

Reviewed by Jason R. Harshman
Ohio State University

Part guide, part inspiration, and part motivation, the collection of essays that create editor Rita Verma’s Be the Change: Teacher, Activist, Global Citizen can inform the practice of every teacher, regardless of experience, grade level, or discipline. The book is divided into four parts—“Teacher as Activist,” “Activism through Everyday Acts of Teaching,” “Youth Activism, Empowerment, and Listening to Student Voice,” and “International Contexts and Global Citizenship”—and addresses the four core subjects of math, language arts, social studies, and science. In doing so this collection helps promote the fact that teaching for social justice and multicultural education is integral to all disciplines and lend themselves to student-centered, interdisciplinary learning environments. Moving beyond the school walls, Be the Change includes chapters related to community activism along with examples of

social justice programs outside of the United States that serve as shining examples of how to teach and act for social change.

Almost every author included in section one draws upon Paulo Freire’s philosophies regarding critical pedagogy and how to empower teachers and students to teach, learn, and act in accordance with a principled and shared curriculum. “Teacher as Activist” is the most theoretical of the four sections and affirms, as Verna writes in the introduction, that “when there is little attempt to unlearn or dissect hierarchies of power, cycles of oppression are left unbroken” (p. 4). In the spirit of Freirean praxis, Verna believes that in order for these vicious cycles to be broken by the students who occupy our classrooms today, teachers must possess the initiative to educate for fairness and equity, to value difference and recognize injustice, and then to take action. Everyone plays a role in the process. There is hope when teachers care and come together to face these issues head on. As with every student in our classroom, we have a great responsibility as educators to make every effort to reach each student (p. 5).

While on the surface such ideas may sound simple and easy to enact, teaching for, rather than just about equity and justice is too often overlooked in our everyday practice as educators. This problem is addressed in chapter three, Eric Gustein’s “Human Rights and Liberating Education: Critical Mathematics in a Chicago Public School.”

Through mathematics, Gustein’s work illustrates how teachers can apply Freire’s (1970, as cited in Gustein, 2010) belief: “Problem-posing education does not and cannot serve the interests of the oppressor. No oppressive order could permit the oppressed to begin to question: “Why?” (p. 67), to engage students in issues relevant to their lives. Gustein writes about the students he worked with in Chicago and how they used math to critically examine equity and justice through “real world” issues such as how interest rates on bank loans often result in borrowers owing more money than they originally borrowed or how costly mortgages often result in the displacement of borrowers unable to pay off their debts. If
you have been in a classroom, you have heard students ask (often aloud) ‘Why do we need to know this?’ and Gustein and his students answer that question in a profound manner.

Classrooms are not islands, nor are they void of the societal influences carried in through curricula, resources, media, students, or teachers. This why it is important to heed the recommendations made in David Stovall’s “Teaching, Organizing, and Justice: Tapping the Resources of K-12 Classroom Teaching and Community Organizing for Solidarity, Praxis, and Survival” regarding the relationship between teachers, students, and their community. Stovall believes

- if social justice teachers understand their work as akin to tasks performed by community organizers who work with families and youth, greater synergy can be created between the groups, with the intention of producing classrooms and community spaces that are intentional in creating thoughtful resistance to systems that continue to relegate our work toward a just and equitable society (p. 37).

Counter hegemonic teaching is not easy. However, if every teacher were to adopt just one idea presented in the first five chapters of this book as part of their philosophy of teaching they will have taken an essential step towards becoming the change many wish to see in the world.

The five chapters that make up “Activism through Everyday Acts of Teaching” include multicultural themed ideas for social studies and language arts teachers and an example of what is possible when an entire school takes on the challenge of teaching and preparing students for global citizenship. This section also reaches beyond the K-12 classroom with Laraine Wallowitz’s “Feminist Pedagogy: Taking Action to Make Change” which describes and reflects upon the author’s experience as the co-creator and co-teacher for a new course in the Studies in Women and Gender department at the University of Virginia entitled Women’s Health Activism. By incorporating shared decision making and student choice throughout the course, engaging discussions about power, privilege, economic status, diversity, race, sexuality, domestic violence, ethnicity and a plethora of other topics were possible
because “we [Wallowitz and her students] created a safe environment for candid and shared communication [that] opened up the opportunity for the affective and the intellectual to convene” (p. 116). Although about a college level course focused on feminism, the principles Wallowitz used in the design and execution of this course can be adopted by any teacher looking to create a more democratic and inclusive classroom.

Teachers are constantly faced with the challenge of how best to make what they are teaching about on any given day relevant to their students’ lives outside of the classroom. But what happens when educators teach their lessons outside of the traditional classroom setting? Part three: “Youth Activism, Empowerment, and Listening to Student Voice” focuses on how educators, by going into the community to work with young people directly affected by the very issues they already teach about in their classrooms, can transform lives and society. The writers and practitioners in this section effectively integrate relevant literature and theories with practical examples of how to nurture and lead young, active citizens. In doing so, the authors and the youth activists they worked with enact the Freirean philosophy quoted at length earlier in this book that it is not enough to simply read about the world, but one must write, if not re-write the world by consciously transforming it (p. 25). “Writing the world” for Freire meant changing one’s reality and there is perhaps no greater measure of how effective a teacher’s lesson is then when a student takes what they learned and uses it to effect real change beyond the classroom walls.

The last section of the book is appropriately dedicated to examples of teaching and learning for peace and equity outside the United States. “International Contexts and Global Citizens” introduces the reader to the work done by the New York City based Dialogue Project in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, value-based education through the OMEGA model in India, the challenges faced by educators in post-apartheid South Africa, the uplifting work done for girls at Camp Hope in Rwanda, and the Student Anti-Genocide Coalition’s (STAND) lobbying and activism to help raise awareness and bring peace to Darfur. In the spirit of the examples presented throughout this collection, each chapter of this section highlights the work
of grass roots organizers whose movements address human rights issues not through class projects and academic conferences but in a “hands-on” manner.

The Lalaji Memorial Omega International School, which is more commonly referred to as Omega, stands outside the city of Chennai in southern India and is home to a project that may prove just as important as anything being done in more globally recognized Bangalore or Mumbai. The goal of this school of 2,000 students and 130 teachers from India and 14 other countries (p. 263) is to create an environment that helps students become physically strong, intellectually competent, emotionally balanced, morally sound, and spiritually evolved. This enables students to be role models and lead society toward peace, prosperity, and harmony (p. 264).

What teacher, parent, or community would not want such goals included in the Mission Statement of their neighborhood school? While this section presents issues considered more national and international in scope, each example incorporates ideas and concepts—dialogue, problem solving, cooperation, compassion, etc.—applicable at a local level, no matter the location. This section demonstrates the role teachers play in encouraging students to not only examine global and local issues, but also helping them recognize the shared experiences of people across time and place.

The strength of Be the Change is that like any good pedagogical related book, this collection encompasses a range of ideas useful to academics, students, teachers, community organizers, and global citizens in general. Teachers have the potential, and as argued by the authors in this work, a responsibility, to weigh heavily upon the future of not only their students but the society they will inhabit and lead. That is why teachers and students will find this work remains applicable beyond the classroom and encourages educators to not only remain life-long learners, but also life-long activists for justice.
About the Reviewer

Jason R. Harshman is a doctoral student in the Social Studies and Global Education program in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. A National Board Certified Teacher in History for Adolescent and Young Adult learners, his interests include educating students and pre-service teachers about social justice and human rights, along with environmental sustainability and East Asian studies.