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*“Hacerlos sentir a ellos como seres humanos importantes”<sup>1</sup>*

**Teaching for Social Justice in Rural Dominican Republic**

Isabel Miranda Sacks

Special Major in Educational Studies and Latin American Studies

Swarthmore College

Advised by Lisa Smulyan and Milton Machuca-Galvéz

Submitted December 2014

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<sup>1</sup> “Make them feel like important human beings”

## **Abstract**

This thesis explores how teachers at Escuela Católica de los Bateyes (ECB), a rural school in the Dominican Republic, define and enact social justice education. The research is based upon semi-structured interviews with four teachers and the author's field notes during her work with nine ECB teachers on her Lang Opportunity Scholarship project in the summer of 2014. She finds that local and national contextual factors, including the Catholic mission of the school, the rural poverty of the area, and the presence of undocumented Haitian students in the school, were crucial to how the teachers viewed social justice education. Rather than the Freirean aims of consciousness building, uprising, and liberation, ECB teachers saw the central goals of social justice education as creating *convivencia* (living in harmony in community and society), instilling *valores* (morals and values), and ensuring their students' right to education.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Professor Lisa Smulyan for advising me every step of the way, from the conception of the project through the thesis process; Professor Milton Machuca-Gálvez for advising me in Latin American Studies; Jennifer Magee and the Lang Center; Juliana Gutierrez; the founder/president, principal, and teachers of ECB; and my parents and loved ones.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Our first day at the school! First we went to “hacer la fila,” which is when all of the students line up by grade level in front of the little white statue of the virgin Mary, raise the Dominican flag, and listen to one of the teachers or the principal lecture, usually about “valores” (values). Sor Virginia<sup>2</sup>, the nun who is principal of the school, led the students and teachers in the Lord’s Prayer. In my past experiences in la fila, they have sung the national anthem. Today they sang a song “A la clase” about how working hard in school is like bees working in their hive.*

A la clase, que ya es hora,  
De empezar nuestra labor.  
Están haciendo, la suya,  
las abejas en la flor.

Y si trabajan las abejas  
Y acaban bien su labor  
Trabajemos en la escuela  
Y haremos algo mejor.<sup>34</sup>

(Field notes, June 1, 2014)

Escuela Católica de los Bateyes (ECB) is a rural school in eastern Dominican Republic (see Figure 1). Nestled between sugarcane fields about 30 minutes drive from town, the school serves three distinct populations of students: middle-class Dominican students from town, rural Dominican students whose parents are subsistence farmers, and Haitian students who live in *bateyes*<sup>5</sup> and whose fathers work in the sugarcane fields. The school is private but receives

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the school and all people associated with it are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> “To the classroom, now it’s time/To begin our work/They are doing theirs/Those bees in the flowers/And if the bees work/And finish their job well/We’ll work at school/And we will do better.”

<sup>4</sup> Song originally by Ramón E. Jimenez and Pedro Manuel de Jesús Gonzales.

<sup>5</sup> Small communities of sugarcane workers who live in extreme poverty, usually without electricity or running water, in small houses made out of corrugated tin, wood, or concrete.

government funding and follows the Dominican national curriculum and testing in grades 8 and 12. Founded in 2000, the school's principal has always been a nun from the Order of Cardinal Sancha and religion is one of the central foci of the school. Because of the religious base of the school and the tight-knit rural community, teachers often express that the school's primary focus is on the well being and development of the students as people and members of a community, even above academic achievement.

Figure 1. Map of the Dominican Republic



Since 2005, I have visited ECB six times and spent a combined total of seven months there, including summers and a semester teaching English. Funded by the Lang Opportunity Scholarship (LOS) program at Swarthmore College, I implemented a social justice education initiative at the school in the summer of 2014, entitled Pedagogy for Social Action. I collaborated with a fellow Swarthmore student named Juliana and nine teachers at ECB to develop curriculum and facilitate workshops for three weeks with the eighth and twelfth grade classes. The workshops included topics of social justice that were relevant to the local

community and utilized interactive, discussion-based critical pedagogy inspired by Paulo Freire. We concluded the program with a field trip to a local microfinance bank, a mural project on a prominent wall at the school, and a closing ceremony.

Each day following the workshop, the teacher cohort, Juliana, and I would gather to reflect on the day and brainstorm how to improve the workshops the following day. These reflection sessions were useful for the project itself but I also found myself fascinated by the teachers' analyses of the topics and pedagogies we utilized. The following research questions emerged.

1. *How did teacher-led summer workshops about social justice at Escuela Católica de los Bateyes in the Dominican Republic impact teacher understandings of social justice?*
2. *How did the workshop series influence the teachers' conceptions of their roles in social change, in and out of the classroom?*
3. *What about the school, community, and country context influenced these understandings?*

This study draws upon semi-structured interviews with four of the nine teacher collaborators, as well as my field notes from the daily workshops and reflection sessions with the teachers. In this analysis, I find that when asked about the concept of social justice and their own role in social change, the teachers I interviewed focused on their students as individuals, linking personal *valores* (values) to being a good member of the school and local communities. They less often analyzed larger societal issues of social justice, except in very general terms. The teachers often expressed that their role in social change was to *concientizar* (create consciousness) or *orientar* (orient or guide) their students in ways such as instilling Christian



*valores* (values) in their students, informing them of their *derechos* (rights), and teaching them how to *convivir* (live together in harmony and community). I argue that context is crucial to how teachers enact social justice education, and in the case of ECB, teachers conceptualized social justice and their role in social change primarily on a small-scale, personal level due to contextual factors affecting their students and their school.

In this paper, I first outline the theories of teachers as agents of social change, primarily through literature from the United States. Next, I describe the context of the Dominican education system, the community, the school, and the summer social justice workshop series. Finally, I analyze how teachers conceptualize social justice and their role in social change after collaborating on the summer project, and what about the school, community, and country context influenced these understandings.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

After spending a summer collaborating with teachers at ECB to create a workshop series for middle and high school students about social justice, I wanted to investigate the following questions.

1. *How did teacher-led summer workshops about social justice at Escuela Católica de los Bateyes in the Dominican Republic impact teacher understandings of social justice?*
2. *How the workshop series influence the teachers' conceptions of their roles in social change, in and out of the classroom?*
3. *What about the school, community, and country context influenced these understandings?*

Theories of social justice education and the role of teachers in social change allow me to analyze how ECB teachers conceptualized SJE and their role in social change in their specific context. I will frame my later findings by presenting theories of an ethic of care, which was one of the primary ways that ECB teachers acted out social justice inside and outside of their classrooms.

### *Teaching for Social Justice*

My understanding of social justice education (SJE) is primarily informed by the work of Brazilian educator and theorist Paulo Freire. In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire argues, “Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it” (p. 66). He describes a method of education that enables the “oppressed” to recognize the structures used by the oppressors and challenge the existing hegemonic order. This pedagogy rejects the “banking concept of education,” a process in which authoritative teachers transfer information to the students, who absorb the knowledge (Freire, 1970, p. 58). Instead, he advocates for a democratic pedagogical model in which dialogue and “acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” are central (Freire, 1970, p. 67). In this model, the teacher emerges as a “teacher-student” with “students-teachers” (Freire, 1970, p. 67). The sharing of ideas instead of a one-way transferal of information serves both to create a democratic classroom and allow for the critical thinking that challenges oppressive societal structures. In Freirean classrooms, teachers and students all participate in the process of *conscientização*, or critical consciousness, and, ultimately, liberation (Freire, 1970, p. 19).

Today, SJE is an “umbrella term” for teaching that can incorporate theory and practice from critical race theory, feminist theory, queer studies, critical pedagogy, multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, and more (Picower, 2012, p. 4). Hackman (2005)

outlines five “essential components” of SJE: content mastery, tools for critical analysis, tools for social change, tools for personal reflection, and an awareness of multicultural group dynamics (p. 104). While each would be beneficial for any classroom, SJE is most effective when all occur together. In *Pedagogy for Social Action*, the content was information about the concept of social justice as well as locally relevant issues. The activities and pedagogical methods we utilized aimed to give students tools for critical analysis, tools for social change, and tools for personal reflection, albeit in a very surface-level way. We strove to build awareness of multicultural group dynamics, specifically in regard to students of Haitian origin, but this proved an extremely complex issue that was fraught with debate among the teacher community.

