

Social Injustice: The Vital Ingredient for a "Democratic" Curriculum

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Introduction

When I began my interest in democratic curriculum it was not the result of much of the current writing that has been done by such individuals as Giroux, Aronowitz, Engle, McClaren, and McNeil or the historical works of Dewey. Instead it is the result of research I started several years ago about McKinley High School in Honolulu, Hawaii. It was then that I began to appreciate how a truly democratic curriculum could evolve—and as I read current theories, I would find myself saying, "McKinley students did that." However, one element seems to stand out as more essential than the rest . . . and that was the concept of social injustice—a component which not only affects students but one of which students are extremely aware and to which they are sensitive. More importantly, it is a part of curriculum which interests them—which springs from their experiences. So I needed to ask myself, so exactly what is social justice and how is it implemented?

Definition

Justice is the quality of rendering what is due or merited. It implies conformity to and administration of the law through the strict rendering of statutes which aim to achieve equal treatment to members of a group. The study of justice has a positive focus and tends to emphasize citizenship education, with its study of documents, legal structures, institutions, and the rights of individuals to participate in the democratic process, especially the right to vote. Often caught up in altruistic patriotism with emphasis on heroes and events, justice serves the cause of cultural transmission, nationalism, and social control. The good citizen is the obedient individual who demonstrates knowledge of the dominant culture and can imitate values endorsed by the formal curriculum. Textbooks reinforce and sustain that knowledge.

Injustice, on the other hand, is an act that inflicts undue hardship, or violation of fair play or equal treatment. Such an act may inflict a positive hurt or it may deny to some a privilege accorded to others. In fact, either the act itself or its consequences could be regarded as reprehensible. Injus-

tice focuses on the reality outside of the textbooks and the classroom. It draws from the real experiences of the community, developing individuals who have the ability to question controversial issues in society. Citizens must learn to question their own values, resolve inequities among citizens, and keep open the dialogue which allows all of its members to participate in the process of improving society. Although it may appear to be merely a negative image of the concept of justice, the focus, especially as it relates to school curricula, is notably different.

Democratic Curriculum

The curricular framework in a democracy must move away from the delivery of facts taken as self-evident truths toward a more open-ended, problem-centered structure. It must recognize the historical development of social issues and nurture the skills needed to broaden opportunities for individuals within society. Justice depends on maintaining a delicate balance—to provide for the needs of society without diminishing the opportunities for all its members. Shirley Engle (1988)

writes, "We do not see democracy as a way of life that can be transmitted unthinkingly to students. Democracy is learned instead as it is questioned, thought about, criticized, and practiced, and as improvements in its workings are achieved" (p. 127). In a society, whose citizens strive to have voice and control of the conditions under which they live, the administration of justice by those who govern has received a dominant role. It is resistance to the status quo that heeds the cries of injustice from the voices for whom democracy has failed. The democratic citizen's concern for change and righteousness serves the call of justice when it *broadens* individuals' experiences to *equalize* the uneven distribution of power in its social institutions.

United States Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts stated: "The fundamental test of society is how it treats the least powerful among us" (Kennedy, 1992). Since the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the United States has praised the importance of equality as the foundation of American society. Christopher Jencks, however, has observed:

Almost nobody really wants to make America an egalitarian society. Ours is a competitive society, in which some people do extremely well and others do equally badly, and most people are willing to keep it that way. For as long as anyone can remember, for example, the richest fifth of the population has earned ten times as much as the poorest fifth. The ability to influence political and personal events is probably even less equally distributed (Rich, 1992, p. 373).

It is the respect for an individual's dignity and protection by the state, his/her right to dissent from the group, to participate in decisions within society as a whole, to have dependable knowledge, and the opportunity to use that knowledge for change and improvement which form the foundation of a democratic society, and the heart of democratic curriculum. Injustice must be viewed as a vital ingredient in democratic curriculum (Engle & Ochoa, 1988).

Educators often unconsciously maintain the status quo fostering an illusion of reform, while administration often shapes the school's organization (McNeil, 1986). Linda McNeil (1986) found schools to be characterized by flattened content, ritualistic teaching, and disengaged students. Powerlessness results in "defensive" teaching strategies that include:

- Fragmentation of curriculum in which bits of knowledge are unrelated to one another;
- Mystification which maintains the authority of teacher's role over content matter;
- Omission of controversial and complex topics; and
- Defensive simplification or oversimplification of work to reduce expectations and effort of students.

