

# Social Studies Education as a Moral Activity: Teaching towards a just society

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## Abstract

*Many competing ideas exist around teaching 'standard' high school social studies subjects such as history, government, geography, and economics. The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of social studies teaching and learning as a moral activity. I first propose that current high school curriculum standards in the United States often fail in focusing on the kinds of sustained discourse and ideas necessary for students to develop an awareness and commitment to justice in a pluralistic society. I then make the argument that understanding social studies as an inherently moral activity creates a space for transformative and meaningful learning to occur. Lastly, I contend that public schools are inextricably linked to understanding and creating elements of a just society and as such, hold equal potential to both support and severely hinder its development.*

Keywords: moral education, social studies, justice, human rights, high school

## Missed Opportunities

Within social studies, students have a unique opportunity to evaluate whether society is structured in a fair and equitable manner. However, even a brief glance at most state mandated curriculum standards in the US reveals a continued tradition of prioritizing the memorization of historical narratives. These accounts generally accomplish little towards teaching young citizens how to make informed decisions and evaluate competing claims around current political, social, and economic problems. Teaching almost any topic within social studies (e.g. court rulings, wars, oppression, economic policies, etc.) has at its core the issues of human rights and social justice, and as such, is inherently a moral activity. Two important questions immediately arise. How do students understand these concepts and use information to prioritize claims to determine what actions support justice? More broadly, what would a fair and just society look like and how do social studies students conceive of fairness in a pluralistic society? Studying society with the intent of improving unjust conditions can be a powerful and transformative objective of social studies. By examining the way in which social studies students come to understand systemic inequalities and the way in which certain groups have been historically oppressed, it becomes apparent how teaching can be seen as possessing important moral ramifications. Regardless of whether social studies teachers realize their class-

rooms are places where students form opinions about the world and its diverse population, this process *is* taking place. Classrooms involved in a discussion about culture and society are never value neutral places.

In order to understand the missed potential within social studies education as a moral activity, we can begin by considering the impact of state curriculum standards on the types of discourse that often occur within high school classrooms. In other words, what are students and teachers talking about in class? What conversations are made possible by these curriculum standards? And to what extent does this discourse contribute or detract from comprehensive understandings of justice? Or, as Parker (2003, p. xvii) asks, 'Are ordinary citizens expected to know justice and injustice when they see them?' Students develop ethical leanings but are often unable to articulate those in a comprehensive manner. Thus, inattention to the moral nature of social studies may shape individuals' perspectives of these principles in unreflective ways.

The rationale behind every mandated curriculum standard has moral implications. It is never amoral but it can be, and sometimes is, immoral (Huebner, 1996). Ignoring societal problems and failing to equip citizens with the ability to recognize and deliberate about basic human rights can also be immoral. Howard Zinn (1994) suggested that none of us can be neutral on a moving train. In other words, when we know that society is still plagued by significant problems and we choose not to address them, we cannot claim to be taking a neutral stance. Ignoring racism, unfair distributions of basic needs, genocide, and other forms of egregious discrimination is to passively condone their existence.

Sustaining or improving our ethical environment relies on the abilities of individuals to understand the surrounding climate of ideas about how to live (Haydon, 2004). Perhaps more important than an academic understanding of ethical philosophy is the personal commitment each individual undertakes to support the social structures which result from fair and just principles. If generalization beyond the classroom is what we hope to achieve, educators should emphasize critical inquiry and a commitment to social justice over simple cognitive abilities (Wardekker, 2004). There is a substantial need for innovative approaches that move beyond traditional frameworks and encourage the development of moral dispositions and personal conscience. Recent literature on moral education proposes that a dialogical model of self-reflection which recognizes the presence of competing self interests is well suited for the kinds of authentic introspection and critical questioning that are required for the development of moral conscience (Piper, 2004). Here, the emerging dialogical-reflection model is compatible with an approach to moral conduct in which dispositions to act for the good of the community become the focal goals. Rather than focusing on external principles, curriculums would emphasize a critical analysis of moral responsibility and action.

Creating a just society begins with an equal opportunity for all people to express and learn about diverse viewpoints. These viewpoints can take the form of reflective deliberation where all possible concerns, questions, and suggestions are given a space to be heard and considered. Often, students feel no meaningful connection to the world that is their classroom. In a typical US high school social studies class, much of a student's time is spent memorizing names, dates, and events. These are soon forgotten and usually serve no purpose to those students who feel their lives are no longer impacted by these events. As such, students can become apathetic to a world they feel is distant and

irrelevant. Unfortunately, many students view history as a story about things that have no real impact anymore. They read a meta-narrative from a textbook, take a test, and move on to the next standard. One such opportunity for transformative engagement exists within a discussion of basic human rights. In 1948, members of the newly created United Nations created a comprehensive document known as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This work can easily lead to robust discussions around the creation of a just society on a global scale.

