

Worthwhile Questions and Dancing Through Despair to Hope

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What I have learned anew from teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic is that we live in an interdependent world. We are responsible for one another and are profoundly connected to each other in our shared world. To explain what I mean, I reflect on the graduate course titled Elementary Social Studies/Minority Issues: Teaching Strategies, which I taught from May 19 to June 25, 2020, at a college just outside of Philadelphia. I describe the arc of the course, share student work, and consider self-care to elaborate the idea of our responsibility to each other, including our children, and to reflect on the aims of social studies education and education more broadly.

Though not offered as an online course when students registered, it was of course quickly redesigned as schools remained closed by the governor's order. Comfortable with teaching online, I appreciate how surprisingly intimate the experience can be as we all write notes to one another and share work and life stories with people that we may have never met in person and yet are accountable to (unlike in many online forums). In many ways, it is easier to hear all voices in the class as students read each other's responses and share connections to their own lives. This was true in the courses that moved online overnight in March as people around the world were told to stay at home. Students supported each other as we showed up in each other's homes via computer screens. Many of the graduate students were suddenly homeschooling their own children and trying to teach young children online for the first time. This was also true in the summer course, when outrage at police brutality and systemic racism drew many into the streets in mostly peaceful protests in the midst of the pandemic.

In Philadelphia, there have been more than 20 days of protests of outrage over the death of George Floyd at the hands of police on May 25, and at the same time, there is a sudden hope of real change. And the protests and movement continues. The pandemic highlighted fault lines of equity in our society, fault lines that opened wider with outrage at Floyd's death due to police brutality. Then, on June 3, a rare storm classified as a derecho followed by a thunderstorm, two different weather systems, flew through our region in one day causing widespread power

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outages, downing trees, and closing many roads. All the while, lives are lost to the virus, nearly everything is closed, we worry about elders in our families and communities that we're not allowed to see, and we face increased isolation and periods of despair. Amidst all of this, our work as educators goes on.

For me and the beginning educators in my class, questions about the aim of education and social studies education in particular took on a clarity that is often absent. We could see the need for change more clearly. In a recent interview, actor Will Smith said, "It's like peaceful protests put up a mirror to the demonic imagery of your oppressor, and the more still you are in your peaceful protest, the more clear the mirror is to the oppressor for the world to see and for them to see themselves" (Farr, 2020, p. D2). Speaking of his experience growing up, Smith continued, "There's a part of this that people who didn't grow up in that, you just can't comprehend ... You just can't comprehend what it feels like to feel like you live in an occupied territory" (p. D2). Smith believes that our problems are not only rooted in our society and our systems but in the hearts and minds of people. At least a part of social studies education should entail learning how to comprehend the experiences of others, however imperfectly, and think critically about our society and the ways in which our systems work to perpetuate racism and other forms of discrimination. And we need an education that touches our hearts as well as our minds. This happened this summer, as our hearts were torn open by the world health crisis and the controversy in controlling the virus, and then again, somehow having the courage to face inequity and continued brutal violence.

The arc of the course begins with two inquiry questions: "Why teach social studies? What do we want for the children in our classrooms and our world?" The course then moves through a consideration of human rights education as civic education to integrating children's literature and artful responses that build understanding to designing a unit on the movement of people that incorporates a text set and ends in some kind of advocacy project. This summer term, after the protests manifested, I encouraged students to design a unit that focused on either the broad idea of the movement of people or people's movements. The simple flip of the words surprised me in how it emphasized how closely the two are related. I'll move through this arc drawing on the students' work and then return to the idea of our responsibility to each other, including our children, and finding the heart, a focus on the common good in our connections or communities of shared fate (Ritter, 2020; Williams, 2003, 2009).

The course is framed by the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) statement on the purpose of social studies and, alongside it, a National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME) explanation of multicultural education:

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The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world. (NCSS, 1994, p. 3)

Multicultural education is a philosophical concept built on the ideals of freedom, justice, equality, equity, and human dignity as acknowledged in various documents such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence, constitutions of South Africa and the United States, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations. It affirms our need to prepare students for their responsibilities in an interdependent world. It recognizes the role schools can play in developing the attitudes and values necessary for a democratic society. It values cultural differences and affirms the pluralism that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. (NAME, 2020)

As educators, the students and I consider together what key understandings and values students should gain from citizenship education. Our responses were in the form of a montage of images and words that highlighted empathy, perspective-taking, equity, and care for others. These themes came through strongly as we all responded to readings, lesson plans, talks, and films on human rights and social justice. Small groups in online breakout rooms were lively, the group members seemingly more engaged than if they had been seated in a classroom. As I moved from room to room, I felt like I was traveling to people's homes. People could speak from their own space. These conversations were extended in discussion threads. Below are two examples that respond to articles and films related to the broad questions: Who chooses the stories that we tell in elementary school classrooms? Whose history is included in textbooks and children's literature? Are there stories, accounts that are left out or told falsely? Students were asked to discuss one or two lingering thoughts or new discoveries prompted by the reading/viewing.