Such strategies only serve to sanitize controversy and disengage students from meaningful, real life work.

It is no surprise to educators that school culture may conflict with the student's home culture. Current educational research shows that the failure to engage students in learning which is related to their lives can create school lives much different, if not at polar opposites, to their home lives. If schools fail to address issues of poverty, homelessness, gangs, drugs, police brutality, and language discrimination, students will see school as unrelated and

sometimes ignorant of the problems of their world.

Language is a reflection of one's community. Students whose home language is different than the official language of the school usually function from different cultural frames. School perpetuates a culture of domination and resistance where cultural mismatch between home and school combined with broader societal factors, result in linguistic confusion, poor self-concept, and academic failure in schools. Disavowing students' knowledge and limiting their learning power through limiting their first language is an injustice in itself. However, just as important as supporting native language while encouraging the learning of their academic language in an active, relevant, and realistic way is engaging students in the discussion of the social, economic and political structures which serve to marginalize their schooling and their lives in the community. Contemporary research found that teachers in effective classrooms of Latino students encourage students to use personal experiences to make sense of their school experiences. Topics that may be considered controversial because they revolve around community issues are commonplace in these classrooms and used to expand the students' literacy (Moll, 1988).

Such is not the case in most schools. In fact, most schools are guilty of what Michelle Fine (1987) refers to as silencing—a process of institutional policies and procedures which obscure the very social, economic, and experiential conditions of students' lives. Silencing expels written or verbal expression regarding these conditions, and constitutes the process by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited.

According to Fine, the process diverts critique away from the economic, social, and educational institutions which organize class, race, and gender hierarchies.

The reason for silencing is that the fear of naming—or giving critical conversation to inequities, especially regarding imbalance of power—can activate curiosity or rebellion. Fine's study describes how dangerous topics are expelled from the curriculum—especially topics regarding the conditions contributing to social class, racial, ethnic, and gender divisions. "To not name, is to systematically alienate, cut off from home, from heritage, and from lived experience, and ultimately to sever from their educational process" (Fine, 1987, p. 157). When Michelle Fine asked a teacher why racism was not discussed in school, she was informed that "it would demoralize students, they need to feel positive and optimistic—like they have a chance. Racism is just an excuse they use not to try harder" (Fine, 1987, p. 157).

Schools often radically sever the curriculum from the realities of students' lives, and as teachers we condemn students to institutionally imposed silence. Instead, their voices should be woven into the curricular fabric. Social injustice cannot be hidden behind progress reports and test scores. Raising consciousness or clarifying and/or changing values is not the way to solve the major problems facing society. Social injustice cannot be peripheral to the educational process—it must be central. Through curriculum the world can be confronted—and those inequities in the system can be utilized to criticize the problems and structure of one's own society. One must move from seeing one's own concerns as the center of the world and strive to see another point of view. The ability to stand back and criticize one's institu-

tions and values in order to make room for someone else's is essential to democracy.

Change in situations of poverty, oppression, and moral destruction are dependent upon critical consciousness, but more importantly a change in the social structure. Social structures are rarely discussed in schools whose main concern is preservation of the status quo. To expose injustice and contradictions makes people feel uncomfortable. It is difficult to expose undemocratic realities in a society that boasts about its democratic ideals. People often tend to treat structures as part of the nature of things, the consequences of bureaucracy, and often as given or unchangeable. If education is to demonstrate a commitment to justice, it must get a better understanding of how systems function in society. It must develop skills, strategies, and actions for social change.

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Social analysis is a key skill in studying the problem of justice. According to Holland and Herriot (1980), schools must move from describing and identifying problems of injustice in our society to understanding the decision-making process. Such questions must be addressed as: Who makes decisions, what are the consequences of them, who pays the price, what key factors influenced the decisions, and is the decision out of character with the institu-

tion? Social analysis also asks: What is the history of these decisions, what is the cumulative effect, how did the person or institution acquire the power to make the decisions, what is the relationship between the concentration of power in the various sectors such as economic, political, educational, etc.? What patterns emerge? What alliances have formed? What limits exist? How are norms and values reflected in the organization, policies, and decisions (Holland & Herriot, 1980)?

