

Voices: Justice is providing excellent education for all

August 17, 2020

EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.

You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudice. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.

[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.

If Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann is correct in defining justice-making as figuring out what belongs to whom and giving it to them, then we must support universal education for all children.

Education provides the ability to name God's world. As the first human did at the feet of God in the wonderful creation story recorded in Genesis 2, discovering and naming our world is the enterprise that makes us fully human. In order to "be fruitful, multiply, replenish the earth, and subdue it," we must engage in this labeling and categorizing project.

As any learner and teacher knows, humans do not "have dominion" over any reality until and unless we understand it, label it and identify it. Such activity constitutes our humanness. It distinguishes us from the rest of the

natural order.

Being human is in a name

In Genesis 2, this naming is listed with two other activities. First, the human is placed by God in a garden of provision with that marvelous command, “You may eat.”

Then, at the end of the chapter, the human is introduced to another human, at which magical moment he exclaims, “At last, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh.” In an ingenious flourish, God commands the human to “cleave” to the other human, thus establishing the gift of relationship, marriage, family. The gift of love.

Long before Abraham Maslow theorized his famous hierarchy of needs, the word of God outlined a similar dynamic order in explaining human motivation and behavior. First, our physical needs are primal and primary. Second, language and learning—the naming impulse—is necessary for us to advance to a fruitful subduing of the earth. Third, love and the quest for self-awareness and self-identity is the highest, noblest impulse of humans.

Education is essential for both human sustainability and provision on one hand, and self-actualization and discovery on the other. This is why justice—what belongs to whom—looks like quality education for all children everywhere, a provision only secured if accepted as a universal human right and provided as a necessary public trust.

Public education and the social contract

There simply are not enough personal human resources, nor is there enough philanthropic human motivation, for education to be left to private

enterprise. If education is to be extended equitably to all children regardless of class, race, gender and religion, it must be secured and provided by the public.

In our confused season, when the very word “public” suffers much suspicion, what this means is everyone in the community invests in the education of everyone in the community.

Public education is integral to the social contract we make with one another as citizens. If we “hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” then we must—by logical extension of this conviction—provide equal education for all.

When our forebears launched the American experiment 244 years ago, they knew the only hope for sustaining their revolution in human affairs would be for all their fellow citizens to be as educated as they were. Thus, they began a conversation about education provided by public tax dollars.

Some decades later, in the 1840s, that conversation became implemented in policy, first in Massachusetts. By the latter part of the 19th century, every state constitution had a statute calling for mandatory education paid by the public.

Naming the gap

We have a long way to go in making this institution of American life truly just and equitable for all children. Because local tax dollars, chiefly through property taxes, underwrite the costs of public schools, all too often a child’s zip code determines the quality of that child’s education.

While state and federal law demands equity—namely, that publicly

provided education must be uniformly executed regardless of the economic level of the community—we have fallen far short of realizing that lofty goal.

Furthermore, because public education serves the sector of the body politic least likely to advocate for their own interests—children—we have seen public school funding has not kept pace with our children’s educational needs.

Tragically, we now have powerful forces seeking to demonize public schools as “failed,” to divert their already depleted funding to underwrite private schools through school vouchers, and to privatize them for the financial gain of a few.

These unjust policies subvert the purpose of public education by making it a commodity for only those who can afford it, rather than a social good for all.

What does justice look like? Great public schools for all children, the crown jewels of our nation and neighborhood.

Charles Foster Johnson is founder and executive director of Pastors for Texas Children and co-pastor of Bread Fellowship in Fort Worth.

[Click here](#) to read the full “Justice looks like...” series.