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Introduction: Steady Work and "Noise Level Zero"

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INTRODUCTION

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Tom Roderick and John Wolfe describe conditions in schools that test our belief in public education as a special space where American society holds fast to its promise to vanquish inequity, to assure equal opportunity, and to nurture a kinder, more just citizenry. Their narratives put a face on suffering and indignity. As expressions of a “healthy outrage” (Giroux, p. 155), they disturb, unsettle.

But there is more.

We are mindful throughout these two narratives that convictions and commitments emerge from a critical analysis of how breaches of fairness, care, and respect breed in schools. Roderick and Wolfe have a longstanding stake in what they write about. Both choose to respond to, *to repair*, such breaches through their work as educators, to make good on broken promises.

Their stories remind us that progressive thinking and practice are not artifacts from a nostalgic past. Rather, they suggest an understanding of progressive education, both sensitive and alert to the historical moment. They suggest an understanding of “progressive” that develops and enfolds in the midst of, and in response to, lived experience. They ask educators to consider their work as a passionate encounter with what they find unacceptable and incomplete; work nourished by values persistently, stubbornly attentive to enriching and reinvigorating democratic culture.

As textured accounts—at once personal, pedagogical, and political—neither Roderick nor Wolfe offers us blueprints for change. There are no master plans embodied in their respective narratives that provide the reader with an easy, simple way to proceed. But each tale moves along a moral axis; each author situates himself—and his work—in a landscape where concerns about fairness, mutual respect, and care help to shape understanding and guide action. The power of such stories about schooling lies in the hope that they might move us to take a fresh look at our own response to what needs to, and can, be done. Each might conjure possibilities, openings; perhaps, even inspire.