The scaling up of analyses of oppression from the local to the societal is a key component of teaching for social justice as currently theorized. SJE consists of more than “community service days or penny drives,” and instead involves work against “larger constructs of oppression in the form of racism, classism, gender subjugation, homophobia, ageism, and ableism” (Picower, 2012, p. 4). Any given social justice issue must be analyzed on a global as well as local scale (Hackman, 2005, p. 105). SJE moves beyond “a focus on individuals” to a more broad political analysis and action (Picower, 2012, p. 6). This aspect of SJE was difficult to achieve in *Pedagogy for Social Action*. The program was only about a month long and as an introduction to social justice, the topics had to be very personally relevant to students’ lives in order to make them understandable. Also, the teacher collaborators primarily conceptualized social justice education on an interpersonal rather than societal level, utilizing the framework of an ethic of caring.

*Teachers as Agents of Social Change*

Pedagogy for Social Action aimed to engage teachers at ECB in analyzing their role in social justice, as educators and as people. Picower (2012) describes three levels of teacher commitment to SJE. The first is teachers' own "recognition and political analysis" of oppression; the second, their integration of this understanding into their classroom teaching; and the third, the ways in which teachers' commitment to SJE manifests itself in "social justice work outside the classroom as activists, with students and on their own" (p. 4). In the United States today, few teacher education programs actively incorporate social justice into training, which is critical for teachers to be able to carry out SJE (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 13). Teacher education that utilizes "generative inquiry-based processes" allows teachers to "link the specifics of particular students and classrooms to bigger educational ideas and frameworks," which can then lead to action (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 13). None of the teacher collaborators reported discussing social justice in their Dominican teacher education programs.

It is generally understood by theorists of SJE that teaching is a political act. Some theorists, however, argue that teachers must also be activists outside of the classroom in order to truly participate in social change. Teaching for social justice is not enough if outside societal structures don't change. If oppression never decreases, teachers of SJE "will have to re-teach their lessons on inequality annually" (Picower, 2012, p. 8). Without participating in activism outside their classroom, teachers "remain[] within the safety or convenience of their classrooms...[and] leave SJE half done" (Picower, 2012, p. 8). Reasons for non-participation on activism include "tacit agreements about avoiding uncomfortable issues" as well a lack of training or "quick solutions" to social justice issues (Marshall & Anderson, 2009, p. 9, 7). In other cases, being an activist outside of the classroom is not possible for teachers due to time constraints or political risk. Teachers who do "stand up and stand together" to be activists often find that they have

increased morale and a sense of agency; joining organized groups is particularly effective (Coleman & Mayorga, 2012, p. 135). I was open to the possibility that the ECB community of practice could grow from a professional community to support its teachers in activism as well. In the Context section, I will discuss a specific instance of ECB teachers getting involved in activism outside of school.

### *The Ethic of Caring*

For any social justice educator, teaching with an ethic of caring is an important first step in SJE, but it appeared to me that ECB teachers often took this a step further, and saw an ethic of caring as central to their work as social justice educators. Throughout the course of the project, it became clear that the teachers I was collaborating with prioritized the well being as well as moral and interpersonal development of their students, even above academic achievement. Noddings (1988) defines an ethic of caring as “both as a moral orientation to teaching and as an aim of moral education” (p. 215), in which “teachers, like mothers, want to produce acceptable persons” (p. 221). Ultimately, caring is about relationships, particularly the relationship between teacher and student (Noddings, 1988, p. 221). Everything from everyday human encounters to pedagogical methods can facilitate “the possibility of a caring occasion” (Noddings, 1988, p. 222). Noddings (1988) details four components of educating with an ethic of caring: modeling caring, dialogue as part of moral education, explicit practice of caring in both in class and in the community, and confirmation of the student by the teacher or caring adult (p. 222-224). One way of enhancing the teacher-student relationship would be finding ways for these relationships to be more long-term, such as teachers following a student group through several grade levels. ECB, in

fact, does have this system in the middle and high school grades, where each teacher teaches their subject area to all three or four class years, respectively.

An ethic of caring is important to students in several ways. First of all, education is preparation for life, not simply citizenship and the workforce. Education in caring can be useful for students “for family life, child-raising, neighborliness, aesthetic appreciation, moral sensitivity, environmental wisdom, religious or spiritual intelligence” and more (Noddings, 1999, p. 14). Adopting a caring stance “allows teachers to understand the challenges students face based on oppressive conditions these students may be experiencing, rather than rely on deficit notions of students’ capacities,” setting the stage for a political analysis of these oppressive conditions (Picower, 2012, p. 5). In the case of Seguin High School in Houston, Texas, the mostly non-Latino teachers oftentimes lacked an “authentic” ethic of caring in the way that students defined it, as “relations of reciprocity between teachers and students” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). Mexican students, both immigrant, and U.S.-born, came from the paradigm of the Mexican concept of *educación*, which privileges “schooling premised on respectful, caring relations” and “closely resembles” Noddings’ concept of the ethic of caring (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 61). ECB teachers in the Dominican Republic seemed to think of schooling in a similar way. Valenzuela (1999) also emphasizes that the caring stance is particularly important for students who are part of historically oppressed groups, and must be enacted in a culturally sensitive way. While there is significant literature about the caring stance, it is usually not tied to social justice education, or it is framed as a first step to social justice education. I argue that for ECB teachers, an ethic of care is the central tenet of their interpretation of social justice education.

### *Conclusion*

Theories of social justice education, teachers' role in social change, and an ethic of caring converge in an analysis of my work with ECB teachers. The literature on SJE and teachers' roles in social change focus on the scaling up of personal-level analyses to societal-level analyses, while other literature frames the caring stance as an initial step to SJE or an entirely separate concept. As I will discuss later, ECB teachers tended towards personal-level analyses and often conflated SJE with the caring stance.

## **METHODOLOGY AND POSITIONALITY**

### *Planning the Project*

I devised Pedagogy for Social Action as a project for the Lang Opportunity Scholarship program at Swarthmore College, through the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility. In 2013, the summer before the project in the Dominican Republic, I interned with Independent Thought and Social Action International (ITSA) in Ahmedabad, India. Founded and led by another Lang Scholar, Riana Shah, ITSA has brought college student interns to Ahmedabad for the past five summers to design and facilitate afterschool and weekend workshops for high school students. The workshops are based on theories of critical pedagogy and social justice education that challenge the rote memorization that characterizes the typical Indian classroom. The summer that I worked with ITSA, I was asked to design a new aspect of the program, a Faculty Fellowship, in which a local teacher would collaborate with one of the facilitator teams. The Faculty Fellowship would be mutually beneficial to the teacher and the intern team; the teacher would be able to share how Indian students learn and an understanding of the local context with the interns, while the interns' training in Freirean pedagogical methods could be potentially useful to the teacher in his/her own classroom. I collaborated with a middle school

English teacher named Shweta as well as a fellow college intern from the U.S. to facilitate workshops centered on the topic of human rights and the theme of “Intersectionality and Access.”

To transfer the strategies I learned with ITSA to the Dominican Republic, I worked primarily with Sebastián (the key teacher collaborator) and Juliana to devise a project that would be useful to teachers and students at ECB. The project was based in theories of teacher participatory action research (PAR) and communities of practice. I included aspects of PAR because I wanted the project to respond to student and community needs, which the teachers obviously understand much better than I do, and I wanted the teachers to have the opportunity to explore their own interests in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. Though the project was not ultimately PAR, due to logistical and time limitations, the teacher collaborators were key to the construction of the project.

