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Say That The River Turns: Social Justice Intentions in Progressive Public School Classrooms

Beatrice S. Fennimore

“Say that the River turns, and turn the River.”

—Gwendolyn Brooks

In her poem “The Sermon on the Warpland,” Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks (2006) gently describes the powerful resistance that is necessary for social change. First, we must *say* that the change can take place—then we must make it happen. Progressive teachers in public schools face many frustrations and disappointments; nonetheless, they can adopt the message of this poem. How? First they can construct a language of belief that change can always take place—and then they can work to create the change to which they aspire. This essay will argue that such language and accompanying action must rest on the personal development of a well-articulated professional *intention* to see the progressive possibilities for social justice and change for common good in daily classroom life. This intention is first enacted in the ways in which the teacher chooses to speak about children and then further reflected in the power and purpose of the teacher’s professional actions.

Standing Up to Pervasive Negativity

I start with some of the comments I have overheard many times in schools:

“All the children in this school are at risk.”

“Our children come from homes that do not value education.”

“The kids who are poor lack the entry skills to be successful in school.”

“The struggling readers will just continue to fall behind.”

Many public school educators are familiar with statements such as those, which reflect stress and frustration as well as the unfortunate denigrating and discriminatory attitudes that continue to persist in the context of schooling. It might be tempting to simply blame and criticize the teachers who make such comments, but in truth they are expressing thoughts that are pervasive in society and even found in some widely read educational resources (Borich, 2014; Payne, 1998; Rothstein,

2004). The stressful current trend of widespread criticism of teachers as well as the pressure on them to produce high scores on standardized tests can inadvertently foster or increase teachers' scapegoating of children with economic and social challenges.

In spite of making such comments, the speakers may well consider themselves to be good and fair teachers and view those words as “just talking”—but where are their articulated and internalized intentions to promote social justice in every aspect of their professional lives? Why aren't they reflecting carefully on the power they do have to “turn the River” of bias and discrimination that can do so much harm in schools? This essay is written to explore the power of teacher intentions and elaborate on the ways in which social justice intentions can be fully integrated into the praxis of progressive public school teachers.

Linking the Progressive Movement to Social Justice Commitments

The progressive movement in the United States “enlisted the enthusiasm, the loyalty, the imagination, and the energy of large segment of the American public and the teaching profession” (Cremin, 1959, p. 22) to embrace the ideal of democracy in the context of a newly developing urban-industrial civilization. During the transformational Progressive Era, public schools were called upon to play their part in a much larger humanitarian reform movement taking place in the political and social life of the United States. At the forefront were the needs of immigrants; many schools became social centers providing services to thousands of immigrant children and adults (Spring, 2008). As Cremin (1959) notes, John Dewey, a prominent figure in the Progressive Era, had a vision of education that was “appropriate to a democratic society” (p. 24) and that equipped all people to live their lives with intelligence and sensitivity to others. Although the progressive education movement is considered to have ended with the collapse of the Progressive Education Association in 1955 (Cremin, 1959), it is credited with the contributing substantial gains in increasing educational equity in the United States (Anyon, 2009).

How are the ideas of progressive education enacted in schools? That occurs when active inquiry and creative reflection are integral components of intellectually and socially engaging classrooms in which children learn to link the importance of academic pursuits with the equally important quality of their relationships with others. The students thus internalize empathy and compassion, leading to authentically cooperative behaviors in their classroom communities. Such progressive skills and intentions lay the groundwork for future citizenship because children become astute problem solvers in the context of democratic community life in the schoolroom (Reese, 2013). It is in the

spirit of inquiry, collaboration, and common purpose that progressive classrooms establish the foundation for adult commitments to socially just communities.

What Do We Mean by Social Justice?

Social justice, simply put, is a public intention to enact fundamental respect for the dignity and human rights of every person. Progressive educators oriented toward social justice continually seek to uphold the common good as responsible citizens in their professional institutions and social communities (Zajda, Majhanovich, & Rust, 2006). Importantly, a commitment to social justice requires all educators to recognize when those who should be served fully and ethically by our profession are instead experiencing discrimination and denial of an equal educational opportunity (Rawls, 1971) and then to take determined action to rectify the inequality. Social justice for progressive educators is a habit of mind and action; they know that social justice is either an enacted virtue “or it is a fraud.” (Novak, 2000, p. 11). They thus accept their responsibility to be transparent and articulate in their commitments and beliefs — and to act on them publicly.

