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AUTHOR Houser, Neil O.
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ABSTRACT

The curricula and instructional approaches often used in elementary school classrooms, which too often avoid difficult issues, may restrict the social development needed to promote societal well-being. This problem is exacerbated in the early grades, where the discussion of controversial social issues seemingly contradicts the goal of maintaining an emotionally safe classroom environment. This paper defines the problem, discusses social development in the elementary classroom, and considers factors related to balancing safety and dissonance. A major portion of the paper examines the efforts of three teachers who have managed, each in her own way, to balance dissonance and safety in the early education classroom by: (1) addressing rather than avoiding perplexing social issues, (2) balancing social development and classroom safety, and (3) addressing social inequities through activities in the classroom. These teachers' perspectives and experiences provide a basis for discussing citizenship education in the early grades. (Contains 23 references.) (DR)

FROM UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION: CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

Neil O. Houser, Ph.D

College of Education

University of Oklahoma

Norman, OK 73019-0260

Work: (405)-325-1498

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Abstract

Highly sanitized curricula and instructional approaches often exist in elementary classrooms. These factors restrict the social development needed to promote societal well-being. This problem is exacerbated in the early grades where the discussion of controversial social issues seemingly contradicts the goal of maintaining an emotionally safe classroom environment. This paper examines the efforts of three teachers who have managed, each in her own way, to balance dissonance and safety in the early elementary classroom. These teachers' perspectives and experiences provide a basis for discussing citizenship education in the early grades in general.

FROM UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION: CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM

American educators have long been concerned with the social development of individual citizens for the greater good of society (e.g., Banks, 1987; Dewey, 1916; Greene, 1988; Stanley, 1985).1 However, social studies in the elementary classroom is limited by numerous factors, including competition for time and materials, low teacher interest and student enthusiasm, and reluctance to address controversial social issues (e.g., Houser, 1995). The result is the perpetuation of highly sanitized educational approaches that do little to promote personal development for the improvement of society. This problem is pervasive in the early grades where attention to difficult (e.g., controversial, personally threatening) social issues seemingly contradicts the larger goal of maintaining an emotionally safe classroom environment (e.g., Houser, 1995; Paley, 1992). This paper examines the efforts of three teachers who have managed, each in her own way, to address such issues in the early elementary classroom.2 Their perspectives provide a basis for discussing early social education in general.

Defining the Problem

Since societies consist of individuals, the nature of any society is ultimately influenced by the perspectives and actions of its individual members (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hewitt, 1991). Societal improvement in a pluralistic, democratic nation such as our own requires individual citizens to develop deeper understanding and greater identification with a broader cross-section of sociocultural others (Baldwin, 1988; Banks, 1989; Houser, 1996). This suggests that curriculum and instruction should be fundamentally influenced by multiple social perspectives and needs (e.g., Banks, 1989; Noddings, 1992; Nieto, 1992). Moreover, as the students' sociocultural understandings increase, they should be encouraged to explore the implications for their public and private actions in their everyday lives. The larger goal is the promotion of responsible (e.g., informed, concerned, self-critical) social participation for the improvement of society

(Banks, 1989; Greene, 1988; Shaver, 1977). Increasing and translating social development into responsible action is the underlying concern of this paper.

Social Development in the Elementary Classroom

Social development, like psychological growth of any kind, involves a struggle to resolve the cognitive dissonance (i.e., the sense of uncertainty or disequilibrium) created by the contemplation of new experiences and ideas (e.g., Piaget, 1972). Like other forms of understanding, this struggle is mediated by language as discussion and reflection are used to reconcile unsettling propositions and existing beliefs (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1986). It is not enough simply to have an experience. Nor is it sufficient to conduct discussions without an adequate experiential base. Optimum social development requires not only the having of experiences, but discussing and reflecting upon those experiences as well. Neither is complete without the other.

