

Rattling Chains

Exploring Social Justice in Education

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WORKING TO AWAKEN: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING FROM A SOCIAL JUSTICE PERSPECTIVE

Two kindergarteners are squabbling at their desk when the teacher comes over. One of them says to the teacher, "It's not fair, she took all the red ones!"

In a teacher education course, in discussing that while "race" is not a biological category, it is still important to collect data using racial categories so we can recognize where social injustices exist. A student argues that collecting and using this data only further perpetuates social stereotypes, and is thus a poor strategy.

"Teacher, Why aren't we celebrating Columbus Day?" "It's hard to celebrate a man who led to the genocide of many Native Americans," says the teacher. "But if Columbus hadn't come here, I wouldn't be here, and we would not have the spread of the constitutional democracy that America created."

According to Dewey (1944) all societies educate the ruling class to be able to make the important decisions for the society. And in a democracy, he pointed out; all citizens are members of the ruling class. It is this purpose of schooling that we wish to focus this article on – for students to learn the ability to engage meaningfully in the important decisions that affect their lives as members of a democratic society.

These three vignettes illustrate a few of the various themes and issues underlying a discussion of what it means to teach from a social justice perspective. As the first vignette suggests, humans seem to be born with almost instinctual interest in fairness, even if often from a self-centered perspective (it's fair as long as I get more). Implied in the term social justice is that we go beyond a self-centered perspective to concern ourselves with "fairness" for all. Therefore what does it mean for us as educators to explore fairness with students, complexifying it, while also keeping alive that passion for it?

The second vignette raises the issue of individual versus social responsibility for creating "fairness" and justice. What are the controversies around attempts to legislate equality and correct inequities through social intervention?

The third deals with the ornery fact that everything has trade-offs. Any issue, any controversy implies a trade-off; we gain this, but we lose that. Columbus massacred natives, but his voyages were the beginning of opening the world to new trade and exploration, of material goods and ideas, across continents that previously had little contact with each other. The list of possible themes could go on and on.

When confronted with issues such as these vignettes illustrate, we need to consider how to respond. Such questions are inescapable no matter what or how we teach. Our responses will inevitably reflect our values and beliefs. If we do not acknowledge our own personal agendas, we cannot tackle being "fair" in regards to other agendas. Some on the Right accuse self-proclaimed social justice educators of having an underlying agenda – to teach students to hate America, the West, or their own government. Some on the other side of the political spectrum believe it is their task to expose the truth about the evils of our government, both past and present, and thus to help instigate radical change. Still others argue that we should do neither: "just the facts ma'am," no interpretation that goes beyond the evidence.

The idea that schooling in a democratic society can avoid taking a stand is questionable. Democracy has a stake in a certain cast of mind and spirit that requires years of preparation and training so that these become "habits" of heart and mind. It is counter-productive to subsidize a form of schooling that requires us to pretend that we are neutral about democracy, the Constitution, etc. The focus on reasoned discourse is itself a value, as is the capacity to imagine alternate perspectives, or the nature of acceptable evidence, and assumptions about causality. These intellectual "virtues" – which we have called habits of mind – are intentional, some even "unnatural." These habits encourage certain forms of public inquiry and behavior. They rest on respect for open-mindedness, skepticism and empathy – which some may view with suspicion. Social Justice educators argue that such a stance toward education is required for a democratic society.

Those on all ends of the political spectrum claim they are for Justice. Of course, there is always room for disagreement once we get into particulars. However, what distinguishes *social* justice is the emphasis on "social." The United States has an equally, if not more powerfully, long strong tradition of individualism. We often speak of individual rights, self-reliance, and rugged independence. The belief in personal destiny and making one's own future is strong. "You can grow up to be whatever you want to be," and "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" are common phrases of an American belief system. However, social justice implies that injustice is often done, not to individuals, but to social groups. To Conservatives, the idea that justice may occur due to one's status in a particular social group regardless of individual merit, smacks of liberal egalitarianism, and is contentious. Such a perspective also overlaps with controversies about identity politics that have raged over the past decades.

