
Democracy & Education

Ethics in Teaching for Democracy and Social Justice

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Abstract

In this essay, I offer provocations toward an ethics of teaching for democracy and social justice. I argue that while driven by compelling macro social and political visions, social justice teachers do not pay sufficient attention to the moral dimensions of micro, classroom-level interactions in their work. I begin by describing social justice education. I then discuss the ways in which social justice educators have talked about issues of ethics in their work in terms of broad political visions, and in response to resistant students and charges of liberal bias. I illustrate gaps in these efforts, particularly in relation to work in teacher ethics. I end with some ethical considerations for activist teachers, framed in three areas of virtue and offer examples of a powerful ethical habit related to each virtue.

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THERE IS NO doubt that teachers who foreground issues of social justice in their classrooms sometimes face resistance from students. They also hear accusations of imposition, indoctrination, and liberal bias. In response, social justice educators argue that no teaching is neutral, that all teachers are partisan in some ways, and that in a democratic society, teaching for social justice is the most principled and defensible stance one can take toward one's work. Yet much of the scholarship surrounding teaching for social justice focuses on the content of what is taught and the broad political issue of what the ultimate purposes of schooling should be, as opposed to how teachers should ethically uphold their visions and stances. For example, social justice-oriented teachers might argue that schools should help to develop democratic habits, alleviate suffering, cultivate critical consciousness, sustain diversity, and create more

humane social relationships. Little attention has been paid to the practices, virtues, and ethics of the individual teacher—that is, how each upholds this vision in the actual classroom. Indeed, when social justice educators invoke ethics, they sometimes conflate issues related to the macro purposes of schooling, which they name implicitly and explicitly as ethical and moral, with those related to the micro practices and behaviors of teachers. While there is a large body of research on ethics within teaching, this work is rarely integrated into discussions of social justice education.

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In this essay, I explore possible dimensions of an ethics of teaching for democracy and social justice, attempting to bridge the seemingly disparate discourses of critical educational theory and teacher ethics. I argue that the ethics in teaching literature is a valuable, yet often ignored, resource for social justice teachers. It offers activist teachers some powerful ways to think about their dispositions and relationships in the classroom, especially to ensure that they are ethical in their activism. Social justice educators suggest that teachers ought to be activists. What they mean by this is that teachers should be guided by certain values, visions, and beliefs in the classroom and help students to develop the habits necessary for critical democratic citizenship, including such things as open-mindedness, critical thinking, respect, care, compassion, and responsibility. McLaren (2015) argued that “while critical educators should not impose their political agendas on teachers or students, they have a duty and responsibility to share political agendas they find worthy” (pp. 189–190). The distinction between exposure to social justice visions and values and imposition or indoctrination is sometimes very fine. While there is a large body of research and debate on indoctrination in education (e.g., Hanks, 2008; Merry, 2005; Snook, 1972), educators tend to agree that all education involves value-laden choices and that it is impossible to always be explicit about these values.

The tenuousness of the distinction between education and what students perceive as imposition or indoctrination is perhaps most obvious when students resist. I suspect that one of the reasons some students struggle with social justice teachings is because of how they were exposed to them, specifically, from teachers who made them feel stupid, intimidated, guilty, angry, and/or silenced. I am sure many critical educators can offer anecdotes of teachers whose politics we share but whose personal behaviors and character we find questionable, if not ethically problematic. We might also recall moments within our own teaching (or in our teaching evaluations) where students responded negatively to our classroom practices and perhaps even claimed that we were doing something unethical. Just recently, for example, I had a conversation with one of my students who felt that I had bullied her during one of our class sessions, in part because she felt that I was not respecting her belief that racism was an individual behavior, even while I attempted in class to show the problematic foundations of that belief. While she and I worked through her concerns amicably, this experience reminded me of how important my demeanor, behaviors, and comments in the classroom are, regardless of my intentions or that some students might respond to my approach quite favorably.

Reflecting on this interaction with my student while reading Hansen’s (2001) book *Exploring the Moral Heart of Teaching: Toward a Teacher’s Creed*, I was struck by his claim about the crucial role of the teacher in the classroom. Hansen maintained that “no other factor has greater weight in influencing the intellectual and moral quality of the instruction children, youth, and adults receive during their years of classroom experience” (p. 20). Many who have explored the moral dimensions of classroom teaching share this belief about the influence of the individual teacher, who both explicitly and implicitly shapes the moral

climate of the classroom. Teachers always do more than pass along information to students. They influence how students receive that information, think about learning, develop opinions and beliefs, respond to others, and see their places in the world. Yet, despite this influence, few teachers fully reflect on their “moral potency” in classrooms (Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993, p. 293).