Unfortunately, attention to substantive social issues in early elementary classrooms can be limited by various factors, including limited time and materials, frustration with traditional social studies approaches, and resistance to social criticism and self-examination (Houser, 1995). Such constraints help perpetuate sanitized practices which, in turn, restrict social development. Although sanitized approaches exist across grade levels, they are pervasive in the early grades where cognitive dissonance related to social dilemmas seems to contradict the teacher's care-giving role and desire to maintain an emotionally safe classroom environment (e.g., Houser, 1995; Paley, 1992).

Balancing Safety and Dissonance

Fortunately, it is possible to examine controversial concerns without unduly compromising affective safety. For example, Paley's introduction of the new rule "You can't say you can't play" in her kindergarten class promoted substantive personal and social critique without destroying the overall comfort of the

classroom environment. Indeed, Paley concluded it is not only possible but necessary to challenge students' perspectives and actions if the classroom is to be a secure place for everyone. Her conclusion is reinforced by the teachers in this study.

Juanita

Consider the approach of a first grade teacher in her sixth year of practice. Like many elementary teachers, Juanita sought to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere. Her desire to make "learning interesting for the children" and to teach them "to get along with each other" was influenced by her own educational experience. The silencing that had begun for her as a child growing up in the south had continued into Juanita's adulthood as an African American teacher in a predominantly white school. Juanita's personal recollections reinforced her commitment to help make learning "positive":

> I want children to enjoy learning....I would want to make [learning] positive because I didn't think that all my learning was all that positive.

Although Juanita wanted to maintain a comfortable environment, she understood that this goal does not necessarily preclude difficult social issues. Indeed, like Paley, she realized that safety often necessitates addressing rather than avoiding such matters:

> Right now I have one little girl who is white, who is the product of an uh uh adulturous relationship. And, she talks about it all the time. So my thing is now how do I--and I have one, a black, a little black girl who moved here from Louisiana who is a product of a divorced family, a divorce--and both of them express it, usually in tears. And so my thing is how do I bring that to the class? I mean, not to the class, but how do I make them [the two girls] aware...that what...they are experiencing is not uncommon?

She continued:

> There are other children [in class] that are spending this week with Dad and this week with Mom who are dealing with it very well. And then there are like these two who are having a very difficult time. My struggle right now is how am I...going to bring their situations sort of into the light so that the ones that are dealing with it very well can say, "Oh well, I don't live with my dad either"?

Thus, Juanita addressed rather than avoiding perplexing social issues. Moreover, realizing that the social environment represents a valuable instructional resource, Juanita utilized her class to affirm the two students with whom she was most concerned:

> This is [something] that just stands out so much that I feel like I need to meet it, I need to address it. And not necessarily one on one with the student. Maybe by letting the children realize that, you know, just make them aware of what is around them. By letting them know that there are other people...who are going through the same sort of thing.

In addition to utilizing her class to create a more comfortable atmosphere, Juanita also used academic tools such as children's literature:

> [I also deal with these problems] through a book or an activity or when we talk about family....Books in particular...There are quite a few out that deal with situations like that. There are some that deal with death, interracial relationships, divorce, I mean all sorts of things.

Juanita's approach required perseverence and sophistication. Recognizing that difficult social issues need attention rather than avoidance, Juanita dealt with loneliness, divorce and other sensitive matters in effective yet supportive ways. She used academic resources (e.g., the children's literature, which also served as the basis of her literacy program) and nonacademic means (e.g., the social environment; the students

themselves) to confront the unsettling circumstances her students experienced in their daily lives.

Although Juanita addressed troubling issues in her first grade classroom, her efforts were costly. She noted, for example, that the parents in the community were highly critical of teachers who lagged behind the others in promoting "basic" reading and writing skills. Juanita had to continually reconcile her social educational goals with these criticisms and concerns. The use of children's literature, peer interaction and other "literacy activities" to accomplish her social goals was one means of attending to these competing demands.

