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Delving into the World Within and Beyond the Classroom Door: Lessons About Inequality and Opportunity

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Table of Contents

Teaching Social Issues: Our Pedagogical Creeds

edited by Samuel Totten

PART ONE -- THE IMPERATIVE

1. The Imperative to Incorporate a Study of Social Issues into the School Curriculum -- Samuel Totten
2. The Social Issues Education Imperative -- William G. Wraga
3. Roots, Branches, and Shoots -- Margaret Smith Crocco
4. A Creed for the Non-Religious: Intellectual Freedom -- Jack Nelson
5. Opening Up to Inquiry -- Jack Zevin

PART TWO: UNDERPINNING DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

6. The Challenge of Teaching About and For Democracy when Democracy is so Troubled -- Diana E. Hess
7. Imagining and Constructing Social Democracy: An Educator's Creed -- William R. Fernekes
8. Preparing Effective Citizens via an Issues Centered Approach -- Mark A. Previte
9. From Controversy to Decisionmaking: The Heart of Social Issues Instruction -- William B. Russell III

PART THREE: CRITICAL STUDIES

10. "Prepare to Be on Center Stage": A Critical, Issues-Centered Approach to Teaching for Social Understanding -- Ronald W. Evans

11. Teaching to Change the World -- Carlos Alberto Torres
12. Teaching for Change: Social Education and Critical Knowledge of Everyday Life – E. Wayne Ross
13. Knowledge, Education and Power: A Social Justice Pedagogical Creed -- Charlene Johnson-Carter
14. My Pedagogic Creed: From Voicing to Naming to Re-humanization -- Miguel Zavala
15. My Pedagogical Creed: Positionality, Recognition, and Dialogue in Democratic Education -- Steven P. Camicia

PART FOUR – MOVING FROM THE CLASSROOM INTO THE WORLD

18. My Pedagogical Creed: Searching for Understanding, Finding the Peacemakers -- Elizabeth Yeager Washington
19. Delving into the World within and Beyond the Classroom Door: Lessons About Inequality and Opportunity – Chara Haeussler Bohan
20. Questioning and Blurring Boundaries in a Context of Change: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Education -- Barbara Solomon Spector
21. Developing Global Consciousness -- Merry M. Merryfield
22. Big History as Core Curriculum -- Cynthia Brown
23. My Pedagogical Creed: The Centrality of Students and Their Appreciation and Understanding of Social Issues -- Robert E. Yage

Appendix

My Pedagogic Creed (*The School Journal*, Volume LIV, Number 3, January 16, 1897), pages 77-80.

Delving into the World Within and Beyond the Classroom Door: Lessons About Inequality
and Opportunity

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My Pedagogic Creed: Teaching and Learning about Social Issues

I was handed my 8th grade diploma from my father, who was the board of education president in our small New Jersey town, Florham Park. The town was so tiny it did not have its own high school. My father had served on the local school board during my time in grade school and continued in this role for several more years while my younger siblings attended the schools, as well. A decade earlier, my mother proudly served as the same town's first librarian. Our family summer vacations were spent driving along the East coast in our Chrysler station wagon visiting museums, battlefields, and other historic sites. Through these experiences, I learned, at a very young age, about the importance of social issues, education, civic involvement, and history. My father's German immigrant family had come to New York in the 1890's and enjoyed modest financial success. My father attributed their achievement to the opportunities afforded by the high quality of public education in America. He gave back to his country by serving in several local public official roles, including three terms on the local board of education.

My first name, "Chara" derives from ancient Greek "Chi Alpha Rho Alpha – XAPA" and means "Joy." My mother, a first-generation college graduate, studied sociology and classics at Wellesley, and gave her two daughters ancient Greek names, as she very much enjoyed studying world languages and cultures. She had dated a man from India during college, but her parents were of English origin and neither family allowed them to visit each other in their homes. Profoundly affected by the sting of this experience, my mother determined her own children would learn to welcome people from all over the globe. In the 1970s, when world travel was not routine, my family hosted exchange students from Germany, France, and England; we sponsored a Laotian refugee family as part of a church outreach; we cooked Indian and Chinese food. My disapproving grandmother, who had moved into our house in 1976, once remarked that our home was "quite a United Nations."

