Rough Seas:

Early-Career Teachers' Moral Difficulties in Educating for Social Justice

Tatiana Geron, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Garry Mitchell, Harvard Graduate School of Education

"Social Justice" in Urban Teaching Preparation

A significant portion of today's early-career teachers believe teaching is a political act, recognize that teaching is a tool for social justice, and want to work in a school that allows them to "[move] the social justice agenda forward."[1] From traditional university-based programs' to alternative pathways such as Teach for American or the Urban Teacher Fellows, many teacher preparation programs use the language of equity, change, and justice to recruit and educate prospective teachers.[2]

Many of these programs focus specifically on schooling in urban, low-income communities of color as the heart of educational innovation and social change, attracting teachers with strong social justice aims to teach in such schools. However, the recruitment and education that these teachers receive somewhat obscures the fact that there are many ways to think about the relationship between education and social justice. Instead, many programs expose teachers to a specific conception

---

[1] Carl A. Grant and Vonzell Agosto, "Teacher Capacity and Social Justice in Teacher Education," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions in Changing Contexts*, eds. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemser and S. John McIntyre (New York: Routledge, 2008); Mary E. Dilworth, ed., *Millennial Teachers of Color* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

[2] Teach for America, "What We Do" Webpage, https://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do; Urban Teachers, "Change Starts in the Classroom" on landing page, https://urbanteachers.org; Harvard Teacher Fellows, "About" webpage, https://htf.gse.harvard.edu/about; University of Michigan School of Education landing page, http://soe.umich.edu/academics/teacher-administrator-certification/

of "teaching for social justice," one that draws from two distinct ideas about educational equity: educational equity as providing social mobility to students who have been historically marginalized, and as preparing students to challenge and transform the dominant power structures that create such injustice.

Social mobility as social justice focuses on how marginalized students can *navigate* dominant power structures of society by learning explicit skills that will allow them to achieve individual success within an unjust social structure.[3] These discrete skills are mostly academic, but may also include learning the habits and dispositions of dominant culture.[4] By contrast, social justice as critical consciousness values

students learning how to *transform* dominant society at the root.[5] Students should be taught to deeply analyze the world around them, recognize oppression in its many forms, imagine a world beyond injustice, and work towards making it a reality in their communities.[6] In order to achieve this, students' interests and identities should be brought into the classroom, and teachers and students should work collaboratively.[7]

There is evidence that the literature on teaching in low-income communities of color has integrated these two conceptions of teaching for social justice, calling for teaching that makes the norms of the culture of power explicit so that students can both participate in and change it.[8] In other

[3] David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Foundation & Institute, 2008).
[4] Paul Tough, *How Children Succeed* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012)
[5] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2008).

[6] Roderick J. Watts, Nat Chioke Williams, and Robert J. Jagers, "Sociopolitical Development," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 31, no. 1-2 (2003): 185-194.
[7] Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).
[8] Lisa Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (1988): 280-299.

words, many of today's urban early-career teachers have been taught that teaching for social justice means educating students to both *navigate* society and also *transform* it by developing both strong academic skills and critical consciousness.[9] Other scholars can, and should, think about how this definition of social justice came to be and whether it's correct. In this paper, we will take it as a reality: it's what we see in the recruitment and training materials of programs nationwide and it's what we learned in the programs that certified us to teach in urban schools serving low-income students of color.

However, school culture and policies constrain or facilitate what teachers are able or allowed to do to reach their vision of educating for social justice. We don't believe that these concepts of teaching for navigation and transformation are dichotomous, but we recognize that though teachers enter these schools hoping to do both, the schools themselves are rarely set up for both to be equally possible. This leads to specific moral difficulties for teachers. The motivation for this paper comes from our experience of these moral difficulties in our classrooms, and how we were better able to understand our own experiences by turning to education philosophy.

In this paper, we will argue that these outcomes are due, in part, to the fact that education for navigation and education for transformation at times can each only be *partially realized* in different school models, and at other times are *conceptualized so differently* as to be incompatible. We will use fictional examples of two urban schools to

[9] Aaliyah El-Amin, "Until Justice Rolls Down Like Water: Revisiting Emancipatory Schooling for African Americans- A Theoretical Exploration of Concepts for Liberation," (PhD diss, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2015); Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, *The Art of Critical Pedagogy*.

examine the moral dilemmas that teachers face in enacting their beliefs about educating for social justice, and the possible responses available to them.

