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Teaching Justice as a Personal Virtue and Civic Value: What's an Elementary School Teacher to do in a Highly Politicized Environment?

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“Teaching almost any topic within social studies is inherently a moral activity,” (Byrd, 2012, p. 1073). One might ask, “What good is a social studies education if learning of topics such as the Bill of Rights, the civil rights movement, the Holocaust, Gandhi, and totalitarianism doesn’t lead to teachers having young learners consider the moral issues inherent in the basic question of justice, i.e., right or wrong, good or evil, and fair or unfair?” But the answers to such questions can lead to controversy and conflict with school administrators, community leaders and parents or end up with a teacher accused of bias or indoctrination on the evening news. The purpose of this essay is to explore some of the challenges, concepts, and issues that elementary teachers should consider when delving into the ambiguity of moral questions with their young learners.

First, because young learners are less able to dissect complex concepts, elementary teachers must find ways to clarify and exam moral questions that are on one hand simplified to meet students’ readiness and, on the other, not so streamlined so as to not require students’ assessment of their personal existing and potential moral stance.

Second, children (and adults for that matter) often rely on what Socrates called “**true belief**,” a perception of what may be the moral way to think about the course of action to be taken (Fine, 2004). True belief may be instinctual, coming from the young learners’ own imagination, or a mimicking of the opinions of parents or significant others. The hallmark of decisions made by true belief is that students cannot systematically explain why they hold their chosen belief. While such choices may prove to be the just thing to do, they can just as easily be the wrong thing to do because the decision was not subjected to reason. Socrates argued for “**Knowledge**” as opposed to true opinion as the basis for making a moral decision because his idea of knowledge was the product of **reason**. The linchpin for a knowledge-based decision is that someone is able to explain both why a course of action is not just and why a moral decision is just. The purpose for the call for **critical thinking** and **open-mindedness** as a hallmark in social studies instruction is derived from this basic principle. It is intended to change young learners from making high risk, inadequately considered, serendipitous decisions based on true belief to a reflective reasoning disposition in answering questions of right and wrong. By such training, young learners will become more deliberate in assessing right and wrong and make better decisions as to the persons and citizens they want to be.

Third, the sophistication of the analysis and judgments about what is just vary by age, but the communal activity of examining moral issues in a thoughtful and deliberate progression with the teacher serving as an interlocutor: It is a driving force in the advancement of one’s development of civic values and personal virtues (Kohlberg, 1969). One might argue that the five most important words in social studies are “but on the other hand.”



Fourth, in social studies unlike other disciplines, the answers are not fixed: They require judgments about competing strategies to produce a just society and the idea of what is just. It is easy to teach that $2 + 2 = 4$. But what is the best way to solve the problem of poverty, requires judgment.

Fifth, defining what should be promoted as a universal moral stance by society and teachers of social studies in schools has always been problematic, yet somehow teachers are expected to promote (but not indoctrinate) something as amorphous as a “democratic ideology.” As an example, in the first half of the last century American society permitted and teachers in the south promoted segregation and its inherent belief in inequality as if it were a universal. In social studies instruction, a teacher may offer “You should not steal,” but from Kohlberg’s “Heinz Dilemma” (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975) where a person steals a drug to save a life, we know that the morality of the decision to steal or not steal is contextualized differently by different age-groups and males and females. There is a long tradition in elementary social studies education of using stories to promote personal virtues and civic values through literature such as the Book of Virtues by William Bennet (1996), aphorisms such as “Look before you leap” to directly promote prudent behavior, mythoi such as “George Washington and the Cherry Tree” (see Washington, 2010), and moral dilemmas drawn from history such as the Armstead trial or a contemporary picture of homeless children. These moral lessons are intended for students to consider justice and the kind of person they want to be.

