The Ethics of Teacher Resistance: Acting on A Vision for Public Education

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Robin, one of the leaders of teacher protest in Washington State, describes a decision she made, based on her vision for education:

> I delivered my letter of professional conscience [to my school district]. [….] We—the four of us…took the Martin Luther King "Beyond Viet Nam" speech and recrafted it so it was about high stakes testing and delivered it the day after MLK Day. I asked for a different assignment: you can give me a different assignment and value my professional judgment or you can force me to give this test--and then I have to make a choice on whether or not I'm going to give it. And they gave me a different assignment.

Jeanne also signed the letter. Both of these teachers describe ethical decisions to not cause students harm.

The concept of ethics holds two definitions that may be applied to Robin and Jeanne' actions: The first is that one should act in a virtuous way, promoting disposition of justice, charity, and generosity toward self and others. And second, the concept of duty to promote change in relation to these dispositions is central (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018).

Clearly, Robin and Jeanne's decisions to opt out of giving students standardized tests hold an ethical dimension. In education, however, teachers who resist the standards movement

are often characterized as being conservative, recalcitrant, or even selfish. They are rarely credited with taking a moral or ethical stance.

However, the consideration of the ethical dimensions of such decisions provides a moral dimension to a conceptual framework for teacher resistance. Teacher resistance as an animating and imaginative source for educational change runs counter to many of our root metaphors for teaching. For example, the expression "visionary teacher" is almost an oxymoron. In other fields, such as science, technology, architecture, social care, medicine, and business, professional vision is front-page news. In education, despite the overwhelming need for people to develop imaginative capacity to envision a just society, teachers are constrained by myriad forces. First, the source of educational vision—especially including the work of teachers--lies outside the classroom: It is located in private/public certification schemes, corporate test design, corporate models for district management, the mission of independent charter schools, and individualistic-learning software design. These schemes, grounded in neoliberal policy, have shifted the locus of vision in public education from the public to the private sphere. Second, the research and discourse on teacher vision have, for many good reasons, focused on teachers' work in the classroom and how they promote the academic learning of their students. This focus on the classroom then then frames the construction of teacher vision to the classroom, decontextualizes it from a political sphere, and eliminates a social impulse for the way teachers seek to improve the classroom.

In this study, we explore constructs of teacher vision in public education which connect classrooms to larger systems and discourses. We argue that as professional educators we must reclaim the space to allow teachers to develop and express their visions for the good of society (and for classrooms as part of that space). First I review the existing literature on teacher

visioning, paying special attention to the boundaries of these conceptions. Next, as a heuristic, I examine and present views of teacher vision from two teachers who are standing firm against the neoliberal forces currently eviscerating public education. Finally, we discuss the discourses within their visions and then present a larger, more holistic and critical framework for teacher vision.

The Tension within: The Literature on Teacher Vision

Almost thirty years ago, Karen Zumwalt (1989) wrote one of the first but still little-known theoretical pieces on teacher visioning in teacher leadership. Discussing teacher preparation, she argued that preservice teachers would benefit from their development of a curricular vision of education:

> Curricular vision gives them [beginning teachers] a mindset to inform their deliberations about teaching, to view the issues of classroom, school, and community in a larger context, and to be dissatisfied with the compromises and survival tactics of the first year as they continually reassess their own teaching in an attempt to provide an appropriate learning environment for their students. (1989, p. 182)

As the quote suggests, Zumwalt consider curricular vision a form of decision-making capacity, helping teachers to consider what "might be," rather than simply "what is." Zumwalt's piece, besides being an early explicit call for the promotion of curricular visions among preservice teachers, is remarkable in that outside of the field of literacy, it remains one of the few explicit calls for teacher vision in education. She draws from Schwab's four commenplaces of curriculum (Schwab, 1961/1974) as a framework to allow the beginning teacher to consider larger questions about dynamic interactions in the classroom. Schwab's framework is clarified

by Clandinin and Connelly's (1992) notion of curriculum making. Curriculum making as a dynamic involves the always-unique interactions of the students, the teacher, the various learning milieu, and the learning materials. Teachers do not "deliver" this curriculum, they, as with the students, experience it, becoming its participants (Clandinin & Conelly, 2000). The social aspects of the curriculum are at least as important as those related to classroom books and materials.

