this is a virtue of Nussbaum's account. Boler is right that in judging others, we assume a privileged position of power and that this may reinforce the very problems of power relations that social justice education seeks to overcome. However, the alternative is much worse. If students do not judge whether particular instances of primary suffering are worthy of compassion, they risk extending compassion to Humbert Humbert when reading *Lolita*, or to the neo-Nazis who bemoan how Jews, Muslims and blacks are destroying Western societies.<sup>viii</sup> This distance between the student and the other, however, does not preclude the self-reflection that Boler identifies as pedagogically essential.

Finally, Boler is rightly concerned with too easy identification with the other, an identification that ends up consuming the other because it puts oneself at the center of the interaction. However, Boler's requirement that students "recognize that a novel or biography reflects not merely a distant other, but analogous social relations in our own environment, in which our economic and social positions are implicated" (1999: 170) threatens to consume the other in a different way. Boler contends that her version of compassion resists the "consumption" of the other since the experience is not merely about how the student feels but about a kind of active response in which the student reflects on her own social relations. Yet one may object: why should the victims of injustice become the mere means through which students are encouraged to reflect on the injustice and the imbalances of power in the *students'* lives? Here there exists another means of consuming the oppressed – rather than students' consuming the oppressed to experience a catharsis of their own guilt or shame, the students consume the victims for the purpose of reflecting on contemporary injustices. One might reasonably ask, should not the victim of injustice, or the memory of that victim, be allowed to stand on its own, for all witnesses to behold in horror, rather than as mere curricular fodder?

Consumption in this sense presents a serious ethical problem for educators and curriculum theorists who must endeavor to do justice to victims while keeping their pedagogical missions in mind. However, I ultimately side with Boler for I believe that consumption of this sort is worth the risk. The alternative is that students would be denied learning about, or at least reflecting upon, any victims of injustice. Educators must hope that students not only learn history but learn from it, and Boler and others are right to argue that learning about injustice ought to lead students to reflect on analogous relationships in their own lives.



## **Inoculative Suffering**

I have argued that distinguishing compassionate suffering from primary suffering provides a reasonable resolution to the paradox of suffering in social justice education and I have defended compassion from some of its critics. Some theorists, however, seek another resolution because they hold that students will only become more just if they experience the same kind of treatment that the victims of injustice endure. They argue that social justice education must be like an inoculation against discriminatory attitudes – that is, a student must experience a small dose of the primary suffering that a victim of injustice experiences in order for social justice education to be effective. The inoculation model holds that primary suffering is meaningful in education, and indeed just, when it serves to lessen unjust suffering.

- 1i. *Unjust primary suffering is bad.***
- 2i. *Social justice educators aim to eliminate unjust primary suffering.***
- 3i. *To eliminate unjust primary suffering, students must experience some unjust primary suffering.***
- 4i. *Students who experience unjust primary suffering, come to suffer only just primary suffering in the course of social justice education.***
- 5i. *Social justice educators cause their students to experience just primary suffering.***

Educators and theorists have often been seduced by the idea that if only students could experience a small dose of discrimination, oppression, marginalization, or stereotyping, they would be cured of their prejudices. This is the premise behind, for example, Ron Jones's exercise, the Third Wave, in which he had a group of students form a club in which members became increasingly hostile towards non-members. Eventually, the students were told that the club was modeled on the activities and hatred of the Third Reich. Their lesson was that stigmatization and mistreatment of others can develop easily and unnoticed (Jones, 1972).

Perhaps the most well-known program that invokes the idea that students must undergo a dose of primary suffering is Jane Elliott's Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes exercise. In 1968, Elliott sought a way to help her students learn the harm of racism. She decided to divide her third-grade class according to eye-color and then randomly discriminated against the blue-eyed students who were treated as inferior, were forced to wear collars, were forbidden from drinking from the water fountain and were forbidden from playing with any of their brown-eyed friends. Blue-eyed students were told that the brown-eyed students were smarter and brown-eyed children were granted an extra five minutes of recess and other special privileges. On the second day of the exercise, the groups were switched and Elliott informed the class that she had lied the previous day and the inferior eye-color group was really the superior one.