Encouraged to pursue the best high school educational experiences possible, I attended Choate Rosemary Hall, a boarding school in Wallingford, CT. My freshman year roommate, Niece Byrd, an African American woman, hailed from nearby Waterbury, CT. Living with Niece enabled me to witness first-hand the vast American racial and economic divide. At Choate, the black students routinely ate dinner together at one table, although the dining room was open to all students who could sit wherever they preferred. *De facto* segregation persisted even when students shared living quarters. In another memorable experience, at the beginning of winter vacation, we drove a friend of Niece's home, but embarrassed by her living conditions, this friend would not allow us to bring her to the front door of her Harlem apartment. Despite these obvious experiences of economic, social, and racial stratification, Choate had a significant international population, and encouraged the study of world cultures and languages; I participated in a study abroad program in France my junior year, thus becoming the first in my family to travel outside of the U.S. since our arrival at Ellis Island. During high school, I also participated in the cross-country and track teams. These athletic teams were the most racially

diverse in the school. On these teams, students of varied backgrounds worked toward a common goal. Later in my career, I would coach cross-country and track.

Because of these formative educational experiences, I became keenly interested in issues of history, race, and culture. With Mr. Stewart's guidance, I began to study these topics in my American history class, and wrote my first term paper on *Brown v. Board of Education*. I wanted to understand why America, the land my father cherished as a place of opportunity, had not offered students like Niece an equal grade school education. Initially, she struggled academically, as the public schools in working class Waterbury had not prepared her for its advanced curriculum. Living with Niece led me to wonder about constructs of race in American life. Returning to school after summer vacation, ironically, my tanned skin was darker than Niece's café au lait colored skin. This phenomenon caused me to wonder what made Niece black and me white? Why did we have such divergent preparation in our public elementary and middle schools? Mr. Stewart encouraged me to study these issues in college. I followed his advice and focused on learning history and government at Cornell University. Under the guidance of Professor Richard Polenberg, I wrote an honors thesis on Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson. Professor Polenberg taught me how to conduct original archival historical research and carefully edited my immature writing. Clearly, I benefitted from having intelligent, supportive, and dedicated teachers. With the support of my father and mother, I knew I wanted to give back to society through education.

With such childhood experiences, it came as little surprise to my family that I became a teacher. Studying about social issues and education was certainly in my DNA. Now, as I reflect on my professional work during the past quarter century and articulate my pedagogical creed, I believe I was destined to devote my career to teaching and learning about social issues.

I began my teaching career in New York City in the fall of 1989. While working on an MAT degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, I engaged in pre-service teaching at Brooklyn Technical High School, one of the crown jewels of the New York City public education system. The following year, I started my first full-time teaching position at an elite private school, Horace Mann, that had been started by Nicholas Murray Butler in 1887 as the laboratory school of Teachers College (TC). At these two New York City schools I taught a range of social studies and history courses, and when my spouse's job was transferred to Austin, Texas, I continued as a social studies teacher at William B. Travis High School, a Title I school, with a predominantly low income Hispanic population. Thus, I had a diverse range of teaching experiences -- in different geographical areas, with different student populations, and a range of courses, including but not limited to: Global Issues, U.S. History, European History, World History, U.S. Government, and World Geography. Tellingly, in each and every one of these high schools and courses, I taught about social issues.

Developing the "itch" to learn more (teachers are overgrown students), I began doctoral studies in 1995 at the University of Texas at Austin (UT) in Curriculum and Instruction under the mentorship of Dr. O. L. Davis, Jr. who had been recommended to me by my TC advisor, Mike Whelan. Dr. Davis was an outstanding mentor, and he taught me how to research, write, and guide students. He introduced me to academic publishing, scholars, and conferences. I began my foray into higher education instruction in January 1996 when I was given the opportunity to supervise social studies student teachers. Working with social studies interns and teachers at a variety of schools broadened my education horizons even further.

My understanding and operational definition of social issues further developed from experiences during my doctoral studies in Austin. Dr. Davis provided his students with abundant

opportunities, and I was given the chance to contribute a chapter on Lucy Maynard Salmon in a book that he was editing with Margaret Crocco, then a faculty member at Teachers College. In the introduction to the book, "*Bending the Future to their Will*": *Civic Women, Social Education and Democracy*, Professor Crocco provided a definition of *social education* that has become a cornerstone of my understanding. She wrote, "We use the term *social education* to suggest that education about democracy and citizenship has occurred in a variety of settings beyond the school. We take social education to mean teaching and learning about how individuals construct and live out their understandings of social, political, and economic relations—past and present—and the implications of these understandings for how citizens are educated in a democracy," (1999, 1). Crocco's definition offers a broad understanding of social issues, and fomented my varied but interconnected interests in history, gender, race, and culture. Crocco's work served as the impetus for my awakened understanding; it became the foundation of my journey into teaching and learning about social issues.