I drew upon the model of communities of practice both to receive daily feedback on the workshops and, hopefully, to provide a permanent structure for professional development at the school that could continue during the school year. I wanted the incorporation of social justice education, specifically, to be based in a professional community; Picower (2012) notes that oftentimes teacher activists engage as individuals, but that “larger networks or movements with other like-minded educators” can have more sustained impact and support the teachers involved in their work (p. 10). In general, teacher communities are particularly important because teachers are often isolated in their individual classrooms with little structured interaction with the goal of professional support and growth. In any professional field, communities of practice “are important for learning...because learning is an action of participation and is therefore an essentially social activity” (Kimble, Hildreth, and Bourdon, n.d., Introduction). A teacher



community within a school can “broaden...[teachers’] sense of self beyond the ‘me’ and ‘I’ into the ‘we’ and ‘us’” and benefit students as well as teachers (Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth, 2001, p. 7). Lieberman (1995) argues that through professional communities, “teachers can...create new possibilities for students through collaborative work, and develop a community of shared understanding that enriches their teaching and provides intellectual and emotional stimulation” (p. 595). In the case of ECB, the teachers had a strong community in their personal lives, but no structured space for mutual professional support. I wanted to build upon these informal relationships and extend their power to the incorporation of social justice into the classroom.

In March 2014, I visited the school for one week to converse with key stakeholders and perform community assessment; the intention was for the project to emerge from the needs of the school and the community. Sebastián and the school’s principal, Sor Virginia, expressed an interest in furthering a Model United Nations debate format, as Sebastián and a fellow teacher had conducted a debate activity on the topic of Haitian migration which proved successful. I wanted to connect this format to social justice, as they share similar pedagogical methods of privileging student constructions of knowledge, although social justice education is more critical than Model United Nations and not explicitly focused on international organizations. Before beginning the project, I wrote a proposal which was approved by a committee of four, who also were key advisors in the planning process: Swarthmore Educational Studies professor Lisa Smulyan, Lang Scholar advisor Jennifer Magee, ECB founder and president Francisco Contreras, and ITSA founder and president Riana Shah.

*The Project in Practice*

The week before the student workshop series, Juliana and I led a session with about fifteen teachers in which we showed them a PowerPoint presentation about Freire’s theories and facilitated a subsequent discussion. We then conducted several activities that could be utilized in workshop curriculum. Through this workshop, recruitment by Sebastián, and one-on-one conversations, we recruited nine teacher collaborators (see Table 1).

Table 1. Pedagogy for Social Action Teacher Collaborators

<b>Name</b>	<b>Subject taught</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Years teaching/years teaching at ECB</b>	<b>Interview participation</b>
Altagracia	Spanish	9-12	14/14	X
Diana	Civic, religious education	1-5	1.5/1.5	
Gabriel	Music	1-12	4/2	X
José Antonio	Physical Education	1-12	26/5 months	X
Mercedes	Art	1-12	2.5/2.5	
Perla	Early childhood	Preschool	13/13	
Rafael	English, French	6-12	11/11	
Ramona	Computers	9-12	10/10	
Sebastián	Math	6-8	14/12	X

The workshop series itself ran for three weeks following the end of the school year. The workshops were conducted entirely in Spanish. We advertised the workshop series to students through a combination of classroom visits and walking around the school talking to students; we also handed out informational flyers and short application forms. Ultimately, the majority of student participants were eighth and twelfth graders who the principal, Sor Virginia, required to participate. During this three-week period, the eighth and twelfth grade classes were having clinics for the national standardized tests and then sitting for the tests in the morning hours. They were then provided lunch and stayed through the afternoon for an hour and a half long workshop. The number of students in attendance varied widely but ranged from 30-50 students each day. I

intended for the teacher collaborators to develop workshop lesson plans, but since they were either leading clinics and tests or performing end-of-year teacher duties, Juliana and I ended up filling this role and making copies of lesson plans to distribute to the teachers the morning of the lesson. The lesson would begin with a team-building icebreaker, one or two interactive, discussion or writing-based activities, and a closing free write. Each lesson followed a central theme, listed below.

- Lesson One: Introduction to social justice
- Lesson Two: Safe space training and “-isms”
- Lesson Three: Stereotypes
- Lesson Four: Music and identity
- Lesson Five: Sex and gender
- Lesson Six: Connections and community
- Lesson Seven: Violence in our community
- Lesson Eight: Human rights
- Lesson Nine: Social action project planning
- Lesson Ten: Social justice organizations at the local, national, and global level

After the workshop each day, the teacher collaborators would meet with Juliana and me for a reflection session, during which I took detailed field notes. In the last week of the project, we took the students on a field trip to a local microfinance institution, Banco ADOPEM, where they were able to shadow the group’s workers in their daily duties. Through this visit, we hoped to give students an example of real-world work for social change in the local context. The following day, we held a closing ceremony where every student participant received a certificate and we presented each teacher collaborator with a copy of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the

week after the conclusion of the workshops, about seven students and several community members worked to paint a mural on a prominent wall of the school featuring messages related to social justice including quotes from Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

### *The Research*

This qualitative study is based on participant observation in the workshop series and semi-structured interviews with four teacher collaborators and the principal of the school. I took detailed field notes during the community of practice reflection sessions each day immediately after the conclusion of the workshop. I also wrote field notes in the evening, detailing and reflecting on the occurrences of the day and the workshop itself. Building on traditional participant observation, a technique in which an investigator studies the life of a group by sharing in its activities, I took on the role of a “participant as observer” in which my primary focus was managing the project. In this stance, “the researcher’s observer activities, which are known to the group, are subordinate to the researcher’s role as a participant” (Merriam, 2009, p. 124). For instance, I never took field notes during the day, in which I was involved in running the program; rather, I wrote field notes each evening with my memories of the day.

My investment in the project definitely influenced my research process. While I had a deep understanding of the program, I also could not have an objective outside perspective. Undoubtedly, there was quite a bit of “subjectivity and interaction” in my role as participant-observer, which is necessary in qualitative research, but I had to be cognizant about it throughout the research process (Merriam, 2009, p. 127). I would qualify the research as action research, which “incorporates selected ethnographic and Case Study techniques to document and explore purposeful changes in educational practice” (Freebody, 2003, p. 85). Although my primary role

was that of project manager, I was open with teacher collaborators, students, and administrators that I was conducting research throughout the process. All received a written letter with information about the research and signed a consent form before the workshop series began. The Institutional Review Board of the Department of Educational Studies at Swarthmore College approved the entire research process in advance.

Four teachers participated in the interview process: Sebastián, José Antonio, Altagracia, and Gabriel. These four teachers were interviewed partially because they were most accessible after the conclusion of the project; Sebastián, José Antonio, and Gabriel were at the school several days the week after the last workshop. I interviewed Altagracia in her home. However, these four teachers happened to be four of the most enthusiastic and committed teacher collaborators. While this means that they were more deeply involved in the program, it also means that I do not have the perspective of teachers who were less active or enthusiastic, although each of these four teachers had their own critiques of the project. I conducted the interviews based on a pre-set interview protocol, yet let the conversation flow as necessary. As is the case in all semi-structured interviews, “what is taken to be relevant *to the interviewee* [was] pursued” (emphasis in original), giving me a more thorough portrait of how social justice and SJE fit into each interviewee’s worldview and teaching practice (Freebody, 2003, p. 133). Juliana was also present at the interviews and occasionally interjected a clarification or follow-up question. The interviews were conducted in-person, audio recorded, and transcribed by hand. I interviewed Sor Virginia, the principal of ECB and a key supporter of the project, in writing a few months after the conclusion of the project, to give me more perspective on the school’s positionality on teaching for social justice. All of the teachers and administrators had the option of agreeing to an interview or not when they signed the consent form for participation in the

project. I will next describe the four teachers who I interviewed as part of the research process, including their teaching practice and personal attributes, to set the stage for my later analyses of their interviews.

