Chapter #22

PJI PRINCIPLES: TAKING STEPS TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ON EQUITY IN OUR CLASSROOMS AND DAILY LIVES

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ABSTRACT

Today's educators, from kindergarten through higher education, are uniquely positioned to provide their students with real life opportunities that demonstrate and promote equity, change, and social justice ideals amongst their peers, throughout the schoolhouse and into their communities. These opportunities for students, supported by the norms and culture of the classroom, often come in the form of daily interactions with curricula, which affords teachers the window to teach how to disrupt inequity among students and in their lives. For teachers and school leaders to open this window, each must also have the courage to investigate and learn from the mirrors of the experiences of others reflected to them. The work of the Peace and Justice Institute at Valencia College provides educators with the courage to investigate those personal mirrors for the benefit of their students. Their courage is found in the sharing of stories about themselves and by turning off their automatic responses to the stories of others. The following chapter considers how The Principles, the philosophical foundation of PJI, translate into an equitable classroom practice. This qualitative case study of 24 teachers explores the impact of the PJI Teachers Academy in the k-12 classrooms of these teachers.

Keywords: teachers, education, social justice, professional development, inclusive education.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." These words of James Baldwin serve as a roadmap in the role of education today. Educators not only instruct students in various content areas but also serve as a conduit for the introduction to the societal norms, beliefs, and expectations each will encounter during their lifetime. Students today will be asked to meet the challenge of WHAT diversity truly looks like. In the curriculum and in classrooms every day, educators need to be equipped with the tools requisite to provide a socially just and inclusive education for all students. One of these tools is the establishment of a set of classroom norms that embrace inclusiveness and foster a sense of community within the classroom setting and the school. For educators who have participated in the PJI Teachers Academy, these norms come in the form of The Principles for How We Treat Each Other: Our Practice of Respect and Community Building (The Principles, see Table 1). The Principles are the core philosophy practiced in the Teachers Academy and throughout the work of the Peace and Justice Institute. With the mission of "Making a difference by intentionally engaging in practices and principles that explore, advocate, and honor the dignity of self, others, and the earth" (PJI Website), The Principles were prepared by the founders of PJI (which included the current Director, Rachel Allen) with considerable help from Peter Block's work in building community, Parker Palmer's Center for Courage and Renewal, the Dialogue Group and the retreat work of Center for

Renewal and Wholeness in Higher Education. PJI adapted and customized The Principles to serve the needs of the community since 2010. The Principles are foundational in all its professional development opportunities offered for nonprofits, city employees, the faith community, police departments, school districts in and around Central Florida, as well as, the faculty, staff, and students at Valencia College.

2. BACKGROUND

Each summer since 2018 PJI has offered the PJI Teachers Academy that provides educators a weeklong cohort experience that leads to making a difference – personally and professionally. Created by PJI facilitators, educators themselves, with educators in mind, the PJI Teachers Academy creates a safe space for participants to engage in difficult conversations throughout the five days about privilege and personal identity. Each day, the cohort intentionally engages in interactions that pushes each to become better equipped with tools to work effectively in a pluralistic society. With The Principles in mind participants explore their own identity, hidden bias, and life experience through the lenses of privilege, race, gender, trauma, resilience, empathy, and mindfulness. This unique combination of reflection and social justice provides an opportunity for participants to explore their influence on their curriculum and student/teacher relationships. The knowledge gained through this professional development is reinforced through selected readings, written reflections, engaging activities, and discussions, as participants identify ways to expand inclusion and create safe and welcoming learning spaces.

Previous studies have focused on the need for an inclusive and welcoming space, while other, more theoretical research, has centered around the reproduction of inequity in educational spaces. This chapter addresses the combination of the disruption of inequity in education and the creation of inclusive spaces using the PJI Principles in k-12 schools.

Table 1.
The Principles "How We Treat Each Other: Our Practice of Respect and Community Building".