Sixth, because of their age, young learners are particularly susceptible to **indoctrination**. Elementary school teachers are not expected to be ideologically neutral; indeed they must take a stance in support of a democratic ideology. However, this is quite different from taking a political position and presenting it as a universal. Kelley’s (1986) long-standing analysis of the options for teachers to avoid indoctrination has stood the test of time. The ideal, what he called “committed impartiality,” is where teachers make their political ideological preferences explicitly known to their students prior to a deliberation so students can see if the teacher is indoctrinating or biasing the deliberations. But young learners are too likely to accept such remarks as a true belief because of the authority figure status held by a teacher. With young learners “Neutral Impartiality” in which teachers lead discussions but do not disclose their own perspective (perhaps until the end) is almost a necessity with young learners and would not be indoctrinating if the teacher remains committed to the students’ development rather than a particular ideological stance that teacher has adopted. With such a disposition, teachers of young learners of social studies can avoid indoctrination while promoting values and virtues considerations that lead to students developing their own idea of justice.

Seventh, the moral questions raised in social studies content are at its core, but the time for such thoughtful discussions - where the complexities are unpacked for children, perspectives shared, and insights provided by an adult committed to a democratic ideology, critical thinking and open-mindedness - is in danger of being driven out of the classroom along with all social studies due to time constraints (Passe, 2006; Rothman, 2005). Assuming these traditional social studies approaches to moral development in schools will survive the onslaught of micro management,



mandates, and high stakes testing, the grey area for most teachers lies in the well-established moral questions in topics such as “Given that Washington owned slaves, was he a good man?” and contemporary topics such as the alternative solutions to poverty and health care and conflict over free speech, etc. In videos from the last elections we see children coerced into promoting “equal pay for equal work,” (see, New Jersey video, 2009) because there is little evidence from the video that they understand the concepts or implications. And, in another video (see, Swedish Video, 2009) we see a biased teacher disabusing a student for his support of Senator McCain. Today’s harsh left/right, liberal/conservative political rhetoric makes the job of deciding what moral perspective to examine and promote as a core democratic ideology and what to only examine leaving students to make choices, that much more difficult.

Eighth, elementary school teachers’ training usually does not include significant college course work in philosophy, ethics, and axiology, the traditional sources of how to think about the moral complexities. All humans are susceptible to the easy path of true belief, rather than the road less taken that leads to knowledge. The following analysis is intended to unpack some concepts about justice and moral education that should be useful to elementary school teachers who take up the challenge of promoting a democratic ideology.

Ideology & Moral Education

Ideology has been dubbed “the most elusive concept in the whole of social science” (McLellan, 1986, p. 1). Ideology is how we envision and interpret the world (Gerring, 1997, 1998). It is a perspective ultimately shaped by one’s personal virtues, civic values, knowledge, and modes of reasoning, all of which are influenced by an elementary school teacher. By **civic values**, I mean communal commitments such as “Respect rights of others,” “Respect property of others” and “Adherence to rule of law” (Misco & Shiveley, 2007, 2010, p. 123) and by **private virtues**, I mean “qualities of the soul,” such as “Fortitude,” “Courage,” and “Justice” (Aristotle, 1999). When writing about ideology, Wittgenstein (1969) posited that it is “the inherited background against which I distinguish true and false” (p. 94).

By **democratic ideology**, I mean an ideology that holds, as a considered conviction, a set of fundamental human rights and duties that are necessary to advance liberty and justice for the common good. The adoption of a democratic ideology is the goal of moral education and indeed, a social studies education. The inevitable controversy ensues from different perspectives as to what the “rights and duties” are or should be and what is meant by “liberty,” “justice” and the “common good.” Inherent in a democratic ideology is the commitment that individuals will hold different versions of a democratic ideology and that other’s perspectives that are different from one’s own are worthy of respect. This is not so say that all ideas are worthy of respect or democratic. Someone advocating totalitarianism or racism does not hold a democratic ideology and such notions dictate that teachers help students reexamine the evidence and consider other perspectives. In this regard, Immanuel Kant (1959) offers a helpful guide. Using his framework, it is democratic if one holds the civic value and personal virtue that one must extend to others those liberties one wants for him or herself. So a racially-biased belief, in effect, does not extend to others the respect you would want for yourself and thus must be undemocratic and rejected.



