

Rethinking “Social” Education: A Personal Narrative

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Abstract

“Social” education is fraught with impositions, deficit approaches, and even racist mindsets in dealing with teaching and learning tied particularly to ethnicity, race, gender, ability, and choice. As a result, critical approaches in education addressing issues in “Social” education are vital for the world of the 21st century. The research question for this investigation is “What are personal and professional perceptions regarding a rethinking of social education?” Such a question requires a qualitative methodology focusing on critical narrative. Findings suggest current education practice serves the interests of those in power and merely contributes to issues in social education.

Social Education (a working description): Addressing economic, social, political, environmental and equity issues in education in a local to global context connected to ethnicity, race, class, gender, age, ability, orientation, and culture leading to critical consciousness and civic engagement.

Introduction

“Social” education is fraught with impositions, deficit approaches, and even racist mindsets in dealing with teaching and learning tied particularly to ethnicity, race, gender, ability, and choice. And with the education reform movement equity and social justice is discarded as the priority is not about human endeavor. Achievement and accountability since Sputnik really, have become the education mantra for any and almost all “Reform”. Challenging the public framing of education has also been the constant approach from the right since A Nation at Risk at least, with these “Reformers” using quantitative data as their fodder.

Issues of generalizability, objectivity, reliability, validity, essentialism, accountability, achievement and the like are often applied in a business model. Such approaches deny the richness in education of detailing human experiences. Again, within a social education framework, critical implies consistent exploration and investigation of social issues through a social justice lens. The idea is that most human endeavor is socially constructed and that both individual and collaborative experiences are needed for us to develop into socially conscious beings focusing on advocacy and activism. Citizenship necessitates awareness first, but most important, critical action allowing for multiple perspectives,

questions rather than answers, and ongoing flexibility regarding the mediation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Issues and Rationale

Hickey [1] suggests several epistemological commandments for critical approaches to “Social” education.

- Demonstrate incredulity toward claims of grand truths or meta-narratives.
- Resist contexts that marginalize people in any situation.
- Commit to betterment, assistance, hope, and emancipation in all human experiences.
- Challenge any practice that marginalizes based on race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, class, age, ability, or belief.
- Question unbridled capitalism and privatization.
- Champion multiple perspectives, diversity, and human experiences.
- Promote advocacy and activism for basic human rights and democracy for all.
- Continue a lifelong work for societal transformation toward equity and social justice.

A primary goal is to investigate the world critically with the hope of ultimate transformation for social justice. A process that integrates awareness, advocacy, activism/ action, and assessment is a model for educators and their students to address societal issues. This process for learning and engagement is ongoing in that once through the process one (or the group) should begin again with new questions or issues. Everything can and should be adapted depending on what is investigated and discovered along the way. According to Kincheloe [2], such strategies seek historical contextualization, multiple perspectives, individual and collaborative approaches and a diversity of knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Literature Review - Implications for the 21st Century

Critical approaches in education addressing issues in “Social” education are vital for the world of the 21st century. The onslaught of privatization, corporatization, standardization, testing, and the continuing attack on public schools and educators necessitate critical approaches to teaching and learning along with critical qualitative research in social education. Ongoing issues with equity and social justice tied to race, ethnicity, class, orientation, age, and ability linking to schooling, education, teaching and learning must be addressed. The struggle between unbridled capitalism and democracy warrant these investigations in the 21st century, hopefully leading to advocacy and activism.

Empowering and emancipating educators and students requires a redesigning of schooling to demonstrate a truly democratic way of life, to be consistent with the ideals of equity and social justice, to be informed by research that is “Educative” [3]. According to Goodman, Ullrich and Nana [4], a “Triple consciousness” based on Freire’s critical consciousness is much needed for equity and social justice in a teaching and learning context. We must model critical multicultural, social justice education (culturally responsive pedagogy), work to transform perspectives of all education, society and its stakeholders, and engage in critical research leading to advocacy and activism.

We must continually challenge the corporatized, unequal, and essentialist framing of education. Education is both a political and ethical endeavor hoping to facilitate critically active students anxious to engage in the world. Linking the process to the community and the world provides the context we all need to understand and advocate for equity and social justice. A critical qualitative research in social education that investigates these hard issues locally and globally can only lead to empowering educators and students as change agents.

Methods

Most any qualitative educational research should consist of a personal narrative. This enables the researcher to posit claims of authenticity, bias, subjectivity and intended focus; and also

facilitates depth of research. This also allows for the research problem or issue and rationale to be stated tied to the goals of the researcher. It is important in critical qualitative research, especially in investigating issues of equity and social justice (i.e. social education) for the researcher to write through these “Issues”. Qualitative research in general claims no generalizability and in fact intentionally focuses on the human endeavor, thus the particular story to be explored.