Social Justice is Controversial

Social justice is a politically controversial concept; its presence in teacher education has raised past concerns significant enough to motivate the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education to remove social justice language from its documents (Wilson, 2005). The major concern expressed by “conservatives” was that social justice in teacher education embodied a potentially coercive “liberal” bias that could interfere with first amendment rights and academic freedom. Students in teacher education programs might be forced to adopt (or pretend to adopt) liberal views in order to pass classes and receive certification (Wasley, 2006). Some critics of a social justice approach to teacher education also claimed that it was replacing a focus on traditional academic subjects (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

How might progressive educators respond to such concerns? First, they can make the case that social justice commitments are fully aligned with all the expectations laid out for educators in professional codes of ethics (Feeny & Freeman, 2005; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005; Strike & Soltis, 2004). Further, they can argue that all teachers in the United States have a civic responsibility to uphold the constitutional principles of liberty and equality in our democracy. Public schools in the United States are charged with the enactment of democratic practices; teachers do not leave their citizenship at the school door. Their responsibility for the

well-being of every one of their students means that they must be particularly mindful of civil protections, laws, and rights (Swadener, 2003). It can thus be argued that social justice transcends partisan politics and political party allegiance; it is a universal responsibility of citizenship, neither liberal nor conservative. All educators (like all citizens in a democracy) are called upon to demonstrate their intention to respect human rights and to act in service of the common good (Fennimore, 2014). Any claims that a focus on social justice is replacing traditional subjects in school reflect a great misunderstanding. Social justice commitments complement the curriculum and make it more likely that all children will have access to an outstanding academic education. My stance is that incorrect beliefs about the role of social justice in education must be strongly countered whenever possible.

Controversy in Teacher Praxis

Social justice can be controversial in teacher praxis as well; teachers who are outspoken in their advocacy for children may not always fit in well with the cultural norm of their school. How often, after all, do teachers hold open and frank conversations with their colleagues about what is right, fair, and ethical? How often do educators in schools acknowledge the ways in which society as a whole is failing to nurture and protect the developmental needs of all children? Such considerations of the moral dimensions of teaching can seem uncomfortable or controversial (Sockett, 1993). Teachers have often told me that they veer away from discussing issues related to social justice (particularly in connection to racism and forms of prejudice and discrimination) because they fear that their opinions may be misinterpreted or might inadvertently offend others. Progressive teachers whose talk and actions openly reflect their social justice intentions may indeed be moving out of the comfort zone of what is considered conventional conversation in their schools. In spite of this, however, I believe that their efforts are a major step toward countering the damage that can be done by biased or even callous lack of regard for children whose life experiences are very difficult.

Deficit-Based Teacher Talk, Ethics, and Social Justice Intentions

The opposite of discourse reflecting social justice commitments is the deficit-based talk that can be prevalent in schools, particularly those serving socially marginalized populations. I hear this talk often while supervising school-based field experiences; teachers will make comments such as “most of these kids will end up in jail” or “the kind of student population I teach could not possibly do the work the gifted kids do.” When I reflect on such talk, I realize that it is possible for teachers

to consider themselves to be dedicated professionals while failing to see the connection between discriminatory, disparaging talk and real harm to children. In fact, however, teachers are never “just talking”—talk is an action and a behavior that makes things happen and continue to happen (Austin, 1962; Searle 1969). Negative talk and deficit-based labeling represent enacted generalized assumptions of students’ inferiority that interfere with the rights of all children to be welcomed and respected in their public schools. Such comments reinforce bias, negativity, and hopelessness in other listeners; they make it more likely that some children will be continue to be marginalized and neglected in schools. When we think of this kind of teacher talk as an action, we can see why it merits careful consideration from the standpoint of professional ethics—particularly the ethic that no child should be harmed in the process of education (Strike & Soltis, 2004).