Sometimes democracy seems ill-defined or opaque. If as Senator Kennedy said, "the things that bind us as one people are stronger than what divides us," then as democratic citizens strive to celebrate diversity, they must also work to identify those elements which destroy our harmony. Just as society is concerned with distribution of power, status and wealth, so must education focus on these issues. It is the cultural diversity of our immediate and global society which creates problems of imbalance among those groups striving for political and social empowerment. The connection between rights and responsibilities is unmistakable. Students must explore the issues of social justice and develop an awareness of injustice. As Viktor Frankl wrote: "I recommend that the Statue of Liberty on the East Coast, be supplemented by a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast" (Frankl, 1984, p. 156). Teachers must encourage and welcome the discussion. Social justice cannot be implemented without first identifying the injustices which permeate society. A student recently wrote in her class philosophy journal:

Until now, I didn't realize the political aspect of teaching. I always thought that a teacher had more of

an influence on what you know than on what you do. But, if a teacher can challenge you to think in new ways, and to have confidence in your own ideals, then that teacher has given you the courage to act to change your world.

Finally, this leads me to think about my own generation. We have been called the apathetic generation, because we haven't really worked or even noticed a need for change in our world. So, what does this say about what has been taught in the schools during our lifetime? (Chinski, 1992)

She has hit on a very key issue. At the same time that we criticize students for failure to be committed, or concerned, we fail to discuss the very issues which can affect them. Disengaged students may find it difficult to engage in a political process for which they lack knowledge and feel powerless. In order for citizens to protect and maintain the challenges of democracy, they must understand the connection between the actions of government and the actions of its citizens.

The School as an Agent of Democratic Change: McKinley High School, Honolulu, Hawaii

School is an ideal environment for tackling some of the very real and important issues of justice. Students beginning in the middle grades are very conscious of "fairness." However, they become more concerned about what is unfair. For this reason social in-

justice as it appears in their lives or those of their classmates can be a vital hotbed of ideas and discussion. This sense of justice needs to have an opportunity to be channeled appropriately or "the result can be anger, resentment, alienation from schooling, or simply dropping out physically or psychologically" (Nieto, 1992, p. 216). Whether debating an issue, developing a community newspaper, initiating collaborative programs between the school and the community, or starting a petition, students can realize their individual and collective power for change. Although many of these ideas are receiving increased attention in current curricular trends, some schools have developed a history of success in utilizing social reform as a component of their curriculum.

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McKinley High School in Honolulu, Hawaii has been a multicultural urban high school for most of its 127-year history. After the annexation of the Hawaiian islands as a territory in 1898, McKinley High School continuously grew to serve the needs of the students whose parents were part of the everchanging Oriental populations working the plantations. Instead of an antiseptic curriculum designed solely to develop patriotism and understanding of the "great American heroes," McKinley High School instituted a community-based

core curriculum. The daily program of English, Social Studies, and a study hall were synthesized into a unit grounded in actual student and community problems. With a curriculum developed through the assistance of parents, neighbors, teachers, and students, identifying critical problems of local, national, and international significance, young people began to connect their school experiences with the concerns of vital problems actually faced in their communities and their relationship to people throughout the world. They focused on issues of social injustice, especially as it surfaced among ethnic groups throughout the Hawaiian territories.

Whether a concern regarding the importance of the appropriate use of language in a linguistically diverse society, or the use of a common language to discriminate against public school attendance in English Standard Schools, problems of social inequity or injustice were addressed as an ongoing part of the school curriculum. Problems changed as the needs of the students and the community changed. Democratic citizenship became the most valuable achievement of school life.

Only two years after the implementation of the Core Studies, McKinley High School was receiving national attention. "Without a doubt there is as complete democracy in the student group of McKinley High School as there is in any high school in the world. . . ." (Bolton & Cary, 1931, p. 43). If McKinley had become a laboratory school for citizenship, it is because it was a model for democratic process. The means by which McKinley students developed democratic responsibility was through a citizenship laboratory manifested through its school government, an organization based on distributed and shared

responsibility. The students carried out a large part of the activities of the school, working out problems, consulting with advisors, and making plans to implement goals they had set through many ongoing projects.