More recently and specifically, teacher visioning has emerged in the literature on teacher thinking about literacy. Here, researchers have described teacher thinking as a form of conceptual guide for teachers to draw from as they work in literacy instruction with their students. Related to adaptive expertise and drawing from a range of theories about teacher thinking (e.g., teacher knowledge structures, life histories, and personal practical knowledge), teacher visioning in this field provides a framework for examining both the conceptual and pedagogical aspects of teachers' work (Duffy, 2002). As a framework for examining how teachers are "independent users of professional knowledge" (p. 331) within specific classroom contexts, it is focused on both teachers' pedagogical competence and their fluency and agency in using this conceptual map to promote the learning of diverse students. Teachers with such visioning--adeptly using professional content and pedagogical knowledge—are "psychologically strong enough to use professional knowledge in creatively resourceful ways" (Duffy, 2002, p. 332). Activating their operational maps, teachers who exhibit visioning may draw from broader personal beliefs and values about the meaning and goals of education (Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010), (e.g., that education should promote social justice). These beliefs potentially add a sort of meaning-and-motivational compass to their actions. They also provide the basis for an image of

desired practice, which may guide and sustain teachers' throughout their careers (Hammerness, 2006; Vaughn & Faircloth, 2013).

Both Zumwalt (1989) and Cochran-Smith, Friedman, Barnett, and Pine (2009) considered teacher *curricular* vision [emphasis added] a context for teachers' professional decision making. In a study on the depth and quality of preservice teachers' classroom inquiry, Cochran-Smith et. al (2009) suggested that the more substantive and critical inquiry questions of a group of preservice teachers who were working on action research projects were grounded in a form of teacher vision. Referencing the 1989 Zumwalt analysis, they describe teacher curricular vision as "a kind of theoretical vision that linked particular teaching methods or classroom interventions with larger understandings of students as learners, classrooms as cultures, and the possible worlds open to students" (p. 22).

Zumwalt's discussion of curricular vision foreshadowed slightly later work on two advancements in educational theory that deepen and expand the concept of teacher vision. The first is critical pedagogy. Rooted in Paolo Friere's (1970) revolutionary work in liberation pedagogy in South America, critical pedagogy boldly situates educational analyses and development within systems of anti-oppression education. It provides educators with a powerful analytical and formative stance to deconstruct oppressive and inequitable discourses embedded within schools and curricular projects, with the goal being the replacement of inequitable and biased educational systems with those that promote systemic forms of justice. Critical pedagogy thus explicitly frames the notion of teacher vision as a political act.

The second dimension missing from the work on teacher visioning is the notion of critical self-critique has been a develop line of critical pedagogy since the mid 1990s. For example, bell hooks suggested that teachers must be aware of themselves and their personal educational

histories in relation their students educational histories if there are to teach diverse students in a supportive way. Ladson-Billings includes the knowledge of self as a characteristic of culturally relevant pedagogy. These theories intersect with the curriculum work of Clandinin and Connelly (1995), who suggest that curriculum is embedded in narrative—the past and present—lived lives of the students and teachers as well as the thoughts of and hopes for the future.

Method

The following study of teacher vision is part of a larger case study I conducted of two teachers, members of the Washington State Badass Teachers (WABATS), who organized a large march against a corporation in Seattle. Specifically, in the larger study I dissected the actual march to examine their motivation, rationale, complex planning, and enactment of the march.

Focusing now on teacher vision, I first observed the teachers at the march, taking photographs of them in action. I later used these pictures as part of the basis of an interview (more of a structured conversation) with each teacher. For this study, I highlighted aspects of the conversations in which they discussed their vision for education.

To analyze their thoughts, I primarily used a deductive approach, focusing on key words and thoughts related to Zumwalt's framework: for the specific classroom curricular piece I examined narrative dimensions of the four contexts of curriculum making (i.e., the student, the teacher, the environment, and the subject), but expanding this construct by placing it in a narrative and critical context. For the critical aspect of the study I drew more generally from the work of Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Examining their words for their critical meanings within larger structures of oppression or liberation.