This is why the refreshingly and determined positive talk of effective progressive public school educators should be thought of as an intentional extension of professional ethics. Because these teachers *intend* to consistently promote social justice in public schools, they use their words in ways that construct ethical possibilities. In the development of their intentionality, progressive public school educators identify what they consider to be irreducible in their professional stance. Their intention to seek equity and fairness in the context of articulated professional power and responsibility is reflective but nonnegotiable. Their talk is an action unto itself and also leads strongly into further action—the moral matching of words and deeds that gives authenticity and integrity to the work of the best progressive educators.

An Example of Ethical Talk and Action

My former student Diana¹ is now a kindergarten teacher in a public elementary school serving a highly diverse student population. She considers the climate of the school to be a significant professional challenge; Diana consistently hears her colleagues and administrators express negative attitudes toward certain children and families. Committed to a progressive approach to these challenges, she has constructed ways of infusing those commitments into her responses to colleagues who demean or complain about the children and families served by the school.

For example, her principal recently told her that she was “going to have to accept one of those halfway house kids” in her classroom. Diana was actually very interested in the welfare of the children in the nearby halfway house; they lived with single mothers recently released from prison

1 All names used in this essay are pseudonyms.

who were being assisted in finding jobs and homes. Sensing a negative administrative tone, she said, “I really appreciate the chance to help this child as much as I can—and this is another good opportunity to help my class to focus on welcoming newcomers to our classroom community.” Diana followed up on those words with action.

When the child arrived, she greeted him warmly and held his hand while walking him to the classroom and introduced him with enthusiasm to other teachers standing in the hall. For the next few weeks, while she made every effort to support the child’s academic and emotional progress, Diana also made a point of sharing the child’s successful development with the principal and her colleagues. When negative comments such as “I don’t know why we have to get kids like that in this school” were made, Diana’s response was consistently positive: “I really like this child and I am so glad to have him in my class.” She accepts the fact that she sometimes receives negative responses to her positive comments; she sees value in her intentions and efforts regardless of a resistant or unkind response. She also seeks to implement progressive educational strategies in her classroom that strengthen the children most at risk of being weakened by institutional bias. Through her own progressive actions, Diana models inclusiveness and acceptance of differences for her colleagues and for all the children in her classroom.

Say That the River Turns

The challenges faced by progressive teachers must be recognized; advocacy and activism for children can be difficult. This seems to be particularly true today, when teachers are faced with the significant social and economic problems that confront their students and their students’ families as well as with constant public criticism. Many of those who find fault with public school teachers simply do not understand the incredibly complex social context in which those teachers work daily.

Government leaders and policy makers who criticize teachers may only *read* about those who live in poverty in the United States. Many teachers, however, conduct their professional lives in close daily relationship with children whose impoverished life circumstances have deeply troubling ramifications. Poverty constitutes human suffering (Noguera, 2008) that can manifest itself in exhaustion, fear, hunger, emotional distress, and lack of access to basic health-related services. We expect teachers to be compassionate and fair in a society that often seems to be neither. Quite a few critics engage in the hypocrisy of blaming teachers alone for low standardized test scores while conveniently ignoring the significant implications of widespread poverty and grossly underfunded public schools (Apple, 2009).

My former student Ajani, for example, is now teaching in a school serving children living in a high-poverty rural community. He recently told me about a child in his class who was in agony with a toothache for a number of days; the child sometimes wept uncontrollably and continually pressed his hands into his face. Ajani was troubled by the daily suffering of this child—how could he not be? The children in the class were concerned as well; they tried to comfort and help their friend. Ajani advocated with the school nurse, the guidance counselor, and the principal to help him seek relief and dental care for the child. Unfortunately, in spite of everyone’s intervention, the suffering child had to wait a few days for an itinerant dentist—the only one willing to serve patients on Medicaid—to return to the community.

In spite of this difficult situation, Ajani continued to teach daily with compassion and enthusiasm. His resilience and commitment to social justice sustained him as he taught, tried to support the child in pain, and worked to engage the children in productive learning experiences while he modeled the importance of helping and caring about others.