Cheryl

Balancing social development and classroom safety was also an important goal for Cheryl, a second grade teacher with five and a half years experience. Like Juanita, Cheryl wanted her classroom to be welcoming. However, concerned with the preferential treatment demanded by the parents of her "gifted and talented" children and with the lack of ethnic diversity in her community, Cheryl also wanted her students to understand a variety of sociocultural conditions and perspectives (e.g., how it feels to be systematically oppressed) and to assume greater social responsibility in their everyday lives. With these goals in mind, Cheryl began one classroom activity by writing a letter containing a modified list of playground rules:

> I brought them in after recess and said, "I have some news. Mr. Prinkett [the principal] has given me a letter"...The letter [says] that he has allowed the fifth-graders to make some rules for the school because he felt that they were old enough...I set out four rules...like you can't play on the field because you'll make it muddy and the fifth-graders can't play there, you can't go down the twisty slide. Just a whole bunch of things. Well they get--irate! I mean like two kids start crying...

Cheryl was as concerned as any other teacher about the feelings of her students; however, she also recognized the importance of prolonging her powerful educational experiences long enough for them to have a significant

emotional impact. Thus, Cheryl paused before helping her students think about the experience analytically:

> I said, "I understand that you're really feeling badly but...let's get through this [letter] and then we'll talk about it and we'll have some time to think about it."

After reading the letter, Cheryl responded to her students' concerns. But even then she was unwilling to provide a simple solution for their complex problem:

> I said, "I feel for you guys, and I understand how you're feeling. What would you--what can we do?" So I put the...problem on them--"What would you like to do?"

Cheryl's goal was twofold. First, she wanted her students to develop greater empathy and understanding about systematic forms of oppression. To make her point she simulated age discrimination, a condition with which her students could readily identify. Second, Cheryl sought to promote socially responsible action based upon her students increased empathy and understanding:

> [I want students] to be able to make good positive decisions as to what [they] want to get out of [their] learning and education, and for the kids to take responsibility for their actions in their lives.

To help her students move from understanding to action, Cheryl followed the initial experiences (e.g., the letter from the "principal") with discussions in which she encouraged her students to develop their own solutions:

> I always put it back on them, like, "What do you think about that?" and "What can you do about that?"

Like Juanita, Cheryl did not restrict her approach to formal educational activities. Rather, she helped her students develop greater responsibility for solving social problems that arose throughout the school day:

> Someone came in from the playground...complaining about how it had gotten rough and so and so pushed him...I said, "Graham, how would you like me to handle this?"...(W)e ended up having a classroom conference...I kept saying, "How is it that you would like me to help you [the class] with this?"...Science [the regularly scheduled class] got bagged for twenty minutes.

Thus, Cheryl helped her students develop their own solutions to problems posed within the formal, academic curriculum. She also encouraged them to assume increased responsibility for resolving informal dilemmas arising during the school day. In each case, she urged her class to consider potential causes as well as solutions.

Although Cheryl's methods were effective, she nonetheless found them somewhat troubling. Regarding the letter from the principal she noted:

> You know what was so hard...is that I had to tell them eventually that I had lied about this...So that was an issue on top of the original issue.

To deal with her discomfort, Cheryl talked openly with her students about her reasons for conducting such activities. When asked whether she discussed why she had deceived them, Cheryl responded immediately, "Yes. Yeah, absolutely." And when asked how well her second-graders handled such experiences, she replied, "Very well....Kids are so amazing, they really truly are and they have such a sense and understand so much more than we give them credit for."

Thus, Cheryl's desire to promote social criticism and self-examination created dissonance for herself as well as her students. To reconcile their mutual discomfort, Cheryl talked frankly with her class about her actions and motives. In permitting her students to share in her personal thoughts, she added yet another layer of the understanding required for responsible social action.

Donna

Donna, the final teacher, had spent ten years teaching first grade in ethnically mixed elementary schools. Like Juanita and Cheryl, Donna was quite concerned with the affective environment:

> More than anything...I teach love for each other....how to get along with each other, and how to love each other--and how to find something good about that person.