After making notes and writing up my version of their case studies related to their planning and enactment of the march, I shared my notes with Robin and Jeanne. As a phenomenologist, I don't present the words and actions of Robin and Jeanne as reality and fact, but rather as ways that I interpreted their considerations of education and practice.

Expressions of Teacher Vision

The following two case portraits will first focus on Jeanne' vision of education and the second on Robin's vision.

Jeanne—A Flashpoint for Teachers' Hopes and Questions

Throughout her teaching career, Jeanne, an elementary school teacher in Washington state, has been focused on the meaning and mandate of public education. Entering teaching approximately ten-years ago with a master's degree in education, she has, from the start of her career, held a high conceptual level toward teaching. From her beginning in education she has emphasized not just classroom-based activities or even best practice, but larger structural issues that impact classroom dynamics. As a beginning teacher she was able to take part in union activities that expanded her work in education and provided her with an awareness of the impact of structural issues on schools. And as a veteran teacher she acts on her views by organizing marches against the new reforms and speaking publicly.

As a description of her current vision of and for education, Jeanne made the following statement at a public rally for democratic education:

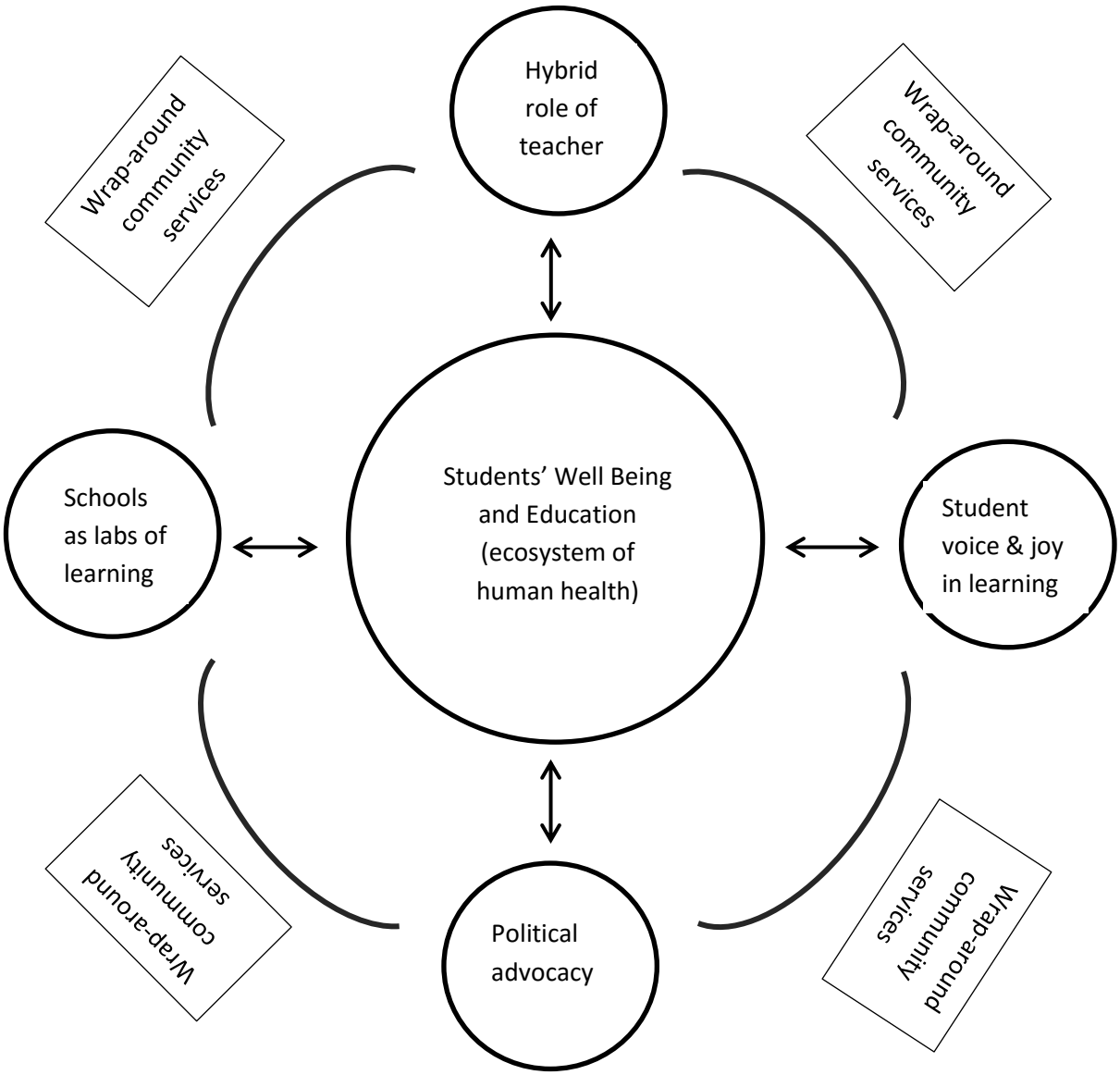
> [I would like] schools as community hubs; wraparound services provided for every child to be nourished and nurtured; high quality free early learning; technology integrated to