Elliott observed of her students: "I watched what had been marvelous, cooperative, wonderful, thoughtful children turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating little third graders in the space of fifteen minutes" (quoted in Peters 1970/2004). The exercise is deemed pedagogically valuable because the experience of discrimination is so painful that students develop strong beliefs about the harm of racism and the need to combat it to the extent that they can when they encounter it; for Elliott, the best way to make inroads against entrenched racist attitudes is to make whites experience arbitrary, discriminatory treatment. Recounting a reunion of the third-graders from Elliott's class featured in *The Eye of the Storm*, a special on ABC, fourteen years later, Peters remarks of Elliott's former students, "Crusaders against racism or not, they were

clearly young adults who had been *inoculated* against racist attitudes” (1987: 29-30, my emphasis).

I think that the inoculation model is fundamentally problematic for social justice education, and Boler’s concern about too easy identification is one of its central problems. There is something particularly worrisome, even offensive, about the idea that a student (or anyone, really) can grasp the experience of a victim of injustice by means of a pedagogical exercise, even if that exercise is particularly involved and painful. Jane Elliott’s students, for example, may have become more sensitive to the harm of racism, but they should not be put in a position where they are led to believe that they comprehend how victims of racism feel. There will always remain an unbridgeable gap in one’s understanding of the other, and we show a lack of respect for that other should we suggest – even with qualification – that our students have come to appreciate and comprehend her.

Further, if an inoculation model is acceptable, and the goal of eliminating racist behavior justifies subjecting students to primary suffering, then there might arise scenarios like the following. A teacher runs a class in which primary suffering is inflicted on some students and during the course of the exercise she notices that a group of three students appears resistant to the message. During the debriefing after the exercise, the students tell the teacher that they did not care about the game because they know it is not the same thing as the “real” differences in races. The experience of discrimination did not have the desired effect on them.

How might the teacher react in this hypothetical scenario? If he took the inoculation model seriously, he might have to ratchet up the pain a notch. If the tiny dose of the disease was insufficient to inoculate the student against racist attitudes, then perhaps a larger dose is necessary. Maybe these three children need another day of being discriminated against, but this time he will choose something more specific to them, impose greater restrictions on their behavior or create some other way to make them suffer. Because it can be difficult to determine if a particular student is resisting the lesson or merely the authority being exercised over her, the inoculation model is open to this form of abuse.

In sum, a certain degree of identification with the victims of injustice is inevitable in compassionate suffering. The inoculation model, however, takes the power of identification too far in that it strongly implies to students that the others’ experience can be fully appreciated. Further, teachers may end up inflicting harm on their students by ratcheting up the pain if they do not believe that the identification has occurred. The teachers may be misreading the students’ affective response and thereby cause lasting harm to the student and to the student-teacher relationship.

### **Empowering Suffering**

If compassionate suffering is the “awareness of another person’s undeserved misfortune,” it does not capture theories and practices of social justice education in which students identify as part of the marginalized or oppressed group about which they are learning. Indeed, when discussing Boler’s analysis above, it is evident that her main concern is educating across difference. Yet social justice education also occurs within marginalized or oppressed groups. For example, African-American students learning about contemporary discrimination against African-Americans suffer not because of compassion for some distant other but because of racism and discrimination that they experience themselves.<sup>ix</sup> The painful awareness of the structural and cultural biases that limit oneself might be called “empowering suffering” – a pain inflicted in social justice education to empower groups who face discrimination to realize the obstacles they face and to work to eliminate and overcome them.