Progressive public school educators like Ajani, faced with seemingly intractable social problems, nonetheless remain dauntless; they “say that the River turns” with words and actions that reflect their powerful intentions to enact social justice every day. No matter how serious the problems may be, progressive educators acknowledge that something can always be done. Their commitment to social justice inspires their coherent intellectual approach to education—one that acknowledges but does not give in to the difficult social and political problems that deeply affect teaching, learning, and schooling (Cochran-Smith, 2010).

Progressivism Today

It is the narrative of the promise of democracy, deeply woven into multiple layers of the Progressive Era (Popkewitz, 2011) that is closely linked to social justice commitments of teachers today. Such a focus, then and now, is on the assurance (however elusive) of equal respect and equal opportunity in a society characterized by the absence of class distinctions (Reese, 2013). Democracy is always a complex and sometimes contradictory undertaking; proponents of progressivism and social justice alike experience the tensions and conflicts inherent in balancing individual rights with responsibilities to serve the common good. Teachers with progressive social justice commitments today might mirror the belief of pioneer social worker Jane Addams (as cited in Cremin, 1959, p. 22) that “good must be extended to all of society before it can be held secure by any one person or any one class.”

Progressivism is still at the heart of classrooms where teachers seek the multifaceted positive growth of every child in the context of her or his wholeness of identity and experience. Preparation for citizenship in a democratic society continues to be central to children’s intellectual and social development; the school must support children in forming an understanding of their place in fair and just communities (Reese, 2013). Schools and teachers therefore play an important role in transforming systemic oppression into systemic equality (James, 2010). It is the construction of fair and equitable school environments, combined with powerful modeling by progressive teachers, which can give children in even the most impoverished circumstances hope in the possibilities of the future (Weiler, 2004).

An Example in the Classroom

How might progressive teachers enact such lofty progressive goals in their classrooms? I return now to Diana and her new student from the negatively viewed halfway house. Diana knew full well that she would have serious democracy-building work to do with her class after she welcomed the new student to their classroom. Several teachers and school parents had previously complained to the superintendent about enrolling children from the halfway house, and Diana suspected that some of her students were aware of this.

She realized that her progressive commitments to social justice in this situation were inherently political as well as educational; she considered it her responsibility to use spaces of freedom in her classroom to model inclusive respect and to teach principles of good citizenship related to the larger goals of democratic social reforms (Weiler, 2004). Although she had always worked hard to create a classroom community where fairness was valued, Diana anticipated some potential social challenges with the inclusion of her new student and planned to confront them in positive and interesting ways.

When she introduced the new student to her class, Diana told the children that it was a wonderful day to welcome a new friend because they were all going to plant seeds in a new window box for their classroom. She explained that all the seeds depended for their care and growth on everyone working together for the next few weeks. Each seed, just like each child in the class, was different—but each one needed good cooperative friends to help it grow. Her new student was placed in one of the groups of “gardening friends” that would report daily on the progress of the seeds. Diana observed the social interactions of her class carefully over the next few days and facilitated inclusiveness whenever possible.

One day, she overheard a child say something to a classmate about “that kid from the prison house” during the class’s free time. Diana walked over to join in that conversation, asking the two children about their activity. As they talked, Diana reinforced her commitment as a teacher to a wonderful classroom community where all friends were welcomed. Later in the day, she redesigned a music activity so each child would partner at some time with all the others in movement. She read several children’s books to the class that focused on dimensions of friendship and inclusion in the context of human difference.

Diana was sad when the child suddenly moved to a different state a few months later, but she felt that she, her students, and the child had experienced positive growth in the context of a progressive and social justice approach to their time together in her classroom. Much of what she did might seem simply like good teaching, but in fact there were many other choices Diana might have made that could have fostered less inclusion and possibly greater reinforcement of unfriendly attitudes toward the child. For example, she might have just ignored the negative comment that she overheard or commented in the teachers’ room that she felt that the presence of the child was creating a disruption in the social life of her classroom. She could have acted on deficit-based beliefs that caused her to focus more on the child’s challenges than on his strengths. It was Diana’s well-established intentions that led her to take advantage of every opportunity to reinforce progressive principles of fairness and equal acceptance and opportunity in her classroom.