Given the important influence of the individual teacher in the classroom, it is surprising that educators who teach for social justice do not pay more attention to teacher ethics in their work. There are certainly some exceptions of teachers who conscientiously attend to issues of ethics in their practice; for example, there is discussion on reflecting on the need for compassion when disrupting students’ worldviews (e.g., Boler, 2004a; Conklin, 2008); on infusing teaching relationships with love (Warren, 2011; hooks, 2010); on “artful facilitation” of classroom discussion (Bettez, 2008, p. 281); and on reflective approaches to dialogue across lines of difference (Boler, 2004b; Parker, 2006). Yet for social justice teachers, issues of ethics are largely embedded in the content of what they teach and the antioppressive ways of seeing that they hope to engender in students. Classroom behaviors, relationships, interactions, and climate are often afterthoughts, except, perhaps, when students resist. In this essay, I argue that teachers who foreground social justice in their work need to reflect more deeply on issues of ethics. While it is not possible, or even advisable, to offer an ethical code for teachers (for reasons I develop later), it is useful to take a step back from our practices—a reflective pause—and to explore ways to ensure our classroom ethics are consistent with our larger social and political visions of justice in the world. As part of this pause, I offer some considerations toward an ethics of activist teaching, recognizing that such an ethic is always provisional and always shaped by the social, cultural, and political contexts of classrooms, schools, and communities and by local and global conditions and realities. Some educational situations may call for compassion and sympathy, while others may require “moral outrage” (Purpel, 2001).

My primary goal is to lay some groundwork for an ethics of activist teaching. While we must advocate for visions of human and communal flourishing in the classroom, we must do so in ethical ways. For example, we must open rather than close dialogue, respect diverse perspectives in genuine ways, provide students with choices, be reflexive, and collaborate with others to ensure we don’t abuse the power of our positions. In developing this vision, I first briefly describing some of the research around teaching for social justice, including purposes, visions, and goals. Second, I discuss the ways in which social justice educators have talked about issues of ethics in their work, for example, in terms of broad political visions as well as in response to resistant students and charges of liberal bias. I illustrate gaps in these efforts, particularly in lack of careful attention to the ethical identity of the individual teacher in the classroom. This gap is particularly noticeable given the large body of research on the ethical and moral dimensions of teaching. Third, I describe some of the ethics in teaching research and the lessons it offers about developing and sustaining moral and ethical relationships in the classroom. Bridging the research on social justice education and teacher ethics

in the fourth and final substantive section, I offer some considerations for activist teachers to help ensure that classroom advocacy is supplemented with ethical practices such that students are respected and valued in the classroom and not silenced, alienated, oppressed, or otherwise harmed. I discuss three areas of virtue—character, intellect, and care—in which social justice teachers must reflect on their classroom practices, and provide an example of a powerful ethical habit related to each virtue: reflective humility, open-mindedness, and sympathetic attentiveness. I offer these examples in the spirit of opening further dialogue on ethical practices in teaching for democracy and social justice.

Education for Social Justice

There is a long tradition of educators who ground their work broadly in commitments to social justice, from social reconstructionists in the first part of the 20th century, including Counts (1932), who dared the schools to build a new social order, to democratic educators, critical pedagogues, multicultural and critical race theorists, cultural studies practitioners, and alterglobalization activists. These scholars analyze oppressive systems and structures in our world and work to transform these so that all people can live more freely, pursuing their passions while also creating the conditions for others to pursue them as well. In her often-cited definition, Bell (1997) argued that social justice is both a goal to be achieved, involving “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs” and a democratic, inclusive, participatory and collaborative process of creating a world where “distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure” (pp. 3–4). It also refers to a “utopian vision” of a “world in which human beings and their relationship with each other and the environment are the determining considerations behind our decisions, not profit” (Choules, 2007, p. 463). Educators who foreground social justice in their work argue that the central purpose of schooling is to create the habits necessary to make deep democracy a reality. This means empowering students to understand the world around them, to identify problems and their root causes, to cultivate imagination, and to collaborate with others in transforming societies so that all people can live full and rich lives.

It has become increasingly common for education programs to center social justice in their missions, visions, curricula, and teacher education programs. In fact, the term *social justice* has become so ubiquitous in educational circles that it has almost become an empty buzzword. After all, who could possibly be against social justice? Despite the way it is sometimes taken up uncritically, there is also a sophisticated theoretical and practical body of research around education for social justice. For example, Oakes and Lipton (2003) argued that those who adopt a social justice perspective on education engage in several complex practices. For example, they consider the values and politics that influence schooling, while also attending to questions of how to teach and organize schools in equitable ways; ask questions about current common-sense educational practices, how they came to be and who they benefit; identify inequalities related to race, class, gender, language, and other social categories; and work to create alternative to these inequalities (p. xiv). Similarly,

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) suggested that social justice advocates recognize that unequal social relations are prevalent at both individual and systemic levels; understand their own positionality in relation to inequalities; think critically about systems, structures, and knowledge; and “act from this understanding, in service of a more just society” (p. 145). Ayers, Quinn, and Stovall (2009) added that social justice education rests on three pillars: equity, activism, and social literacy (p. xiv). They assessed equity in terms of fair access to challenging and enriching educational experiences and the outcomes of schooling. They called for activism from both educators and students, citing the importance of “agency, full participation, preparing youngsters to see and understand, and when necessary, to change all that is before them” (p. xiv). Finally, they argued that learning should be relevant—that social literacy entails critiquing social ills, understanding identity, nourishing connection, challenging oppression, and acting courageously.