That education might bring about a painful recognition of the injustice one suffers is a powerful theme in American works arguing for racial equality. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass recounts an episode when he was a slave and Hugh Auld, his master, discovered that his wife had been teaching Douglass to read. Within earshot of Douglass, Mr. Auld reprimanded his wife saying, among other things, “It would forever unfit him to be a slave... As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy” (1845/1982: 78). At that moment, Douglass writes, his desire to learn to read became a passion. He befriended young white boys that he met on the street and, in exchange for some bread he brought along, they were “converted into teachers” (1845/1982: 82). Douglass’s self-education revealed to him the injustice he suffered as a slave – an injustice which was always clear to him but reached new depths through his self-education. The pain he experienced proved that Hugh Auld had been correct; learning would indeed cause Douglass to suffer and diminish his value as a slave. Douglass writes, “As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish” (1845/1982: 84). The anguish, of course, would become a powerful emotional wellspring for Douglass’s eventual escape from slavery and his later leading role among abolitionists. The suffering that Douglass experienced in reading about slavery, and the suffering of many African-Americans who later read Douglass’s work, was empowering.

Another example of this phenomenon can be found in W.E.B. Du Bois’s, “Of the Coming of John,” a story that he included in *The Souls of Black Folk*. John, an African-American from Southeastern Georgia, a “good boy,” “always good-natured and respectful,” goes north for his education (Du Bois, 1903/1999: 143). After light-heartedness and inattention to his studies resulted in his semester long suspension from his preparatory school, he returned to his studies with seriousness. Du Bois writes, “it was a hard struggle for him” but he grew “grave” and thoughtful.

He now looked for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh. (1903/1999: 146-147)

Du Bois repeatedly emphasizes that education can open people’s eyes, enabling them to see the world differently than they had before. Education cannot be comfortable and simultaneously enable one to recognize and address inequities in society. When John returns home after his education, he has the following conversation with his sister:

“John,” she said, “does it make every one—unhappy when they study and learn a lot of things?”

He paused and smiled. “I am afraid it does,” he said.

“And, John, are you glad you studied?”

“Yes,” came the answer, slowly but positively.

She watched the flickering lights upon the sea, and said thoughtfully, “I wish I was unhappy,—and—and,” putting both arms about his neck, “I think I am, a little, John.” (1903/1999: 150)

John's education opened his eyes to the primary suffering that he had experienced and was experiencing. His education would not be well described as an education of compassionate suffering, as he became aware of his own suffering and that of his family and community. To me, this literary example powerfully demonstrates the ways in which learning about the suffering of people like oneself must be understood to be a distinct variety of pain.

- 1e. Suffering that is not empowering is bad.**
- 2e. Social justice educators aim to eliminate *bad* suffering.**
- 3e. To eliminate *bad* suffering, students must learn about *their own* suffering.**
- 4e. Students who learn about *their own suffering experience empowering suffering.***
- 5e. Social justice educators cause their students to suffer *empowering suffering.***

In the case of teachers working with marginalized or oppressed groups, the suffering is not that of a distant other but of the student herself and others who are marginalized or face discrimination for the same reason. In this case, identification is reasonable. This identification still remains problematic, because even if one shares race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious conviction, or anything else with someone else, that does not mean that the other's experience becomes transparent and completely comprehensible. Indeed, an African-American student today cannot fully appreciate the suffering of Douglass and Du Bois, nor even the effects of racism suffered by her contemporary African-Americans. Nevertheless, there is a significant degree of similarity that must be present for the experience of empowering suffering, similarity which is indeed shared when one learns about the contemporary injustices suffered by a group of people with whom one identifies. Further, in this case the perspective-taking that the educator intends for the student to experience is that of the student herself rather than someone else. The painful new awareness and understanding of the discrimination is intended to empower students to identify, challenge and resist the injustices they face.