> SUPPORT learning, not direct it; teachers in hybrid roles working part time teaching students and part time in the area of their passion and expertise; community embedded project-based learning as curriculum; performance assessments that loosely correlate to age-appropriate academic standards; all administrators and union leaders teaching at least one real lesson per week in a real school; pre-service teachers having 10-20 practicum experiences simultaneous with coursework; community and business leaders having a "home school" at which they spend time each year meaningfully mentoring students and helping with decision-making.

As seen in this quote, central to her vision is a call for the integration of schools and community, with the community positioned to benefit schools in multiple ways. She describes community-based organizations "wrapping around" schools to provide students services, nourishment, and nurturing. Furthermore, she describes schools as places that encourage administrators to also be engaged in teaching and that respect teachers' expertise as they work in layered ways with students and new teachers.

The following diagram attempts to offer an overview of her complex vision:

Diagram 1: Jeanne's Vision of and for Education



At the heart of Jeanne's vision are students as active contributors to schools as ecosystems of human health. As a joke, Jeanne said that she would like schools to offer "puppies for everyone. –I jest, but really?" This image--of puppies for all and classrooms as places where students are active and nurturing—provides a powerful curriculum metaphor. Hers is a critical, problem-solving curriculum in which students learn to deconstruct and solve issues facing communities within a larger global ecosystem of social and environmental justice.

Here she discussed the impact of the Smarter Balanced Test, a standardized test, on students: "I teach students to ask big questions. Not just answer questions. […] But this test will undo the confidence that I have strived to build in them. Instead of acknowledging and nurturing kids on their path of learning, we are punishing them. Because they fail to learn fast enough." She clarified her classroom goals by contrasting them with current unacceptable practices:

> [Schools do] not address the human needs of poverty. These reforms [the Common Core State Standards] actually exacerbate the real issues by drawing attention and money away from the real problems. Too many kids per caring school adult is the problem. Lack of TIME for teachers to collaborate, plan, and authentically assess is the problem. Lack of PLAY and socializing is the problem. Lack of engagement for kids who see these new lessons for what they are-test prep- is the problem.

Instead, she works to "to train my staff on SIOP [sheltered instruction and observation) practices-and this is directly anti-CCSS in my mind because the SIOP strategies empower teachers to ignore the scripted lessons sold to us by Pearson and teach students in creative and unique ways."

Resisting the new harmful reforms forms part of her mission as a teacher. As part of this resistance she thinks that teachers should organize with parents: "Parents aren't used to fighting

on these issues but when they hear how standardized testing has reduced their child's classroom experience to one of ranking and sorting children instead of instilling curiosity and creativity, they are willing." She sees it as being imperative for teachers to work together in resistance:

> Of course the rank and file membership must rise up and reclaim our union's power but I see this struggle in relation to the underlying problems with American democracy-these systems only work if people are actively engaged in them.

This is about grassroots democracy to address underlying issues with people being denied a voice and democratic agency within a market democracy:

> The economy being more important that ecosystems or human health the scale of political importance says it all. Americans do not engage in ethical debate and the fact that we all assume everyone agrees with our worldview means that parents and every other tax payer looks for schools to reinforce their expectation and worldview.
>
> Compounding this is the idea that privatization of public institutions is a good thing; teachers are just now realizing that our profession is the LAST sector under attack by profiteers who see the edu-'industry' as the last great cash cow of tax revenue.