1. **Create a hospitable and accountable community**. We all arrive in isolation and need the generosity of friendly welcomes. Bring all of yourself to the work in this community. Welcome others to this place and this work, and presume that you are welcomed as well. Hospitality is the essence of restoring community
2. **Listen deeply**. Listen intently to what is said, listen to the feelings beneath the words. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking, and acting.
3. **Create an advice free zone**. Replace advice with curiosity as we work together for peace and justice. Each of us is here to discover our own truths. We are not here to set someone else straight, to "fix" what we perceive as broken in another member of the group.
4. **Practice asking honest and open questions**. A great question is ambiguous, personal and provokes anxiety.
5. **Give space for unpopular answers**. Answer questions honestly even if the answer seems unpopular. Be present to listen not debate, correct or interpret.

6. **Respect silence**. Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. This applies to the speaker, as well – be comfortable leaving your words to resound in the silence, without refining or elaborating on what you have said.

7. **Suspend judgment**. Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to the other, and to ourselves, more fully.

8. **Identify assumptions**. Our assumptions are usually invisible to us, yet they undergird our worldview. By identifying our assumptions, we can then set them aside and open our viewpoints to greater possibilities.

9. **Speak your truth**. You are invited to say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard, and your contribution respected. Own your truth by remembering to speak only for yourself. Using the first person "I" rather than "you" or "everyone" clearly communicates the personal nature of your expression.

10. **When things get difficult, turn to wonder.** If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, or shutting down in defense, try turning to wonder: "I wonder what brought her to this place?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now.

11. **Practice slowing down**. Simply the speed of modern life can cause violent damage to the soul. By intentionally practicing slowing down we strengthen our ability to extend nonviolence to others—and to ourselves.

12. **All voices have value**. Hold these moments when a person speaks as precious because these are the moments when a person is willing to stand for something, trust the group and offer something they see as valuable.

13. **Maintain confidentiality.** Create a safe space by respecting the confidential nature and content of discussions held in the group. Allow what is said in the group to remain there.

Peace and Justice Institute (2021). *Principles How We Treat Each Other*. Retrieved September 10, 2021 from https://valenciacollege.edu/students/peace-justice-institute/who-we-are/principles.php

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Education equity work begins with understanding the barriers and structures that prevent students from obtaining a quality and inclusive education. Social reproduction theory aids in identifying these barriers by considering the ability of social institutions, including schools, to replicate the inequities in capital that are found in society (Au, 2008; Bischoff & Tach, 2018; Bourdieu, 1986; Vesely, 2012). Capital, while commonly used as an economic term, can also be used to describe the educational, cultural, and social benefits an individual accumulates. Bourdieu (1986) centered his writings on social reproduction theory around these four types of capital, deeming them to be the building blocks of an individual's success.

The first two forms of capital, economic and human, are easily identifiable inside and outside of the educational realm. Economic capital, or wealth that is directly related to tangible financial capacity, can be seen within income inequality in communities, and the difference in funding in American schools. Human capital, on the other hand, represents the intangible educational attainment of an individual. Through family educational expectations, and increased access to academic resources, human capital and economic capital are

intricately linked: the higher the education, the greater the anticipated paycheck. This symbiotic relationship also applies in the reverse; children from households that have limited educational resources are likely to replicate the educational attainment of their parents (Vesely, 2012). When schools are divided by economic and human capital expectations, the educational environment compounds the gap between those with resources, and those without.

