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Everyday Practices of Social Justice and Education: An Interview with Dr. Paul Theobald

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The Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis has traditionally published interviews with individuals who have strong connections to our special issue topics. We believe that interviews are important ways to contribute to the conversation surrounding critical issues in social justice. This interview features Dr. Paul Theobald, a scholar who applies historical and philosophical lenses to rural education and what role schools might take in revitalizing community and democracy.

Q. What brought you to your work in education? What drew you in?

I was one of the lucky ones, I guess. I went to college with the intention of becoming a teacher. At that point in my life it was mostly a fascination with history; a real passion for the subject matter. I wasn't thinking so much about the lives I might touch, that came later.

Q. What are the challenges inherent in your work?

I spent most of my career helping future teachers understand the profession at a deep level. Right now, I'm focused on trying to do the same thing for future educational leaders. The challenge in that kind of work is fighting against a pervasive view which holds that formal education is all about preparing individuals to take up an economic role in life. I can still recall a very telling 1980s sitcom episode with Michael J. Fox. He was a young suitor, and when asked about his future plans by the father of the young woman he was dating, he responded, "It's simple. Four years, BA. Five years, MBA. Six years, BMW." We've made the economic question primary in this country, and that represents an obstacle to anyone attempting to engender deep level thinking about the educational enterprise.

Q. For people starting this work, what advice would you give?

Don't take yourself too seriously. It's very hard, painstaking work. If you attack it too intensely, you will eventually become disillusioned by the slow pace of progress. Work at it, but find additional sources of satisfaction in your life—or you will burn out.

* Greg Wickenkamp interviewed Dr. Paul Theobald for this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*. Inquiries regarding Dr. Theobald's work can be directed to jctp@iastate.edu

If you are unable to find a co-worker who can serve as a sounding-board, a confidante of sorts, reach out directly to scholars who are doing work that resonates with you. My experience has been that they will respond and happily serve as a kind of temporary support system until you find others locally, who share your cause.

Recognize that the nation's schools were to be "pillars of the republic," they were to be a part of the nation's democratic infrastructure. Schools were created to make the most of, and at times to preserve, democracy. Never apologize for educating students capable of shouldering that burden.

Q. How is your work related to social justice?

Everything I do is connected to elevating social justice such that it becomes the nation's primary educational goal. It's not our ability to make money that makes us human, it's our ability to wisely deliberate about how life should unfold for family, neighbors, and countrymen. Increasingly, neighbors include those living elsewhere on the planet. That sort of deliberation requires an education, the ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives.

Social justice is simply the answer to the question of how society's resources will be distributed. This doesn't mean merely wealth, although that is a part of it. We have a very capable health care system in this country, do all members of society have equal access to it? How about housing? Education? Transportation? Does everyone have equal access to voting? Or are there obstacles for some that others do not face? How is work compensated? What about conditions within the workplace? These are all questions that individuals in society must be prepared to answer—thus there is a huge social justice role for schools.

Q. What do everyday practices of social justice look like for you?

When I think about "everyday practices," it's usually about consumption. In what I buy, am I supporting wage slavery? Am I supporting the degradation of the environment? Do I legitimate unethical business practices by purchasing from abusive corporations? Few people get wealthy in this business—I know that I am not one of them. But I make sure that my meagre retirement dollars are invested in funds that have passed a social justice test. Ethical consumption promotes social justice.

Q. There seems to be a disconnect between the discussions around critical approaches to education, and the discussions around rural schools. How might these two discussions inform each other?

Critical approaches to education often include an examination of power, how power is wielded and why. This is a good fit for rural schools, because rural areas are the clear victims of unethical power. It's easiest to see this in agricultural communities, but it's also true in rural mining communities, logging communities, fishing villages, etc. Into the 1980s it was still possible to make a living as a farmer on a small holding. You could get by with small used machinery. You could control pests and weeds through sophisticated crop rotations. And many tens of thousands of farmers did just that. They drove agribusinesses

crazy. Those agribusinesses then colluded with politicians to create policy that would handsomely reward the largest operators. In no time, small farmers were bought out, practically driven from the American countryside. And with them went main street business, churches, schools, hospitals, newspapers—all the things rural communities need to thrive. Critical approaches to education can help rural students understand what was done to their families, neighbors, communities—and what might be done to reverse the trend.