The Progressive Social Justice Stance

All teachers have a stance; it is important that they know what it is and, if necessary, strengthen it with democratic intentions. Progressive public school educators should thus make the sociopolitical natures of their schools apparent, and deliberate “about strategies to negotiate on behalf of students who are marginalized” (Boutte & Jackson, 2014, p. 625). Not unlike the alienated radicals of the progressive movement in the 1920s, educators who accept their personal responsibility to stand up for equality and social justice in school and society may at times find themselves discredited by some in power or some who simply disagree with their beliefs (Weiler, 2004). Thus it is empowering for them to embrace Freire’s transformational concept of *conscientização*, through which progressive educators are called upon to develop a “process of social introspection and self-reflectivity” (Torres, 2008, p. 8) that creates the personal space for them to have the courage and resilience to persist in their commitments. Essential to teacher reflectivity is the ability to question one’s own actions as

well as those of others, and “to develop a permanent ethical attitude of epistemological and ethical self-vigilance” (Torres, 2008, p. 8).

It is important to remember that ethics require us to pose questions of ourselves in situations where both right and wrong can be done (Fennimore, 2014). Self-righteousness has no place in progressive social justice commitments; personal humility and vigilance of ethical thought and action is essential. Progressivism, like democracy itself, represents a form of social and personal struggle. For dedicated educators, this struggle can also be characterized as a hopeful and powerful infusion of fairness and justice into the lives of all children served in the public schools.

An Example of Progressivism in the Classroom

How might the embodiment of historical progressivism look in a classroom today? I return to Ajani, whose student had to wait so long for the dental care he needed so badly. That experience made Ajani more aware of the shortage of medical resources for those experiencing economic poverty in his school community. He spoke to his principal and some of his colleagues about the situation, but he was told that other than making referrals to social services, nothing more could be done. This bothered Ajani, and he kept thinking about what might be an ethical response to the situation. Although he realized that there was no immediate way that he personally could alleviate the shortage of medical services in the community, he felt that it would be wrong to let things go at that. He decided to turn his concern into preparing his students to be citizens whose voices could serve the common good in their present and future community.

Linking a social studies lesson on government and citizenship with an English language arts lesson on letter writing, Ajani first talked with his students about the responsibility of all the people in a community to help one another. He said, “When we think about everyone in our community, we create nicer and safer places in which we all can live.” He engaged his students in a discussion about ways in which they could help their school community; the students focused on being nice to people in the lunchroom and not pushing. They started a campaign and hung posters about it on their bulletin board in the hallway. Later, Ajani extended the lesson into thinking about the larger community and what might make things better there; after discussing the need for more help for people who were sick, his students all wrote letters to the mayor, suggesting that more medical services be provided in the community. The children were excited when the mayor wrote back to them; she indicated that she had been looking into federal funding for a community center for just that purpose.

In the teachers' room, Ajani shared the work his students had done and the letter from the mayor. A few of his colleagues talked with him about ways to infuse concern about the school and surrounding community into their own classrooms. Although of course those outcomes were not major solutions to a serious problem, they were nonetheless small steps forward that started with intentions that led to actions that helped progressive teachers and students alike to see themselves as important actors in a world that needed their caring, their kindness, and their active concern for the common good.

Rewriting the Sentences!

“Some of the children in this school are placed at risk by poverty, but all the children who attend this school are respected and encouraged to reach for success.”

“We are not always able to engage families as much as we hope to, but we continually reach out to support them in their concern about their children’s educational well-being.”

“We are aware of some of the research and writing that predicts inevitable cumulative school failure in children who are poor, but we refuse to allow it to dampen our enthusiastic encouragement of every child.”

“We do have some children who struggle with difficulties in this school, but we continue to employ every possible strategy to help them make continual progress.”

For committed progressive public school educators, advocacy for children is the protective tent that covers their enthusiastic efforts on behalf of their students (Fennimore, 2014). These remarkable teachers acknowledge that their work is not easy and know that their ethical and civil social justice intentions rarely bring about immediate change. They are nonetheless infusing a resilient energy into their schools and classrooms; for their students as well as their colleagues, they are powerful role models of resistance to injustice. In their own way and their own time, progressive public school educators do indeed *say that the River turns*, and they do *turn the River* toward justice, equality, democracy, and the common good.

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