Sebastián was my primary teacher partner in the development of the project over the course of the year and a half before implementation. He has been a teacher for 14 years, 12 of which were at ECB (Sebastián, personal communication, June 30, 2014). Sebastián teaches middle school math and is respected and somewhat feared by his students, who know they cannot get away with slacking off or misbehaving in his classroom. Sebastián is generally considered a leader among the teachers and has recently begun organizing the other teachers in curricular and extracurricular experimentation. He first organized a Model UN-style debate activity with the fifth through twelfth grades around the issue of Haitian citizenship. Then he led the middle and high school teachers in developing an interdisciplinary curriculum centered on the issue of bullying, a topic selected by the students. He was crucial to the process of recruiting teachers and students to participate in the summer workshop program as well as the development of the project itself. However, I often found him condescending, offensive, or silencing to women, including students, me and Juliana, and even his women teacher colleagues, despite his outward condemnation of *machismo* in Dominican culture. I was grateful for his support of the project, inspired by his deep care for his students, and impressed by his initiative to develop new curricula and pedagogies, but I lost some respect for him on a personal level due to these attitudes. I tried not to let this bias affect the project.

José Antonio, the physical education teacher, is a new arrival to the teaching force at ECB. He arrived in February 2014 to replace the longtime PE teacher who was imprisoned for

having sexual relationships with young female students.<sup>6</sup> José Antonio has 26 years of teaching experience and is therefore close to retirement. He originally became a teacher because his parents did not have the financial resources to pay for engineering school, his true goal. He intended to become a PE teacher to earn money to return to college and study engineering, but loved teaching and never went through with his plan (José Antonio, personal communication, June 24, 2014). José Antonio is a beloved member of the ECB community despite being relatively new to the school, and was also the oldest teacher involved in the project.

Gabriel is the school's music teacher, although he is working towards a career in architecture. He has worked at ECB for about three years and previously taught English and computer classes on a substitute basis at schools in town. He sees music education as he performs it as integral to moral education, in contrast to the lyrics of many popular *reggaeton* songs that students listen to, which often include references to sex, alcohol use, and violence (Gabriel, personal communication, June 30, 2014).

Altagracia is one of the most dedicated and beloved teachers at the high school level. She teaches Spanish to the high school classes and often serves as the advisor to the graduating class. She has been a teacher for 14 years, all at ECB. When I lived and worked at ECB for four months in 2010, I was a student in Altagracia's class in order to improve my Spanish. She often has her students read short texts with religious messages, as well as critical thinking and discussion activities. However, the majority of the work in her classes centered on banking model style activities such as reading and copying of information from textbooks and the chalkboard. Despite this, her students are usually inspired by her class, possibly more because of

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<sup>6</sup> While this detail is not relevant to José Antonio's teaching work, I included it because the phenomenon of older men having sexual relationships with young and sometimes underage women was very common in this community—yet another social problem faced by many of the students who participated in the workshop series.

her frequent lectures full of wisdom than because of the academic aspects of her class. She is deeply dedicated to her students and is particularly concerned with her students' post-graduation plans (Altagracia, personal communication, July 7, 2014). Since the summer, she has made efforts to incorporate discussion-based activities about social issues into her classroom, challenging the primarily banking model style activities that she used in 2010 (personal communication, October 14, 2014).

### *Positionality*

Since 2005, I have had a sustained relationship with Escuela Católica de los Bateyes. Through a family friend, my family connected with Francisco Contreras, the founder and president of ECB, and taught English summer camp for three-week stints in 2005 and 2009. In 2010, I deferred my admission to Swarthmore College and spent a semester as a volunteer English teacher at ECB during the school year, teaching the third and fourth grade English class on my own and assisting Rafael, the school's foreign language teacher, in the sixth through twelfth grades. I was the only volunteer at the time, and I lived with a host family, took some classes with the high school students, and immersed myself in the community. In 2012, I returned to the school for the graduation of the class in which I had been a temporary member, of which my host sister was valedictorian.

In college, as I took classes in the social sciences at Swarthmore College and studied abroad in Chile and Argentina, I became increasingly critical of the white savior industrial complex in general and, specifically, the phenomenon of "voluntourism," in which privileged



Westerners spend short periods of time in poorer countries in an effort to do good.<sup>7</sup> Was I actually qualified to teach English, aside from being a native speaker? What did it say that I could enter and leave this community as I pleased? Were there underlying power dynamics in the close interpersonal relationships I formed with ECB students and families? I was almost certain that I had benefited more from my gap year semester than any of my students did. Despite, and perhaps because of, these concerns, I felt by my sophomore year that I wanted to return to ECB, but this time be more careful in how I constructed my work. I applied for a Lang Opportunity Scholarship and designed Pedagogy for Social Action in conversation with Sebastián, Juliana, Mr. Contreras, and one of my Educational Studies professors.

Thus, going into this project, I was a familiar outsider to the ECB community. In terms of the research, it is crucial for participant observers to “establish rapport,” which I already had coming into the project (Merriam, 2009, p. 123). I knew most of the teachers and many of the students, and many of them knew me. My host family and many community members have known me since I was thirteen and we have close and loving relationships. In addition, the school and community are used to hosting foreign volunteers, as there have been several others in previous years. Still, I am a comparatively well-off, white young woman from the United States, who had the privilege of entering and leaving the community. On each occasion, I was there with the support of Francisco Contreras, the school’s upper-class founder and president, which also influenced others’ perception of me in the community. As an Educational Studies student and aspiring teacher, I had much to learn from the teachers with whom I collaborated. At the same time, I was the project leader and was introducing them to somewhat unfamiliar

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<sup>7</sup> See NPR’s article “As ‘Voluntourism’ Explodes in Popularity, Who’s It Helping Most?” (July 31, 2014) or The Guardian’s article “Beware the ‘Voluntourists’ Doing Good” (February 13, 2013).

pedagogical styles. Throughout the project, I made my best attempts to be constantly thoughtful and critical of my positionality, particularly in informal discussions with Juliana; as Freire (1970) puts it, “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (p. 47).

At certain points in the project, I felt a tension between my beliefs and those of some of the teachers, particularly around issues of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. For instance, in the training and team-building workshop that Juliana and I did with the teachers before beginning the workshops, we did a “human barometer” in which the teachers had to place themselves along a spectrum of agreement or disagreement with a given statement. In response to the statement, “There is discrimination against Haitians in the Dominican Republic,” I was shocked to see that Sor Virginia and one teacher agreed, two were in the middle, and the rest of the teachers present disagreed (Field notes, June 6, 2014). Although none of the teachers are of Haitian descent, there are many Haitian students in the school; in fact, Perla, the preschool teacher, joked, “No, because of all the work I do for them!” which drew laughs from the rest (Field notes, June 6, 2014). The teachers argued that since the Haitian students in the school have access to education, they now have just as much opportunity to succeed as a Dominican child.

I struggled with a desire to respect that the teachers had a much deeper understanding of the local context than I did, while still challenging ideas that I found oppressive, particularly in the presence of students. For instance, during the Human Rights lesson, Sebastián criticized Haitian parents who do not get a birth certificate for their Dominican-born children (Field notes, June 23, 2014); however, there are many legal and logistical barriers to getting documentation for a Dominican-born child when the Haitian parents usually did not come to the Dominican Republic legally. In fact, a 2013 Dominican Supreme Court decision retroactively denied

citizenship to thousands of Dominican-born people of Haitian origin. It is understandable that Haitian parents would be scared to go to the authorities to get documentation for their newborn. When Sebastián made this comment, in the presence of several Haitian students, I found it difficult to keep quiet. In this instance and others like it, I tried to present contrasting points of view without directly challenging the teacher, in attempt to at the very least not make students feel uncomfortable. However, I am aware that my presence in the classroom was brief, while the teachers and students have an on-going relationship where these dynamics are present. I also recognize that as an outsider, I do not have a complete understanding of local issues. But I was very disturbed by repeated comments about Haitians and those of Haitian origin by several of the teachers, both in front of students and in reflection sessions and informal conversations.