The political Right is skeptical of the term social justice at this moment in America, not because they are against justice, or believe that extreme inequities are good, but because "we liberals" have owned it as ours. In fact, in Deborah's youth the phrase social justice was a term she associated with Catholicism and religious belief. Many Conservatives believe that interfering politically to correct social injustices makes things worse – that in fact such interventions may be the cause of the problem. They might argue that morality should be left, as most things should, to voluntary institutions. The "market place" of freedom and liberty will take care of social justice. It is from a guru of the Right, Friedrich Hayek (1976) that the

following is taken, "I am certain nothing has done so much to destroy the juridical safeguards of individual freedom as the striving after the mirage of social justice."

Michael Novak (2000), in his defense of Hayek, claims that social injustice, as we define it, cannot exist because justice is a moral term and only individuals can be moral. Since social justice is about injustices done by "society" or its institutions, it has no meaning. "Institutional racism" would, we thus presume, be a concept that Novak and Hayek would reject, while most on the left embrace it. For example, consider the claim that:

"High unemployment" or "inequality of incomes" or "lack of a living wage" are cited as instances of "social injustice." Hayek goes to the heart of the matter: social justice is either a virtue or it is not. If it is, it can properly be ascribed only to the reflective and deliberate acts of individual persons. Most who use the term, however, ascribe it not to individuals but to social systems. (Novak, 2000)

Such classical market economy defenders see the economy not as a human invention, but as a natural force. To say that the economy or market is unfair is akin to saying that it was unfair that one place had more rain than another. To interfere with the natural process of the "invisible hand" of the market undermines "nature" and depends on a far more imperfect dependence on human virtue.

In contrast, those who use the term social justice, do believe, that laws, societies, or institutions can be unjust. Even nature can lead to a lack of justice if society does not deal with the "unfairness" of the consequences of natural phenomenon – droughts, volcanoes, earthquakes, etc. This view may beg the question of whether ill intention is required. If an action, policy or law has the effect of creating or sustaining inequities, then it is socially unjust. Not to act to change a social injustice is therefore a lack of virtue on the part of those individuals and social groups not working for such change. Even if injustices are not always created by the actions of an individual, individual humans are responsible for the impact of unjust public policy. Therefore, to work for social justice is to work for policies and laws that are more likely to result in the equitable distribution of power and resources. When examining such inequities, we notice patterns – non-randomness – in which some groups have more and some have less access to society's power and resources. Social Justice educators seek to expose the young to such patterns, to explicitly confront youngsters in schools with the impact of their own self-interests on others.

While rhetorically everyone agrees the 21st century requires critical thinkers, our schools appear uncomfortable letting students examine critically anything meaningful. Instead, we make the claim that our form of democracy rests upon a citizenry educated to treat their fellow citizens with the respect they wish for themselves. We argue for a democracy that presumes that citizens are in a position to engage in the debates over important decisions that affect their future and have a say in such decisions, when they virtually never see or engage in such practices during schooling, is absurd. In fact, even that a debate exists is mostly hidden from the curriculum.

Gerald Graff (1992) some years ago during the debate about the "common core," argued that what schools must do is "teach the debate" itself, challenging

students to explore various perspectives, maybe focused a little more on exposing the less publicized facts under the assumption that the views of the status quo already so permeate our schooling and general media, that a form of "affirmative action" regarding ideas and information is needed.

Learning to debate "the debate" is perhaps, as Graff argues, our best stance. It provides the tools and the language for entering into the critical discourse about the good society with respect for alternate views, and a sound understanding of one's own view, while being open to the possibility of being wrong. It is precisely such habits that as social justice educators we seek to imbed in our future adult citizens. Such skepticism may itself be controversial among many of the families public schools serve. However, should that interfere with an obligation in a democracy to insist on doing so, even when it comes to abhorrent views – starting in schools? Can the Bill of Rights make sense without confronting difficult ideas?

Part of our task as educators is to select those issues that are most critical to preserving and extending democracy. As teachers we are considering all of this given limited time and resources, having to meet and consider multiple purposes and possible mandates; we are not making the decisions in a vacuum. We must weigh multiple priorities against each other in the real day-to-day act of teaching. What "to cover" is as important as what "not to cover" in the reality of school time. This does not apply only to social studies teachers, or to the teaching of literature. It crops up as well in science and the arts and even in mathematics!