Political ideology, is a subset of ideology, it is a “set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved” (Erikson & Tedin, 2003, p. 64). Whereas, a **political platform** is comprised of the policies or programs one supports which derive from one’s ideology and political ideology (Gerring, 1997, 1998). As an example, one may have an ideology that poverty is something society as a whole has a duty to minimize, if not eradicate. Both liberals and conservatives may hold this considered judgment to be a just objective. But the chosen political platform to achieve that end through government action (such as a change to the minimum wage) or expanded head start programs is reasonably defined as a **liberal** platform. The **conservative** platform would, however, anticipate acts of benevolence by individuals or a government policy encouraging acts of benevolence, not a government undertaking, as the remedy. Much of the ideological and political ideological conflict over platform preferences that are voiced in classrooms and public arenas are based in left/right, liberal/conservative ideological choices that pertain to classic disputes concerning the proper role of government, power, justice, liberty, authority, and inequality (Bobbio, 1996; Burke 1790/1987). The selected orientation leads individuals to having a preference for one political platform over another by which they hope to fulfill their ideology. The positions they take tell us what civic values and personal virtues they hold to be most important.

Where a racial bias, as an example, might be thought of as “out-of-bounds” of a democratic ideology and thus unacceptable, political platform preference are “in bounds” and, indeed, the debate as to which strategies are the best way to achieve a just society is an essential aspect of furthering the democratic ethos. It is the tension between the different political ideological perspectives that serves as the dialectic which has led to Western civilization, and the United States in particular, to provide more liberties to more people than any society in the history of mankind (Hart, 2001). It is through a deliberative process (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) in the classroom against a backdrop of social studies topics where the best available evidence is examined, tentative conclusions are evaluated in consideration of others perspectives, and judgments made as to the wisest, fairest course of action that is at the center of moral education. Students bring their existing civic values and personal virtues to the classroom, and elementary school teachers introduce students to the kind of critical thinking and open-mindedness that is essential to a democratic ideology and the development of their civic values and personal virtues. Students, through a social studies education, are expected to mature into the same commitment (or disposition) toward open-mindedness and critical thinking as their teachers. By making critical thinking and open-mindedness *the* primary undertaking, elementary teachers of social studies personal political ideological predilection becomes irrelevant: They are set aside because the focus is not on telling children what to believe, but helping children form ideas of justice.

Justice, Social Justice, and Liberty

A complicating factor in a dialogue about ideology is that the vocabulary can be imprecise and leads to misplaced concreteness. As an example, both liberal and conservative political ideologies often state that government is giving assistance, such as tax breaks, subsidies, etc. to corporations or food stamps, housing assistance, etc. to individuals.



However, government, in this regard, is only a conduit, a facilitator. The common place misstatements, “the government gives me food stamps” or “the small business administration gives me a low interest loan” distort the dialogue and depersonalize the actual events. These statements sound quite different from, “My neighbor gives me food stamps or my neighbor gives me a low interest loan for my business.” The antagonism seen in public debates and divisions in society might be, in part, attributable to this misplaced concreteness and depersonalization of the relations needed in a civil society.

Justice

Teachers of social studies should promote students’ development of the idea of justice, but be careful not to promote a political platform that reflects their (the teachers) personal social justice or liberty political orientation.

Justice and social justice are not the same (Read, 1973). It is the “social” in social justice as opposed to just “justice” that implies specific liberal political preferences (Greg, 2013; Read, 1973; Will, 2006). The development of the idea **justice** has its origins in Greek antiquity, is complex, and limited in this essay to the concept of justice as a personal virtue and civic value.