Two Schooling Models, Two Visions of Teaching for Social Justice

Two schooling models that comprise a significant portion of the landscape of urban schools with social justice orientations are progressive and No-Excuses schools.[10] For teachers in urban districts looking to work at a school that shares their values, progressive and No-Excuses schools may be the most available and attractive options because they typically state a focus on justice and equity in their mission statements and recruit teachers who share these values.[11] Additionally, each model has a specific vision and set of practices for teaching for social justice. We find that these practices map on to the navigation and transformation conceptions in a way that creates tradeoffs for teachers who believe that both are necessary.

No-Excuses schools aim to close the opportunity gap for low-income youth of color by focusing on academic achievement.[12] We understand No-Excuses schools as aligned with the "navigation" side of social justice education, given the practices they use to facilitate achievement.[13] Take "Tight Ship Academy" (TSA), a fictional example of a No-Excuses school. At TSA, teachers work within a highly-structured environment designed to teach students how to successfully

---

[10]Scott Seider et al., "Developing Sociopolitical Consciousness of Race and Social Class Inequality in Adolescents Attending Progressive and No Excuses Urban Secondary Schools," *Applied Developmental Science* 22, no. 3 (2018): 169-187.

[11] Seider et al., "Developing Sociopolitical Consciousness."

[12] Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff.*

[13] Scholars have questioned whether No-Excuses schools can be thought of as facilitating social justice given the high levels of student discipline they require and their coupling of navigational skills with neoliberal values (see Joanne W. Golann, "The Paradox of Success at a No-Excuses School," *Sociology of Education* 88, no. 2 (2015): 103-119.) Whether we agree with these arguments, however, in this paper we choose to engage with No-Excuses schools' claims of social justice as serious and immediate for the teachers who seek to enact their values in these schools every day.

navigate dominant societal institutions and achieve traditional educational successes, like high standardized tests scores and college acceptance. To this end, school leaders frequently observe and coach teachers on instruction and classroom management. Teachers use mandatory curriculum and scripted lesson plans. To make sure learning isn't disrupted, TSA teachers carry out a zero-tolerance code of discipline, where undesirable behaviors are met with strict, unwavering consequences.

Progressive model schools, in contrast, share a mission of empowering students to make social change through collaborative school culture and problem-posing pedagogy, aligning with the "transformation" side of social justice education.[14] At our fictional example Freedom Ship School (FSS) teachers are given autonomy to develop classroom structures and lessons that

focus on critical consciousness development. Teachers create their own units and lesson plans based on student interest and identities. In terms of discipline and structure, school administrators employ responsive practices that vary significantly depending on the student or teacher, and a loose set of guidelines give primacy to student voice in determining school practices.

At either school, however, teachers will experience tradeoffs on their vision for teaching for social justice. At both TSA and FSS, the dual conception of teaching for social justice is in some ways only partially realized and in other ways conceptualized differently than the teachers' vision.

First, it's difficult for teachers at either school to prepare students to *both* navigate dominant society via academic success *and also* transform it through

---

[14] Alfie Kohn, "Progressive Education: Why It's Hard to Beat but Also Hard to Find," in *Feel-Bad Education and* *Other Contrarian Essays on Children &* Schooling, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011).

critical consciousness development. TSA's standardized curriculum doesn't leave much room for teachers to bring in students' identities and interests. Though it is not impossible for critical consciousness development to exist within this framework, particularly in older grades, it comes through academic discussion about critical texts, student-teacher relationship building, or advocacy by parents, rather than out of embedded school practices. Similarly, it's not as if academic achievement doesn't occur at FSS. At FSS, teachers engage students in deep thinking through project-based learning and action research. But with less focus on direct instruction, students who enter the school needing help with their reading and math skills may have trouble accessing material and making progress. As a result, academic expectations and achievement vary among students.