What happens when students never gain an appreciation for understanding a world of diverse populations and cultures? What happens when students cannot express what a fair and just society looks like? At the very least, we can say that students are less prepared to recognize when their own civil liberties are being violated. As a result, they may also become desensitized to the oppression of others. When events are devoid of human meaning, they are quickly forgotten. When schools do not foster a connection to others but instead focus on management and control of the students, any hope of altruistic learning and a sense of belonging can be squandered. Here we begin to see the importance of an education that doesn't marginalize student interests but instead brings them into a world where they feel a connection to all individuals, regardless of race and ethnicity, gender identity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, etc. In other words, students become literate within a culture of appreciation, diversity, compassion, and fairness.

### **Curriculum Implications**

The framework described here serves as a means for understanding student experiences within social studies classrooms and as a philosophical position with curriculum implications. At least two intriguing questions arise from this approach. What types of instruction and curriculum lead to students feeling connected to people from all cultures? What curriculum choices are best suited for enabling students to articulate defensible and comprehensive notions of social justice?

Students, as mutually connected citizens, should know how to engage in a deliberative process that results in a consensus within a pluralistic society. John Rawls (1971) attempted just this in his thought experiment for deciding what principles of justice would apply equally to all people from varying backgrounds, cultures, religions, socioeconomic status, etc. His theory has multiple implications for social studies classrooms and evaluating the responsibilities of public institutions. Rawls' conception is one in which hypothetical citizens, unaware of their eventual social positions, choose specific principles of justice to govern society. This veil of ignorance, under which principles of justice are chosen, prevents choosers from only supporting those policies and principles which they know will benefit those belonging to similar social categories as themselves. According to Rawls, no one actually deserves these arbitrary endowments; rather they are the results of a society where certain members are more advantaged than others.

Rawls' (1971) approach is both a method for students to assess political, social, and economic decisions, and a defensible theory on the role of public schools and education. Any educator can construct a curriculum that emphasizes critical deliberation within

moral education simply by exposing their students to Rawls' meta-theory. Students could use this framework to evaluate historical decisions, current events, and future public policies. Even though Rawls describes a hypothetical orientation where choosers don't know their social positioning and therefore are not tempted by self-interest, students and teachers can still use this method by embracing the principles of justice and incorporating them into a structured approach towards decision making.

Our school system holds a unique position in that, as a public institution, it can provide the foundation for understanding the fundamental principles of a participatory democracy committed to inviolable rights and social justice. We have a means for teaching citizens the virtues reflected in a system of self-governance, and instilling in them the notion that it is to every member's mutual advantage when we uphold these principles of justice and cooperation. Although ways of relating to other people are learned within many contexts, educators can provide a structured and thoughtful approach towards cultivating students' ideas of their own role in a culturally diverse and just society. These issues need not be framed as belonging to one particular political party or ideology. Classroom teachers should ensure that explorations of fairness and justice transcend political biases so that no individual or group can claim ownership of these universal values. This approach may seem difficult; however, that sentiment only underscores the increasing importance of using social studies instruction for this specific purpose. I believe a commitment to these principles can best develop when students are presented with the language to engage in discussions of culture, human rights, and their collective ability to influence the structure of society. Through a culturally responsive pedagogy, we can create a forum for collaboration and moral deliberation (Parker, 2003). Therefore, instruction which specifically embraces these ideals stands the greatest chance of producing citizens who possess a sense of belonging, find meaning in their social contributions, and display the willingness to support a system which allows for the protection of individual, inviolable rights across every culture.

We can imagine a set of curriculum standards that begins to address such important issues. Rather than focusing primarily on names, dates, and events, these standards would direct students towards understanding their role towards upholding and defending just principles. Human rights would play a significant part in this curriculum. In an Economics course, students might debate the pros and cons of capitalism, socialism, and communism without being indoctrinated to only support that which mostly benefits the United States at the expense of other countries. In World Geography, students might learn how arbitrary borders are created, changed, and sometimes ignored in the name of nationalism and controlling natural resources. In an American Government course, the curriculum standards could challenge students to imagine and define an egalitarian government as a means to truly evaluate the strengths and weaknesses currently seen in the US and throughout the world. When teaching history of any kind, teachers can focus on the decisions made by political leaders and their constituents by examining the extent to which those decisions create and sustain a just society, based on universal principles of fairness. Multiple opportunities exist for this dialogue and the creation of curriculum standards that would support such an endeavor.

## **Connections to Teacher Education**

If teacher education programs truly want their students to provide instruction that is significantly different from what is seen at most schools, we must provide guidelines and a space for dealing with the obstacles that are often faced upon entering the profession. Schools are not traditionally set up as democratic institutions. The move towards high stakes, standardized testing presents huge problems. Teacher education programs have to actively address such problems both individually and systemically if their intent is to improve instruction and the educational experience of every individual in our diverse population. This effort will significantly contribute to the conceptualization of social studies instruction as integral to the human experience and an inherently moral activity.

Students as moral individuals are in need of a dialogue that encourages reflection on one's social positioning and a commitment to correcting social dilemmas. Curriculum choices must include a concern for social problems and their value to society. Teachers can prepare their students to understand the interplay of political, economic, and social forces by focusing on distributive and procedural justice. Educators, who fall prey to an inadequate and misguided form of political deliberation, where competing viewpoints are not adequately critiqued, help to solidify familiar dichotomies of 'liberal/ conservative, left/right, democratic/ republican, etc.'. In doing so, students are wrongly convinced that it is nearly impossible to come up with comprehensive ethical principles with which one can begin to evaluate opposing claims.