First, justice is one of multiple virtues such as, temperance, courage, etc. (Aristotle, 1999). Justice is, however, unique among the virtues because the other virtues become “just” when individuals act for the good of the community. As an example, it is temperate to limit one’s food intake to fulfill the personal virtue of temperance, but the temperate act becomes an act of justice (a civic value) if someone refrains from eating food because that makes more food available for others (Kraut, 1989). This fits into the Athenian concept of individuals having a **duty** to promote **human flourishing** (*eudemonia*) of oneself, others, and communities (emphasis added) as a matter of justice (Aristotle, 1999; Kraut, 1989). As a result, teachers need to examine with students the idea of duty. Out of a sense of duty to oneself, others and the community at large, one has an obligation to care for one’s self and my children and take responsibility for one’s own decisions so that one does not have to rely on the benevolence of others (or “the government”). For young learners this can be promoted as starting with doing well in school and deliberations about personal responsibility. Concurrently, out of a sense of duty to individuals and the community, one has an obligation to assist others who are deserving of help. For children this maybe helping other children in the classroom, service learning activities, etc. as well as deliberations about duty and benevolence.

Second, the “**Principle of Desert**” as in “you got your just deserts” proposes that those who act well toward others also deserve to be treated well. But those who don’t treat others well, do not deserve to be treated well. The two are inseparable as a matter of justice, that is, you can’t have one without the other if there is to be justice (Rachels, 1997). So those who fulfill their duty in contemporary society deserve good treatment and those who do not should not receive the same good treatment by society as those who have acted responsibly. Individuals or society may choose to treat individuals who have not acted responsibly better than they



deserve, but this would be an act of benevolence. If they were to be treated as well as those who treated others well that would not be justice. Rachels (1997) points out that,

Deserts is a way of granting people the power to determine their own fortunes. Because we live together in mutually cooperative societies, how each of us fares depends not only on what we do but on what others do as well. If we are to flourish, we need to obtain their good treatment. A system of understandings in which desert is acknowledged gives us a way of doing that (p. 472).

The debate over the role of government and duty of individuals in the creation of a just society is at the center of political ideological struggle between liberal and conservative and the source of controversy in classrooms. Even young learners have an idea of justice, at least as true opinion, and based on their culture, family, and community bring understandably naïve (i.e., grade appropriate) notions of social justice and liberty to the classroom.

Social Justice

There are a number of perspectives as to what social justice is (Hayek, 1978; Miller, 1999; Novak, 2000), but it is almost always accepted as a liberal political ideological stance. Rizvi (1998) points out that “the immediate difficulty one confronts when examining the idea of social justice is the fact that it does not have a single essential meaning—it is embedded within discourses that are historically constituted and that are sites of conflicting and divergent political endeavors” (p. 47). Murrell (2006) describes **social justice** as “a disposition toward recognizing and eradicating all forms of oppression and differential treatment extant in the practices and policies of institutions, as well as a fealty to participatory democracy as the means of this action” (p. 81). What constitutes “equal participation,” “oppression,” and “differential treatment” is in large measure a function of the ideological frame through which one views the world and it is teachers of social studies who are expected to convert those true opinions about such things to knowledge.

The term social justice seems to rests on four principles. First, social justice is a matter of redistributing “goods” to improve the lives of the disadvantaged (Freire, 1980; Gutierrez, 1971/1988). Social justice is argued to be needed because society has a duty to provide for individuals a fair share of opportunities and resources that correct, to some extent, the chance circumstance of birth and upbringing. Institutions of society are viewed as favoring and sustaining certain starting places over others. Combined, especially “deep” inequalities are created, meaning they are not easily remedied (Rawls, 1971), “It is these inequalities, presumably inevitable in the basic structure of any society, to which the principles of social justice must in the first instance apply” (p. 7). Arguably, in America, the long standing commitment to universal, free public education was intended to correct the inequities of home and community. Second, in addition to the traditional view of goods as representing wealth in the financial sense, the idea of goods includes cultural capital and access to decision making; that is, all forms of resources that bring power to the individual. Third, this



redistribution is interpreted as a “right” as opposed to an opportunity of the relatively disadvantaged. And fourth, a role of government is to redefine rights and redistribute resources through its elected officials to insure “a more equal and equitable balance of powers that will enhance and multiply the effective liberties of the mass of individuals” (Dewey, 1987, p. 362).