One of the challenges of multicultural classrooms is that teachers have before them diverse students who may be suffering from various kinds of injustices. This challenge has caused educators and theorists to worry about the possibility of genuine dialogue in classes (e.g. Ellsworth, 1989) and others to suggest that students of different ethnicities should be separated from other students in classes which address social justice (e.g. Jones 1999, 2004). One way to think about the roots of this problem is that, within a multicultural classroom, educators expect some students to experience compassionate suffering while others are expected to experience empowering suffering. Douglass and Du Bois clearly intended for their contemporary white readers and African-American readers to have different reactions – African-Americans should experience empowering suffering. Likewise, there is great value in recognizing that different students will experience different kinds of pain in classes focusing on social justice. Recognizing these differences is an essential first step in enabling educators to provide appropriate support and challenges to their diverse students.

## **Conclusion**

In classrooms throughout the world, dedicated teachers mine the depths of human cruelty and suffering with their students with the hope that their students will never repeat those injustices and that they might prevent others from committing them as well. Theorists and educators who are concerned with social justice education have been frank and thoughtful about

their students' pain in these classes. In this paper, I have attempted to analyze some of the claims made about student suffering in order to map four resolutions to the paradox of suffering in social justice education. Causing students pain in social justice education is unavoidable, but it is essential that educators distinguish pedagogically valuable pain from that which is less so.

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<sup>i</sup> As Connie North (2008) has demonstrated, "social justice" in education is defined in a variety of ways. I use "social justice education" in the following sense in this paper: it is any educational curriculum, activity or encounter in which a teacher explicitly intends to facilitate students' moral development in order that they be able to recognize the mistreatment and suffering of others, refuse to add to it, and act to alleviate it, especially when that mistreatment and suffering are due to marginalization, discrimination and oppression.

<sup>ii</sup> For other discussions about the necessity for disruption of beliefs in social justice education, see Mayo (2004) and Erickson (2004).

<sup>iii</sup> I should note that, to my knowledge, none of the other theorists whom I discuss has identified or explicitly addresses this paradox as I have, though I hope to demonstrate that many theorists do indeed implicitly reckon with it.

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<sup>iv</sup> Verducci's review of the literature demonstrates that there is no settled distinction in the literature: "It is not that educators do not distinguish among phenomena such as empathy, sympathy, and compassion. It is that they make these distinctions differently" (2000, p. 64). Additionally, since I dwell at length in this section on Megan Boler's work, I follow her in using the terms compassion and empathy interchangeably.

<sup>v</sup> Though it "is not sufficient for justice, since it focuses on need and offers no account of liberty, rights, or respect for human dignity" (1996, p. 39).

<sup>vi</sup> Rather than sharply distinguishing the victim's primary suffering and the witness's secondary suffering, one could follow Schopenhauer who held that compassion involves participation in the suffering of another: "I suffer directly with him, I feel *his* woe just as I ordinarily feel only my own" (this idea leads to his extreme contention that "Only insofar as an action has sprung from compassion does it have moral value" [1995, pp. 143-4]). Many theorists have likewise viewed compassion as a kind of contagion in which the witness comes to experience a self-oriented type of suffering. Regardless of whether compassion arises via emotional contagion, it is morally problematic to consider it as such because of the implication that one genuinely appreciates the pain suffered by the victim of injustice. Also, it is morally insufficient from an educational standpoint if its selfishness fails to lead to action to help the victim (ideas to which I return below). If one grants that contagion is problematic in these ways, Nussbaum's understanding of compassion is superior, especially with respect to its role in education.

<sup>vii</sup> On compassion as insufficient see note 5. In a work that was likely published too late for Boler to respond to in *Feeling Power*, Nussbaum writes, "To produce students who are truly Socratic we must encourage them to read critically; not only to empathize and experience, but also to ask critical questions about that experience. And this means cultivating an attitude to familiar texts that is not the detached one that we sometimes associate with the contemplation of fine art. The more critical attitude has its roots, in the West, in the ancient Greek tradition of the tragic festivals, where watching a work of art was closely connected to argument and deliberation about fundamental civic values" (1997, p.100).

<sup>viii</sup> Nussbaum makes this point drawing on different examples (1996, p.45).

<sup>ix</sup> Though such suffering might also entail compassionate suffering for others in the group with which one identifies.