Undoubtedly, I also came into the project with a very clear definition of social justice and social justice education, based on my experiences in Educational Studies courses at Swarthmore, with ITSA, and studying comparative education in Chile and Argentina. I firmly believe that all education is political and that failing to incorporate social justice education into curriculum and pedagogy is a disservice to students and can even reproduce oppression. The way I designed the project was fundamentally based in this ideology. This was a bias since the teachers I collaborated with did not necessarily share this perspective. However, I recognized that “it is critical for those of use who see education as a vehicle for liberation to be clear about what we mean when we say social justice education” (Picower, 2012, p. 3-4), and the first workshop lesson was devoted to establishing a shared understanding of social justice. We defined social justice as “Justice in terms of distribution of wealth, opportunity, and privileges within a

society.”<sup>89</sup> While not an all-encompassing definition, this lesson at least laid groundwork for further discussion about the meaning of social justice and social justice education.

While my ideology about social justice and SJE was undoubtedly clear in how I designed the project and the workshop curriculum, I wanted the research to focus on the teachers’ interpretations and constructions of these concepts. The interview questions were fairly open-ended, but it is highly probable that teachers had their knowledge of my opinions on the matter in mind when answering. The questions were focused on change over time, as I was interested in the influence of the project in the teachers’ definitions of social justice and approaches to SJE. Since I managed and won funding for the project, they may have been more likely to speak favorably about it in an interview with me. The main criticism I got in the interviews was that they and the students did not like having the workshops in the summer during the testing season, whereas the teachers had few critiques of the curriculum itself.

My positionality was also relevant to the interview process. My role as a familiar outsider in a relative position of privilege and power may have resulted in more positive reactions to the workshop series, but I felt that on the whole, the teachers’ descriptions of their understandings of social justice were genuine and based in their own intellectual paradigm, rather than mitigated to fit my own. In fact, I found that their interpretations were more interpersonal and less societal than my own, which I will discuss further in the Findings section. In any interview, the interviewee interprets how they will “talk-as-a-speaker in and for the category that seems of interest to this interview” (Freebody, 2003, p. 148). Interestingly, I felt that the teachers spoke more to me as if representing the Dominican Republic as much as representing the teaching

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<sup>8</sup> “La justicia en términos de la distribución de la riqueza, oportunidades y privilegios dentro de una sociedad”

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this paper, I will quote data originally in Spanish in my own English translation and cite the original Spanish in a footnote.

profession, often taking great care to explain contextual factors about the country and the school. They also spoke much more formally in the interviews than they did in class, teacher reflection sessions, and informal conversations. My explanation for these phenomena is that the interviewees knew that I was using the interviews to write my thesis at a university in the United States, and wanted to represent their country and school for a foreign audience. In order to frame the teachers' conceptualizations of social justice and SJE, I will next outline the country, school, and community context in which ECB teachers teach.

## **THE RESEARCH IN CONTEXT**

### *Education in the Dominican Republic*

An analysis of the Dominican education system as a whole provides insight into the context of ECB and its teachers. Here, I will describe funding, curriculum and pedagogy, and recent reforms in Dominican education, and how ECB fits into or diverges from the national norms. Later in the paper, I will analyze how the context in which ECB teachers teach is significant to their conceptualizations of social justice and their roles in SJE.

Overall, funding and resources are a challenge in both urban and rural, public and private schools. Rural schools face unique challenges. Only 17 percent of rural schools go up to fifth grade, and high schools in the countryside are even more uncommon (Metz, 2001, p. 98). The fact that ECB offers preschool through twelfth grade, in a rural school, is extremely rare, even for private education. In most schools, funding issues mean that materials and facilities are often not sufficient or are of poor quality (Metz, 2001, p. 99). However, private schools, mostly run by the Catholic church, are often considered superior to public schools in terms of academics and resources (Metz, 2001, p. 100). Private schools are funded primarily by student tuition and other

sources, but often receive government support (Sor Virginia, personal communication, December 18, 2014).

Teachers in the Dominican Republic are not paid well and often not well trained. The average Dominican teacher earns about 344 US dollars a month, in contrast to about 561 USD a month for the average university-educated worker (Manning, 2014). This salary makes it difficult for many teachers to support a family (Manning, 2014). In addition, Dominican teachers are often poorly trained; a recent study found that “math teachers only understood 42 percent of the material they were supposed to be teaching” (Manning, 2014). In response to school funding issues, in 2010 and 2011, a nationwide movement of teachers, in which many ECB teachers participated, fought for the Dominican government to spend 4% of the country’s GDP on education. When I lived and worked at the school in Fall 2010, we had three days off school in which several teachers traveled to the capital to participate in conferences and rallies. When they returned, the students and teachers wore yellow shirts to school to represent the yellow umbrella, the symbol of the movement. Although ECB is only partially funded by the government, the teachers were expressing support of improvement of the Dominican education system in general.

In both private and public schools, teachers in every subject area follow a national curriculum. This curriculum gives teachers some flexibility in designing lessons, yet prescribes the information they must transfer to students (Sebastián, personal communication, March 12, 2014). Because of the national curriculum and lack of resources such as textbooks and lab equipment, teachers often expect that the students learn the essential information, rather than draw upon critical thinking skills; this reflects Freire’s (1970) idea of the “banking” model of education (p. 72) which tends to perpetuate the existing structures of power in a society. According to Bartlett and García (2011), “The general approach to literacy practices in the

Dominican Republic requires copying the words, reading a few words carefully, and decoding them” (p. 121). Students in both public and private schools take national standardized tests in eighth and twelfth grades, at the conclusion of their primary and secondary education, respectively. Although these exams do not have an effect on the student’s promotion to high school or graduation, they are intended to evaluate the student’s learning, the effectiveness of teachers, and the school itself (Sor Virginia, personal communication, December 18, 2014). During the period of the workshop series, the eighth and twelfth graders were preparing for and sitting for these exams.

In recent months, President Danilo Medina has called for broad educational reforms in the Dominican Republic, outlined in his “*Pacto nacional para la reforma educative en la República Dominicana*” signed in April 2014. In this document, he restates a commitment to spending 4% of the country’s GDP on K-12 education (*Pacto nacional*, 2014, p. 3). His reforms include the expansion of the *tanda extendida* or *jornada extendida* model, which is runs for a full school day (8 am to 4 pm) instead of a half a day, to all schools (*Pacto nacional*, 2014, p. 10). Escuela Católica de los Bateyes has functioned under the *tanda extendida* since its founding, which set it apart in quality from neighboring schools. The expansion of the *tanda extendida* on the national scale means that schools that previously served half of their students in the morning and half in the afternoon now must serve all students all day; this has resulted in the construction of new schools and expansion of space in existing schools to be able to accommodate the increased numbers. However, President Medina has invested about four times as much on construction as on teacher training and hiring, due to a desire for more tangible products to show voters, as he hopes to be re-elected in 2016 (Manning, 2014). Teaching as a profession continues to receive low pay and low status in Dominican society.

### *Escuela Católica de los Bateyes and its Community*

ECB was founded in 2000 by Francisco Contreras, whose family had owned the land and surrounding acres for several generations. In the late 1990s, Mr. Contreras wanted to start a business venture growing oranges on his portion of land. It would be an investment; these particular orange trees took about 10 years to be profitable. He asked a family friend who was a priest to come and bless the land before planting the oranges. On the agreed upon date and time, the priest arrived at the plot where the oranges would be planted, but much to the chagrin of Mr. Contreras, refused to bless the land, appalled by the conditions in which the Haitian workers and their families lived. In response, Mr. Contreras and his wife founded Escuela Católica de los Bateyes to serve the children of the *bateyes*.

Thus, the school was founded on Catholic values and has always had a nun of the order of Cardinal Sancha as principal of the school and 1-3 additional nuns who work as teachers and support staff at the school. Each Thursday, a priest comes from town and leads mass for the school community. Religious education is also an integral part of the curriculum. Although ECB is a private school, the Dominican government pays the teacher salaries and provides breakfast and lunch for the students as well as uniforms, backpacks, and school supplies (Sor Virginia, personal communication, October 19, 2014). Costs of running the school and the salaries of the nuns who work there are paid by the Escuela Católica de los Bateyes Foundation (Sor Virginia, personal communication, October 19, 2014). The school is heavily reliant on the financial support of the Foundation, run by Mr. Contreras and funded primarily through donations from wealthy Dominicans who know Mr. Contreras and from local politicians.