Translating these broad goals to the classroom, those who teach for social justice advocate for a particular vision of the world, one where diversity is prized, every student is valued, information is critiqued, and resources are distributed fairly. Contrary to the claims of critics, it does not inherently involve teaching information in one-sided ways, indoctrinating students into specific worldviews, or ignoring the importance of skill development (though if done poorly, it can of course, involve all of these things). Social justice educators argue that no teaching is neutral. Every choice teachers make in classroom—the texts they choose, the assignments they create, the lessons they teach, the relationships they establish, the activities they facilitate, the grades they give—requires taking stances. Moreover, normative values are always passed on as part of the hidden curriculum as well. The charge of bias only makes sense if there is a nonpartisan position that teachers can take, that is, some objective realm where knowledge equals truth, or, alternatively, all possible perspectives on a topic are given equal weight. Critical educators argue that these perspectives are irrational. There is no such objectivity; rather, viewpoints and worldviews are always passed on in whatever we teach. Seeming impartiality supports dominant cultural perspectives; it is not a position from nowhere. Yet as Applebaum (2009) has maintained, teachers who raise questions about injustices and how power operates are accused of “being ‘political,’ ‘partisan,’ and thus ‘imposing’ an ideology, while those who ignore or reject such questions presumably are not” (p. 385).

Social justice-oriented educators are transparent about the values that they believe schools should uphold, most notably, democratic values: concern for minority rights and dignity, commitment to common goods, faith in the power of individuals to solve problems, belief in the importance of an open flow of ideas, use of critical reflection to assess information, and responsibility toward others (Beane & Apple, 2007, p. 7). Social justice teachers believe that schooling should serve broad social purposes, preparing “students to use the knowledge and analytic skills that they develop in school to identify ways in which society and social institutions can treat people more fairly and more humanely” (Westheimer & Suurtamm, 2009, p. 592). As our educational decisions must be grounded in some vision of the good life, social

justice educators name what that vision should be (however provisionally) and develop educational policies, practices, and procedures in the light of this vision. In part, this means teaching in ways that support broadly democratic values. They argue that is the most ethical stance we can take toward our vocation, especially since there is no value neutral way to go about our work.

Ethics in Social Justice Education

When it comes to discussion of ethics, social justice educators argue that all of what they do is connected to a broad social and political vision for the world. This macro vision of an inclusive, supportive, harmonious, communal, and antioppressive world drives the micro decisions made in the classroom, especially around curricular content and classroom arrangements and values. Much of the discussion surrounding social justice teaching involves the goals that such teachers hold for students, for example, “to think independently, critically, and creatively” about curriculum materials, to question dominant narratives, yet to also understand how to succeed sometimes in spite of those narratives (Kumashiro, 2009, p. xxv). It is the larger vision of an inclusive, democratic society that drives micro decisions in the classroom. Translated to the more practical level, this means teachers for social justice are likely to arrange their classroom environments so that student discussion and voices are encouraged, if not frequently centered. They require students to think about the implications of ideas and about how classroom learning relates to social and political realities. They create assignments that ask students to take positions on problems and to defend those positions, as well to act on their knowledge. They challenge racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, xenophobia, and the like in all forms, for example, in reading materials, popular culture, traditional curriculum content, and classroom expression. According to Kumashiro (2009), they sometimes bring students to crisis, where common sense understandings and dominant worldviews are disrupted, leaving students to trouble the knowledge they take for granted in order to open up spaces for new, antioppressive ways of seeing to enter.

Social justice teaching is, in some ways, predicated on discomfort. After all, such teaching challenges dominant, individualistic, meritocratic views of the world, as well as upends the beliefs that our schools provide equality of opportunity and that all citizens are treated equitably in the world, and not more or less privileged simply because of their social positionalities. Leading students to discomfort certainly raises ethical concerns. How should we help them to see the world through different lenses, to disrupt what they think they know, but do so in ethical ways, treating students as complex and thoughtful beings? How do we know when we have pushed students too far, leading them to resist, shut down, and disengage? Even worse, when might our efforts harm students? Alternatively, what experiences and activities might compel students to dwell in discomfort in productive and meaningful ways? Kumashiro (2009) explicitly invoked ethics in his discussion of discomfort and crisis in learning, suggesting that it is actually unethical to approach teaching and learning in ways that are comfortable, confirming, acritical, and reassuring. He wrote, “If students are not experiencing crisis, they are likely not

learning things that challenge the knowledge they have already learned that supports the status quo”; consequently, they are also “not learning to recognize and challenge the oppression that plays out daily in their lives” (p. 32).

It is in the challenge of disrupting students’ worldviews that teachers for social justice most directly reflect on questions of ethics. Of course, on a macro level, teaching for social justice is itself a fundamentally ethical stance, as it entails advocating for a particular vision of the world, one free of oppression and replete with opportunities for all people to flourish. And on this macro level, educators for social justice certainly argue for the ways in which their vision of the world is the most ethical one. When challenged that this vision reflects a liberal, progressive, leftist bias, they have attempted to show that all educational visions are indeed partisan in some ways, yet we have to decide on the broad, shared values we support in society. Teaching to disrupt oppression and create more humane and inclusive systems and structures, and more genuine equality of opportunity, is the stance most consistent with democracy. Bialystok (2014) offered a thoughtful philosophical defense of social justice education, suggesting that it is the position most reflective of liberal democratic values, including respect for pluralism, multiple viewpoints, and individual rights. She invoked legislative mandates in liberal societies (she focused particularly on Canada), “the background set of values or procedures that can be accepted even when they result in policies that citizens disagree with” (p. 420), to support teaching that may seem otherwise overly political or partisan.