Sarah wrote:

The events that have been in the news the last few days have been on my mind a lot. It has made me wonder what teachers' and schools' role is in this. I read a powerful passage on the theadvocatesforhumanrights.org website. It said, "Children develop an awareness of the similarities and differences between people from a very young age and pick up on value judgments by others about those differences. They are influenced by the behaviors and attitudes modeled by those around them throughout their childhood and develop their own values and beliefs based on these observations." I believe that we as teachers have a powerful impact on how our students view not only themselves but other people as well.

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Kelsey wrote:

In this extremely sad and challenging time, I found myself feeling encouraged and refreshed by the Chalkbeat¹ article that Dr. Ritter shared with us yesterday. The article showcases how different teachers from around the country are connecting with their students in the wake of the recent acts of police brutality, protest, and unrest. A school in New York is preparing to host a “Day of Action” via Zoom next week; a teacher in Chicago has plans to use the current events as a springboard into conversations about the larger, overarching issues faced by Black people in America; and a teacher in Ohio has been conscious to allow time for students to discuss their identities and share their experiences so that concepts such as racism become more tangible. Rather than shying away from these difficult engagements, these teachers are deeply committed to listening to their students’ feelings and frustrations while also educating them on the broader issue of systemic racism and how they can be responsible, yet powerful, advocates for change.

The responses exemplify thoughtful exploration of values that are in the classroom, that have an impact on children, and they begin to articulate our responsibilities as educators to young students and to society. The theme of listening to students and following their lead came up often. For me, my thoughts about listening were impacted at this time by participating in a Zoom meeting organized by POWER, an interfaith community organization, called “Finding Grounding: Listening Deeply to One Another” led by .O, Lena Glickman, and Rev. Yvette Davis.² It was part of a monthly series, but this was my first session. It was a turning point for me in recognizing my own emotional state with worry about what people were going through with the virus, with my not being able to see and care for my father who lives in an assisted living facility, and with listening and working to be present to students’ stress and worry regarding what was often referred to as “all that is going on.” In this session on self-care, we were skillfully led in a practice of listening and reflecting back without judgement. We were asked to think about where we carried the emotions we were feeling now, how they felt in our bodies. Then we had a dance break where all 90 of us danced around in our homes to the song “Already Won” by Unspoken. The intent of the dance break, Glickman explained, was to move beyond the fight-or-flight

¹ <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2020/5/31/21276371/educators-tackle-tough-conversations-about-race-and-violence-this-time-virtually>

² <https://powerinterfaith.org/event/finding-grounding-listening-deeply-to-one-another/>

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response brought on by stress or a threat to a place of hope, of joy, where social engagement and creativity are possible. Both listening deeply and remembering that we can dance our way out of a threatened feeling, out of despair, at least for a moment, are vitally needed at this time.

I don't know a way forward or back to a more familiar world, but I was heartened by the surprising pleasure of joining together each in our home space for a shortened class period in weekly Zoom meetings. In these meetings and in written responses, we had rich discussions of children's literature about families and children who had to flee from danger. We experimented with integrating the arts to build comprehension of the text, of another's experience, many trying out a strategy such as sketch to stretch with their own children. We read about the scope of the refugee crisis, now compounded with the COVID-19 crisis, and reflected on welcoming the stranger. And as we sat in our homes, we thought about those families who were not at home or whose homes were not safe. In the short timeframe of the course, students wrote powerful units on movement of people and people's movements.

In conclusion, we simply *are* connected. This may not be good, of course. We work in that direction when we are accountable to one another, when we listen with our hearts, when we respect the dignity of each person and take care of one another and the world where we live and breathe. Responsibility is only sometimes a difficult thing. I remember a father saying toward the end of a long community organizing meeting that we might be looking at responsibility in too limited of a way. He continued, referring to his sleeping five-year-old daughter curled on his lap, "It is my responsibility to pick up my daughter and take her home, tuck her into her bed, and it is a joy to do so and source of deep satisfaction." In thinking about our responsibility to our students and with our students, we need to listen to one another and take up difficult conversations, and there can be a deep satisfaction in that. We also need to head straight for the joy at times, finding ways to dance and laugh together and enjoy each other's company, whether in our classrooms, families, work places, or communities, whether in person or through online platforms. In *The Book of Joy* (2016), His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu are asked whether, in a world where there is so much turmoil, it is possible to find joy. Rev. Tutu responds, "You show your humanity ... by how you see yourself not as apart from others, but from your connection to others" (p. 115). You choose hope. "[Hope] is in the pit of your tummy. It's not in your head" (p. 122). "Despair turns us inward. Hope sends us into the arms of others" (p. 123).

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