

## **A Student's Perspective on Teaching for Social Justice**

The following remarks were made by Ms. Heidi Heyrman, an undergraduate major in the School of Education and the Diederich College of Communication, to the parents of incoming students at Marquette Preview Lunches held in the summer of 2006. They represent one student's brief perspective on teaching for social justice.

*As an education student, I took my second literacy methods course last fall. The focus of this course was teaching a social justice reading unit to a group of students from a local Milwaukee Public School. When I first heard of this term assignment, I was a bit skeptical of my ability to teach an entire reading unit, much less help seventh graders to conceptualize social justice. While this task was a bit daunting, I knew I was up to the challenge, not just academically, but as a socially conscious student and citizen. The mission of the School of Education is teaching for social justice. This course gave me the opportunity to apply theory I studied in my earlier education classes and experience the challenge and excitement of making a change toward social justice in the world through the classroom. My hesitations were met with a thrilling responsibility of empowering students through social justice education.*

*Through the novel *Parallel Journeys*, my group of ten seventh graders was able to explore the theme of intolerance. This novel followed the life of a young Nazi soldier and a Jewish girl. In preparation for developing my approach to this material, my professor and I sat down and talked about the different ways in which intolerance is present in the two perspectives of World War II, but also in the lives of the students I would be teaching. Through our conversation and application of educational theory, I decided to first assess my students' understanding of intolerance so that I could plan my unit according to their background knowledge.*

*While I saw strides in every one of my students throughout the unit, I was deeply touched by the transformation I saw in one particular student. On the first day we met during the student-teacher interview, TraVon expressed a neutral attitude toward school and could only say that Nazis did bad things during World War II. Toward the end of our unit, the students had the opportunity to respond to the journal prompt, "How is intolerance present in your life?" TraVon wrote in his journal, "Intolerance starts with me. I cannot expect that problems will be fixed by others if I do not do something about them myself." He continued, "We are all part of the community and are responsible for making it better every day." As I read TraVon's journal, I thought about how teaching this unit fundamentally changed how TraVon saw himself as part of a community. He went from being a neutral student who did only what was asked of him, to a boy who embraced the responsibility and initiative of making the world a better place. Seeing this transformation affirmed for me why I am in the field of education at Marquette.*

*When I shared this experience with my professor, she helped me to understand how the social justice mission of the School of Education lives in its students as we practice our teaching methods in local Milwaukee Public Schools. I know that my story is one of many examples of Marquette students creating change in the community and am inspired by the collective difference all Marquette students make in the Milwaukee and global communities.*

*The education I am receiving at Marquette is more than textbooks and lectures. Marquette embraces the Jesuit tradition of being men and women for and with others. I am excited and inspired in knowing that your sons and daughters will soon create their own experiences, through classes and other activities that will personalize this mission. Thank you for listening to my experiences this afternoon and welcome to Marquette!*