In response to the discomfort, and even suffering, that some students (especially those from dominant cultural positions) experience in social justice classes, Boler (2004a) and Conklin (2008) argued that we need to replace their felt sense of loss with compassion and with critical hope. Here they are gesturing toward an ethics of social justice teaching, one that at least initially honors the perspectives, however flawed, that students bring to their own learning and that validates them as multidimensional, complex, unfinished, and potentially thoughtful people. Moreover, such an ethic entails pedagogical relationships and practices of openness, careful attention, observation, dialogue, caring, and humility. It requires that teachers provide alternative ways of seeing and being that students can productively adopt, without feeling mired in guilt and blame. There is no doubt that responding to the challenge of resistant students is an important part of an ethics for activist teaching, and that this is never an easy task. This is especially true when it consumes an inordinate amount of teacher emotional labor and when allowing significant space for resistant students can (however inadvertently) actively harm marginalized students who may be silenced in the very same classrooms where teachers are attending to these privileged students. However, there is more that social justice teachers need to think about in terms of teacher ethics than navigating discomfort and engaging resistance.

In lamenting the absence of attention to issues of teacher ethics in teacher education, Campbell (2013a) suggested that the rapid growth of social justice education has actually impeded efforts to think deeply about the moral agency and ethical identity of teachers. She expressed being especially troubled by the fact that social justice

education has seemingly become “the new ethics of teaching” (p. 217) in both academic and practitioner communities. While I think she exaggerated the prevalence and impact of education for social justice in general, as well as the narrowness of its ethical agenda, her critiques are nonetheless compelling. Succinctly put, she argued that there is glaring absence of attention to ethics in teacher education, despite the existence of a rich tradition in scholarship exploring the “values-infused nuances and complexities of schools and classrooms” (Campbell, 2013b, p. 414). Filling this vacuum, a different ethical language has emerged that replaces consideration of teacher behaviors and virtues with a moral imperative to disrupt oppression, privilege, and power and agitate for equity, resistance, and social change. Campbell (2013b) claimed that “the teacher as an activist conduit” for promoting narrow, ideological orientations has been “prioritized over the cultivation of oneself morally and ethically in relation to others” (p. 415).

Considering the strident and sometimes polemical writings of many critical theorists, it is quite possible to imagine them as dogmatic, overbearing, and aggressive teachers in the classroom, though we actually have few ways of knowing (besides self-report of teachers and students, including the sometimes incendiary comments of conservative students) how teachers for social justice actually teach on the classroom level. Consistent with the visions I have been describing, Cochran-Smith et al. (2009) have argued that teaching for social justice, or what they have called “good and just teaching,” entails advocating for students and working toward larger social transformation. In their extensive, qualitative study of teachers who were educated in a program dedicated to such a social justice mission, they found no evidence that such teachers engaged in indoctrination or even that they engaged in much structural or systemic critique (to the dismay of the researchers). Rather, these teachers enacted their social justice missions most notably in the ways in which they advocated for students by helping them to think critically about knowledge, engaging diverse students and their perspectives, and valuing their students’ linguistic and cultural resources. Here their commitments to social justice were largely exhibited in the individual relationships they created and maintained with students: listening to them, supporting them, pushing them, holding them to high expectations, providing them options, and caring deeply about their success. All of these behaviors point to the moral and ethical character of individual teachers in their relationships with students, rather than these teachers centering their macro political commitments.

Ethics in Teaching

In contrast to a social justice ethic, Campbell (2008, 2013a, 2013b) has argued that we need to pay much more attention to the individual teacher as moral agent and practitioner and attend to the degree to which a teacher exhibits and models ethical virtues and behaviors in the classroom (as opposed to advocates for specific social and political visions). She drew on the scholarship in ethical practice in teaching and the virtues of ethical practitioners to lobby for a reclaiming of the discourse of teacher ethics, suggesting that a social justice agenda is, at best, a distraction and, at worst, a form of

indoctrination into a narrow, politically radical worldview. For her, ethical teaching primarily entails upholding a range of seemingly universal virtues or uncontested goods in the classroom: honesty, fairness, compassion, care, constancy, diligence, dedication, practical wisdom, respect, courage, integrity, personal responsibility, patience, empathy, trustworthiness, beneficence, civility, kindness, conscientiousness, etc. These values and virtues should compel teachers to treat all students with respect (and perhaps especially those who hold viewpoints that challenge those of the teacher); initiate “genuinely open and balanced examination and critique of opposing perspectives on knowledge” (presumably including those that are inconsistent with the vision of democracy upheld by social justice advocates); ensure impartial judgments of student work; and uphold “the principle of autonomy so that students are never treated as a means to larger personal, social, or indeed, political ends” (Campbell, 2013a, p. 226).

