
January 2018

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Yetta Goodman
University of Arizona

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Goodman, Yetta (2018) "Looking Back, Moving Forward," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 50 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol50/iss2/9>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

by Yetta Goodman, Ph.D.

In this article, we interview Dr. Yetta Goodman. She is Regents Professor Emerita at the University of Arizona College of Education's Division of Language, Reading, and Culture. We interviewed Dr. Goodman in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of her graduation from Wayne State University. In this interview, we ask her to provide our readers with some insights about the concept of social justice in education and specifically how literacy can be used as a tool to achieve social justice and equity.

MRJ: *What do you see as some of the relationships between looking at students individually and teaching for social justice?*

YG: I think about the concepts of social and personal. In reading, for example, you bring your own knowledge to the reading, but you are also bringing your own social community with you to the reading. Then you have to have some sense of what the author's personal and social communities are, as well. So to me, it seems that social and personal are on a continuum, not, "this is time for individuals," "this is time for social." It's a constant blend.

One thing that we really need to think about is all of the immigrant kids who are coming into our country right now. How are these children going to identify themselves with each other? And teachers have to keep their eyes open and watch what goes on. Our social interactions have great impact on what happens to the person, so how do you separate that social person? It's so important for teachers to be consciously aware, and unfortunately, in our educational practices at the present time, I still see individualization being imposed on curriculum; everybody gets a worksheet and everybody is doing their own thing. Where are opportunities for kids to learn together, to solve problems together? That's what our world needs, problem solvers. That doesn't start in businesses when kids are adults. Problem solvers need to learn to solve problems from an



Yetta Goodman

early age and little kids are great problem solvers. You know, they can make a vegetable garden together and figure out who should do the watering and for how many days, how should somebody do that, and who should look up all the names in the book and how we should write them. Kids can solve these kinds of problems, teachers don't have to. How are we engaging kids in those kinds of things that have an impact?

I'm not saying, "We've got to do some problem solving today! We have to have inquiry at 3 o'clock." These are strange kinds of things that happen when education comes up with important things like inquiry, like problem solving; and then we have to find some way of teaching it so you can measure it on a worksheet. It's bizarre to me and yet we continue to do that. I've been thinking about this a lot lately. The issue of when something is ultimately part of life's experiences that you *can't* separate out, and you need to deal with because that's what learning is all about. I think that very often people try to implement these ideas that they think are great, and then they don't know how to do them in a social community.

MRJ: *At least not in ways that can be measured?*

YG: Yes. And so they now have to do it individually or personally. Then it becomes a worksheet again. So we have to find ways of talking about this. We don't really

have good language to talk about it because we don't think about the complexities.

MRJ: *In your time as an educator and researcher, what have you seen in the field of literacy, in terms of instruction and assessment, that empowers and disempowers our students as readers, writers, thinkers, and agents of change?*

YG: I think it should be in the hands of the schools. I think schools should sit down and have policies about these kinds of things. Policies that say, "This is what we believe as a school." We've been talking about this need for policy since the 1960s in terms of language learning. In fact, there were many schools at that time, some even in Detroit and suburbs, with language policies. The Canadians were doing this; every school had a language policy. I saw this in Australia too, where teachers got together in school. They didn't say, "This isn't my business." What they said was, "What do our kids need and what do we think is important for our kids?" And they would list their principles of teaching, their principles of language learning, their principles for how our kids should treat each other and that became their language policy.

MRJ: *A lot of what we've been talking about speaks to the idea that it is naïve to think that we can educate the mind without addressing the whole child, including the culture they bring to the classroom. Can you say more about the roles of families in their children's educations?*

YG: I don't know why we've become so dependent on commercial materials controlling our education, rather than parents or kids; maybe we need to learn how to bring parents in on these discussions, what we want parents to do for us. For example, teachers want parents to read to their kids.

MRJ: *Yes, the way family involvement is approached can be very "top-down."*

YG: Right. We need to involve them in educational experiences so they know that, first of all, you trust them, that you believe that they have something important to say. Then, you have a beggar's chance

to get some ideas that parents will support you with. To me, involving parents in your classroom is a social justice issue. There are parents who have said to me, "You know I went to the school and said to the principal, 'I'm moving into the neighborhood and I want to visit the classroom;' and the principal said, 'We don't let the parents visit classrooms.'" I think they still have those rules in many schools. How is that possible? First of all, why would anybody want that? I want parents to see their kids in classrooms. I want parents to know what their kids are like in school, as well as what they're like at home. There are so many issues that we can think about when it comes to social justice, and just the simple day-to-day things are important, too.

