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Christopher Hanks Ph.D.
Grand Valley State University

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Hanks: Social Foundations

FEATURE



Social Foundations

By Dr. Christopher Hanks, Ph.D.
Grand Valley State University Faculty

My job is to convince you not to become teachers." I often begin introductory courses in the social foundations of education with this statement. It's not entirely true, of course. I do hope that many of my students become teachers, and good ones at that. But I also want them to think hard about *why* they are entering the field of education, and *who they will be* as a professional educator. These are some of the questions that social foundations help students explore.

Emerging Social Issues

There are a lot of things we know about the schools of the future. We know that demographic changes in American society will present enormous challenges in terms of cultural and linguistic diversity, social class divisions, and a widening gap between aging taxpayers and the children whose education they support. We also know that technology will play an increasingly prominent role in schools and classrooms, in the form of expanded curriculum, communication tools, modes of instruction, and cognitive augmentations (in the form of medications and assistive devices, for instance).

In just these two respects, culture and technology, the list of things we don't know about the schools of the future dwarfs what we do know. How these challenges will (or won't) be met, the scope and direction of efforts to reform the structure of schools, standards and accountability, and teacher preparation, and the range of work skills and civic duties required of our future students are all areas of uncertainty that are difficult to predict. In the words of educational thinker Ken Robinson, "How do we educate our children to take their place in the economies of the 21st Century, given that we can't anticipate what the economy will look like at the end of next week...?" (2008)

Larger questions loom. Will the shifting contexts of culture and technology alter the social and individual aims of education? Perhaps more importantly, who will be involved in making decisions about those aims? The field of social foundations takes as a premise that teachers themselves should be among the stakeholders who shape the future of education.

Critical Thinking

Thinking critically about these and other questions is essential if teachers are to fulfill this role. We often discuss critical thinking as an aim of education, and I don't know any educators who would argue with the idea. But what critical thinking means, exactly, is often unclear. Forming logical arguments, drawing appropriate conclusions, acting on the basis of reasons—these are all certainly key elements of clear and critical thinking.

But the field of social foundations encourages us to expand our view, to include reflection on unstated assumptions and underlying interests behind a given policy, and consideration of unintended consequences and differential effects of educational structures and practices. What we need are teachers who possess more than a toolkit of classroom strategies, who can make intelligent, professional judgments about the wisdom of various approaches and aims. John Dewey recognized this need more than a hundred years ago, arguing that "criticism should be directed toward making the professional student thoughtful about his work in the light of principles, rather than to induce

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in him a recognition that certain special methods are good, and certain other special methods are bad." (1974) Steven Tozer has repeated the idea in a recent social foundations textbook. "[T]eachers should have the best possible understanding of the relationship between their schools and the larger society in which those schools are embedded. We think teachers need more than *training* in how to deliver a set curriculum or technique, though such training... is important. Teachers also need to be *educated* as critical thinkers who have the ability to diagnose unique and complicated situation and create original solutions to these problems...." (2008)

Global Society

So teachers need a perspective that extends beyond the classroom. How far does this horizon extend? Well, that's just the sort of question that might be posed in a social foundations classroom. But I'll conclude with a few speculations that may begin to set the stage for this issue of *Colleagues*. One observation worth remembering is that American education has always been deeply linked to the project of democracy. After all, a central aim of Thomas Jefferson's original plan for public education (along with the aims of equalizing opportunity and cultivating exceptional talent) was to create the conditions under which ordinary citizens could be active, informed participants in democratic deliberation. Our efforts to live up to this ideal have been a mixed bag, but the challenge is no less important today. And as Dan Butin points out, "the social foundations classroom can promote the basic attributes of liberal democratic societies, most immediately by creating deliberative classrooms that foster students' exploration and creation of linkages and dialogues across academic, institutional, psychological, and emotional borders" (2005).

But we also live in an increasingly interconnected global society, and there are good reasons to think that social foundations of education should include study of complex global issues. Decisions made by global economic and political institutions affect us all, many of the world's most urgent crises—environmental, military, and economic among them—are inherently global in scope, and we might just learn something new about ourselves through encounters with the unfamiliar. Beyond all this, Luise McCarty's feature article makes the case that developing a global perspective is an essential component of what it means to be an educated person. In that sense, social foundations of education provides a critical link between the profession of education and the ideal of a modern university. 🗳️

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