The third and fourth form of capital, cultural and social, while more abstract, can be easily encouraged or suppressed within a classroom. Cultural capital refers to both the tangible artifacts of culture (e.g., art collections), and the knowledge and cultural experiences (Bourdieu, 1986). Linked to economic and human capital, increased cultural capital represents an alignment with desired norms and understanding in a society. In schools, cultural capital can be supported by fieldtrips, extensive extracurricular programs, dual language programs, and a plethora of electives, all of which are traditionally found in more affluent education settings. Thus, those who have the means to engage with various cultural aspects outside of school are likely to attend schools that offer opportunities to further grow cultural capital (Bischoff & Tach, 2018). Unfortunately, the suppression of cultural capital is found in schools that serve students from low socio-economic backgrounds. This is seen in the narrowing and standardizing of the curriculum, high enrollment in remedial courses, and the focus on testing the material rather than connecting to the curriculum (Au, 2008; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Another aspect of cultural capital refers to the alignment between linguistic capabilities of the students and the academic language in the school. Students who attend school in a language that is different from their mother tongue, are often seen as having less cultural capital, which can be erroneously linked to their academic potential and ability (Croizet, Goudeau, Marot, & Millet, 2017). While it is considered a cultural benefit to speak more than one language, the advantage only applies to those who speak the dominant language first.

The final form of capital, social capital, refers to the connections one has with the world around them. Social capital is the meaning behind the adage "it is not what you know, but who you know", and can open the metaphorical doors of opportunity. On a superficial level, social capital can refer to the popularity of students within a school, who likely also possess a higher degree of economic and cultural capital. Within the classroom, however, social capital can take on a more intimate role. When a classroom is considered a community, with everyone seen as valuable to the success of the class, all students experience an increase social capital. This creation of social capital within the classroom also lends itself to the universal manifestation of cultural capital in the classroom environment. Students in these settings find a sense of belonging to the culture of the classroom, equal and united under a standard set of norms, rather than attempting to meet the expectations of the culture outside of school.

4. METHODS

The data for this chapter comes from two studies that were conducted with PJI Teachers Academy alumni. The first study (S1) was a funded evaluation of the first year of the PJI Teachers Academy program, and was conducted by a team from the University of Central Florida Public Affairs PhD program (Anderson, Sanguiliano, & Mack, 2019). The data from the second study (S2) was part of a mixed methods doctoral dissertation that considered the personal and professional impact of the PJI Teachers Academy on k-12 educators and on their sense of professional agency (Sanguiliano Lonski, 2020). Both studies addressed the use of The Principles as part of a culture change in the classroom and school.

4.1. Participants

Participants for both studies had to meet a set of criteria prior to recruitment for either study. The participants had to have completed a full week of the PJI Teachers Academy and currently work in a k-12 setting. As the PJI Teachers Academy hosts teachers from around the state, this chapter only used the data from teachers who taught within the same school district. This was done to control for geographical differences as well as district expectations. The final selection of participants yielded 24 educators representing nine schools. The schools ranged from a charter k-12 school that focused on a high-need's rural population, to a large public high school serving nearly 3000 students.

4.2. Setting and data collection

The data for this chapter came from recorded interviews. Due to the social distancing restrictions from COVID-19, the S1 focus group setting was replaced with interviews on a web conferencing program for the second study. Other than the difference in setting, the participants were asked the same eight semi-formal interview questions for both studies (see Table 2). As per guidelines from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Central Florida and the school district's research office, pseudonyms were used for the participants, and numeric identifiers were used for the schools.

Table 2.
Semi-Formal Interview Questions.

Focus Group Interview Questions
1. What is your purpose as a teacher, and how do you fulfill that purpose?
2. How do you reflect on your teaching practice?
3. How did participating in the PJI Teachers Academy impact you personally and professionally?
4. Think back and compare you and your classroom before you attended the PJI Teachers Academy, and you and your classroom now. Discuss the most impactful strategies that you have implemented in your teaching/administration? How do you know it was impactful?
5. Regarding Principle 1 of "How We Treat Each Other", how have you created a hospitable/welcoming and accountable educational community? What has worked/not worked?
6. How have you used Theoretical Framework: Curriculum as Window and Mirror (Emily Style) and Strategy: Serial Testimony?
7. As PJI Teachers Academy will be offered again, what recommendations do you have regarding areas of improvement or addition?
8. Finally, is there anything else that you would like to share that we have not covered?