The student body of the school comprises a range of demographics. The school was originally founded to serve Haitian children whose parents work in the sugarcane fields and live in extreme poverty, often without basic sanitation, running water, enough food, or reliable electricity. The ECB website outlines its vision “to improve the quality of life of people in the rural areas of...the Dominican Republic” and highlights that “the [Escuela Católica de los Bateyes] Foundation believes that all children in the Dominican Republic should have equal access to education and equal opportunity to achieve their potential” (not cited for confidentiality). The school also serves rural Dominican students whose parents work in agriculture or work elsewhere in tourism and send money home. Finally, there is a significant cohort of middle-class students from the nearest town who travel on a school bus to ECB each day, as their parents believe that ECB is a better educational option than the schools in town. As of now, though, the rural students must walk to school each day, sometimes from several miles away; a few of the students are dropped off by relatives with motorcycles or have their own. There are about 20 teachers at ECB. Most of them are of a higher socioeconomic status than their rural students. All live in town and commute daily to the school on the school bus or their own motorcycles. Due to the fact that they teach for a full day rather than a half day, ECB teachers are paid about 602 USD a month (Francisco Contreras, personal communication, April 4, 2014), significantly higher than the national average of 344 USD (Manning, 2014).

ECB has become known for being one of the best schools in the region since its founding, primarily because it runs for a full day rather than a half day. This schedule leaves time for *talleres* (workshops) for students, addressing various skills and topics, including web page design, music, jewelry making, and sewing (Gabriel, personal communication, June 30, 2014). Therefore, the full school day is not taken up with academic coursework. It is also helpful

for working parents who cannot take care of their children during the day (Gabriel, personal communication, June 30, 2014). The school is also one of the only rural schools in the area that serves high school grades as well as primary grades and provides its students with uniforms, breakfast and lunch, and a doctor on the premises. Teachers highlight its winning sports program and technology available at the school, including a computer lab and computer teacher, a sound system for school wide events, and projectors in several of the classrooms (Gabriel, personal communication, June 30, 2014).

Despite the fact that ECB provides comparatively more resources for its students and benefits from its extended day schedule, adults connected to the school express frustration that so far, few students have been successful in higher education after graduation, primarily because of structural barriers; many families cannot afford college tuition and/or housing. There is little employment in the area so many students move away to work. For several years, the valedictorian was awarded a full scholarship and housing to attend university for five years. However, for financial reasons, this policy was ended for the class of 2013. This year, Juliana and I pooled our leftover grant funding to sponsor a scholarship for the valedictorian of the class of 2014, who was also an active participant in the workshop series, but it is unclear whether the scholarships will continue after this year.

## **FINDINGS**

After the completion of Pedagogy for Social Action and interviews with four of the teacher collaborators, the following questions emerged.

1. *How did teacher-led summer workshops about social justice at Escuela Católica de los Bateyes in the Dominican Republic impact teacher understandings of social justice?*
2. *How did the workshop series influence the teachers' conceptions of their roles in social change, in and out of the classroom?*
3. *What about the school, community, and country context influenced these understandings?*

Teachers noted that participation in the workshop series increased their interest in social justice and gave them tools to talk about it, although they primarily interpreted it through their existing frameworks of human rights and *convivencia*, or living together in harmony. Teachers conceived of their role in social change as facilitating their students' development of *valores* (values), connecting their classroom work to community engagement, and being good people themselves; these understandings, based in the caring stance, were not new, but strengthened by the workshop series. The context of the poverty in which most ECB students live and the Catholic foundation of the school resulted in an increased interest in social justice education, as teachers saw it as highly relevant. In recent months, they had taken initiatives for more critical thinking and socially oriented pedagogy.

#### *Teacher understandings of social justice*

The teachers I interviewed reported that participation in the workshop series strengthened their interest in social justice education and gave them knowledge of specific related topics. However, their analyses were primarily on a small scale rather than on a larger, political level. When they did scale up these analyses, teachers often utilized the frameworks of human rights and *convivencia*, or living together in harmony.

Several of the teachers expressed that before participating in the social justice summer program, their understanding of social justice was vague and it was not an important consideration in their classroom practice. José Antonio knew that social justice issues existed, but he didn't explicitly "take them into account"<sup>10</sup> (personal communication, June 24, 2014). Similarly, Gabriel said that he and fellow teachers had "some knowledge there but we didn't give it the importance it deserved"<sup>11</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). He also expressed that he didn't have "a very deep knowledge...I wasn't aware of many things"<sup>12</sup> (Gabriel, personal communication, June 30, 2014). Sebastián, on the other hand, stated, "The concept [of social justice] was the same one I had"<sup>13</sup> but that the workshop series motivated him to continue working on incorporating social justice topics into his classes (personal communication, June 30, 2014).

Through the program, the teachers say that they gained more of an understanding of social justice as a concept through study of specific topics. Juliana and I primarily designed the curriculum, though the teachers had flexibility in how they enacted it in their classroom. Each day focused on a topic or theme, such as stereotypes, types of discrimination, violence against women, sex and gender, communities, human rights, social action project planning (See Methodology and Positionality section). Gabriel said that through the workshops, "we were able to analyze and understand many of the subtopics that social justice entails"<sup>14</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). He specifically mentioned the subtopics of stereotypes and sex

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<sup>10</sup> "No lo tomaba en cuenta"

<sup>11</sup> "algunos conocimientos que lo teníamos por allí pero que no...le dábamos la importancia que debía"

<sup>12</sup> "un conocimiento...muy amplio...no estaba enterado de muchas cosas"

<sup>13</sup> "El concepto era el mismo que yo tenía"

<sup>14</sup> "Pudimos analizar y comprender muchos de los subtemas que conlleva eso de la justicia social"

and gender as topics that he found important but hadn't thought about explicitly or brought up in his classes. Altagracia also expressed that the workshops focused "on topics that [she] previously hadn't had the opportunity" to explore<sup>15</sup> (personal communication, July 7, 2014). Social justice is just a catchphrase if specific examples are not employed, and the teachers were able to explore a variety of topics through collaborating on the workshop series, in a way that they may not have had time or curriculum flexibility to do during the school year.

However, when presenting workshop topics to students, teachers sometimes analyzed social justice issues on a very small-scale, personal level. For instance, in the day on stereotyping, Gabriel gave the example of how people stereotype those with tattoos and piercings, but nothing about how stereotyping may happen based on country of origin, class, gender, or whether they live in an urban or rural area (Field notes, June 11, 2014). When talking about homosexuality, Mercedes reminded the twelfth grade students that a man who is a stylist, hairdresser, or interior designer is not necessarily gay, ignoring the constant threat of violence that gay men face in the Dominican Republic on a daily basis (Field notes, June 17, 2014). Another day, a teacher named Mariela, who was only able to participate that day, made a skit with a student to demonstrate the meaning of ageism to the rest of the class. In the skit, Mariela asked Sor Juana, an elderly nun who works at the school, to play basketball with her, but the student didn't want Sor Juana to participate because of her age (Field notes, June 10, 2014). While this was a good starting point, this example was an interpersonal analysis, rather than an analysis of larger power structures or institutionalized oppression. Rather than interpreting these instances, and others like them, as teachers themselves having a superficial understanding of social justice, I instead think that using interpersonal examples rather than societal ones was a

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<sup>15</sup> "Enfocamos en temas que anteriormente no había tenido la oportunidad de hacerlo"

way to make sense of new concepts, partially for the sake of the students. Personal examples can be very effective, yet most successful social justice educators quickly scale up these examples to the larger oppressive systems that they represent. At ECB, the analysis often stopped at the interpersonal.