Liberty

Liberty is often defined in terms of rights (Rawls, 1996) and is associated with conservative political ideology. In the case of liberties or rights, one can enumerate a list such as “freedom of expression” or “freedom from oppression.” Such enumerated liberties vary greatly and can be found in the social studies education literature (see, Misco and Shiveley, 2010), countries’ constitutions and laws, and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The provisos of enumerated rights either guarantee or restrict liberties based on a concept of justice at the time they were written. It is common place for elementary school teachers to have students begin to conceptualize rights by teaching about the U. S. constitution, legislation, and court cases (Bailey & Cruz, 2013).

It was Mill (1869) who focused on the tension between the state’s need to both care for the common good and individual liberty and what “... limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual” (n.p.). The solution for liberty advocates is not government or programs, but a free market economy and the concept of **benevolence** which can be traced to early Roman Catholic theological teachings. It is to be bestowed at the will of the relatively well-off not because of a right of the less well-off or a government mandate, but because justice and duty to the common good demands it. Aquinas (1975) also insisted that with the exception of particular emergencies, justice requires that individuals in a community be free (have the liberty) to carry out their duties via their own free choices and actions; that is, benevolence should not be coerced by individuals, majorities, or the state. Benevolence leads individuals to take action when their civic values and personal virtues compel them to promote the flourishing of others.

Robert Nozick in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1976) relates the idea of liberty to a free market economy and the rights of individuals to the products of their initiative. He makes the case that individuals produce all resources and they have rights to the things they produce, rights of equal merit as those who advocate the right to social justice. Thus, attempts to improve the condition of the least advantaged through redistribution of one person’s goods based on a social justice political platform is unjust because such actions deprive people of the goods and opportunities they have created by expending their own time and efforts and effectively make some people work involuntarily for others.

Critique of Liberal and Conservative Platforms

Social justice advocates argue that the liberty ideology fails to sufficiently take into account the conditions of poverty as a loss of liberty, is often inherited, and is perpetrated by



the inequities of capitalism against innocent victims, depriving them of fundamental economic entitlements and cultural capital and thus requires some form of redistribution of wealth to make societal equality even a possibility (Freire, 1980; Gutierrez, 1971/1988; Murrell, 2006; Rawls, 1971). They argue that benevolence alone is insufficient to produce justice. So, it follows that a democratic government elected by the people would be just in limiting some liberties and imposing a social justice end through government action. Even, Hayek (1982), a liberty advocate, argued that people have duties to help each other even when those so obliged did not cause the distress to be alleviated, "There is no reason why in a free society government should not assure to all protection against severe deprivation in the form of an assured minimum income" (p. 87).

However, Lou Read (1973) called the social justice ideology a "Sheltering Ideology" which he described as,

Protection from life's problems-seeking refuge from difficulties-not by building and strengthening one's own intellectual and physical assets but by using force or coercion to live off the resources of others. In politico-economic parlance these sheltering ideologies range from protectionism and state interventionism to socialism, welfarism, the planned economy, Nazism, fascism, Fabianism, communism (p. 40).

He argues that justice requires only the absence of deterrents to the "creative aspirations of any individual" as opposed to social justice which entails a "grant of privilege" (p. 95). Government action to redistribute goods is seen as a taking of liberties and leading to a welfare state and totalitarianism (Feser, 1997). Conservatives argue, even if there was greater "equalization" in societies beyond what is already done for the marginalized in countries like the U.S., it would never be enough for social justice advocates and that these advocates demand too little of the beneficiaries of the redistributed goods. Cradle to grave policies and programs are seen as robbing people of responsibility for their own actions and a diminution of the liberties of others.

Most Americans, young learners and adults alike, adopt an ideology that combines aspects of both of these left and right political orientations. Young learners through young adults, however, are forming both their initial ideology and initial **identity**. Ideology is shaped by one's identity and, at the same time, shapes one's identity. Unlike other disciplines with very different kinds of goals, social studies' most important goal, a democratic ideology, is intertwined with young learners' personal identity. As a consequence, elementary teachers of social studies must focus on students' feelings about the content as well as the students' knowledge when examining moral claims.