4.3. Data analysis

Twenty-four participants participated in over fourteen hours of recorded focus groups and interviews. The recordings were transcribed using an online transcription software and were verified for accuracy by the research team. The transcripts were then loaded into *Dedoose*, an online qualitative analysis program, for initial open coding. Axial coding was then used to collapse the codes into related themes. Finally, the themes were compared to determine further relationships and ensure that the participant voices were appropriately represented within the results.

4.4. Results

The coding revealed three central themes within the participant responses: (1) Using The Principles as a Guide, (2) Creating a Welcoming and Inclusive Environment, and (3) Focusing on Individual Principles. The following section uses the voices of the participants to explore each of the themes.

4.4.1. Theme 1: Using the principles as a guide

One of the most prevalent themes during the interviews was the participant's discussion on their reliance on The Principles as a guide for their professional and personal lives. Many spoke about how they used The Principles in their classrooms and professional spaces. Ms. Molly, a high school teacher, mentioned that she "found a lot more harmony with all of my students," while Ms. Charming discussed the change she felt with her coworkers.

> Just taking one of The Principles and applying it in my daily work changed another employee's perspective of me as a person. I challenged my coworkers to do the same, to take one of The Principles and use it throughout their day.

Many teachers also shared that they had The Principles posted in their classroom. Usage of The Principles spanned across grade levels, with examples found ranging from pre-k to twelfth grade. In some of the elementary classroom settings, The Principles were used in lieu of classroom rules. Second grade teacher Ms. Ashley explained:

> They [The Principles] are posted on our wall. We talked about them the first couple of weeks. We created motions to go with them. We took one per day and talked about what does this look like in our classroom, in our school...They've signed them. It's been something that I can continually go back to throughout the year again. Before the class created rules with me, but it was so different than these Principles because these are principles that are overarching class rules. The way I know they're working is to watch these students. When I say, 'wait, stop talking, it doesn't look like everyone's listening deeply' they know what that means.

Several of the schools, predominantly those that include elementary grade levels, had schoolwide application of The Principles. For example, a charter k-12 school that had a campus-wide implementation of The Principles, k-12 principal Mrs. Manatee shared that she uses The Principles to model a positive environment for her students.

> I realized that our students are watching every move I make. Am I going to model those Principles? Am I going to be a role model for them? But they're observing. When I was home with my ankle, my injury, a second-grade class made little love notes for me and they wrote, "I love how you do this" or "how you do that?" But one of the students said, "I love how you're careful with everyone that you meet." I was blown away. That was so impactful to me and really brought home that they're watching. Am I following these Principles too?

Unlike content specific strategies, The Principles were also seen across content areas, including electives. In high school, Mr. Artman described how The Principles informed his art classroom management, "You can always use them. You can use them when you are disciplining or when you're disappointed, or when something nice happens you can use The Principles in your praise," Summarizing the impact of The Principles, Dr. Turtle, who has

her high school Spanish class read The Principles aloud in English and in Spanish every day, condensed the general sentiment that, "I think the most important thing are just The Principles. Because if you do nothing but instill the Principles for How We Treat Each Other, you're going to be fine."

Practicing The Principles in the classroom also guided changes in the personal context of the participants. Several of the participants mentioned that The Principles helped them with colleagues outside of the classroom. Dr. Turtle shared that "after the PJI, I feel much more comfortable in the way that I treat my student and my co-workers." Others noted that they use The Principles at home. Mrs. Toni, for example explained,

> The Principles helped me with how I handle my children and deal with conflict at home with my husband. It helps me to stop and reflect and really turn to those Principles and think about what…my kids are feeling, what they've been through when they start acting up or they're whiny or cranky or they're just wanting to argue with me about something.