In other ways, the two schools conceptualize teaching for social justice differently, leading to more extreme levels of incompatibility. For example, both TSA and FSS believe that schools should be a place where students feel physically and emotionally safe. However, TSA believes that students feel most safe when their school environment is consistent and structured, and FSS believes that students feel most safe when they know that their voices are valued. At FSS, flexible discipline policies and school operations allow teachers to respond to their students' needs and evaluate behavior in context. However, this flexibility means that expectations aren't always clear; for example, teachers don't know exactly what will happen if they send a student to the office for disruptive or unsafe behavior. This phenomenon can create psychological uncertainty for both teachers and students. It can also lead to even more

dire consequences for students if and when they come up against dominant social structures, like the criminal justice system, that they have not been taught to navigate in socially-prescribed ways.[15]

At TSA, all students and faculty know what to expect from the high level of structure, but it can also feel physically and psychologically restrictive. Discipline structures and zero-tolerance policies present harsh punishments that may be developmentally inappropriate for students and exacerbate their vulnerability in the face of unjust social systems. The many rules for student behavior and dress frustrate students who want to exercise autonomy. Similarly, between the mandated discipline policy and the structured curriculum, teachers can exert very little autonomy themselves. In the most extreme cases at each school, teachers

and students may feel an incompatibility between physical and emotional safety that mirrors an incompatibility between navigation and transformation at these two schools.

Moral Difficulties

TSA and FSS represent two familiar models of urban schooling. Though schools exist that can integrate the two conceptions of teaching for social justice—and do, masterfully—they are regretfully few and far between in the reality of urban schools serving low-income communities of color. Each year, cohorts of teachers schooled in the dual conception of social justice graduate from their preparation programs and enter schools whose operationalization of social justice fundamentally challenges their beliefs. We see this challenge as occurring on an individual moral level and look to two

---

[15] Ira Glass, "Is This Working?," *This American Life*, Episode 538, October 17, 2014.

contemporary philosophers of education, Doris Santoro and Meira Levinson, to help us understand them before considering how teachers may respond.

When teachers "cannot enact the values that motivate and sustain their work," they begin to feel discouraged and despairing. Santoro calls this process *demoralization*.[16] Because teaching is a values-driven profession, Santoro argues, teachers rely on a moral barometer to encourage their work and persevere through the many challenges of the field. When teachers feel they are being asked to perform and teach in ways that compromise their values their sense of wrongdoing grows. In this case, teachers wish to work towards both navigation and transformation with their students, but the structures at each school stymie their efforts.

In fact, teachers may begin to feel that they are harming students by working in their school. This sense of complicity or direct harm can be understood by what Levinson refers to as *moral injury*: "the trauma of perpetrating significant moral wrong against others despite one's wholehearted desire and responsibility to do otherwise."[17] Similar to demoralization, moral injury occurs for educators when they "have the obligation to enact justice but school-based contexts make that action impossible." In this way, teachers may hurt themselves as well as students by working in an environment that compromises their vision of justice.

Response Strategies

Neither TSA nor FSS allow teachers to perfectly enact the dual

---

[16] Doris Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay*, (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2018), 48.

[17] Meira Levinson, "Moral Injury and the Ethics of Educational Injustice," *Harvard Educational Review* 85, no. 2 (2015): 7.

conception of educating for social justice as both require tradeoffs in the development of navigational *and* transformational skills. Indeed, teachers may experience some level of moral difficulty regardless of which school they work at. The question then becomes, how can teachers respond to this moral difficulty in ways that mitigate the degree of moral injury experienced? In this next section we explore a series of responses that teachers might adopt.

We take our framework from Albert Hirschman's argument that members of organizations can respond in one of two ways when faced with an unsatisfying experience with their organization—they can exit, giving up their membership, or they can voice their grievances in hopes of eliciting organizational change.[18] Although many teachers may temper their divergent opinions or align with the enactment of teaching for social justice at their school in order to continue teaching there, we find Hirschman's framework applicable to the options available to early-career teachers who choose (and are able) to resist. To extend the metaphor, we offer *jumping ship* and *rowing against the current* as the possible responses for resistance that teachers experiencing moral difficulty can choose.