When teachers did look at social justice on a large scale, they frequently interpreted it through the lens of human rights. In the teacher reflection session on the day that we talked about human rights in the lesson, the teachers noted that students participated more than on other days and that human rights has connections to lots of other topics; Mercedes called it a “key topic”<sup>16</sup> and suggested that it could have been an introduction to the workshop series (Field notes, June 23, 2014). Human rights was possibly the least foreign concept that we addressed in the workshop series, as it is a component of the social studies and civics curricula (Field notes, June 23, 2014). Both Sebastián and Altagracia placed value on students becoming aware of their rights through participation in the workshops or education in general, and argued that knowledge of these rights would increase self-esteem and empower students to advocate for themselves (Sebastián, personal communication, June 30, 2014; Altagracia, personal communication, July 7, 2014). In this way, their inclusion of human rights under the umbrella of social justice was actually more of a personal level than societal level analysis. Rather than talking about human rights around the world, the teachers emphasized their students’ human rights. The local context, in which many students, particularly those of Haitian origin, face human rights abuses, explains this focus. Some rural students in the area would not be going to school at all were it not for the existence of ECB, and thus the school is directly responsible for them accessing the basic right to education.

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<sup>16</sup> “Tema marcador”

Several of the teachers understood social justice on the societal level as a balance of rights and responsibilities, rather than analyzing inequality or oppression. They frequently employed the word *convivir* or living together, to describe the role of individuals in society. Sebastián advocated that people have to “comply with a series of norms”<sup>17</sup> to live peacefully together in society and work together to enact change (personal communication, June 30, 2014). Both he and Mercedes believed that conversations about rights should also include discussion of responsibilities, and that rights are only useful if people make sure those around them are guaranteed the same rights (Field notes, June 23, 2014). José Antonio connected this to the development of the Dominican Republic; he saw the school as a site of preparing students for the job market, which will result in nationwide economic development, less poverty, and, thus, fewer social problems (personal communication, June 24, 2014). In most cases, the teachers constructed their understandings of social justice on the societal level within a framework of communalism, rather than challenging oppressive structures.

While the workshop series did expand and emphasize social justice education for ECB teachers, their basic understandings of social justice did not change much. They conceptualized social justice primarily on the small scale, and when they did analyze it in larger terms, using the frameworks of human rights and *convivencia*, it was primarily in terms of the specific applications of these concepts to the lives of their students.

#### *Teachers' conceptions of their role in social change in and out of school*

The ECB teachers' understandings of social justice as primarily personal carried over to their conceptualizations of their own role in social change. In school, ECB teachers were first

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<sup>17</sup> “Cumplir con una serie de normas”

and foremost preoccupied with promoting *valores* in their students. In terms of social justice issues that we talked about in workshops, the teachers saw their role as both promoting justice in class and facilitating their students' engagement with their communities. Finally, several of the teachers connected social justice to being good people in their personal lives.

ECB teachers frequently saw their role in social change as facilitators of their students' moral development. While this would not qualify as activism as defined by Picower (2012), I argue that it is still a form of SJE. Sebastián saw his role as an educator as one in which he “promotes values: honor, responsibility, respect, camaraderie, love for others”<sup>18</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). The summer workshops were complementary to his classroom practice because “they were topics that make [the students] better people”<sup>19</sup> and as teachers at ECB, “we try to focus first on the human aspect”<sup>20</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). In fact, all four of the teachers I interviewed, as well as Sor Virginia, talked about the role of teachers and school in promoting *valores* in their students; it was possibly the most common concept that came up in the interviews. Gabriel, for instance, stated that music education “instills many values”<sup>21</sup> and could be used to keep students out of trouble (personal communication, June 30, 2014). José Antonio saw the role of teachers as “making [students] good men and women”<sup>22</sup> (personal communication, June 24, 2014). While not explicitly defined, *valores* were sometimes connected to the school's “Christian philosophy, with a Christian base”<sup>23</sup> (José Antonio, personal communication, June 24, 2014).

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<sup>18</sup> “Promover cada uno de los valores: la honradez, la responsabilidad, el respeto, el compañerismo, el amor hacia los demás”

<sup>19</sup> “Fueron temas que a ellos los hacen mejor personas”

<sup>20</sup> “Tratamos de enfocarnos primero en la parte humana”

<sup>21</sup> “Te inculca muchos valores”

<sup>22</sup> “Hacer de ellos hombres y mujeres de bien”

<sup>23</sup> “Filosofía cristiana, que tiene base cristiana”



In some cases, teachers also saw social justice as an important topic to include in school year curriculum, and some saw their role as facilitating student engagement with social change outside of school. Altagracia stated that “from [her] space as a teacher,”<sup>24</sup> she wanted to promote social justice by including relevant topics in her Spanish curriculum (personal communication, July 7, 2014). Gabriel saw his role as a teacher as both educating his students about social justice and facilitating their ability “to put it in practice in their communities, because if we know it, and don’t put it into practice, the effort was for naught”<sup>25</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). For José Antonio, a deciding factor in choosing to collaborate in the workshop series was frustration with people who critique social problems and do nothing to change them; while he was involved in organizing the annual twelfth grade service project, he felt that more projects like it were needed (Field notes, June 5, 2014). However, his ideas about service and community engagement sometimes came off as paternalistic and based in the charity model. He suggested, for instance, taking the students on a field trip to the nearest rural community, called Quisqueya Verde, so “we can see how they live,”<sup>26</sup> and find a family to donate clothes and supplies to (personal communication, June 24, 2014). A huge number of students from this community attend the school, and probably would not appreciate their community being used as a charity case. In fact, when José Antonio suggested this project during the workshop on social action project planning, he mistakenly called the community “Área Verde” instead of “Quisqueya Verde” on multiple occasions, which drew giggles from the students (Field notes, June 24, 2014).

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<sup>24</sup> “Desde mi espacio como maestra”

<sup>25</sup> “Que la pongan en práctica en sus comunidades, porque si la sabemos, y no la ponemos en práctica, de nada sirve tanto empeño”

<sup>26</sup> “Vemos como viven”

Several of the teachers also talked about their role in social justice (based on their individual interpretation of the concept) in their personal lives as well as their teaching practice. José Antonio planned to fight injustice by “First of all, not practicing it myself”<sup>27</sup> and then trying to help poor communities (personal communication, June 24, 2014). When I asked him his role in social change on a personal level, Sebastián said, “Treating everyone the way that I would like to be treated, which is well”<sup>28</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014). For Altagracia, the workshops were helpful to her parenting, and made her “want to be a little more just”<sup>29</sup> with her two teenagers (personal communication, July 7, 2014). She also thought that parents should talk to their children from a young age about social justice. While it makes logical sense that teachers would intimately connect their personal role in social change with their role in social change as an educator, it is even more relevant because the predominant interpretation of social justice was through the lens of *valores*. It seems that the teachers saw being a person with *valores* as the first step to participating in social change.

ECB teachers prioritized *valores*, both their own and those of their students, in their conceptualization of their role in social change. They also saw their role as a teacher as that of teaching social justice topics and connecting these topics to community engagement, but not necessarily societal-level activism. Although teaching values could be a first step to political and social analyses, in the case of ECB, the teachers’ definitions and practices tended to stop there. The teachers were undoubtedly more focused on their students’ personal development and incorporation into community and society than on large-scale social change.

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<sup>27</sup> “Primero, no practicándolo yo”

<sup>28</sup> “Tratar a todo el mundo de una manera como a mí me gustaría que me trataran, que es bien”

<sup>29</sup> “He tratado de ser un poquito más justa”

*The school, community, and country context and teachers' conceptions of social justice*

The teachers' understandings of social justice and their role in social change were rooted in the school, community, and country context. Specifically, the poverty and social problems common in students' lives and the school's Catholic founding and mission explain why teachers interpreted social justice as primarily on the personal level. I will conclude with a description of teacher initiatives prior to the project that demonstrate how teachers chose to construct SJE in their school.