Ideology and Identity



Young learners spend half of their waking day, typically with one elementary school teacher for nine months of the year. Much of what they learn from teachers comes from the teacher modeling thoughtfulness, empathy, reason, critical thinking, and open-mindedness. These are dispositions that are essential parts of a democratic ideology and what makes social studies different from other content. Mathematics and science may help someone get a job, but because ideology requires answers to moral questions, the shaping of an ideology is tied to one's identity. Ideology is a projection of who one is and who one is striving to be. As E. Doyle McCarthy (1994) points out,

Ideologies bestow identities. For what is known and believed and thought are not merely knowledges, beliefs, or thoughts, they are what I know and what I believe and what I think. They inscribe in what I do, who I am ~ my identity (p. 423).

Elementary teachers have always been taught, as the expression goes, "to teach students not subjects." They are often called upon to equalize the playing field for students who they see as disadvantaged because a student may lack the cultural capital other students were fortunate to inherit. This always requires more than pedagogical content knowledge, it requires nurturing (Noddings, 1995). Helping students create their personal and civic identity is necessary to formation of a democratic ideology which can best be thought of in terms related to the philosophical counseling movement (Marinoff, 1999) and authenticity and autonomy.

"**Authenticity** aims at defining and realizing one's own identity as a person" (Guignon 2006, 136). Dewey, pointed out the lack integration in modern man's behavioral and psychic life ~ the contradiction "between outer and inner operation" ~ in the lives of men to be a particular challenge in modern society and an impediment to social change (Dewey 1931, p. 318). Teachers of social studies must encourage their students' natural inclination to create a consistent and holistic identity because it is necessary to their state of being, which in turn is necessary for a thoughtfully produced democratic ideology. To become authentic is to liberate oneself. Guignon (1999) explains the importance of authenticity in shaping a personal identity and political ideology that extends to the liberation of oneself and others:

It [authenticity] is not just a matter of concentrating on one's own self, but also involves deliberation about how one's commitments make a contribution to the good of the public world in which one is a participant. So authenticity is a personal undertaking insofar as it entails personal integrity and responsibility for self. But it also has a social dimension insofar as it brings with it a sense of belongingness and indebtedness to the wider social context that makes it [authenticity] possible. (p. 163).

Classroom instruction in social studies offers a unique setting in society in which young learners can test and reflect on their own identities (*what* they are) and ideology in a nurturing environment and thus further their authenticity and autonomy (Byrd, 2012). As Taylor (1992) explains, one's authenticity and autonomy can be forged, "Only against a backdrop of things that matter...only if I exist in a world in which history, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order...matters crucially" (p. 15).



Autonomy, in the modern democratic state, encompasses the idea that citizens should be liberated ~ free to choose their goals and behaviors. Human dignity and liberty consists largely in one's freedom to be autonomous, "whereby each individual is thought to have a unique identity, an original way of being human, to which he or she must be true" (Taylor 1992, p. 38). In turn, it involves a duty that one will reflect critically on one's principles, consider one's circumstances, decide how to live, and act based on those reflections. American society formally creates the opportunity for this endeavor through social studies instruction. This requires that teachers of social studies encourage students to take and articulate political ideological positions that reflect the students' developing autonomy and authenticity, even if those platforms are less mature and differ from their own ideas of the ideal balance between liberty and social justice.

Conclusion

Elementary teachers, due to the distinctive aspects of ideology, have a unique opportunity to further the personal development of their students and promote the development of a more humane and just society. Their adherence to the principles of critical thinking and open-mindedness, commitment to students' personal development, and willingness to guide students to a thoughtful understanding of justice can achieve that goal. It starts with the teachers who adopt an ethos of self-reflection on their own beliefs; critically analyze their ideology and political preferences; honestly negotiate and renegotiate subjective and unsettled civic values and personal virtues; implement a teaching disposition that reflects a deep-seated belief in a deliberative classroom; and an understanding of character formation that is not required in other disciplines. Such approaches can help insure that elementary school teachers avoid controversy while teaching about choice between social justice and liberty ideological orientations.



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