While Donna was adamant about her affective goals, she addressed remarkably controversial issues in her first grade classroom. A recent Ku Klux Klan demonstration at her school had rekindled Donna's long time conviction to promote social equity through her teaching. Donna was convinced that her European American students (in particular) needed to experience and discuss prejudice and other institutionalized forms of oppression. One of her approaches included an activity adapted from The Eye of the Storm, the classic film depicting a Midwestern teacher's use of discrimination by eye color to teach about the prejudice and hatred surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The following exchange between Donna and myself indicates some of her goals and accomplishments:

D: I do the same thing that she did in the movie. Basically, the brown eyed children get to go to lunch first and sit at a [privileged] brown eyed table, and then we go through the whole thing and then we talk about how it felt...They switched, like after lunch, and then the other ones were on top again, and they wore little badges just like they did in the movie...(I)t was good because they were able to verbalize how it felt to be--

N: First-graders? They really did that?

D: Yes, they were able to say how they hated it, and how they thought other people were better than them because they had this color eye, and that they didn't want to have their color eyes any more if they weren't on top--they wanted another color.

N: They were willing to switch just that quickly, huh?

D: Yeah. It was interesting, I mean it was real basic, we didn't get real deep into it but you could see that they were visibly upset about what I was doing.

N: Did you level with then, before they went home?

D: Oh yeah...(W)e went through the whole thing, and then they explained to me why it [eye color] wasn't better. They were talking about "It doesn't matter if you have on a blue shirt or a red shirt, you're still the same person," like they were generalizing to their clothing, to their toys...

Donna understood that changing social inequality ultimately requires changing the actions of the individuals that comprise society. She further recognized that the responsibility for personal change cannot be borne solely by the oppressed. Therefore, like Cheryl, Donna was not satisfied simply with having her students modify their views. She also wanted them to modify their actions. Donna wanted her students to consider their own responsibilities for helping change the conditions that perpetuate various forms of social injustice. These goals were reflected in a project combining the principles of economic "wants" and "needs" with an environmental focus on shelters:

> [We discuss] what your basic needs are: food, shelter, loving care. And then we talk about, you know, how we get our food and what foods are important--people who do the jobs and where the food comes from, and we talk that aspect of it. Then we talk about shelter and how some people don't have shelters...[I ask], "What would it be like if you didn't have a place to sleep?" Some kids were very honestly able to say, "Sometimes we slept in the car, sometimes we had to go to the 'Y'," or whatever. "We slept at Grandma's house for a long time"--and what it would be like to have to sleep outside in the cold and all of those things, "So why do we need a shelter?" That kind of thing.

After focusing on how it might feel to live without shelter, Donna encouraged her students to think about personal actions they might take to help alleviate the problem. While the children's solutions were

rudimentary, they nonetheless represented an authentic attempt to address the problem. Donna continued:

> For the last couple years at Christmas time we've been saving our lunch money or doing a fund-raiser, or our snack money, and then giving money to a shelter in [name of city], and then they [the residents of the shelter] have written back to us thanking them.

Rather than performing perfunctory academic exercises (e.g., writing forced letters to the President or Congress), Donna encouraged her class to think of realistic actions to confront the problem in some tangible way. As the project progressed, the students began generating ideas and actions of their own:

> (T)hey started doing just little things and then--like finding old toys that they had or tapes--and then they'd put all that into, they call it a loving care box, and then they'd put that together and send it to this house. And then when they got the response back, the letter, they all wanted to write back right away. The letters to them [the residents] were, "I hope you're not out in the cold any more." It was kind of like they didn't completely [understand the extent of their needs]...but they saw that even their little bit of change was appreciated by somebody who didn't have as much as them. So basically I go a lot into that.

Hence, Donna combined social studies and science in an instructional unit that focused on shelter as a basic human need. Instead of simply listing the differences between wants and needs or uncritically simulating the free-market economic system, Donna interrelated, problematized and personalized each of these factors. Although Donna's students still have much to learn about the role of the dominant culture in perpetuating social inequality, her first-graders nonetheless generated and implemented their own ideas for the care of others.3 Thus, Donna helped provide an essential foundation for her students' continued social development.