Unless we are going to just read from script that someone else gives us, we as teachers are confronted constantly with what and how to present what we plan to teach. Each of these decisions implies certain beliefs about how people learn and the purpose of the education. And actually even to use a script is a decision to, with the same implications.

I (Nicholas) deal with making decisions about what to present almost daily. A recent example is when I discussed the achievement gaps in K-12 education. While the various achievement gaps in education are pretty much commonly accepted as fact (though even there, the magnitude and what constitutes the best evidence of that gap is contentious), what is not agreed upon is the explanation for that gap. Explanations for that gap range from genetic or cultural to blaming those in power for purposely keeping oppressed groups down and much in between. I have to decide which claims to present, decide how I will present those claims, as well how much time and importance to put on the topic at all. Whatever decision I make has implications for what the students of my course will know about the topic. If another professor taught the course, they would make different decisions than I made regarding each of these.

While, I, as a professor, in theory I might want my students to read a wide variety of views and delve deeply into the evidence. In reality I have limited time with my students, and only so much that I can expect them to read. I might decide to give them a view, that given my expertise, I believe to be both more accurate than, and alternative to, what they are likely to be exposed to otherwise. I believe that affording students an opportunity to explore other points of view that may be contrary to their own, creates a more level playing field upon which students can

explore their own ideas. I see such decisions, as an effort at restoring some of that needed balance. Through challenging *ad hominem* assumptions students often come to realize that their angle of vision may be myopic. Broadening their thinking around a topic or issue gives rise to seeing and embracing a bigger far more complex picture.

In the studying of various historical periods, the essential question for the ninth grade humanities curriculum at Central Park East Secondary School was "Is justice always fair?" From this came further questions: Why do we argue that the law is "blind?" Does fairness necessitate "equality" among all? Does it disregard age? Does it take into account expertise, or one's specific relevance to the issue involved? Do we take into account "consequences" or just equality of process? Is it "fair" to exclude people of a certain age from having full democratic rights? By what right? Ditto of course for all the other "excluded" peoples, such as immigrants or convicted criminals.

In teaching there is always a tension between "coverage" and depth. There is also the question of preparing students with enough background information to enter the debate intelligently. During that discussion, is there a place for the teacher to present his/her own view, or is the teacher's role simply that of facilitator? Does the answer depend on the age of the students? The type of class? Can we pretend that our views are just one of many in the classroom? For students who disagree does it open up their minds or close them – feeling impotent to confront the views of an authority whose expertise and articulateness they cannot match?

We do not need to create balance of views in all our classes – although we need to acknowledge and expose students to minority as well as dominant views – since we are trying to redress an imbalance that exists outside school. It is a risky but tenable position that open discourse broadens our students' minds – so that as our niece/granddaughter said of one professor, "I could feel my mind expanding."

Schooling in a democracy is at heart teaching the young how to exercise judgment. If there were only one "truth," judgment would be irrelevant, and democracy unnecessary. Our standardized high stakes testing system reinforces this notion that there can be only one correct response. Yet both schooling and the mass media encourage the young to assume that the only alternative to right answers are wrong ones. We argue that what for of education one receives will influence that development of moral reasoning, one that instead of focusing on right answers, focuses on getting students to learn bout, ask and engage in the debates about the important questions that matter to them and society; the one's that have no right answers. If they do not see this and practice this from an early age, it is unlikely to become a habit of mind.

Perhaps in exclaiming "It's not fair!" very young children are expressing the most neutral and apolitical root of justice. It is not clear whether this early complaint is culturally "taught" or universal. Nonetheless, how we respond to it is surely relevant to its development. In Jean Piaget's discussion of moral stages, he suggests that our concept of fairness has a certain natural progression, which relates to the increasing capacity to hold varied views at the same time, to "play" with perspectives. This playfulness enters not only the oral realm but also the

scientific, judicial, mathematical, artistic realms, when we ask such questions as: What if? Supposing that? But Piaget acknowledges that not all humans move to the more sophisticated stages of this development.