Ultimately, Jeanne sees public schools themselves as being learning institutions in which both veteran teachers and students preparing to become teacher learn together with community members:

> I saw that the changes to how teachers were trained were not in the best interest of children; data for outsiders ruled over the anecdotal data teachers collect. Tests were the

determinant of teacher efficacy. Art, civics, project-based learning, health and joy were diminished or altogether lost from the public school classroom.

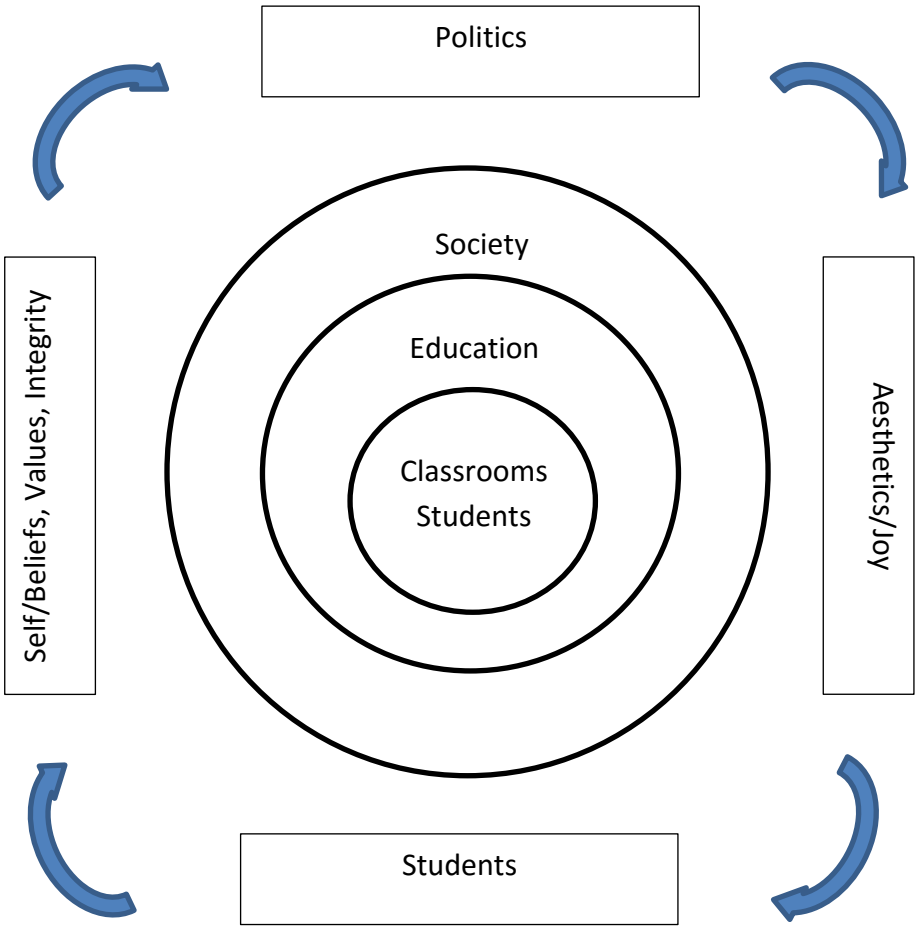
Finally, Jeanne sees school funding as a political issues that must be addressed and resolved.

Robin--A Broad Civic Vision with Inclusive Depth

As a teenager in secondary school in the Seattle area, Robin was politically active. She started the Junior Statesman Club at her high school and was a junior senator, actually meeting with elected state senators. After she became a teacher over 25 years ago, she married and focused on home-and-school life. After getting divorced, she returned to her political roots.

In 2010 she joined her union organization and became a leader of the Washington State labor organization, the Washington Educational Association (the WEA). A year later, the organization sent her to Washington D.C. where she formally trained as a political organizer and learned about how to turn a vision into a mission and then into collective action. In 2011 also became a member of the group, Save Our Schools (SOS) and took part in a large march on Washington in favor of education. She later became one of the founders of the bad assed teacher (the BATS). In 2013, along with Julianne and Susan, she helped organize a march on the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

It's important to note that Robin lives her vision for resistance in education. Situated within society and the lives of students, her vision is dynamic and constantly changing. Starting with the larger society and moving toward the individual student and even herself, there are different nested contexts. In this mix, her present views transact with her past values and history, finding application in lived situated action. Figure 2 presents a diagram of these different contexts or dimensions.