Finally, like both Juanita and Cheryl, Donna's efforts came with a price. The school curriculum,

packed with the "basics," left little room for the projects Donna wished to implement. Moreover, community attitudes of "reverse-discrimination" and parental concerns about preserving the emotional well-being of their children prompted resistance to her most meaningful activities:

> (T)he first year I did it [the activity on prejudice], I had some complaints from parents, but the second year I did it I wrote a letter explaining it to parents first and then did it with the kids...The second year I did it I had no complaints.

In spite of the difficulties, Donna, like Juanita and Cheryl, retained her central goals. Although Donna adjusted her approaches where needed (e.g., writing letters to parents the second year), she refused to relinquish her vision of the teacher's role in promoting the social good:

> I think it will happen, I think we inspire it. We inspire society because...the kids look at you and they want to be like you, so the things that they--[that] really turn them on--you can see them acting it. You can see them following through on it. You know, the thing that we did with the...shelter, they are already coming up with other things that they can do to help out, so--and in that respect, I think [teachers do inspire societal improvement].

In summary, many early elementary teachers provide emotional safety within the classroom setting. However, as Juanita, Cheryl and Donna demonstrated, emotional safety needs not preclude the cognitive dissonance required for substantive social development. Each of these teachers balanced dissonance and safety within her classroom. By mediating social development through thoughtful discussion, each teacher also helped her students assume greater responsibility for their perspectives and actions.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from the efforts of teachers such as Juanita, Cheryl and Donna.

Beyond clarifying the relationship between dissonance and safety, their work suggests ways to approach unsettling social issues without unduly compromising the classroom environment and ways to move from personal understanding to social action.

Understanding the Relationship Between Dissonance and Safety

One implication of this study is that it is possible to address controversial topics without unduly compromising the emotional security of the early elementary classroom. The three teachers demonstrated that cognitive dissonance and emotional safety exist in a mutually defining (i.e., dialectical) rather than exclusive relationship. Each factor is to some degree influenced by and dependent upon the other. This relationship is important to understand if both the individual and society are to benefit from classroom practice.

Juanita, Cheryl and Donna provide a glimpse of what can be accomplished when dissonance and safety are viewed in relation rather than opposition to one another. On the one hand, a supportive environment can help create the emotional opportunity, or space (e.g., Greene, 1988), needed to think about troubling social issues. On the other hand, attention to unsettling ideas necessitates a backdrop of affective security. It is unlikely, for example,that the approaches described would have been as effective in the absence of a comfortable classroom setting. Insofar as the relationship between dissonance and safety is further examined, it should become increasingly possible to assist our students in grappling with challenging social questions.

Maintaining Safety, Promoting Dissonance

In addition to providing insight to the relationship between safety and dissonance, these teachers demonstrated specific ways to preserve the one while promoting the other. Affective safety was maintained in a variety of ways. Much of Donna's curriculum, for example, influenced her overriding goal of helping students learn "to love" and to "find something good about" others. Similarly, Juanita dedicated much of her

energy to promoting classroom comfort. She elicited the help of her class to support students in need of affirmation. Both her use of children's literature and her willingness to negotiate personal control (e.g., by mediating rather than directing classroom activity) further contributed to the kind of classroom she sought to maintain.

Although affective safety was highly valued, it was used as a supportive backdrop instead of a replacement for the discussion of controversial issues. This backdrop enabled Juanita to address rather than avoid her students' pain as they coped with their feelings of isolation. It allowed Donna's students to feel and think about their own prejudicial attitudes. And it permitted Cheryl to insist that her students assume greater responsibility for defining and resolving problems that arose during their daily interactions.

Given the backdrop of environmental safety, the three teachers used varied approaches to help their students think about important social issues. These approaches were spontaneous and nonacademic (e.g., Cheryl's focus on the playground altercation; Juanita's concern for the girls who felt alone and different) as well as formal and academic (e.g., Juanita's use of children's literature; Donna's social studies/science unit on human wants and needs). While some methods required relatively little time to implement (e.g., putting the question back on the students), others continued throughout the year and into the next (e.g., Donna's project on wants and needs). There are numerous ways to promote social dissonance in the early grades; however, the experiences most conducive to substantive social development within any particular setting must be selected by individual teachers who recognize that society cannot improve without greater sociocultural understanding.