Jumping Ship

When unable to realize their vision of educating for social justice, educators might choose to *jump ship* or exit. In this strategy teachers respond to moral difficulty by leaving the school by choice. Though this decision may be practically straightforward, it abounds in moral complexity. A dedicated and

---

[18]Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States,* Vol. 25. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

passionate teacher might feel deeply conflicted by jumping ship; after all, it means that they leave behind students, families, and faculty that they've no doubt developed relationships with and care for. What's more, by leaving either TSA or FSS, they contribute to the already-high teacher turnover rate in high-poverty schools.[19] However, a teacher might feel that by staying at either TSA or FSS, they are complicit in promoting a problematic vision of education. For instance, a TSA teacher might feel that by staying they are participating in a school culture that relies on the bodily control of Black and Brown students for the sake of academic achievement. An FSS teacher may even feel that they are insufficiently securing students' academic or social achievement. By remaining at a school in which students are not provided the tools to successfully navigate dominant society through academic achievement and expected social behavior, a teacher may feel they are inadvertently a model that poorly prepares students to participate in ways aligned with our society's institutions, leading to negative consequences when students leave school.[20]

Jumping ship, therefore, represents a significantly morally complex choice. Teachers contemplating this response strategy may find themselves in a moral injury catch-22: is it more injurious to continue to teach in an environment harmful to students, or to contribute to a teacher turnover phenomenon that harms students who continually lose strong and caring teachers?[21] Jumping ship will

[19]Nicole S. Simon and Susan Moore Johnson. "Teacher Turnover in High-Poverty Schools: What We Know and Can Do," (*Teachers College Record* 117, no. 3, 2015): 1-36.
[20] Glass, "Is This Working?"

[21] Randy R. Miller Sr., "Resisting No Excuses Culture as a Black Male Teacher: Valuing Critical Thinking and Relationships over Compliance," in *Principled Resistance: How Teachers Resolve Ethical Dilemmas*, ed. Doris A. Santoro and Lizabeth Cain (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

certainly result in differential moral injury based on one's closely-held values and particular moral commitments.

Rowing Against the Current

Teachers who choose to stay in their environment and preserve their vision of educating for social justice may respond through organizational resistance, deliberately enacting elements of their vision without institutional support. We call this *rowing against the current*. This subversive response can occur in both public and subtle ways. For instance, a teacher at TSA might choose to completely abandon the lesson plans provided by their district or network and instead draft their own curriculum that develops critical consciousness, or use a system of merits and demerits while also encouraging a level of self-reflection from students instead of abiding by zero-tolerance policies.[22] At FSS a teacher might row against the current by replacing opportunities for critical thinking with skill-acquisition exercises or instituting a system of prescribed classroom consequences.

Rowing against the current requires a great deal of commitment and energy from the teacher and coincides with significant moral difficulty. As teachers take the conflict between their values and position head-on, they may experience cycles of demoralization (as well as exhaustion).[23] They may also worry about modeling recalcitrance or subversion for students knowing that should students similarly resist authorities in certain contexts it could cost them greatly. However, some teachers may feel that this struggle is

---

[22] Beth Sondel, "Raising Citizens or Raising Test Scores? Teach for America, "No Excuses" Charters, and the Development of the Neoliberal Citizen," *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 43, no. 3 (2015), 289-313.; Miller Sr., "Resisting No Excuses Culture as a Black Male Teacher."

[23] Sondel, "Raising Citizens or Raising Test Scores?"; Miller Sr., "Resisting No Excuses Culture as a Black Male Teacher."

more in line with the values that motivated them to pursue teaching in the first place, and therefore, is less morally injurious.

Conclusion

Each option available to teachers in the case of the dual conception of social justice leads, in some respect, to moral difficulty. Admittedly, our argument is meant to illuminate, not solve, the dilemmas that we experienced in the classroom. In our experience, naming teaching as a *morally complex* profession, rife with challenges that occur precisely because of their moral weight-- rather than as burnout or lack of professionalization-- helps teachers to reclaim agency, energy, and power on a personal level. Similarly, naming schools and schooling models as complex, messy environments that both uphold and confound theories of justice help teachers (and philosophers) approach their work with realism and clarity. We hope that understanding the philosophical trade- offs, incompatibilities, and moral mechanisms underpinning these strategies will help teachers determine which strategies are best for themselves, their schools, and their practice as they continue to work towards their vision of social justice.