While now somewhat dated, there is a large body of research on moral and ethical issues in teaching. Among the path-breaking and representative works in this area are Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik’s (1990) *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching* and Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen’s (1993) *The Moral Life of Schools*. Both books are based on large-scale studies, the first of teacher education programs and the second of teachers in schools, and both aimed to identify and call attention to the moral dimensions of schooling, which even then they argued were overlooked in favor of more practical, technical, behavioristic issues related to teaching methods (as if these issues could be understood absent consideration of their moral dimensions). The authors of these studies implicitly and explicitly connected teacher professionalism with maintaining ethical behavior in the classroom. They also illustrated the myriad ways in which morality is embedded in even the most mundane classroom practices.

After extensive observations of teachers in classrooms, Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) created a “taxonomy,” or “observer’s guide,” of eight categories for exploring the salient moral dimensions of teaching (p. 3). These categories are moral instruction as part of the curriculum, moral instruction within the regular curriculum (e.g., as part of English and social studies classes), rituals and ceremonies, visual displays with moral content, spontaneous interjection of moral commentary into an ongoing activity, classroom rules and regulations, morality of the curriculum substructure (how classrooms are organized, perspectives are valued, knowledge is presented), and expressive morality within the classroom (the manner in which teachers carry themselves in the classroom) (pp. 4–42). They suggested that the three last categories, reflective of the more implicit ways in which morality is displayed in classrooms, have the most moral potency and thus require our greatest amount of attention. They offered that the “unintentional outcomes of schooling, the ones teachers and administrators seldom plan in advance, are of greater moral significance—that is, more likely to have enduring effects—than those that are intended and consciously sought” (p. 44). This reminder of the importance of the moral hidden curriculum of schooling is still relevant today, including for those who are committed to education for social justice who may not pay

sufficient attention to their own positionality and expression of moral agency in the classroom.

The chapter authors in *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching* also have attempted to reinvigorate public conversation about teacher ethics, focusing directly on issues related to the everyday practices of teachers, the moral dilemmas in classroom, and the need for community building as part of the moral mission of education. For example, Fenstermacher (1990) reflected on the habits, behavior, and dispositions of teachers—their manner in the classroom—most notably because teachers are always models for their students. That is, “the particular and concrete meaning of such traits as honesty, fair play, consideration of others, tolerance, and sharing are ‘picked up,’ as it were, by observing, imitating, and discussing what teachers do in classrooms” (p. 133). Sirotnik (1990) offered five ethical roots to ground teachers’ work, expressed in terms of commitments to rational inquiry; knowledge generation; competence in the classroom; caring relationships; and freedom, well-being, and social justice (pp. 298–304). On the whole, the perspectives in this book are reflective of a general tenor in the work surrounding teacher ethics, namely a somewhat individualistic perspective. In this body of research, the focus is on the important role of teachers in the classroom and the ways in which they interact and build relationships with students, as well as model ethical conduct. What is sometimes lacking is critical reflection on the context in which teachers work and on the larger mission of schooling, which are precisely the passions of social justice educators. Lisman (1991) offered just this critique of *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching*, asserting that the various visions offered in the book lacked a critical pedagogy and instead focused too narrowly on individual teachers’ behaviors. While teachers need to reflect on their own practices, they also need to understand how they are “socially situated” beings, “embedded in a political economy,” where justice and empowerment should be as important as goals like mutual respect and encouragement (p. 233).

Historically, prospective teachers were likely to take classes in ethics or philosophy of education. Even if they didn’t take semester-long classes in these areas, they were exposed to ethics as part of disciplinary-based foundations-of-education classes (history, philosophy, and sociology of education), which have been increasingly replaced by required courses in multiculturalism and diversity. Now in its fifth edition, Strike and Soltis’s (2009) work on ethics in teaching reflects an approach that used to be more dominant in teacher education, namely, asking students to explore the ethical dimensions of common classroom dilemmas. After introducing students to consequentialist and principle-based ethical theories, they offered several case studies for students to think about, using the tools of these theories. These cases revolved around such issues as punishment and due process, intellectual freedom, religion, multiculturalism, democracy, and professionalism. They suggested that studying real dilemmas through the lens of ethical theories enables students to “understand and think clearly about what is at stake in hard cases,” thereby enabling students to make ethical choices (p. 18). Nash (2002) also helped educators think through the multilayered ethical dimensions of practice by asking them to consider three moral languages that

influence their ways of being in the world: personal background beliefs, character, and moral principles. His goal has been to help educators to improve, “deepen, enrich, [and] crystallize” their own moral languages, understandings, and tools for analysis (p. 31). His work has been particularly influential in professional ethics, though it is also relevant for prospective and practicing teachers as well.