After completing my doctoral degree, I taught undergraduate education students at Baylor University and later graduate students in social studies education at Georgia State University (GSU). Located in downtown Atlanta, GSU's urban setting enables the world to be my classroom. Students and faculty come from 150 different nations, and GSU is ranked among the country's most diverse institutions. In Atlanta, the home to Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, social issues are at the forefront of the learning environment. The United Nations is once again part of my domicile. For example, in a doctoral seminar of ten students, my class included people from four continents, who each shared their views of how history has been written and narrated in their homelands. All these experiences, from childhood forward, have strongly shaped my pedagogical beliefs. The practice of teaching, researching, and writing in the field of social education has also informed my educational outlook. In the following narrative, using Dewey's creed as a guide, I discuss my own pedagogical creed as it relates to teaching and learning about social issues. Social concerns have been the focus of my entire professional career. Dewey's creed is organized into five sections; 1) what education is, 2) what school is, 3) the subject matter of education, 4) the nature of method, and 5) the school and social progress. These categories serve to organize my own discussion about teaching and learning social issues.

ARTICLE I: "WHAT EDUCATION IS"

I believe education is the acquisition of life-long learning. Although many theories of learning have been espoused over the years -- such as functionalism, behaviorism, developmentalism, information processing, and constructivism (Schunk, 1996) -- they all share commonalities. At a basic level, all learning theories connote a change in behavior or performance that has resulted from experience (Driscoll, 1994). In the context of teaching and learning about social issues, I believe that the social nature of education cannot be overemphasized. Teaching and learning about social issues involves understanding the world and the humans who live in it. Education is a result of humans learning from one another. Experiences also shape learning, especially with regard to social education. Consider the experience of visiting, or perhaps living in a foreign country, compared to simply reading about the country. The two kinds of learning are vastly different. Educational aims are most often meant to be beneficial, but they can produce unintended harmful results, too. Robert Oppenheimer's experience with the creation of the atomic bomb serves as a keen reminder of the destructive power of knowledge.

Learning takes a variety of forms. Learning involves cognition centered in the brain. Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences first offered in his book *Frames of*

Mind informs my understanding of education as a process of learning. Although Gardner's theory has undergone revision and has received criticism for its subjective nature and lack of empirical evidence, the theory helps to remind teachers about the wide range of human intelligence and the variety of student interests/natural strengths.

Gardner's list of multiple intelligences include logical-mathematical, spatial, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, existential. As an educator, with respect to teaching and learning social issues, I tend to emphasize linguistic and interpersonal learning over other kinds of learning. However, when I focus on teaching about social issues in my classroom, while the world of words and human connections is paramount, I do my utmost to try to nurture students strengths in other areas, be they logical-mathematical, spatial, linguistic, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, existential.

Dewey posited that learning begins at birth (Milson, Bohan, Glanzer, & Null, 2010, p. 362). Humans typically build upon the knowledge of previous generations and learn synchronously or asynchronously from one another. In the context of learning about social issues, human connections are of utmost import. Learning does not always progress forward, and can, of course, regress or be lost. One such example was the vanished ability to read Egyptian hieroglyphs until the 1799 discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Learning about social issues can derive from a variety of sources and experiences, such as apprenticeship, literature, technology, repetition, movement, observation, and can involve use of the five senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, smell. Dewey believed that the child's interests should serve as a starting point for education. I concur, but would add that the child ought to be introduced to new ideas, concepts, skills, activities, environments, cultures, as well, in order to facilitate an educative process. In regard to teaching and learning about social issues, education centers on humans.

ARTICLE II: "WHAT SCHOOL IS"

I believe that in the traditional sense, school is the location where students and teachers gather to learn. School is a structure that the community designates for education. Teachers College professor Lawrence Cremin (1970), however, frequently encouraged his students to think of education in a broader sense, beyond the institution of schooling. He reminded his pupils that learning can take place anywhere in any form. Cremin wanted his students to expand their understanding of education beyond the schoolhouse door, and to think of learning that occurs in a wider range of institutions such as "families, churches, libraries, museums, publishers, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio networks, military organizations, and research institutions" (Cremin, 1970, p. xi). The recent development of online learning has helped revolutionize traditional notions of school, but at its core, school facilitates learning between humans; hence the inherently social nature of education, even if technology serves as the primary, or, only, link between people.