Especially in times of crisis, many Americans worry whether students are being taught, under the guise of critically thinking, to undermine “patriotism” and love of one’s country. Many citizens suspect that schools are run by “elites” bent on undermining the authority of parents or Church. A friend of Nicholas’, who taught fourth grade in a progressive two-way bilingual school, related an issue that arose in her class. She had taught these nine year olds about what had been done to Native Americans during the European settlement of the US and about what had been done to people of color during slavery and of the struggle to undo our racist past. When one of her students got visibly upset, she probed and discovered that this student felt she was asking her to be anti-White. This teacher had to ask herself whether the way she was teaching about these social injustices, both past and current, is intended to confront those with a European heritage, with the goal of creating self-hate? Is there a certain age level when such topics are okay? Or is there some way at any age-level that we need to confront our past without it backfiring on us? Conversely is there a way to discuss controversial issues, and not whitewash the truth while still encouraging students to have an allegiance to their own country and their own heritage? Or are we neutral – teach the brutal facts and let the consequences take care of themselves?

As we mentioned earlier, we respond generally by falling back on one of three positions: Tell the story in a way that encourages patriotism, or conversely radical activism. Tell the story in its age appropriate fullness, warts and all, while also building allegiance to one’s country. Or third, present “all sides” and let students feel and believe whatever – it is not our job to build allegiance, or not. Or we try to combine them.

To avoid this, schools have historically either ignored negative aspects of our country’s historical past, or put them in the light of past actions that have now been overcome in the inevitable march of progress. One can even teach them as myths, not to be taken as literal historical truths, but serving to unite people around shared values.

In contrast is the view that such myths do more harm than good. In his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen (2007) documents many of the ways that our high school history textbooks whitewash our past with chapter and verse. In the more “ancient” past – 1940s-1950s – the notion of the arc of human progress from the ancient Middle East to modern America was the larger narrative within which we were taught to absorb all the bumps along the road, everything else is a sidebar to this main story of inevitable progress.

One of the reasons for the contemporary focus on social justice is because many of us have come to the conclusion that even well intentioned myths, such as those articulated by Loewen, leave us unprepared to confront modern problems. Emphasizing the positive aspects of European history, while neglecting other histories, whitewashes the past and current realities of social injustices experienced by many. Most detrimental of all, it silences genuine inquiry into difficult issues.

There needs to be a place for students to hear other perspectives and develop their own. Those who have the most to gain from maintaining the status quo are the very people who own the mass media. They have the money to promote their views through commercial uses of the media, by deciding what shows are "airable" on network television (including "public" television), and even inordinate influence about what makes it into our adopted textbooks and curriculum. Hence, schools need to be a place as free as they realistically can be to explore truths.

Even if we draw the broadest definition of our task as educators – with close attention to avoiding forms of "brainwashing" – there are dilemmas. Even such dilemmas need to be part of the professional life of the school and of the larger school and community discourse.

It is not our intent to give you our answers to all the questions raised in this article, although we have surely not kept our agenda secret. Since there is no way to deal with controversy that does not itself potentially create controversy, we need to explore over and over why democracy, at its heart, presumes controversy and is built upon the premise that controversy is healthy. If so, why not introduce this in schools – if and as we also explore the controversial imbalance between the powers of the adults and the students within our classrooms. For in discussing democracy, we are also exploring, in various academic disciplines, the role of authority and power, hardly easy topics to discuss with the young, but nevertheless essential to our shared future.

Besides, young people love controversy, a good argument, digging beneath, and uncovering. It is precisely at that moment when kids get truly excited that many of us, as teachers, get worried. We've hit a button; we're in vulnerable terrain. But isn't that what it is all about?

EXTENSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

1. Michael Novak claims that social injustice, as we define it, cannot exist because justice is a moral term and only individuals can be moral. Since social justice is about injustices done by "society" or its institutions, it has no meaning. Jot down some of your thoughts about Novak's claims. How does his claim fit with your personal and professional life? Turn to a partner or form a small group and discuss your thoughts.
2. Does social justice depend on the far more imperfect dependence on human virtue? Try to ferret out the difference between virtue and social justice. Can you have one without the other? For example does social justice require integrity, empathy, tolerance, and kindness-virtuous behavior or does it stand on its own as a construct with a specific definition, valence, and direction. Divide a piece of paper in half like a hot dog and one side put the term social justice and on the other virtue. Try to discern the difference. Draw lines to similarities or overlaps. Form a small group of four and share your thoughts.

3. Define democracy in one powerful sentence. Does your definition include social or justice? If yes, explain why. If no, explain why not.

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