Rather than dismissing or ignoring the work done on teacher ethics, I argue that it is worthwhile for social justice educators to revisit this research, as it offers a range of resources that we can draw upon to think more critically about the moral dimensions of our work. Sure, there are significant limitations. The focus on individual behaviors absent sufficient attention to social and political context is one. So too is the universal language of virtues, as if we all share a common understanding of what such things as respect, compassion, and fairness look like. Valenzuela’s (1999) study of the politics of caring in schools is an important reminder that virtues are never culturally neutral or universal. She showed how both the White students and the Latino students in the large public high school where she conducted an ethnography desired caring teachers, yet teachers and students understood the meaning and practice of caring in dramatically different ways. The predominantly White teachers and staff expected students to “demonstrate caring about schooling with an abstract, or *aesthetic* commitment to ideas or practices that purportedly lead to achievement.” Alternatively, Latino students craved a more “*authentic* form of caring that emphasizes relationships of reciprocity between teachers and students” (p. 61). Yet despite these differences, it is nonetheless useful to reflect deeply on what it means to care in particular contexts and to discuss this with students and colleagues. This reflection is part of the “pause” I am calling for teachers to take, especially those of us driven by social justice visions. Indeed, reflection is an important overriding component of the ethics of activist teaching that I am sketching in this essay.

Ethics of Activist Teaching

There is little formal or sanctioned guidance for teachers that relates to ethical behavior in the classroom, besides some legal restrictions and the broad principle of non-maleficence, or that teachers should do no harm. The National Education Association (n.d.) offers a code of ethics for the education profession that provides some general guidelines for teachers as they live out their expected commitments to students. For example, such teachers should not restrict students’ independent thinking, deny them access to multiple perspectives, suppress or distort alternative viewpoints deliberately, treat students unfairly because of their social positionality, exclude students unnecessarily, embarrass or disparage students intentionally, or disclose confidential information. Yet it is not always clear how to live out these commitments during the day-to-day moments of classroom life, especially when every decision a teacher makes potentially carries moral weight.

Focusing primarily on the work of educational leaders, Gunzenhauser (2012) argued that one of the marks of ethical educators is that they actively develop a philosophy of education (a larger vision of educational purposes and values) and “recognize

themselves as powerful in relation to others” (p. 9). Such leaders balance their social justice visions, which should entail resisting high-stakes accountability schemes, with developing ethical relationships of responsibility that are “interpersonal (the responsibility an educator has toward herself or himself), relational (responsibilities toward proximal others), and public (responsibilities educators have toward all others)” (p. 8). He maintained that an important part of developing and sustaining ongoing ethical relationships is regular reflection on one’s philosophy of education, which “provides answers to significant questions about the purpose and value of education and the kinds of persons we wish to come out of education” (p. 32). As we consider desired outcomes, we also must reflect on the means, methods, and ways in which we teach and create classroom environments that support the visions we hold and the outcomes we seek.

While the NEA code of ethics is a useful starting place for considering classroom ethics, it is not rich or complex enough to provide much guidance for all the everyday ways in which educators must live out their ethical commitments in the classroom. In fact, no code of ethics can adequately address the complexities of living an ethical life. At best, such guidelines provide some things to think about; at worst, they limit ethical thinking by providing an abstract list of expectations and prohibitions for teachers, absent context and the inevitable uniqueness of each educational environment. Following rules and acting ethically are not the same thing, especially when the rules privilege some groups of people over others. At the same time, I agree with Campbell (2013b) that “teachers can not leave ethics up to chance and assume that their own good character will permeate their intentions and actions” (p. 426). Instead, we need some systematic ways of thinking broadly about ethical issues in education, as well as about our own habits and behaviors in the classroom.

In his thoughtful reflection on the complex and complicated call for assessing future teachers in terms of dispositions, Sockett (2009) argued that we ought to think about dispositions in the language of virtues. He suggested that as ethical professionals, teachers must uphold virtues in three broad areas: character, intellect, and care. He wrote that “*character* describes the kind of person the teacher is. *Intellect* is the teacher’s stock-in-trade, however the curriculum is constructed. [And] teachers have children placed in their *care*” (p. 296). These broad areas of virtue provide a powerful starting place for social justice teachers to reflect on their own classroom practices, positionality, and ethics. While there are certainly other broad disposition areas that are relevant to educators, I draw on these because they are particularly useful for social justice teachers as they reflect on challenges they face in the classroom. They open up spaces for dialogue related to how one might perform ethically as an activist in the classroom, for example, in the face of difficult or resistant students. There is much to consider under each of the three areas. They don’t offer prescriptions or narrowly defined expectations for action. Rather, thinking about ethics in these three ways provides some rich resources for taking seriously the ethical dimensions of our work and for thinking about some of the lessons learned by activist teachers who struggle with resistance

and accusations of bias in the classroom. As a way of encouraging more genuine dialogue about activist teacher ethics, I briefly describe each of these broad virtue areas and discuss one powerful habit under each: reflective humility as an aspect of character, open-mindedness as part of intellect, and sympathetic attentiveness as a form of caring. I offer these as provocations more than principles, while also maintaining that teachers for social justice ought to be regularly reflecting upon and talking about ethics in our work. Of course, there are many additional habits related to character, intellect, and care that are worthy of exploration as well. Here, my primary goal is to open up conversations about what it means to ethically teach for social justice; these three habits offer a good place to begin.