Another common theme was comparing the use of The Principles and participation in the Teachers Academy to a religious experience. Dr. Turtle expressed, "I love it [PJI]. I love it. So, if they let me, I'm going every year again because it's like in church." Similarly, Mrs. Snickers noted that "I grew up Baptist. It [PJI] was like going to a Revival and you just would come out of there and there'd be so many things to think about and process. I couldn't wait to come home and share it." Finally, Ms. Adria, when discussing The Principles shared, "I want to embody them [The Principles]. I try to introduce them to the people that I most routinely talk to and interact with. Almost like a religion, like come convert to these beautiful things".

4.4.2. Theme 2: Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment

In addition to guiding and informing the classroom interactions, teachers frequently referenced the first Principle as the motivation behind changing their classroom environment and how they facilitated student relationships. The first Principle emphasizes the need for a "hospitable and accountable community" and reads:

> We all arrive in isolation and need the generosity of friendly welcomes. Bring all of yourself to the work in this community. Welcome others to this place and this work and presume that you are welcomed as well. Hospitality is the essence of restoring community (The Principles for How We Treat Each Other).

Teachers who attended the PJI Teachers Academy focused their discussions on transforming their classroom into a community that resembled a family. This change ranged from rearranging the physical layout of the classroom to the way they facilitated classroom relationships.

The easiest change to identify is the physical layout of the classroom. For some teachers, like Ms. Bernice, this included changing how the students were arranged for daily lessons.

> I offered flexible seating, and that was just a way so that kids could find their own little area. I had a table where students could stand, I had a rug and some floor pillows where they can sit, it made them like 'this is my space'.

High school teacher Ms. Tami emphasized the importance of having a rug with oversized cushions, noting that "maybe some of these kids don't have this at home." Others, like Mrs. Butterfly, used furniture to facilitate community explaining that "I have tables that they all sit at; I don't have [individual] desks." Similarly, high school Spanish teacher, Dr. Turtle explained the change in her students following using a group table seating arrangement.

> One of the students was absent during the week, like two or three days, and when she came back, I watched her table. When she got there, the tables are four students, and the other three students turned to her and started telling her, 'ok, here is what you have to do' and 'we did this and that', and I was so happy…I didn't have to ask them to tell her what we were doing.

In addition to rearranging the classroom, several of the teachers offered Peace Corners for their students. Mrs. Bea, a middle school chorus teacher, transformed one of her practice rooms into a peace room. This calming room was open for students to use during the class,

> Nighty percent of the time they came back out, and they were completely different students, and it was nonreactive. It was non-combative, and it was a way for me to show the student that I care that it's okay that we all have those moments.

Outside of the change in environment, the welcoming and hospitable community also came from within the classroom. Mrs. Snickers, an elementary school teacher, highlighted the importance for students to feel a connection to each other. "For the most part my students got along like a family; they would squabble like brothers and sisters, but they stood up for each other." Ms. Adria shared a similar sentiment, "I explain to my class that we are together more than we are with our families, so we have to trust each other and be open and honest. This helps us unite as a class family." Another second-grade teacher, Ms. Ashley, hosted daily classroom meetings to greet the students. "This is an important piece of what I'm building, the accountable and respectful community. And just the other day one of the students said, 'you know, I feel like our class really likes each other'." This idea was repeated in Mrs. Charming's discussion on her classroom that "we really got to hear everybody's voice. The classroom did become like a community, and everybody was a lot more welcoming." The link between the classroom and a family unit was also discussed by Mr. Artman who routinely mentioned the connection to his students. "I got to be the father and the mother and said, 'you guys are like my kids.' I've tried to use that old cliché. 'This is our home, and we have to try to come together. We're like a family.'"