Moving from Understanding to Action

Perhaps the greatest contribution of teachers such as Juanita, Cheryl and Donna is their ability to promote socially responsible action. Although their specific approaches varied, these teachers were similar in their use of experience and discussion to facilitate transition from understanding to action. For example, each

teacher selected social experiences that generated a degree of mental uncertainty, and each experience was in some way related to the students' immediate needs and concerns (e.g., feeling different from one's peers; being "picked on" at recess) or to social dilemmas within society at large (e.g., homelessness; oppression).

In addition to focusing on substantive social experiences, these teachers were also similar in their use of discussion to mediate reflection upon those experiences. Besides having experiences, their students were expected to think and talk about them as well. Cheryl, for example, interrupted a regularly scheduled science lesson so her class could discuss a problem that had arisen on the playground, and Juanita structured much of her classroom interaction so her students could verbally support their peers. Moreover, all three teachers utilized dialogue to help their students connect classroom experience (e.g., the brown eyes/blue eyes experience; the letter from the principal) with their everyday lives and with society in general.

The implications of particular experiences for responsible action are not always apparent; however, young children are fully capable of making these connections if they are given adequate opportunity and assistance. Indeed, with Donna's guidance on the shelters project, her students soon began generating solutions of their own (e.g., "they are already coming up with other things that they can do to help"). The presumption that students are capable also informed Cheryl's decision to direct responsibility toward her class (e.g.,"Kids are so amazing...they have such a sense and understand so much more than we give them credit for"; "I always put it back on them"). Thus, by combining experience and discussion these teachers helped their students utilize their increased understanding for socially responsible action.

In spite of practical and social pressures to maintain the sanitized curriculum, early elementary teachers such as Juanita, Cheryl and Donna persist in their efforts to foster social development for the good of society. They demonstrate that responsible activity can be promoted if we recognize that emotional safety need not preclude cognitive dissonance, that troubling social issues can be addressed through a variety of experiences, and that the nature of the experience-discussion relationship is essential in mediating the transition from understanding to action. By showing that it can be done, teachers such as Juanita, Cheryl and

Donna put the ball back in our court. Kids can too handle difficult social issues. The question is, "Can we?"

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Footnotes

1. Of course there are varying conceptions of the "greater social good." For the purposes of this report, societal improvement will be viewed as the increase of shared responsibility for the equalization of opportunity (e.g., political, economic) across sociocultural groups. This implies benevolent action (including personal compromise) informed by the critical examination of self and society.

2. The data for this report originated with a study of the social studies in Delaware (e.g., Houser, In Press; Thornton and Houser, 1994). One of the interviewees in the original study is included in this report. Juanita's work with first-graders influenced the direction (i.e., influenced the theoretical sampling, Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of the present inquiry and the selection of Cheryl and Donna for additional interviews. The data for Juanita and Cheryl were drawn from personal, semi-structured interviews (e.g., Berg, 1989). In Donna's case, the data were drawn form a semi-structured interview, several informal interviews, and a response journal maintained for a graduate course in ethnic studies and multicultural education. All three teachers are public school employees. Juanita is African American, while Donna and Cheryl are European American. While Cheryl works almost exclusively with middle and upper middle class European American students, Juanita and Donna teach in settings with a slightly higher ethnic mixture. A qualitative methodology and interpretivist theoretical framework were used to analyze the data (e.g., Berg, 1989; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Jacob, 1987).

3. Nieto (1992) uses the terms "dominant culture" and "dominated cultures" to distinguish the European American "mainstream" and sociocultural groups that have been systematically dominated by the ideologies and actions of that mainstream. It should be noted that there is no clear demarcation between dominant and dominated cultures, however. To some degree, "dominance" is relative and context specific.