

Should Teachers Encourage High School Students To Work For Social Change?

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More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, rejected the idea that education could be the force to transform society and resolve social ills. Instead, Durkheim concluded that education “can be reformed only if society itself is reformed.” He argued that education “is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter. . . ; it does not create it” (Durkheim, 1897/1951: 372-373).

Most mainstream proposals for improving education in the United States assume that our society is fundamentally sound, but that for some reason, our schools are failing. Different critics target different villains: poor quality teachers, pampered, disruptive or ill-prepared students, the culture of their families, unions, bureaucrats, University Schools of Education, tests that are too easy, or inadequate curriculum. But if Emile Durkheim was correct, a society has the school system it deserves. Denouncing the poor quality of education is like blaming a mirror because you do not like your reflection.

The first step in improving education is to recognize that the problems plaguing our schools are rooted in the way our society is organized. We live in a competitive economy where businesses and individuals continually seek advantage and higher profits, and where people on the bottom rung of the economic ladder are stigmatized as failures and blamed for their condition. Its culture glorifies violence in sports, movies, video games, and on evening news broadcasts that celebrate the death of others through hygienic strategic bombings. It is a society where no one feels obligated to pay taxes for the broader social good and where welfare “reform” means denying benefits to children if their parents cannot find work; a society that promotes the need for instant gratification and uses youthful alienation to sell products; a society where those who do not fit in are shunned (Bowles and Gintis, 1976).

Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that our school system is designed to sort children out and leave many uneducated. To legitimize the way our society is organized, its schools teach competitive behavior and social inequality as if they were fundamental law of nature. Just as with the economy, some are rewarded in school, others are punished, and both groups are taught that rewards and punishment are the result of their own efforts (Kohn, 1999).

As a teacher educator and a New York City public high school social studies teacher, we try to avoid being overwhelmed by pessimism during debates over school reform. Even though we believe that education will not be changed in isolation, we recognize that efforts to improve schools can be part of a long term struggle to create a more equitable society in the United States. We also believe that students, especially high school students, must be part of this struggle and that an important part of our job as teachers is to help prepare them to participate as active citizens in a democratic society.

Should teachers encourage high school students to work for social change? Thomas Jefferson believed that, in a democratic society, teachers do not really have a choice. According to Jefferson, freedom and republican government rest on two basic principles: “the diffusion of knowledge among the people” and the idea that “a little rebellion now and then is a good thing.” Jefferson supported the right to rebel because he recognized that the world was constantly changing. The crucial question was not whether it would change, but the direction of change. Education was essential so that ordinary citizens could participate in this process, defending and enhancing their liberties.

In the United States, there has frequently been a close connection between advocacy for mass public education and demands for expanding democracy, social equity, and political reform. For example, in the mid-19th century, Horace Mann championed public education because he believed that the success of the country depended on “intelligence and virtue in the masses of the people.” He argued that, “If we do not prepare children to become good citizens, . . . then our republic must go down to destruction” (*The New York Times*, 1953).

John Dewey (1939) saw himself within this intellectual tradition. He believed that democratic movements for human liberation were necessary to achieve a fair distribution of political power and an “equitable system of human liberties.” However, criticisms have been raised about limitations in Deweyan approaches to education, especially the way they are practiced in many elite private schools.

Frequently, these schools are racially, ethnically, and economically segregated, and therefore efforts to develop classroom community ignore the spectrum of human difference and the continuing impact of society's attitudes about race, class, ethnicity, gender, social conflict, and inequality on both teachers and students. In addition, because of pressure on students to achieve high academic scores, teachers maintain an undemocratic level of control over the classroom. Both of these issues are addressed by Paulo Freire, who calls on educators to aggressively challenge both injustice and unequal power arrangements in the classroom and society.

Paulo Freire was born in Recife in northeastern Brazil, where his ideas about education developed in response to military dictatorship, enormous social inequality, and widespread adult illiteracy. As a result, his primary pedagogical goal was to provide the world's poor and oppressed with educational experiences that make it possible for them to take control over their own lives. Freire (1970; 1995) shared Dewey's desire to stimulate students to become "agents of curiosity" in a "quest for . . . the 'why' of things," and his belief that education provides possibility and hope for the future of society. But he believes that these can only be achieved when students are engaged in explicitly critiquing social injustice and actively organizing to challenge oppression.

For Freire, education is a process of continuous group discussion (dialogue) that enables people to acquire collective knowledge they can use to change society. The role of the teacher includes asking questions that help students identify problems facing their community (problem posing), working with students to discover ideas or create symbols (representations) that explain their life experiences (codification), and encouraging analysis of prior experiences and of society as the basis for new academic understanding and social action (conscientization) (Shor, 1987).

In a Deweyan classroom, the teacher is an expert who is responsible for organizing experiences so that students learn content, social and academic skills, and an appreciation for democratic living. Freire is concerned that this arrangement reproduces the unequal power relationships that exist in society. In a Freirean classroom, everyone has a recognized area of expertise that includes, but is not limited to, understanding and explaining their own life, and sharing this expertise becomes an essential element in the classroom curriculum. In these classrooms, teachers have their areas of expertise, but they are only one part of the community. The responsibility for organizing experiences and struggles for social change belongs to the entire community; as groups exercise this responsibility, they are empowered to take control over their lives.