The context of ECB students' lives, specifically poverty and the social problems that come with it, were the focus of teachers' explanations of why social justice is important in this community. Sebastián was concerned specifically with students' family lives, citing that many students have divorced parents, parents who worked all the time, or parents who were entirely absent (personal communication, June 30, 2014). Altagracia explained that the “underdeveloped”<sup>30</sup> status of the Dominican Republic as a whole resulted in countrywide economic inequality that disadvantaged her students, resulting in situations where students “don't feel good physically, emotionally, and unfortunately these situations are reflected here in school”<sup>31</sup> (personal communication, July 7, 2014). In situations where a student's home life is negatively affecting his or her performance at school, ECB teachers will sometimes visit the family to see what the situation is and attempt to mitigate the problem, a clear example of the caring stance (Sebastián, personal communication, June 30, 2014; Altagracia, personal communication, July 7, 2014). This connects to the teachers' general prioritization of their students' well being as people before their academic achievement; while partially cultural, it may

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<sup>30</sup> “Subdesarrollado”

<sup>31</sup> “No se sienten bien físicamente, emocionalmente, y lamentablemente estas situaciones pues la reflejan allá en la escuela”

also have been a response to the context in which many of the students live in extreme poverty. Sebastián expressed that the workshop topics were relevant to the students because they reflected many of their lived experiences:

[The topics from the workshops] are topics where [the students] feel like protagonists because they live through each of these topics, the topics aren't isolated for them, rather, in some given moment, each of these students have lived through one of the situations that you mentioned to them. So they could express their own experience [in the workshops].<sup>32</sup> (personal communication, June 30, 2014)

Thus, teachers saw social justice as they defined it, and specifically the workshop series, as highly relevant to students.

The school's mission and positionality also connected to the teachers' interpretations of social justice and SJE from the workshop series; specifically, teachers referenced the school's resources and basis in Christian principles as related to the significance of social justice in this context. Sor Virginia and the other nuns who work at the school are members of the Order of Cardinal Sancha, which focuses on work with the poorest of the poor. She connected their work at the school to the tradition of the social doctrine of the church and "how to make the Gospel of Jesus a reality"<sup>33</sup> by giving ECB students a moral education as well as academic (personal communication, October 19, 2014). In this vein, both José Antonio and Sebastián stressed the

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<sup>32</sup> "Son temas donde ellos se sienten protagonistas porque ellos viven cada uno de esos temas, estos temas no son aislados para ellos, sino que ellos, en algún momento determinado, cada uno de los estudiantes pasó por una de las situaciones que se les mencionaron a ellos. Entonces ellos podían expresar su experiencia"

<sup>33</sup> "Cómo hacer realidad el Evangelio de Jesús"

importance of the school's Christian principles and how they relate to the students' moral development and finding their role in society (personal communication, José Antonio, June 24, 2014; personal communication, Sebastián, June 30, 2014). Altagracia expressed her view of the role of schooling:

The school has a fundamental role in this situation...because we have to...make [the students] feel like important human beings, everyone equally...the school plays a fundamental role because it's here where we teach them a series of content areas, just as much on the academic level as *valores*, spiritual values, moral values, and by combining the academic content with the *valores*, we make sure that they understand their position in society.<sup>34</sup> (personal communication, July 7, 2014)

Here, Altagracia demonstrated caring in her recognition that her role as a teacher is to provide her students with knowledge and skills, academic and otherwise, to serve them in the real world. She prioritized giving her students confidence as well as this preparation, which was founded in Christian principles. José Antonio argued that “the more resources [the school] has, the more possibilities it has to help the community,”<sup>35</sup> a position reflective of the social doctrine of the church (personal communication, June 24, 2014). The fact that the school is able to provide resources such as clothing, food, medical care, and school supplies to its students who otherwise

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<sup>34</sup> “La escuela tiene un papel fundamental en esta situación...pues tenemos que...tratar de hacerlos sentir a ellos como seres humanos importantes, todos en igual medida...la escuela tiene un papel fundamental porque aquí es que nosotros les vamos enseñando a ellos una serie de contenidos, tanto a nivel académico como valores, valores espirituales, valores morales, y combinados estos contenidos con los valores pues nosotros procuramos que ellos vayan entendiendo cuál es su postura en la sociedad”

<sup>35</sup> “Mientras más recursos tiene más posibilidades tiene de ayudar a la comunidad”

may not have had access to them, while perpetuating the charity model, also created more possibilities for working for social justice in and out of the classroom, since the basic necessities are taken care of. Most of the teachers saw their classroom teaching, moral education, and caring stance as fitting into the school's overall mission to serve the community in every aspect, and this was based in Catholicism.

Finally, I found that the social justice curriculum of the summer workshop series actually fit in well with existing programming at the school during the academic year. Within the past year, several of the teachers, led by Sebastián, had started two new initiatives: a Model UN-style debate activity about the issue of Haitian citizenship in the Dominican Republic, and an interdisciplinary curriculum about bullying in the middle and high school grades (Field notes, June 1, 2014). Sebastián and Elisabeth, the assistant principal, organized the initial Model UN debate and expressed interest in creating a Model UN extracurricular club during the school year to continue the work begun in the summer social justice workshop series. The interdisciplinary curriculum involved students brainstorming social issues that affect their school, deciding to focus on bullying, and working on anti-bullying initiatives in several classes, including those with Sebastián, Altagracia, and Gabriel. Several of the twelfth graders even performed a skit and song (written by Gabriel) entitled “No More Bullying!”<sup>36</sup> at a national school festival in the capital city Santo Domingo (Field notes, June 12, 2014). These new initiatives connect to the school's social mission and also to the feeling of increased competition with area schools; ECB used to be the best school in the area because it operated with the *tanda extendida*, but with all schools converting to this model, the teachers are looking for other ways to set it apart from area schools (Sebastián, personal communication, June 30, 2014). The initiatives also reflect an

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<sup>36</sup> “¡No más bullying!”

environment in which teachers were eager to engage in social justice education. However, the relevance of the selected topics, Haitian citizenship and bullying in schools, to the students' lives, reflects the larger patterns of ECB teachers interpreting social justice education on a personal level.

Teachers at ECB constructed their understandings of SJE in response to the specific context of ECB and its students and community, particularly its poverty and social problems and the Christian paradigm of the school. Although it may appear that teachers failed to raise their analyses to the societal level, I argue that their specific conceptualization of social justice was actually a negotiation of contextual factors. ECB teachers acted out the caring stance in their adaptation of SJE to the needs of their students, and the lack of political analyses of oppression was not ignorance, but rather preoccupation with their students' well being first and foremost. Although SJE literature rarely accounts for differences in context, context was highly influential in this school and project.

## CONCLUSION

The teachers I collaborated with at ECB primarily interpreted social justice education and their role in social change on a small-scale, personal level, rather than large-scale social or political analyses or activism. They were particularly concerned with their students' development of *valores* (often founded in Christianity), understanding of human rights, and ability to *convivir* and live in community and society. Above all, they demonstrated caring in their preoccupation with their students' well being above academic achievement. Collaboration on the summer workshop series enabled teachers to explore new topics and be exposed to social justice pedagogies, and they reported an increased interest in utilizing social justice curriculum and

pedagogy during the school year. However, this version of SJE was specific to helping their students develop as moral people, as family members, as community members, and as citizens.

The social justice education literature makes a distinction between social justice education in the classroom and working for social change outside the classroom, or, as Picower (2012) says, on “the streets.” ECB teachers did practice social justice education both in and outside of school, but their version of social justice education looked more like an ethic of care than the political analysis outlined by SJE theorists. Rather than caring being a first step to SJE, for these teachers, caring *was* social justice. Their interpretations of SJE and preoccupations with their students as whole people are culturally specific and a reaction to the local context, in which students live in extreme poverty and often lack access to basic services, have illiterate parents, and, in the case of many students of Haitian origin, may be undocumented. In this context, children going to school at all is a political act. ECB teachers adopted an ethic of care to protect and preserve their students.

It is useful to acknowledge that social justice education may take different forms in different contexts, particularly in the fields of comparative and international education. Specifically, it is important to give teachers agency in constructing a version of social justice education that is relevant to their students. I do think that a larger political analysis and activism is needed in the case of ECB and education in the Dominican Republic in general. Teaching about oppressive structures could empower students to work for social change, which is needed in countless areas. However, I also firmly believe that ECB teachers’ conceptualization of social justice as an ethic of care “counts” as social justice education in this specific context. As Audre Lorde said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of



political warfare.” At ECB, teachers take on this role—their caring for their students is a political act.

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