Q. How might a better understanding of rural schools and communities contribute to those wanting to work for social justice?

As soon as a person figures out that rural community erosion, rural school consolidation, rural small business failure rates, etc., are NOT some kind of “natural” phenomena, but are rather the results of deliberate policy choices that have enriched the wealthiest among us, the demand for social justice appears quite naturally. Thomas Jefferson argued that humans possess a “moral sense,” a kind of innate distaste for injustice. My experience tells me that he was right.

Q. What advice would you give to teachers in rural schools who are wanting to work for social justice but might feel isolated, unsupported, or unsure of how to proceed?

Find a network, or build one. Don’t work alone.

Q. In your book, *Education Now: How Rethinking America’s Past Can Change its Future*, you note how views of an atomized, individualistic, market-based society have all but displaced those that are more focused on relationships, democracy, and community. Schools seem especially vulnerable to embracing and reproducing these market-driven assumptions, particularly with recent political shifts. Are you hopeful about the future of public education in rural places?

I can tell you that I would be more hopeful if a large segment of the education research community were not a part of the problem. After the feds completely re-vamped the parameters for grant funding, supporting nothing that wasn’t tied directly to the production of test scores—too many researchers followed along like sheep. They had no idea they had become pawns in the corporate attempt to take as much profit from the educational enterprise as possible. Many still haven’t figured it out. Thankfully, that number is getting smaller each year.

I do think there is hope. The clear overreach, the unceremonious grasping that we see from conservatives at this very moment, is itself recognition that they have one last opportunity before the tide turns against them. For example, in order to give a tax break to the very wealthy in this country, Republicans are willing to let millions of people lose their health insurance. In order to pay for more spending doled out to military contractors, Republicans are willing to cut funding for the arts, for public media, even food programs for the elderly. All of these moves are very unpopular with a majority of Americans, and they are good examples of what I mean by overreach.

Q. How might we encourage local control in communities, without that local control defaulting to oppressive traditions or broader neoconservative, neoliberal influences?

Local control does not mean local elites call the shots—if it did, this would be a very important question—one I’m not sure I could answer optimistically. Local control is about shared control, sharing between pedagogical experts (teachers) and those who care most deeply about students (parents). There is plenty of room for give and take between these groups—but elevating those conversations, making them a regular part of the educational life of a community, that’s what’s needed to safeguard the enterprise. We do far too little of this right now. We must do much more.

Q. Where should people go with this work?

They should try to make the school where they work the very best school anywhere, one that is deeply attentive to the community of which it is a part. They should expand their pedagogical imaginations and use traditional school subjects to promote community well-being, perhaps producing food in school gardens or constructing a wind or solar farm to help wean us from fossil fuel dependence. Place-based curriculum and instruction is happening in isolated places all across the country. As more and more teachers are introduced to the concept, the movement will continue to grow. As Wendell Berry noted years ago in *The Unsettling of America* (1977), substantive change takes place first on the margins, and then moves toward the center.

Author Notes

Paul Theobald taught in Minnesota public schools for seven years before pursuing and receiving his Ph.D. in educational policy studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Since then he has served in various capacities at Texas A&M University, South Dakota State University, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, Wayne State College, Buffalo State College, and Buena Vista University. He is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of Southern Indiana. He has published widely in distinguished journals across academic disciplines. With a historical and philosophical lens, his books and work have focused on rural education, and what role schools might take in revitalizing community and democracy.

Greg Wickenkamp is a master’s student in Social Foundation of Education. Greg believes that social justice work means recognizing and fulfilling our responsibilities to transform systems that unfairly privilege some at the expense of others. As an educator, Greg is particularly interested in K-12 education and what teachers can do to transform schools and society towards something more equitable.

References

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