

Foreword

Schools do not exist in isolation. Democratic schools and classrooms can only thrive if they are supported by the communities in which they are situated. They need this support because good teaching sometimes causes what longtime civil rights activist and Congressman John Lewis calls “good trouble”: exposing difficult and potentially messy conversations about equity and justice. Such conversations can reveal that young people in our classrooms are eager to explore these important civic conversations. However, outside of the walls of the classroom they can stir backlash from parents or the media, leaving educators vulnerable if they lack support from school administrators, their colleagues, and other community stakeholders. As longtime educators ourselves, we have seen firsthand disputes over curriculum, classroom practices, and school policies. It can get nasty.

Let us share an example. The town of Brookline, Massachusetts, where we both live, recently changed the name of one its schools in response to its reckoning with the town’s historical connection to slavery. A slaveholder originally donated a slave as well as some land to the town. About 150 years later, Brookline erected a school on the site of the donated land and named the school after the slaveholder. The school carried his name for over a century. A few years ago, however, a group of parents and students protested that they should not have to attend or send their children to a school named after a slaveholder. Others pushed back, pointing out that slavery was inscribed in the names of streets and public buildings all over Brookline. Why should the name of the school be any different? School names matter because they often symbolize the core values of a community through whom they honor. The ensuing debate over the name change was thus predictably rancorous. People accused each other of political correctness, oversensitivity,

insensitivity, or bigotry during community meetings and in the local press. In the end, our town decided to change the name of the school, a decision we both support. And yet, the impact of the controversy has provoked—or perhaps revealed—deep divisions that have lasted well beyond the spark. As the case studies and commentaries in this volume reveal, democratic discord in schools often call to the surface contested notions of values that Americans cherish—freedom, equality, justice. Sorting through them can be difficult and uncomfortable, yet doing so is absolutely necessary. This is the good trouble Congressman Lewis encourages us to engage in.

AN APPROACH TO EDUCATIONAL ETHICS

How are teachers, parents, administrators, school staff, school board members, policy makers, and students prepared to take up such challenges? Unfortunately, although we are all stakeholders in the education of the youth of our community, we have very little practice in preparing for the ethical decisions that suffuse our work.

Consider teachers, for instance, who likely engage in “200 to 300 interpersonal exchanges every hour of the working day.”¹ That means, on average, teachers are making about 1500 decisions a day in response to those interactions. Many of these decisions will be ethical in nature, and they demand a repertoire of strategies to identify and act on ethical decision points. Educating teachers to think about the relationship between pedagogy and student learning undoubtedly helps with some of this decision-making. For example, teachers learn to draw on conceptual frameworks, textbooks, and (too often) standardized testing to inform the development of curriculum. While there is a lot of room for improvement, this education helps teachers make decisions about how to prioritize the content, what teaching strategies to draw on, and which resources to introduce to students. But these are insufficient for addressing complex ethical dilemmas, like those detailed in this book, that are inherent in the lives of schools.

The problem is not just that we haven’t all studied ethical theory. Rather, as Herbert Kohl eloquently observes, educators must contend with the central question of how to put theory into practice—and put practice into theory:

There is a complex and intimate relationship between theory and practice in the classroom. Theoretical ideas are tested every day by the complex and often unpredictable behavior of students and teachers, and by the constant influence of life outside of the classroom. Practicing teachers have to constantly adjust theory based upon their practice. The craft

develops through experience and reflection upon that experience. What is hardest to maintain in the midst of the immediate demands of the classroom is the intellectual aspect of teaching, which though less apparent on an everyday level than the craft issues, still pervades and underlies every good teacher's practice.²

The case studies and thoughtful commentaries in this book do a brilliant job exposing the fault lines between theory and practice. In doing so, they bring what Kohl described as the "intellectual aspect of teaching" to the fore.

Lawrence Kohlberg was one of the first scholars to offer insight into the use of case studies in moral development education, in particular by showing that all of us could sharpen our moral thinking by wrestling with abstract moral dilemmas. The more we did that, the better we would be able to define our moral principles. This connects his work on moral development theory to schools, where such practice could take place. The field of moral development education has been further developed by an influential group of educators including Betty Bardige, Ted Fenton, Carol Gilligan, and Ralph Mosher, among many others.

Our decades of work at the international nonprofit educational organization, Facing History and Ourselves, where Margot was Founding Executive Director and Adam led the content development team, was profoundly influenced by this work—but with a twist. Building off Kohlberg's work using abstract dilemmas, Margot's insight was to focus, instead, on true-to-life moral and ethical dilemmas grounded in historical context such as Weimar and Nazi Germany or Little Rock's Central High School at the height of desegregation. These contextualized dilemmas serve as foundational texts for teachers and students to reflect upon in the classroom. Through both practice and research, we learned that deliberation on these historical dilemmas sharpens students' understanding of the past and helps them prepare for the moral and ethical choices they face in their own lives. This dynamic brings classrooms to life for both the teacher and the student.

