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Book review

When "good intentions" are not enough: Turning the tide toward justice in early education: Review of 'Standing up for something every day: Ethics and justice in early childhood classrooms' by Beatrice S. Fennimore (2014)

Standing Up for Something Every Day is written on the premise that Americans know what is *really* going on with America's children. Fennimore speaks from a seasoned perspective, admitting that early in her work she assumed "once people in the United States were aware of the urgent needs of children, they would act" (p. 1) (Fennimore, 2014). However, over time she discovered multiple authors whom actually argued the opposite, how Americans recognize the hopelessness of so many of our children in society and in schools, but nonetheless have developed numbness toward these desolate experiences (Brazelton, 1990; Cunningham, 1990; Darling-Hammond, 2012). Fennimore has reflected upon this perspective throughout her career and uses this book to address the role educators play in this phenomenon—arguing the closer teachers get "to the real problems that contain both risk and genuine possibility for change" (p. 2), the more likely they are to make a difference.

From this lens, Fennimore writes for current and future early childhood educators who desire to effect change and help turn the tide of inequity and deficit-mindedness. This work is necessary to support movement away from the rhetoric that the innocence of young children should be protected by not pushing them to consider complex issues too soon (Silin, 1995). Fennimore rather urges early childhood educators to "stand up for something every day" and explicitly work to foster ethically and socially just learning environments for young children.

Through the experiences of four "teacher guides", which represent a compilation of educators she has worked with throughout the years, Fennimore positions the reader in real-life situations in diverse early childhood settings. Using the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (2011), Fennimore challenges educators to advocate for justice not only in their classrooms, but also commit to action within their larger school communities. She argues if educators *honestly* believe they have a moral and ethical responsibility to young children then such work is necessary.

Fennimore's multi-layered approach acknowledges that standing up for something every day is personal, professional and even political. In her Introduction, she identifies how social justice is often associated with "liberal" political interests. Fennimore pushes against this belief and asserts "the constitutional protections of liberty and equality should be viewed as both a civil right and a civic responsibility by every American" (p. 6). She challenges readers to see a commitment to social justice as one that transcends political preferences and parties. Fennimore offers reflection and discussion questions at the end of every chapter, which leave the reader food for thought and possibilities for collective dialogue. As Professor Celia Genishi points out in the book's forward, Fennimore writes not solely for those who have already committed themselves to teaching for social justice, but also for those taking first steps toward creating ethically sound spaces for young children.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the need to focus child advocacy on *all* children living in our country not only those whose needs are not being met. Fennimore asserts "every child is affected in a negative way by life in a society that allows some children to suffer so deeply and to lose their opportunities for optimal development" (p. 14). She argues it difficult for children to embrace democratic ideals when they are well aware of the inequities some children experience. In addition, that which allows for shameful neglect of many children can influence the development of compassion, empathy and a commitment to community in *any* child. She therefore believes shifting our advocacy to include all children could strengthen advocacy and policy initiatives. Not in an effort to silence necessary outrage in response to serious social dilemmas (i.e., poverty, homelessness, persistent racism, etc.), Fennimore also thinks it necessary to discuss how inequality and greed affect all our children. She argues these concepts are embedded into the fabric of our society and lay the foundation for what America values as it relates to children and families.

Fennimore references what Garbarino (1995) refers to as "social toxicity", that which has become commonplace in our society. This toxicity may be the "nastiness" children experience in the form of cruel words and actions by peers or that which they observe as adults interact. "Nastiness" may present itself through the hostile words spoken while driving, cutting lines in stores, speaking angrily on cell phones or just generally treating one another without respect or regard. Fennimore argues it is time to address how this lack of civility affects the development of our children.

Another social dilemma Fennimore addresses is consumerism and greed. Described as pervasive and unavoidable, consumerism influences our children very early in life. For example, those who advertise are unaware of the disappointment and frustration poor children experience when they are manipulated to desire certain toys and games outside their family's economic reach. "Moving as a nation from consumerism to humanism and compassion would wake us up to not only the unjust misery that so many children experience, but the damage that empty, selfish values and behaviors do to all children" (p. 16).

Fennimore goes on to describe the tenants of social justice, how they are vital and often controversial while challenging educators to understand the intentionality of ethics and respect for diversity. Fennimore references her book, *Talk Matters: Refocusing the Language of Public Schooling* (2000) to reiterate the power and political nature of language and how educators must be conscious of what, how and why things are said in schools and the unintentional consequences of "teacher talk".

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In Chapters 3 and 4, Fennimore fleshes out multi-cultural education, how it is essential and often met with resistance. She references Banks and Banks (1995) to describe the over-arching goal of multi-cultural education, to "reform the school and other educational institutions so that students from diverse, ethnic, and social class groups will experience educational equality" (p. 45). Fennimore explains multi-cultural education as a reform movement, which challenges the idea that diverse communities and people have to assimilate into one single culture or be viewed as inferior. Multi-cultural education has helped push us to acknowledge the cultural diversity within our schools as well as work toward inclusivity in the ways we *do* education in the United States.

One major argument Fennimore makes is that multi-cultural education must begin with a thorough examination and establishment of our intentions as educators. Once early educators identify their commitments, "they will naturally grow increasingly aware of opportunities for multicultural teaching and learning" (p. 45). One way to infuse multi-cultural learning into the classroom is to start by getting to know our students well and acknowledging their strengths along with their differences.