Reflective Humility

While I struggle with the conservative and universal language of character and the problematic ways in which character education in practice is often tantamount to behavioristic and individualistic exhortations to follow rules and work hard (Kohn, 1997), in a broad sense, the character of an individual teacher does matter. We certainly want to be good people in the classroom, moral exemplars in terms of how we carry ourselves and live meaningful and thoughtful lives. Character virtues include such things as trustworthiness, integrity, sincerity, self-knowledge, courage, perseverance, and persistence. Ongoing self-reflection is an especially important part of good character. Critical self-reflection involves exploring our own choices and beliefs from different angles and perspectives, and perhaps even more importantly, dialogue with diverse others and openness to seeing ourselves through their eyes. It entails recognizing moments when we become defensive or frustrated, trying to look at them through multiple lenses, and being open to having our convictions challenged.

Reflective humility further requires a special kind of listening to others, with open hearts and minds, and vulnerability “enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (Delpit, 2006, p. 47). It may be that this listening sometimes best occurs outside of classroom spaces, as Applebaum (2009) suggested for teachers dealing with homophobic students whom we ought not let harm other students with hateful rhetoric. Curtailing classroom expressions of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and the like does not inevitably mean silencing or oppressing students who hold such narrow beliefs, even as it is ethical to limit their public expression. This special kind of listening points to the need for reflection coupled with humility. Boler (2004a) described this as “the ability to listen to others as we forge connections and the courage to recognize that our perspectives and visions are partial and striving and must remain open to change” (pp. 130–131). While reflective humility does not mean we withhold our social and political commitments from students, it does require that we share them in ways that model genuine openness to other potential beliefs, values, and worldviews. This openness of character is also connected to an intellectual open-mindedness, a second category of virtue worthy of consideration as part of an ethics of activist teaching.

Open-Mindedness

In *How We Think*, Dewey (1933) described open-mindedness as an intellectual attitude that requires habits of listening to multiple perspectives, heeding facts and alternative explanations, and recognizing “the possibility of error even in the beliefs that are dearest to us” (p. 30). I suspect that many of us who teach for social justice are not as open to studying or even considering alternative perspectives as we sometimes think or say we are. This is not surprising, especially when we hold our commitments to diversity, equity, democracy, and social justice so deeply and passionately. While at some point in our careers, we might have seriously considered more conservative viewpoints, it is easy to fall into the habit of only reading, assigning, and attending to the works of scholars who share our passions and commitments. Similarly, it is easy to dismiss perspectives that challenge our own because we think we already know the problematic foundations upon which they rest. It is also easy to create assessments that ask students to think in fairly narrow ways that are already familiar to us, instead of to challenge our assumptions and knowledge, and perhaps offer us new ways of seeing. Yet genuine open-mindedness means we need to recognize the limits of our own knowledge, convey to students our sense that all knowledge is provisional, seek out alternative viewpoints, and keep abreast of new ideas in our fields.

Hare (2007, pp. 216–217) offered a series of questions students can ask of teachers to assess whether they are truly open-minded. I suggest we turn these on ourselves as a way to reflect on our own disposition (or lack of one) toward open-mindedness as we work toward social justice in the classroom. We should ask ourselves: Do I remind students not to take my word as authority but to consult other sources of information? Am I transparent about the ways I have shaped the curriculum, and do I welcome feedback from students? Do I identify moments where I am uncertain about ideas or call attention to the controversial nature of some positions? Do I read widely and welcome diverse perspectives? Do I pose genuine questions or simply ask questions in order to elicit a desired response? Do I listen respectfully to student questions, or do I rely on ready-made responses to student queries?

Sympathetic Attentiveness

Reflecting on questions related to our own open-mindedness is part of what it means to care about our students and all that they bring to our classrooms. I don't know a single teacher who would not claim caring as a central aspect of their work. Yet caring can be operationalized in many different ways, and as Noddings (2002) has reminded us, the cared-for must experience a relationship as caring in order for it to be truly caring. Caring is not simply about holding good intentions or about being kind and supportive. Moreover, it can be enacted in varied ways depending upon culture, context, and student needs.

Much has been written about what it means to care. In the context of teaching for social justice, I argue for the habit of sympathetic attentiveness as part of the broader virtue of caring. When we are sympathetically attentive, we try to understand others' (especially our students') experiences and why they believe what they believe, even when these beliefs are problematic. We are

generous in our assessment of others' ways of thinking and being. In calling for compassion in teacher education, Conklin (2008) maintained that “teacher educators are unlikely to change the teacher's views by first condemning their existing attitudes” (p. 665). Instead, we must show the socially constructed and limited nature of these attitudes, providing students with compelling alternatives to what they take for granted. When we are thoughtfully attentive to students, as opposed to implicitly and explicitly judgmental and accusatory, we are more likely to uncover spaces of openness and possibility. We are also more likely to trouble our own sometimes overly confident and excessively strident approaches in the classroom. We are also more prone to be generous in our dealings with others. This means assuming good intentions rather than nefarious ones, and believing that we are all unfinished people, capable of growth and transformation.