It is here that our approach meets Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay's project. Their work provides an opportunity for educators to think about their thinking when confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas of education. Each case provides a standard text for conversation, professional learning, and discussion about the choices educational stakeholders make. Similar to the way we have explored historical dilemmas in our work, these cases can help develop educators' moral and ethical imaginations while helping them to anticipate the challenges they face in their personal and professional lives.

These cases and commentaries also illuminate real-life dilemmas of democracy, just as we did at Facing History, and as Adam does as cofounder of Re-Imagining Migration. Taken as a whole, they force us to confront difficult questions about the ethical dimensions of educating citizens and wrestling with difference, and doing so in ways that *sustain* a democracy. If we are serious about building the skills that citizens need to live together, what collective life can we build in schools to make sure we are indeed teaching and living democratic values? We need to engage students in the civic challenges of our time, including the fragility of democracy, racial and religious prejudices, homophobia, gender equity, climate change, genocide, individual and collective rights, and immigration. It is during these often uncomfortable classroom conversations that students first have the opportunity to practice the respectful give-and-take that is essential for self-government. As you listen carefully to students, you will hear them connecting the content of the classroom to their lives. Yet it would be folly to expect educators to simply be able to *do* this; they need practice and tools to help them reflect on the challenges of this work. We think this collection provides such an opportunity.

THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT AND OUR STUDENTS' LIVES

Such work is more important now than ever. We began by stating what should be obvious, that classrooms do not exist in isolation. Since the 2016 election, several studies have illuminated the way that the political divisions in US democracy are impacting students' experiences in schools. Reports indicate that the political climate has a direct impact on students' academic, social, and emotional lives, and that students are confronting increasing incidents of hate speech and violence.³

Some of our most vulnerable students feel it the most. A few years ago, for instance, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco conducted a study focusing on how immigrant students believed they were perceived by Americans at large. They asked immigrant youth to respond to the prompt: "Most Americans think that most [people from the respondent's birthplace] are _____." Their findings were deeply troubling, as two-thirds of the children "filled in the blank with a negative term," often including detailed accounts of the prejudice they faced. "Most Americans think that Mexicans are lazy, gangsters, drug addicts that only come to take their jobs away," one 14-year-old boy wrote. Not only did many respondents choose words associated with criminality but many also chose terms related to contamination—"We are garbage"—and incompetence—"We can't do the same things as them in school or at work."⁴ Research such as this shows that young people are

internalizing the stereotypes around them, and hence we ignore democratic discord at our own peril. Too often we do not talk about the way the political environment shapes what is going on in schools until the stories spill back out into the community in soundbites captured in the press or distributed like a game of telephone across social media. We appreciate how cases like “Walling Off or Welcoming In” capture the way these attitudes ripple across a school community. At Re-Imagining Migration, the new organization that Adam directs with Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, they are already using this case with educators worldwide.

Educators cannot afford to be silent, or we risk perpetuating the mistakes of our past. A few years ago, we worked on a project about teaching the history of the civil rights movement in the United States. In the introduction to a book for teachers, Margot took the opportunity to reflect on the failure of her education to confront the civic fissures and struggles for change that divided her hometown:

I grew up in Memphis, Tennessee . . . at a time when separate meant never equal. For it was in Memphis that simple childhood notions of logic and fairness were shattered. It was there that water fountains for “colored only” didn’t spout water which reflected the colors of the rainbow as the child might expect but instead, as one learned later, stood as symbols of the unchallenged dogmas and practices of racism—dogmas that attempted to instill indignity, shame, and humiliation in some and false pride and authority in others, and practices that reflected centuries of unchallenged myth and hate.

I grew up in Memphis at a time when black libraries housed books discarded from the white library; when there were empty seats in the front of the bus for young white girls on a shopping trip downtown, while those of darker skin color crowded the back of the bus on their way to work; when Thursdays were “colored day” at the zoo, and a rear entrance led to a colored section in the movie theatre balcony—if admission was allowed at all.⁵

While the experiences are Margot’s, those stories shaped the way both of us think about education. The school’s silence was deafening. Indeed, our students, teachers, parents, and school faculty bring the world into the school, and as much as some might try to reduce education to inputs from a standardized curriculum and student data to be measured, it just isn’t that simple. Nor should it be. The lives of schools and the health of our democracy are intertwined.

These cases remind us all of that simple fact. They present messy ethical dilemmas without easy solutions that have real consequences for students' lives. We wish we had a classroom of students to share them with. In the exchange of ideas and the back and forth, we would discover what we really think. Those exchanges can feel like magic. However, it is important to remember that they aren't. One way to prepare for them is for teachers, professors of education, and their students to pick up this book and get talking.

Margot Stern Strom

Margot Stern Strom left the classroom to found Facing History and Ourselves as a nonprofit educational organization.

Adam Strom

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