Students participated in studies of such community problems as rat control, traffic, fire prevention, and community chest. As a result the school received a steady flow of requests from local organizations and agencies for student assistance in all sorts of enterprises. In addition, there was a continuous stream of local persons coming to the school, to present a variety of matters to study groups and to participate in discussions. During legislative sessions and activities of the local board of supervisors, classes followed deliberations and developments with great interest. There was a continuous study of local and territorial problems (Cary, 1939).

Student attendance at the National Association of Student Councils conference prepared McKinley students to become a part of the large movements underway on the mainland. Such experiences helped to break down the separation between Hawaii and the mainland and helped demonstrate that the young people in Hawaii were 100 percent loyal American citizens (February 21, 1941, *The Daily Pinion*, p. 4).

One of the key means of developing the necessary skills for democratic thinking at McKinley High School was communication through the student forum and the school newspaper, *The Daily Pinion*. The student forum was an open discussion of problems of the school, community, and territory; *The Daily Pinion* was the voice of McKinley High School government. Both were meant to help students build awareness of real life issues and clarify their own

thoughts regarding them. More importantly, McKinley High School did not attempt to avoid sensitive issues.

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In October, 1937, students representing the core studies classes presented a forum on the subject of "Hawaii and Statehood" for a visiting congressional commission studying the same problem. The subject was particularly difficult to handle at a time when political relations among countries bordering on the Pacific Ocean were complicated by the fact that a majority of McKinley High School students were of Japanese ancestry, and the question of loyalty seemed to loom large in the thinking of mainlanders concerned about war in the Pacific. Nevertheless, students handled this and related matters with insight and fearlessness. The speeches of the young people so impressed the visiting Congressmen that they were included in the report of the commission (Cary, 1939).

After war broke out in Europe and Asia, an issue of special concern in Hawaii was the question of Japanese loyalty, a situation further complicated by the complex process of expatriation. Expatriation refers to a process by which American citizens of Japanese ancestry who had dual citizenship, would petition the Japanese government to denounce their Japanese citizenship. The complexity of the process resulted in the dual citizenship status which during war time increased questions regarding loyalty.

The expatriation issue resulted in a petition sponsored by the Hawaiian Civic Association, supported by both Japanese and non-Japanese McKinley High School students. The territory-wide drive for a simpler method of expatriation was the outgrowth of an effort started by McKinley High School which effected much of the territorial population. The expatriation petition required signatures of almost every citizen of Japanese ancestry in Hawaii. Since only citizens of Japanese ancestry were eligible to sign the petition, McKinley High School circulated a second, supporting petition for citizens of other ancestries. The following letter to support a simpler expatriation process in McKinley's daily newspaper was indicative of efforts to build community understanding:

McKinley students and their parents are no doubt aware of the movement, sponsored by the Japanese Civic Association to simplify the expatriation process. A petition is being sent to our Secretary of State, the Honorable Cordell Hull, requesting that he take this matter up with the Japanese Government. You are familiar with this petition.

It seems to me that all of us should encourage this movement. We all belong to a common community. Just now, certain of our neighbors are embarrassed because of this "dual-citizenship" situation. Their embarrassment and insecurity hurts all of us. Therefore, I am urging all of our students of Japanese ancestry to sign this petition (November 18, 1940, *The Daily Pinion*, p. 1).

A deepening international crisis threatened Hawaii and the United States, while feelings of insecurity caused people to become suspicious of all Japanese. Students at McKinley High School continued to increase solidarity against developing opposition, as their writing focused on how intergroup rivalry and class conflicts affected the current status of Japanese. The school was urged to develop a committee which might deal with such matters as discrimination against Japanese at Pearl Harbor, stories proposing to reveal the disloyalty of all Japanese, cost of living and unfair "price" raising, housing, the food situation, juvenile delinquency, detection of totalitarian propaganda, and the like. And this committee should take the leadership locally, in making it clear that we Americans (including patriotic Japanese) are not opposing the Japanese people, as such, but rather a power-mad group of militarists that are out to conquer the world for themselves. The important thing is to take positive steps now toward building a spirit of unity among all of our people (March 3, 1941, *The Daily Pinion*, p. 1).

