

When the Personal and the Political Collide

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Abstract

A consistent theme within social work has been the exploration of the conflict between the personal and the political – especially how social workers resolve conflicts between their own personal values and their political views. This account explores the clash that occurred when a researcher's findings about school vouchers conflicted with the personal experiences of those around her.

For many of us social work is not simply a job, but also an identity that infuses our view of the world around us. We take to heart the troubling issues of the day. For us discussions about poverty, the lack of health care and the impact of AIDS are real topics about real people that affect our daily working lives. Our careers are often a way to live out our ideals and values, a way to unite the personal and political.

Sometimes, though, the personal and political can collide in uncomfortable ways. We decry racism and racial profiling, but quickly cross the street upon encountering a group of young African-American boys; we profess a commitment to the poor, and then live out our lives in cloistered communities far from them.

Of course, we cannot all be like Jane Addams, settling among our clients (as she did when she opened the settlement house in Chicago in 1889) and devoting most of our waking time to helping others. The fact that we have chosen a profession that has as its goal a better world does not mean that

we are better people. Like everyone else, we inhabit that imperfectible zone of human behavior where even the best among us must daily struggle with our own racism and sexism. But we do need to strive for some consistency between the political values we profess and the personal lives we lead, particularly those of us who have claimed the social policy arena as our domain and who spend our time suggesting how to fix other people's lives.

This dilemma was recently brought home to me while conducting research on school vouchers, which involves giving families public funds to pay for private schools for their children. Couched in the language of crisis and hope, school vouchers have been touted as an immediate escape route for a population that has historically as well as presently been of paramount concern to social workers, the poor and minorities. Vouchers promise to deliver them from dysfunctional, decaying and dangerous inner-city schools resistant to reform.

My research on whether school vouchers

will deliver what they promise had led me to conclude that they will not. I can cite chapter and verse on why vouchers are a bad idea and why they will not work. I can tell you how in the end vouchers will hurt more of the poor than the few they may help. I can even call upon the exalted ideals of democracy and the common good to support my argument, as vouchers will likely destroy the one place – our schools – where a diverse people come together and learn the rules and norms of democracy.

But while my research on vouchers led one way, a real-life conversation led the other way. While I was writing my article an older African-American man was painting the hallway outside my office. One day I struck up a conversation with him. Searching for common ground, I enquired about his children. He proudly told me about his oldest daughter, a neurosurgeon who had graduated from Yale and Harvard medical school. He then told me how this child, born and bred in a poor community in the Bronx where he still lived, accomplished this pinnacle of American success by going to private schools. He had worked two jobs, both involving menial hard labor, to afford her tuition. Even now, no longer a young man, he was putting in the same long hours so that his two other daughters could follow in her footsteps.

I responded with enthusiasm to his story, congratulating him on such a well-accomplished daughter. I was also very relieved that he had no way of knowing that back in my office I was writing an article arguing against his receiving some help. The fact that I would never voluntarily tell him my position on this issue gave me serious pause.

The easy answer to my discomfort was that one man's story does not a policy argument make. Personal anecdotes are not a substitute for good hard research, and that research showed that, overall, vouchers would harm more people than they would help. But this did not assuage my

uneasiness. The problem was not my research, but something more personal. Who was I to oppose a plan that would alleviate this man's financial burden when I, comfortably ensconced in the middle class, would not have to work a single extra day to do the same thing if I so chose? Who was I to tell a family from the inner city that it should wait for long-promised, but never fulfilled, school reforms, while I, out in the suburbs, send my child to a well-equipped public school?

This dilemma is not new. Variations of it are continually played out in the public arena. As I was writing my article, a debate occurred in the pages of the *New York Times* about whether the interim schools chancellor for the New York City public schools should take his children out of the elite private schools they attend and send them to public schools. In response, one commentator asked if we should also require that administrators of public hospitals receive their medical care from such hospitals, and while we are at it, mandate that the head of the Housing Authority be required to live in the housing projects. Another commentator pointed out how quickly things would change if those in more powerful and influential public positions were required to use the same services and facilities that are used by the poor.

I followed this debate closely, seeking in it answers to my dilemma. I tried to draw lines: yes, the chancellor's kids should go to public school, but the housing chief does not have to live with his family in a housing project. Clearly I thought some sacrifice, but not too much, was required to reconcile one's public position and personal life.

Then I adopted a different tack. Is it not enough that certain people are committed to public service and improving the public good rather than pursuing lucrative private careers? We should expect the same, or even less, from them in their personal lives than we expect of others. I realized that I had in

the past applied this principle to myself; for years when I was an underpaid legal aid attorney representing the poor, I never gave to charity, reasoning that I gave at the office, having chosen poverty law over corporate law.

In the end I came up with no easy answers, because there aren't any. We each seek our own level of comfort when deciding how to reconcile our personal and

professional lives, deciding whether we will be more like Jane Addams or the school chancellor who, by the way, decided to keep his children in private school. I sent off my article, and then resolved to donate more money to charitable causes, although I am still trying to decide where to send my check – perhaps to a family in the Bronx struggling to send the children to private school?

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