Foucault (1972) wrote that discontinuity is sought and discovered in the history of thought, knowledge, and philosophy, whereas history itself seems to abandon this notion in favor of the stability of its structures. Pedagogical orientations and methodological decisions can be significantly influential towards ways of knowing and understanding language, and hence become inextricably bound to the engagement of ideas and the evaluation of competing claims of justice. History, according to Foucault, becomes a series of facts that defined the positions of others. To this end, a more useful orientation would be an investigation and description of how we are able to think about these ideas as a starting point and, using this understanding, to ascertain how structures become taken for granted in a matrix of meanings. Rather than viewing social studies education as a passive acceptance and memorization of unchanging causal relationships and events, students involved in a deliberation of concepts and meanings are better equipped to evaluate these systemic relationships and determine how ideas around the nature of society evolve, change, and constitute various forms of thinking. Rather than accepting the dichotomous construct of liberal and conservative for example, students might begin to question how this way of describing political values ever came into existence. An orientation towards understanding the development of ideas then leads to reformulations of knowledge, and in this example might lead a social studies student to ask why political conversations are not commonly framed in terms of fairness rather than categories that possess no inherent moral value. Often referred to as distributive justice, this act of deciding what economic arrangement creates equal access to basic goods, resources, and individual rights underlies almost any issue or action falling within the purview of social studies education.

## **Evaluating Competing Claims of Justice**

In order to address the nature and relationship of concepts and to evaluate competing claims about the structures and inequalities within society, in depth analysis skills must be developed. An instructor can provide the classroom with a framework for analyzing these arguments. Among the ways that one can critique conceptions of the 'good' society are the ability to detect discriminatory biases, arbitrary appeals to authority, and logical fallacies within an argument. When attempting this, students and their instructors can then engage in a deliberative process that moves towards a moral consensus within a pluralistic society. John Rawls (1971) attempted a similar, albeit hypothetical process, for deciding what principles of justice can be said to apply equally to all people from varying backgrounds, cultures, religions, socioeconomic status, etc. This approach is both a method for students to assess the meanings and nature behind political, social, economic, or ethical constructs, and a moral/political theory on justice conceived as fairness. It is crucial to define these elements of 'justice' so that we cannot all equally claim to support it despite vastly different conceptions of what the word means. I offer the following concepts which, I believe, begin to form a conception of justice that can be thoroughly problematized, questioned, and reformulated in order to find Rawls' state of reflective equilibrium. Perhaps one should adjust, add, or subtract from the following elements, but this conception looks at social studies education as primarily concerned with ideas of fairness, equality of opportunity, liberty, participatory democracy, and the meta-construct of social justice.

These five concepts provide at least a minimal framework for helping students deliberate what meanings and relationships are possible between democratic principles and inviolable rights (e.g. the right to be free from oppression, enslavement, physical attack, exclusionary economic practices, etc.). Imagine a curriculum whose focus was explicit in its attempt to help students understand the implications of these relationships. Rather than taking courses in US history, world history, government, and economics and hoping that students come away with a commitment to principles of justice, educational experiences could be designed to focus on fairness, equality of opportunity, etc. with examples from the social studies disciplines to illustrate their integration, or lack thereof, into society. This departure from the traditional curriculum both requires and enables students to begin understanding ethical theory. However, this approach can and should be conceived as developmentally appropriate. Building on what students already know as well as their instinctual leanings, teachers can capitalize on the inherent human desire to determine what is fair and what is not, a question many children begin to ponder at a considerably young age. A mastery of this language then allows students to better understand civil liberties and develop a means for defending their own conceptions of equality. This approach also lends itself well towards a critical deliberation of moral principles and an appreciation for the existence of inviolable rights.

## **Conclusions**

Teaching students to care about social dilemmas presents unique challenges that traditional, teacher-centered instruction does not fully address. Curriculum standards that are tied to high-stakes testing only exacerbate the problem. Therefore, teachers who

understand their practice as a moral activity should integrate content with value dilemmas that are relevant to students' lives. Social studies classes are saturated with examples to consider. Using Rawls' theory, students could enter into the 'original position' where they decide what a fair and just society would look like, compare our current social systems to the ideal, and then develop realistic measures to enact social changes. Students participating in a course with similar activities could then cultivate the idea that it is to everyone's advantage when we take an active role towards reaching a moral consensus in a pluralistic society.

The fate of any society relies heavily on the collaboration of citizens who often hold diverse political and moral conceptions. Unless students are aware of the problems in their society, have accurate information about their perpetuation, and utilize effective analysis skills to understand their function, they can offer only limited help in closing the gap between ideals and reality. Once a framework that upholds individual rights and principles of justice is understood, students as citizens will begin to see how their own human rights are inextricably bound to the rights of people throughout their community, their nation, and the rest of the world.

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