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States was responsible for one of the most immoral and unnecessary events of the

war—the internment of the American Japanese on the mainland. In spite of the high population of Japanese in Hawaii and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, there was no mass evacuation of people of Japanese descent in the Hawaiian islands. Citizens of the Hawaiian territory fought to protect the rights of the Japanese in the islands, and almost 10,000 volunteered for the armed forces. In spite of the heavy Japanese population only 1,000 were interned in "relocation" camps from Hawaii compared to 120,000 on the west coast. What became a social injustice on the mainland became a conflict to be resolved in Hawaii.

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After the war, the National Education Association came forward with a plea for statehood (Givens, 1948). It appeared, however, that the greatest obstacle standing in the way of statehood for Hawaii was the fact that its population was predominantly non-Caucasian (Cary, 1948). The injustice of racism again had raised its ugly head. To deal with this problem, McKinley High School students made a motion picture (complete with color and sound) of their activities to be shown to schools and other groups in the states entitled *McKinley in Action*. The students themselves decided which scenes about the school would be significant. They prepared the sets and wrote the commentary. The

McKinley student body invested approximately \$3,000 in this project. In addition to the original film, fifteen copies were made in order that it could be shown to schools and community groups throughout the United States. McKinley High School students saw Hawaiian citizens as politically conscious and alert; nearly eighty per cent of registered voters voted in the general elections. Their film was one more effort to encourage a more active study of community, national, and world problems among adults. Denial of statehood to a territory that was such an integral part of the American economy, and politics was as grave an injustice as many Hawaiians could imagine.

A Lesson for Modern Curriculum

McKinley High School teachers serve as an example to modern educators. At a time when democracy is breaking the world into a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces have yet to fall in place, the role of empowered citizens becomes crucial. Empowerment sounds risky to the status quo, but it is vital to any educational system that endorses a philosophy of personal growth and the development of critical learners. The world picture has changed from a cartographer's still map to a motion picture in which the citizens of the world have become the directors. Borders often no longer exist except on paper, and the responsibility for global citizenship becomes greater. In such a world, education gains greater significance.

As public education in the United States has focused on the challenge of social issues, such phrases as celebration of culture and affirming diversity have befallen a system adjusting to increasing concerns regarding mul-

multicultural education. McKinley High School did not serve as a "cooling tank" for adolescents in Hawaii. Instead it was a catalyst for democratic growth. It has a unique place in educational history. For many years it served as the largest public high school in the Hawaiian territory. Not only did its population closely resemble the multicultural mixture of the islands as a whole, but school curriculum historically evolved from the voices of its students. For decades a unique core curriculum, with its student government system, a daily newspaper, school forums, and school community partnerships formed the participatory process from which student democracy evolved into active civic participation. The culture of the school had a uniqueness which became an important aspect of the adult community—the bridge from secondary schooling to adulthood was a natural

one. Life after high school was a mere continuation of the habits of the heart and mind which had incubated earlier.

Conclusion

Social injustice and inequity are receiving more attention from curriculum planners. Some schools are changing curricula to require direct work with the urban poor. An academic course in social justice may require concurrent social action to serve as a reflection component. Real life encounters with people in need make the theories of poverty seem abstract and meaningless. Action must become the most important outcome of explorations into controversial issues, while students must learn to do something about what they value. A democracy cannot afford to have citizens ignore the problems of which they

are aware. According to Simon and Harmin (1965) "Merely to learn about controversial issues is to play on the fringes of reality. The step into reality—and toward wisdom—comes when we encourage students to involve themselves in the resolution of issues" (Simon & Harmin, 1965, p. 35). Will such advances serve basic human needs and bridge the worlds of the "haves" and the "have nots?" Or will choices be guided by scientific, economic, or political gains? Schools, however, must serve to eliminate inequalities. The subject matter of schooling in a democracy must be society—not as our constitutions provide its framework for potential, but with muscle, blood, and skin—exposing our handicaps and our scars. Our goal must be that all people in a democratic society are "equal in life as in law" (Kennedy, 1992).

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