It is important to note that in many ways her vision is holistic: the various aspects of her vision are generative and interconnected. Arguably, the central core of her vision is about students and children. I begin by discussing the larger conceptual pieces that focus her work with schools and students. This sketch of the larger and more foundational dimensions--personal, societal, political, and aesthetic dimensions—provide depth for her vision for students.

Here Robin articulated the role of society to education and education to society:

> Thomas Jefferson said that the purpose was to help our society to be able to do the business that they have to do and to be a positive member of society—that's what the original purpose of education was. It wasn't college and career. It was to build this

> foundation in our country. […] Here's our vision. We are going to have this system where we meet the kids where we are, we push them—we don't just let them sit there—we have high expectations but we also care about where they are coming from and…then public education will create a society that's passionate, empathetic, understanding and successful.

As can be seen in the above quote, hers is a vision for a just society, one with on-going debate. This is a lived stance. "We debate this stuff all the time—how are we going to do this—and we have people who lay down in the middle of the street and then we have other people who are a little bit more non-reactive and thoughtful."

This societal stance is in many ways mirrored in her goals for education:

> This is a system whose value lies within its mission of offering free public education for a free non-elitist society. Siphoning off public funds for private or charter schools both reduce much needed resources for under-resourced public schools and the division of elitist and non-elitist districts eviscerated the goal of public education.

In this quote, she suggests that in the larger context of education in a democratic society, education and society are interactive and ideally mutually supportive. Robin sees schools themselves as offering a location for democratic engagement.

The next level is that of curriculum and classrooms—which are firmly rooted in her view of education. Here she describes a framework for classwork:

> In middle school they are supposed to be exploring and figuring out the world around them and figuring out where they want to go and if they don't have the exploring part…you…they won't find that [and…] our role [is] to help these kids find their element. [….] That will help them flourish more than passing tests.

Her concern with students frames her view of educational standards. As with perhaps the majority of teachers, for Robin the issue is not about rejecting standards per se or even a somewhat externally produced curriculum. Rather, it's about what is good for students and whether teachers have the freedom to use their professional expertise to make the necessary curricular decisions to work with students "where they are" as learners:

The developmentally inappropriateness of the standards, it's off the chart. [..] I get it: Algebra is tough. But we have kids where their brains just haven't clicked yet. So what do they do? They stick them in the class and they hope that they will be a sponge and they will soak it up. [….] When is enough enough?"

Her other criticism of standards is the way that the common core reduces the curriculum to "have" and "have not" subjects:

> And we had quite a discussion at our leadership team meeting because they wanted to know how our choir teacher and how the drama teacher and the art teacher and my [computer] class—how are they going to support the ELA common core and I was like, they have their own they have their own stuff they need to be doing and they have their own growth goals. And one of the social studies teacher was just upset with me, she's like, "Well I take offense with that because I do incorporate music." Well she plays music and she dresses up like the Queen of England. Well, that is not teaching the standards for those classes. But that's the perception if you just play some music you're reaching the arts. But that has absolutely nothing to do with the standards that they are supposed to be teaching.

The above quote suggests a lack of an instrumental purpose to specific courses. Instead of being valuable because they promote the common core (and are thus instruments for an external

purpose), Robin stresses that the value of these subjects is inherent to them: it's about the value of art in art class, drama in theater, and the use of computers in computer class—now how well these subjects can help students learn the common core. The other point to note is that Robin thinks that the arts matter, both on an academic or class-based level and also as the "glue" for engagement—that joy and aesthetics can be powerful contexts for sustaining learning.

Finally, running through her vision is the importance of politics and engaged action. However, to simply characterize her vision as being "political" misses the point. Politics, of course, come into play in many ways. She organizes and even evaluates the union based on its support of equity and a specific platform (opting out of testing, working with parents, being opposed to privatization of education). But perhaps the political focus is not so much with taking a particular stance as it is with the engagement of a democratic and dialogic process. Through this process, she tries to get people to open their thinking and entertain new perspectives.