We agree with Freire's concern that teachers address social inequality and the powerlessness experienced by many of our students. We also recognize that it is difficult to imagine secondary school social studies classrooms where teachers are responsible for covering specified subject matter organized directly on Freirean principles. Maxine Greene (1993a; 1993b; 1993c), an educational philosopher who advocates a "curriculum for human beings" integrating aspects of Freire, Dewey, and feminist thinking, offers ways for teachers to introduce Freire's pedagogical ideas into the classroom.

Greene believes that, to create democratic classrooms, teachers must learn to listen to student voices. Listening allows teachers to discover what students are thinking, what concerns them, and what has meaning to them. When teachers learn to listen, it is possible for teachers and students to collectively search for historical, literary, and artistic metaphors that make knowledge of the world accessible to us. In addition, the act of listening creates possibilities for human empowerment; it counters the marginalization experienced by students in school and in their lives, it introduces multiple perspectives and cultural diversity into the classroom, and it encourages students to take risks and contribute their social critiques to the classroom dialogue.

Greene's ideas are especially useful to social studies teachers. Just as historians discuss history as an ongoing process that extends from the past into the future, Greene sees individual and social development as processes that are "always in the making." For Greene, ideas, societies, and people are dynamic and always changing. She rejects the idea that there are universal and absolute truths and predetermined conclusions. According to Greene, learning is a search for "situated understanding" that places ideas and events in their social, historical, and cultural contexts.

Greene believes that the human mind provides us with powerful tools for knowing ourselves and others. She encourages students to combine critical thinking with creative imagination in an effort to empathize with and understand the lives, minds, and consciousness of human beings from the past and of our contemporaries in the present. She sees the goal of learning as discovering new questions about ourselves and the world, and this leads her to examine events from different perspectives, to value the ideas of other people, and to champion democracy.

During the Great Depression, striking Harlan County, Kentucky coal miners sang a song called “Which Side Are You On?” (lyrics available on the web at www.geocities.com/Nashville/3448/whichtsid.html). In a book he co-authored with Paulo Freire, Myles Horton (1990) of the Highlander School argued that educators cannot be neutral either. He called neutrality “a code word for the existing system. It has nothing to do with anything but agreeing to what is and will always be. It was to me a refusal to oppose injustice or to take sides that are unpopular” (102).

James Banks (1991; 1993), an educational theorist whose focus is on the development of social studies curriculum, shares the ideas that “knowledge is not neutral,” and that “an important purpose of knowledge construction is to help people improve society.” Although Banks is a strong advocate of a multicultural approach to social studies, he argues that a “transformative” curriculum depends less on the content of what is taught than on the willingness of teachers to examine their own personal and cultural values and identities, to change the ways they organize classrooms and relate to students, and to actively commit themselves to social change.

The main ideas about education and society at the heart of the philosophies of Dewey, Freire, Greene, Horton, and Banks are that society is always changing; knowledge is not neutral-it either supports the status quo or a potential new direction for society; people learn primarily from what they experience; active citizens in a democratic society need to be critical and imaginative thinkers; and students learn to be active citizens by being active citizens. Assuming that we agree with these ideas, we are still left with these questions: How do we translate educational theory into social studies practice? What do these ideas look like in the classroom?

In Alan Singer’s high school social studies classes before becoming a teacher educator, he promoted transformative goals through direct student involvement in social action projects as part of New York State’s “Participation in Government” curriculum. In New York City, periodic budget crises, ongoing racial and ethnic tension, and the need for social programs in poor communities provided numerous opportunities to encourage students to become active citizens. Class activities included sponsoring student forums on controversial issues, preparing reports on school finances and presenting them as testimony at public hearings, writing position papers for publication in local newspapers, and organizing student and community support for a school-based public health clinic. One of our most successful programs was organizing students across the city to struggle for a condom availability program in the high schools.

During each activity, social studies goals included making reasoned decisions based on an evaluation of existing evidence, researching issues and presenting information in writing and on graphs, exploring the underlying ideas that shape our points of view, giving leadership by example to other students, and taking collective and individual responsibility for the success of programs.

Singer now works with a number of teachers who are part of the Hofstra University New Teachers Network and who share a commitment to empower students as social activists and critical thinkers. Michael Pezone is a high school social studies teacher in a working-class, largely African American and Caribbean public high school in New York City where many of his students have histories of poor performance in school. Pezone is a former student in the Hofstra University School of Education and Allied Human Services, a cooperating teacher in the program, and a mentor teacher in our alumni group. Virtually every social studies teacher education student in the Hofstra program at one time or another visits Pezone’s classroom, where he has involved his students and the pre-service teachers in exploring the possibility of political action.

During the Fall, 2001 semester, in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center, the New York City Board of Education required all public schools to lead students in the Pledge of Allegiance at the beginning of each school day and at all school-wide assemblies and school events” (Pezone, 2002).