The research question for this investigation is “What are personal and professional perceptions regarding a rethinking of social education?” Such a question requires a qualitative methodology focusing on critical narrative. Narrative is a mode of inquiry and begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals [5]. In this case the researcher is the author of whose lived experiences related to social education is documented throughout the paper, including the personal narrative component itself. Stories are collected, analyzed for themes, with analysis of meaning and implications addressed as well. Restorying is included to ensure appropriate themes. Finally, the findings are shared and implications included.

Narrative

Social education is quite a journey. Yes, it really is about the journey and not the destination. It began for me many years ago; sure, school and all that, but perhaps more so with the presidential election of 1964 and church during my “Formative” years. I fondly remember my third grade teacher, Mrs. Barnes, who allowed me to explore and question, even at the age of 9. But it was the experience of handing out President Lyndon Johnson literature that sticks with me to this day. That, and standing up in church and asking why and are you sure questions of the preacher.

Life experience leads us in our social education journey. Learning to play the school game, vacations to state capitals and civil war battle sites, reading, volunteering, then trips abroad. All contributed to my social education story. But perhaps as important formatively as any other was the 1972 presidential campaign. I was 16 and seven of my friends and I spent hours campaigning in Houston for George McGovern. When he lost I remember driving the endless freeways of Houston until the early hours of the morning screaming out the window that all was lost. I really think that pushed my cynicism to the edge. It has been a constant struggle ever since - and the social education journey has provided the balance. I often tip over the edge and shout out about injustice, fascism, or the like - but I do come back.

The seeds were sown... but it took the freedom of the academy to allow for further development. Beginning with traditional social studies education and bridging from there with collaborations with prospective teachers, graduate students, other professors, schools, teachers, and the community, allowed additional critical investigation. The social studies program area morphed into social

education with courses focused on critical pedagogy, popular culture, and social issues. Projects took hold focusing on global education, international experiences, and rethinking American history. Students graduated carrying a torch for something called social education - something that has no “True” definition, that is always evolving and always questioning, but nevertheless is comprised of some general themes.

The social education journey comes from within. Rilke [6] said it well, “The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens” (p. 36). And yes, it really is all about the journey and not the destination. Our personal journeys began for each of us years ago with school, life, family, and friends. We have been bombarded by history, politics, and current events ever since we can remember; and we have always questioned the status quo, especially with respect to issues of social justice. We do not just teach social studies, we teach social education, and are delighted when students leave our classes smiling and shaking their heads, trying to make it all make sense. What in this lesson connects with you we will ask at every opportunity? Students tell us, too. They want to do history and geography, economics and popular culture. They do not want to sit and have it “Done to them.” So, that is what we do. We debate, we question, we make movies and plan programs, we make mistakes, we march the streets and halls, and we investigate the community. Our students teach us more than we could ever teach them. Life experience leads us along our social education journey. Learning to play the school game, learning to tell what matters, vacations to state capitals and Civil War battle sites, reading, volunteering, trips abroad . . . all contribute to our travels. The seeds were sown early on . . . but it took the freedom of the academy to allow the forging of a new path.

The journey of social education leads travelers down a mysterious path with “White spaces” on a map that continuously need to be examined. An exploration into the heart of social education has been fraught with twists and turns requiring us to realign our internal compass and hold tight to our traveling partners. Navigating this social education journey we discover that each traveler’s itinerary is an individualized process allowing for divergent teaching and learning opportunities. In this context, the “White spaces” are rough-hewn educational landscapes that create exhilarating learning experiences - well worth the effort in the end in spite of the difficulties one encounters when exploring the road that is “Wanting wear” [7]. Social education requires shared moments from our travel log, which highlight our attempt to defy the “Well-trodden” social studies path to choose the “Less traveled” [7] pathway toward social education.

Conclusion

Theoretical underpinnings originate from Dewey [8], Freire [9], Kincheloe [10], Giroux [11], and Gay [12] among many others.

While each uniquely adds to the critical pedagogical approaches to education praxis, taken together, they contribute a strong theoretical foundation that stresses continued investigation and questioning in social education. A personal journey should also be documented. Each also suggests that current education practice serves the interests of those in power and merely contributes to issues in social education. It is therefore vital that educators and students conduct ongoing investigations by addressing equity and social justice within curriculum, instruction, assessment, as well as the “Big picture” of education through questions such as the following:

- What issues emerge in making sense of “Social” education?
- How do equity and social justice “Fit” into this sense making?
- What are the implications given the current directions of education?
- How does awareness, advocacy, action / activism and assessment play into efficacy and participation as citizens of the world?
- How can we better empower students and educators in “Reading the world”?

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