What is impressive about Robin's vision is that it cannot be separated from her life. She lives her vision and her vision animates her. Grounded in her life history, it has helped her to propel her forward as an educator.

Discussion: Toward an Ethical Framework for Teacher Vision

As a moral compass for a beneficence and generosity in education that protects students and society, I turn to the concept of "iatrogenesis" found within the medical field. Iatrogenesis describes an awareness of the injury a patient can receive from medical professionals who profess infallibility but engage in harmful practices. Robin and Jeanne suggest how a similar critical stance is needed in the educational field. Their resistance to their perception of harmful school reforms is expressed within the concept of curriculum making (Clandinin & Conelley, 1992).

Both educators considered students active and collaborative learners on projects, examining, as Jeanne mentioned, the "big questions" in education. As these educators limit the testing and standardized curriculum for their students, they increase a problem based and experiential curriculum for them. Working with their students, they rejected structures and practices that sort, isolate, label, and deny students humanistic subjects such as art. Instead, they built on and extended their students' talents, strengths, and self-esteem. Without these teachers awareness of themselves as curriculum makers, as players empowered to craft curriculum with their students in the classroom as opposed to simply implementing curriculum, they would not be able to engage in meaningful resistance. This stance is akin to the process that Cochran-Smith (2009) described as a "kind of theoretical vision that linked particular teaching methods or classroom interventions with larger understandings of students as learners, classrooms as cultures, and the possible worlds open to students" (p. 22). They also engage in social democracy with other teachers and community members, extended an ethic of care from the classroom to the larger society.

Also, they act on a respect for the different virtues in education (justice, charity, equity, generosity, fairness). Formal education for them plays a central role within an engaged social democracy. Schools act as sites of democratic engagement and education for students, teachers, and community members. For them, democracy is not an abstract construct, but rather a grassroots effort in a daily process. Schools can play a role in the improvement of society and elimination of structures that cause poverty. At the same time, both teachers recognized that poverty and opportunity gaps matter and impact students' work in the classroom. In a way, both hold visions for schools as rich micro systems of health and student/teacher growth which contribute to the growth of larger ecosystems of environmental and social justice.

Viewing the ethical discourses within Robin and Jeanne' work delineates two dynamics in teaching and education. One is that teaching embodies a sense of "mythopoesis" (Bradbeer, 1998). Mythopoesis is a metaphysical concept that suggests that animating sources of teaching and learning are deep relational negotiations of meaning making that take place in collective settings. The second dynamic is that to deny the role that ethics play in teaching and learning is to remove teaching and learning from its greater humanistic purpose—grounded in the lived curriculum of teachers and students. Both Robin and Jeanne lived their ethical responses to their perceptions of education.

Conclusion

The world, at the moment, is deeply troubled. It was recently announced that approximately 21 percent of people in the United States have lived their entire lives in the country at war and 46 percent have lived the majority of their lives in the country at war ("Harpers Index," 2017). Austerity schemes coupled with the privatization of public institutions (such as public schools in the U.S.) continue to dominate economies of Western countries. However, hope for making the world more equitable, educated, and respectful of diverse lives and thought exists. This hope resides in athletes refusing to accept racism, in women saying enough to sexual abuse and exploitation, in transgendered people demanding dignity, and in educators who maintain a vision for humanity and the common good.

Ethical vision in education acknowledges that students inhabit the curriculum. An ethical vision in education acknowledges that within the context of students bringing their lives--narratives with promise, talents, and, yes, social and emotional scars--into the classroom, it is the role of education to change social and political structures to benefit all students. This vision finds parallels between forms of engaged learning in the classroom and social democracy outside the

classroom. It also involves action, promoting movements that challenge inequities and bring about change.

Examining ethical vision in education through the thoughts and actions of two engaged teachers shows that ethical vision in education is both specific and general. In the case of Robin and Jeanne, their resistance was and is intended to reduce harmful situations directed toward children in the name of public education. Their thoughts and actions show us that hope and humanity reside in the interaction between commitment to a vision and its meaning as the basis for ethical action.

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