In studying the moral life of schools, Jackson et al. (1993) reflected on the power of sympathetic attentiveness and generosity toward our students, implicitly suggesting it means we try to see our students and their work “in the best light possible,” looking for strengths rather than weaknesses. It means we are able to build on students' contributions to discussion, turning them “around until they make better sense, asking questions about them or rephrasing them in a way that makes them more substantial than when they were first stated” (p. 259). It means we recognize our own visceral reactions to students and work to ensure we do not unintentionally (e.g., through gestures, bodily reactions, facial expressions) dismiss, demean, or alienate them. Of course, there is no simple way to do this, and there is a danger of spending excessive class time on students whose oppressive comments and perspectives silence and harm other students. No rules or codes of ethics can prevent this from happening; however, I argue that habits of care, manifest in sympathetic attentiveness and concurrent generosity, are more likely to open up genuine spaces of learning than confrontation or silencing. Ethical, activist teachers must always treat students ethically, as ends in themselves, not simply as potential conduits for sharing certain social and political values. We need to always be engaged in negotiating ethically charged and thus potentially challenging classroom spaces. This work is never complete.

Conclusion

One of the fundamental assumptions of educators who are committed to social justice in their work is that in our current oppressive, inequitable, neoliberal social and political climate, teacher neutrality is impossible. Given pervasive social injustice in the world, teachers must become activists. This means that they need “to understand the competing political, economic, and social forces in education, become less apologetic for their views, and become more confident in resisting the dominant discourses in order to advocate for those typically marginalized and powerless in society” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 392). Indeed, critical teachers argue that because schooling is always partisan, it inevitably requires supporting some perspectives and positions and not others. Teachers must always make choices about what material to teach, how to present that material, how to engage their students, and

whether to support or resist directives (for example, teaching toward tests). Yet there is a fine line between implicitly and explicitly advocating for certain values in the classroom, which is vital to democracy, and imposition, manipulation, and indoctrination, which are oppressive and threaten democracy. Throughout this essay, I have argued that we need an ethics of activism in order to best navigate this fine line.

There are contemporary scholars whose work provides us additional resources for creating an ethics of activist teaching. For example, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2014) have challenged the idea that there are safe classroom spaces where all voices and agendas should be given an audience. They troubled guidelines that call for a certain kind of tolerance, respect, and equal time in the classroom, because these often privilege dominant perspectives. Moreover, valuing all students' opinions means regular microaggressions are committed against marginalized students (for example, allowing the religious expression of homophobia). They have offered instead some dispositional goals for both students and teachers, for example, striving for intellectual humility, differentiating between opinion and knowledge, and noticing our own reactions (for example, defensiveness or frustration), and using these to initiate deeper self-reflection about our beliefs, habits, and classroom choices.

Similarly, based upon their longitudinal study of high school classes where students discussed controversial, and sometimes polarizing, political issues, McAvoy and Hess (2013) also have offered recommendations for how to teach contentious issues in ethical, non-proselytizing ways. They suggest teachers should select issues carefully and because they "embody conflicts between fundamental values," help students to understand the "the difference between open and closed" empirical and policy questions, embrace ideological diversity, and "carefully monitor their own behavior so that they are not interfering with the deliberative potential in the classroom by adopting the divisive practices of polarized politics" (p. 36). This last recommendation resonates with the argument that I have been making throughout this essay about the need for ethical, open, reflective, attentive, and responsible practices in the classroom.

In some ways it is a shame that discussions of teacher ethics are no longer prominent in teacher education, even as our approaches were often too behavioristic and individualistic, as well as entrenched within dominant cultural norms and perspectives. If it is indeed true that teaching for social justice has become the primary space within teacher education where we implicitly and explicitly teach about ethics, then it is incumbent upon those of us who teach such classes to be more thoughtful about how we approach issues as well as how we position ourselves within the classroom. It is unlikely that courses in philosophy, foundations, or ethics for teachers will ever become common again, especially given the seemingly never-ending range of expectations we place on teacher education students. However, we can be creative about the spaces where we revitalize talk of teacher habits and dispositions and include these more prominently in our social justice classes. As the language of dispositions is central to teacher accreditation bodies, it should not be hard to talk more about

dispositions, and concurrently ethics, throughout teacher education core classes. Moreover, we can more conspicuously model the kinds of dispositions I have discussed in our own classes.

While I share the values, passions, and commitments of social justice educators and indeed consider myself a teacher who centers social justice in my work, I also think we need to regularly reflect on our commitments and how we strive to enact them in classrooms. We have all probably heard too many stories of unethical practices enacted under the banner of good intentions and in the spirit of values we share. Reflecting on issues of ethics in activism is one important way to help maintain consistency between our expressed values and actual classroom practices. We have a rich practical and scholarly literature on the moral and ethical dimensions of education, especially on the micro classroom level. This body of research provides important insights into how to best maintain caring, respectful, responsible, and supportive relationships in the classroom. It is worthwhile for social justice educators to revisit some of this research and to engage in more sustained dialogue with our colleagues and students about the ethical dimensions of our practice. I hope my thoughts here have provided some provocations to help in these important efforts.

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