Although education is experienced in an extensive range of institutions, I have devoted my career to the teaching and engaging my students in learning about social issues in formal schools as well as a host of other informal institutions. In formal schooling, I encourage student learning about social issues through several activities that include but are not limited to writing research papers, giving in-class presentations, writing book reviews, participating in professional education conferences, and imagining and creating dinner party conversations among historical figures, leading politicians, educators or other prominent figures. I establish guidelines for each of these different assignments, but allow students freedom of choice with respect to specific topics. I also work in informal educational settings and encourage students to take field trips to

Presidential libraries, archives, local history and art museums, historical monuments, and even work with students to analyze popular media. In particular, I have taken students to the Jimmy Carter and Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential libraries where we view historical artifacts and discuss the lives and careers of these particular presidents. I brought history student to Ellis Island to discuss U.S. immigration. I have also brought students to *Waiting for Superman*, shown clips of Ken Burns' Civil War series, listened to FDR's radio talks, and discussed the role of teachers in popular television shows and movies. In each particular situation, the social issue varies and is related to the context.

In each setting, formal and informal, I work to foster a sense of community among learners. In discussing the origins of European residential colleges in his recent work *College: What is Was, Is, and Should Be*, Andrew Delbanco (2012, 38) notes that the meaning of the Latin term *collegium* is society or community. This idea, of course, complements what Cremin and Crocco said about school and beyond being educative in a host of different and significant ways. ARTICLE III: "THE SUBJECT MATTER OF EDUCATION"

I believe that the teaching and learning of social issues is the foundation of American democracy. In 1816, Thomas Jefferson advised, "If you expect a nation to be ignorant and free and in a state of civilization, you expect what never was and never will be" (Thomas Jefferson letter to Charles Yancey 6 January 1816; Graham, 2005, p. 3). Democracy depends on an educated populace. Understanding the nation's history and government as well as those of other countries is vital to human relations and advancement.

In "What knowledge is of most worth?" Herbert Spencer (1919 reprint of 1884 article) asserted that the latter question had to be answered before school curriculum could be developed. I agree. Schools reflect the answer to Spencer's question in a variety of ways, including the allotment of time devoted to particular content. Students spend more time learning subject matter that the community prioritizes, and this reality is particularly true in those school districts obsessed with standardized test scores. In contemporary formal school settings, testing of linguistic and logical-mathematical skills often reflects the value placed on that kind of subject matter. A common saying in schools is, "If it is not tested, it is not taught."

For my specific work in teaching and learning about social issues, the world, the country, the region, the state, and the local community is my classroom and the subject matter with which I am concerned. The time frame can be past, present or future. People, places, and events comprise the learning narratives.

The ten thematic strands of the National Council for the Social Studies (2010) function as a comprehensive guide to important social studies subject matter education. These ten themes include: culture; time, continuity, and change; people, places, and environments; individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority, and governance; production, distribution, and consumption; science, technology, and society; global connections; and civic ideals and practices. These ten broad themes are comprehensive with respect to teaching and learning social issues. I often refer back to these ten themes when developing formal lessons for teaching about social issues.

ARTICLE IV: "THE NATURE OF METHOD"

I believe in the old saying that "variety is the spice of life," and that the principle of variety is particularly important when considering the nature of methods when teaching and learning social issues. I also believe that learning is keener when it is active; thus individuals learn best when they have to teach ideas to other people. Dewey emphasized the importance of learning as an active process. He noted that,

the active side precedes the passive in the development of the child nature; that expression comes before conscious impression; that muscular development precedes sensory; that movements come before conscious sensations; I believe that consciousness is essentially motor or impulse; that conscious states tend to project themselves in action (quoted in Milson, et al., 2010, p. 368).

In my courses, I model my belief in the importance of variety and implement several activities to foster active learning. Over the years these include but are not limited to: simulations, role-playing, group work, lectures, discussions, student presentations, student-created television adds or newspapers, interpretation of primary source documents, field trips, debates, mapping the school building or larger geographical area, and research projects.