Pezone's students were confused about the law governing behavior during the flag salute and concerned with defending the first amendment rights of fellow students. They contacted the New York Civil Liberties Union to clarify legal issues and learned that participation was not required by law. They decided to monitor both compliance with the directive's requirement that the Pledge of Allegiance be recited each day and freedom of dissent. They also circulated a questionnaire in the school that asked students about their opinions on the issues, encouraged students to behave respectfully and responsibly during the pledge, informed them of their legal right not to participate, and asked them to report violations of the law. The results of the student survey and student comments were later distributed in the school's magazine.

The next year (Fall, 2002), New York City initiated a new metal detector program that made students up to one hour late for class every morning. Michael Pezone's students organized to petition fellow students while they were waiting for admission to the building. As a result of their efforts, the problem was highlighted on a television news broadcast and finally addressed by district administrators.

At the center of Michael Pezone's pedagogy is a project he calls the democratic dialogue (Pezone and Singer, 1997; Pezone, Palacio and Rosenberg, 2003). It has been adopted by a number of colleagues in the New Teachers Network who first participated in the project when they visited Pezone's classroom. Pezone believes that the success of the dialogues depends on the gradual development of caring, cooperative communities over the course of a year. To encourage these communities, he works with students to create an atmosphere where they feel free to expose their ideas, feelings, and academic proficiencies in public without risking embarrassment or attack and being pressed into silence. He stresses with students that the dialogues are not debates; that as students learn about a topic the entire class "wins or loses" together.

The student dialogues are highly structured. Pezone believes that structure maximizes student freedom by insuring that all students have an opportunity to participate. It also helps to insure that classes carefully examine statements, attitudes, and practices that may reflect biases and demean community members.

Pezone uses dialogues to conclude units; however, preparation for the dialogues takes place all the time. At the start of the semester, he and his students decide on the procedures for conducting dialogues so that everyone in class participates and on criteria for evaluating team and individual performance. Usually students want the criteria to include an evaluation of how well the team works together; the degree to which substantive questions are addressed; the use of supporting evidence; the response to statements made by the other team; whether ideas are presented effectively; and whether individual students demonstrate effort and growth. These criteria are codified in a scoring rubric that is reexamined before each dialogue and changed when necessary. Students also help to define the question being discussed. After the dialogue, students work in small groups to evaluate the overall dialogue, the performance by their team, and their individual participation.

During a unit, the class identifies a broad social studies issue that they want to research and examine in greater depth. For example, after studying the recent histories of India and China, they discussed whether violent revolution or non-violent resistance is the most effective path to change. On other occasions they have discussed if the achievements of the ancient world justified the exploitation of people and whether the United States and Europe should intervene in the internal affairs of other countries because of the way women are treated in some cultures.

The goal of a dialogue is to examine all aspects of an issue, not to score points at the expense of someone else. Teams are subdivided into cooperative learning groups that collect and organize information supporting different views. The teams also assign members as either opening, rebuttal, or concluding speakers. During dialogues, teams "huddle-up" to share their ideas and reactions to what is being presented by the other side. After dialogues, students discuss what they learned from members of the other team and evaluate the performance of the entire class.

An important part of the dialogue process is the involvement of students in assessing what they have learned. In Pezone's classes students help develop the parameters for class projects and decide the criteria for assessing their performance in these activities. The benefit of this involvement for students includes a

deeper understanding of historical and social science research methods; insight into the design and implementation of projects; a greater stake in the satisfactory completion of assignments; and a sense of empowerment because assessment decisions are based on rules that the classroom community has helped to shape.

Pezone uses individual and group conferences to learn what students think about the dialogues and their impact on student thinking about democratic process and values. Students generally feel that the dialogues give them a personal stake in what happens in class and they feel responsible for supporting their teams. Students who customarily are silent in class because of fear of being ridiculed or because they are not easily understood by the other students, become involved in speaking out. For many students, it is a rare opportunity to engage in both decision making and open public discussion “in front of other people.”

From the dialogues, students start to learn that democratic society involves a combination of individual rights and initiatives with social responsibility, collective decision-making, and shared community goals. They discover that democracy frequently entails tension between the will of the majority and the rights of minorities and that it cannot be taken for granted. It involves taking risks and is something that a community must continually work to maintain and expand. Another benefit of the dialogue process is that it affords students the opportunity to actively generate knowledge without relying on teacher-centered instructional methods.

Pezone finds that the year long process of defining, conducting, and evaluating dialogues involves students in constant reflection on social studies concepts, class goals, student interaction, and the importance of community. It makes possible individual academic and social growth, encourages students to view ideas critically and events from multiple perspectives, and supports the formation of a cooperative learning environment. He believes that when students are able to analyze educational issues, and create classroom policy, they gain a personal stake in classroom activities and a deeper understanding of democracy.

A number of the teachers related to the Hofstra New Teachers Network consider themselves transformative educators, yet none of them, including either of us, has created a model transformative classroom. It may simply be that, although the educational goals discussed above provide a vision of a particular kind of classroom, transformative education, like history, is part of a process that is never finished.

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