4.4.3. Theme 3: Focusing on individual principles

The third theme found within the conversations related to the use of specific Principles in the classroom. More than just guiding the general classroom, or establishing a welcoming environment, comments in this theme focused on the direct impact of using various Principles to inform interactions among the teachers and students. For example, Ms. Tami, a 10th grade English teacher, used three of The Principles in her explanation:

> I think one of the biggest things that PJI taught me, that works both professionally and personally, is to stop expecting myself from others. You know, when you stop expecting yourself from others, that allows you to kind of tap into that the place of wonder [Principle 10], where you just start asking those open-ended questions [Principle 4], you started just like suspending judgment [Principle 7]. It just all falls into place.

Instead of taking The Principles as an overall guide, Ms. Tami highlighted the ones that she frequently employed. Ms. Adria, a second-grade teacher, explained the power of the 10th Principle in her classroom.

> The Principles ... especially #10, when things get difficult, turn to wonder. I encourage the students to listen and think before they speak. They may not agree with their friend, but their friend may be going through a difficult time, maybe dad had to go out of town, maybe they didn't have breakfast, could be a million different scenarios. Stop and turn to wonder. How can you help your friend? Principle 10 will change everything!

By turning to wonder instead of jumping to conclusions or dismissing the lived experience and opinions of others, these teachers focused on the individuality of their students and those around them. This shift in thinking, from expecting others to behave in a similar way, was emphasized by Mrs. Kay in her description of a tough situation in her class.

> I think the big thing was that I let my students express their feelings instead of coming in with judgment and cutting them off... one day we did have a fight… I really wanted to know why it was happening... calmly I started to ask some open-ended questions, and they were just all amazed that a teacher would care about what's going on behind it [the fight].

This final category, of turning to specific Principles, demonstrated the power of the set of norms in transforming the personal and professional spaces of the PJI Teachers Academy participants.

5. DISCUSSION

While it is apparent from the discussions that The Principles were influential, the conversations also revealed a disruption to the reproduction of inequity in the classroom. One of the more striking examples of this is how The Principles helped to create a classroom where students had a similar sense of cultural capital. By having the students work within a common frame of reference (The Principles), the students were introduced to the set of norms and expectations for the classroom. When the rules were reinforced either by daily reading or monthly emphasis, each student was provided multiple opportunities to understand and work with The Principles. Furthermore, the content of The Principles themselves facilitated a more equitable and welcoming classroom. Through suspending judgement and turning to wonder, students and teachers were invited to question the cultural capital and social capital of others. The combination of having similar social capital within the classroom and the questioning of social/cultural capital from outside of the classroom created a space where the students felt comfortable sharing and learning.

Having a welcoming environment at school provides a sense of stability and community for the students, something that the participants mentioned occurred following their participation with the PJI Teachers Academy. Several of the teachers explicitly stated that their classroom ran smoother, had a calmer atmosphere, and that their students were more likely to engage with the content and with each other. Even more telling of the impact that The Principles had made on the classroom were the comments by students that the teachers chose to share. This implies that when teachers are exposed to social justice and inclusive professional development, implementation has the potential to enact change that extend beyond the teacher, directly impacting the lives of the students.

6. CONCLUSION

The most exciting implication of the qualitative analysis is the magnitude of change that can stem from relatively small initiatives. While schools cannot change a student's economic capital, cultural capital, nor their family's educational background, the changes presented in this study increase the social capital for all students.

One recommendation for future implementation both within the PJI Teachers Academy and in schools worldwide is an emphasis on a common set of norms (in this case The Principles) to provide an equal sense of social capital amount students. Another recommendation would be to ensure that the physical classroom environment provides an engaging and welcoming environment for students. As the classroom becomes increasingly digitized, the classroom itself has the potential to promote a sense of community and agency among students, further increasing the social capital of students.

The PJI Teachers Academy serves as an example for how to disrupt the reproduction of inequity in the classroom in a way that is easily implemented, transferable, and applicable to any school setting. Through the introduction of The Principles within an extensive professional development session, PJI Teachers Academy reaches beyond the participants and into the hearts and minds of those they teach.

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