Fennimore also explains and exemplifies culturally relevant teaching as a lens through which "children can experience optimal academic development, develop cultural competence, and begin to understand and critique issues of power, privilege, and oppression" (p. 49). These chapters describe the personal nature of ethics while embracing the professional NAEYC code. From my experience as an early childhood educator, this code is widely recognized and a copy is physically given to every teacher. However, it is less often analyzed through collaborative discourse, intentionally incorporated into conversations with colleagues or infused formally in collective planning.

In Chapter 5, through the lens of showing the reader how one can take idealistic ideas about activism and roll them into one's daily life, Fennimore draws attention to a very important and common topic in early childhood—school readiness. A practical suggestion Fennimore offers is for teachers to shift the way in which we talk about our students in terms of their academic readiness. Instead of focusing on what our students *can not* do, we instead shift our language to that of inquiry—getting excited about the strategies we will experiment with to help meet the academic needs of *all* our students.

Fennimore shows how several "teacher guides" take initiative by researching what qualities children need in order to be viewed as "ready" for the next academic year. One teacher learned that many first grade teachers expect students to take on more autonomy in the classroom as they meet school expectations. She therefore designed activities that allowed children to practice working independently and learning to monitor their time. She also began building relationships with the first grade teachers in her building. This gave her opportunities to share what her students have been doing to get ready for next year as well as plan for her students to spend time in a first grade classroom. As Fennimore advocates for teachers to seek out resources, she compels them to critically analyze everything they read, particularly that which is research-based. In my experience, this skill is often taught in scholarly settings while sometimes overlooked in early childhood school environments.

In Chapter 6, Fennimore acknowledges the demanding daily lives of teachers and uses this to further justify why "our good intentions must become firm habits of mind" (p. 91). She uses this chapter to show how democratic classrooms are moral classrooms, ones where "nothing is taboo or 'not nice' to discuss" (p. 93). As she reiterates the necessity for young children to have the freedom to broche *all* topics that are a natural part of their lives, she also reveals where we stand as a nation in providing the full range of rights to children. She reminds educators that even at the youngest ages "we do have the power and ability to construct positive classroom communities in which our students learn how to be not only successful learners but good citizens as well" (p. 91).

Chapter 7 is designed to support early educators in their long-term commitment to justice and ethics for children. While admitting this can be more challenging in some settings than others, Fennimore asserts that an educator's determination plays "a central role in the construction of outstanding service to children and the profession" (p. 111). In this chapter, Fennimore shifts the concept of reflection away from one's teaching and one's school environment to reflection on one's past. "We need to do the work necessary to confront our 'ghosts' throughout our career and see whether any of them are interfering with our willingness to expand our thinking and incorporate new and fresh ideas" (p. 112). One way she invites teachers to begin this work is by acknowledging that what we believe and think about what is best for children and teaching should evolve with time. She argues that evolving thoughts and ideas make it possible for us to retain our enthusiasm year after year. This call to refresh, refurbish and reflect on our philosophies often is justified by the countless examples of deficit-mindedness Fennimore highlights throughout this book.

Fennimore impels teachers to be leaders and identifies how this can be done without taking on an administrative role. Although there are schools that designate teacher leaders, teachers do not have to be selected in any way to begin assigning themselves important aspects of leadership. A simple example that Fennimore provides is refusing to use deficit language to describe children regardless of their background or abilities. Teachers instead can model positive "teacher talk", utilizing words that uphold respect and value for children. In addition, Fennimore's "teacher guides" exemplify how early educators can utilize relationship building as a way to enhance the perception of their students in the building. Another way to become a teacher leader is to simply open your classroom door to peers who need advice or assistance, modeling collegiality and professionalism. Fennimore asserts "as long as we keep the needs of children front and center, and treat colleagues with respect and compassion, true benefits can come from a positive approach to confronting issues of professional competence" (p. 118).

This book should be considered a resource that both shows and tells. It appeals to multiple types of early educators, as Fennimore's "teacher guides" span urban, rural and suburban settings. The ethnic and racial identities of these educators are purposefully never revealed. This gives the reader permission to self-identify with the experiences of any "teacher guide" and to think about how they would respond based on their own identity and experiences. Fennimore respects the realities of teachers, acknowledges the criticisms often thrown their way and uncovers spaces for "effective but reasonable activism" (p. 125).

We as Americans may not know the intricate details of "what is *really* going on with America's children", but we are bombarded with images of the have-nots and often become desensitized to heavy and hopeless experiences. Particularly in communities where we walk by the homeless daily, we see people have less and experience difficult times but nonetheless often choose to live in spaces where we are not moved to movement. I believe it takes a connection to, understanding of or compassion toward those with less in order to stand up for what is right in any profession. This kind of activism is even more difficult in settings where children's rights are assumed to be at the forefront.

I would argue early educators are often portrayed as caring, committed, kind-hearted and genuine. It is therefore almost taboo to challenge the ethical and moral compasses in early education settings. Fennimore's work pushes against the concept that "good intentions" are enough. I believe this book is timely and necessary as it challenges educators to look beyond the surface of our

"good intentions". In order to advocate for young children, we must first be willing to self-reflect and analyze who and what values are privileged in our teaching, our talk and our actions. From this point, we can work to intentionally respect and appreciate diversity, acknowledge prejudices when we see and hear them and work to gain a reputation for moral integrity.

For those looking to begin, strengthen or continue conversations around ethics and justice in early childhood settings, this book serves as a relevant, appropriate and attainable resource. At the base of Fennimore's work is the acknowledgement of and respect for human rights. She reminds us that as educators we "possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. [We] can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. [We] can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is [our] response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized" (Ginott, 1972, p. 15–16). This book is an excellent foundation for stirring collaborative discourse amongst those working to improve early childhood classrooms, schools, policies and teacher preparation programs.

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Further reading

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