ARTICLE V: "THE SCHOOL AND SOCIAL PROGRESS"

I believe that schools are a means of social betterment, but they do not provide equal opportunities to all children, especially not to impoverished students from racial and ethnic minorities. Who can forget Kozol's (1991) description of horrid conditions in East Saint Louis schools? Similarly, who does not wish for genuine futures for the brilliant students in Kohl's (1967) Harlem classroom who appear condemned to a life of poverty, neglect, and violence? Yet, I long to believe in the American dream. In the context of teaching and learning about social issues, I lead classroom discussions about reasons for immigration to the U.S., and examine its impact on schooling. I have conducted studies on the U.S. citizenship examination with several colleagues (Doppen, et al, 2011), as well as research on foreign-born social studies education professors who wrestle with the decision whether or not to pursue American citizenship (Bohan, et al, 2008). I have written about adopting a daughter from China and how such a potentially sensitive issue can be handled in the classroom (Bohan, 2003). As the great granddaughter of German immigrants who came to the America for a better life, education in public schools was instrumental in providing the opportunity for familial intellectual and financial achievement.

Yet, the path my ancestors followed was not one of continuous progression and included a few bumps in the road. Shame came to the family when my grandmother's older sister was held back in first grade because she spoke German and not English. During World War Two my father recalls getting in trouble in elementary school for punching a child who called him a Nazi. His ire was aroused particularly because his father had served in the U.S. Army during World War One and he did not want to be associated with the enemy. But my father survived this elementary school incident as well as the difficulty at age twelve of having a bed-ridden father who suffered from an incapacitating stroke. Long before my father could vote, he filled out tax forms, made family economic decisions, and effectively served as the head of household. He went on to become high school valedictorian, and a first generation college student at MIT. He credits his success to the public schools in New York, which established standards through the Regents examination (as far back as the Civil War).

As a teacher and teacher educator, I believe that the school is an important vehicle of social progress. Nevertheless, opportunities are not the same for all students, nor are they equal among schools. Having taught in two high schools, one with predominantly affluent students and one with largely poor students, the disparity in educational opportunities in America was strikingly evident to me each and every day. A keen awareness of differences developed because my teaching experience in an elite New York City private school (Rupert Murdoch's son James was on the track team that I coached) immediately preceded working in a Title I predominantly

Hispanic public school, where my infant son spent his first months of life in the on-campus childcare facility designated for the children of the students who were teenage mothers. These teaching experiences led me to develop a college course on poverty and education in order to help future teachers understand the vast socio-economic differences in students who populate American schools. In class we read books by Jonathan Kozol *Savage Inequalities* (1991) and *Shame of the Nation*, Herbert Kohl *36 Children* (1967), and Martin Haberman (1995) *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty*. These authors profoundly influence my thinking about whether the schools serve as vehicles of social progress.

These professional and personal experiences spurred me to pursue research on the confluence of race, gender, culture, and history in education (Woyshner & Bohan, 2012). I support teachers and schools wherever, whenever, and however opportunities arise. Throughout the years, as both a parent and educator, these occasions are numerous. I volunteer in a range of school activities; cleaning the bathrooms at the high school baseball stadium, tutoring players in American history while traveling for the state tournament, teaching lessons at the history fair, co-chairing the middle school environmental club, planting greenery for Earth Day on school grounds, leading school-based paper recycling efforts, and fundraising for routinely underfunded school programs. Through commitment, hard work, and learning, I hope to set an example about the importance of educational opportunity for all humans.

Even in difficult economic times, I believe in the power of education. I believe that the school can serve as a means of social progress, but this goal is not always achieved. In the context of teaching and learning social issues, I believe teachers and students need to carefully examine the nature and purpose of education, the role of schooling, the knowledge and subject matter of most worth, the nature of teaching methods used to convey learning of subject matter, and the means by which schools serve and do not serve to enable social progress. In the context of teaching and learning about social issues, real concerns can generate ideas for active learning that leads to social betterment.

Nigel Hamilton explains, “Biography was the record of real lives; but if its great benefit to society was its ability to provide insights into human nature that could be useful to the reader in his own life, then there was no intrinsic reason biographers should chronicle only the lives of the famous” (2008, 11). The methods of learning about social issues can and should vary, but the goals ought to be clear. We should teach and learn about social issues in order to work to understand ourselves and our lives. Over my office door, I have a sign hanging to remind me of my grander purpose—live your life in a way your children will know you stood for something wonderful—I would change the words “your children” to “all people.” I hope that my first quarter century in education and the quarter century to come will serve as a model for the importance of education for all humans. I work to teach about social issues as a way to honor my past teachers, especially Mr. Stewart, Professor Polenber, and Dr. Davis, and to provide an example to future teachers.

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