MRJ: *As a field, where do you think we need to go next if we are striving to use literacy as a tool to achieve social justice and equity?*

YG: In today's climate, maybe we have to talk about the politics of it; I don't know. There are lots of conservatives, liberals, and everyone in between who want honesty, want their kids to be thoughtful, and want their kids to understand things in deep ways. What worries me is just the people who are saying, "We're just gonna do our job." What is your job? Let's list it down and is your job just the listed things? What do you do with the things you list? Do you think? Do you explore? Do you wonder? Do we want our kids to be curious? I mean, when you're curious, you raise tough questions. I hope high school teachers are responding to questions and talking to kids about the kneeling down for the National Anthem, but I'm sure that there are people who won't touch it with a 10-foot pole. What are you going to do if kids ask you these questions in the classroom? What are you going to say to them? We don't talk about that here?

I just never in my life couldn't talk about these things, because they come up all the time. How do the teachers prevent those concepts from coming up except to not let the kids talk in class? I asked a teacher that once and she said, "Well, we're not talking about that today." So, is that the way we solve our educational problems? We have to go back to what we believe about what teaching

is about, what learning is about, because I don't know how you can teach about the world without talking about the world. There are so many real things out there these days and kids are more tuned in, I think because of technology, because of the amount of social media. You need to know the culture of your students. That's a responsibility that teachers have always had. How can you [teachers] say that you're not responsible? In kindergarten we talk about families. How do you talk about families without talking about the power of fathers? Or the power of mothers? Or families that have two women in it or two men in it? I mean, how do you avoid that? Do we just say, "Let's get rid of that. We can't talk about that in the curriculum anymore because it's too hard to talk about."? So, we're going to get rid of all our curriculum if we are afraid. And this is fear. It's not because we're intellectually honest about it. The curriculum is what happens to kids all day long. I learned that here at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1960s. Everything that goes on is curriculum because everything that happens you can teach with! You can learn with! Everything is curriculum.

MRJ: *Many of our readers are teacher educators, either at the university level, or in K-12 classrooms in which they support pre-service teachers. What advice do you have for us about preparing the next generation of teachers in ways that support social justice?*

YG: In teacher education programs, we have to set up the same kinds of opportunities for pre-service teachers. They need to deal with social justice within their own situations at an adult level. I mean, I want to teach reading. I want my students to know how to teach reading. But maybe I have to stop and say, "OK, let's read some stuff for ourselves. Let's read some real stuff and deal with these issues." I don't know if we do this in teacher education enough with our own students at their level, not simply doing lessons for kids with them. We need to bring together some materials, and ask the students to bring stuff in, so they can begin to question whether they are thinking academically and where they are academically. What do they believe? Maybe we have to help each other in teacher education programs, if these are things we really want to do.

We also need to teach our pre-service teachers how to address these issues with their students. In reading education, we have books, children's books that talk about these issues. When you use different books, you're supposed to get different points of view. To me that's what a good book does in class, it gives you access to incredibly different perspectives. But to me, censorship is another big issue, when we have people who come in and tell us what books we can and can't use. You know?

MRJ: *Would you like to leave us with any parting words of wisdom?*

YG: We need to take the concept of inquiry curriculum more seriously and be more concerned about how students become interested and excited about their own learning than about our over emphasis on levels and grading and scores on test. That in and of itself is a political issue to ponder.

Author Biography

Yetta M. Goodman is Regents Professor of Education at the University of Arizona. She consults with education departments and speaks at conferences throughout the United States and in many nations of the world regarding issues of language, teaching and learning with implications for language arts curricula. In addition to her research in early literacy, miscue analysis and in exploring reading and writing processes, she has popularized the term *kidwatching* encouraging teachers to be professional observers of the language and learning development of their students. She is a major spokesperson for whole language and in her extensive writing shows concern for educational issues and research with a focus on classrooms, students and teachers. She can be reached at ygoodman@u.arizona.edu.

