

# The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework

## A Cross-curricular Approach to Integrate Social Justice Topics into the Classroom

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**Abstract:** Many teachers enter the field of education with a yearning to make a difference; they have a desire to teach from a social justice perspective to help promote a better society. Most often, educators are exposed to the theories, purposes, and, approaches of such educational philosophies in their pre-service programs (Delpit, 1995). However, while these philosophies often encourage a teacher to teach from a social justice perspective, when teachers attempt to do so, they frequently run into obstacles in implementation, resulting in social justice teaching staying more theoretical than actual (Picower, 2012). This manuscript explores current theories of social justice education in order to provide teachers with a framework for implementing key concepts of teaching from a social justice perspective.

### Introduction

Ask teachers to define the influence they hope to have on their students, and most will ultimately say: “I want my students to grow into responsible citizens. I want my students to contribute to society in an active, engaged way.” Or, “I want my students to change the world.” But how many of us know how to make that happen? Can we explicitly teach students how to change the world? Maybe not, but we can teach our students about the injustices that we’ve seen not only in our past, but also today. Exposing our students to these injustices and showing how they were overcome may help cultivate these responsible, active, world-changing citizens. Historically, students and the schools have been a platform for social change, because they have provided an arena to explore, promote, and reflect on new and existing ideas. Beyond introducing relevant academic content, one of the most important roles as an educator is to help students develop critical thinking skills, collaborative skills, and self-reflection skills that can foster a better society.

If the purpose of education is to help students develop critical thinking, collaborative and self-reflection skills that can foster a better society, where does this fit into the curriculum? Curriculum is defined as the means, methods, and materials with which students interact for the purpose of achieving identified educational outcomes (Brown, 2004). If educational outcomes aim to create students who can foster a better society, something which is implicit in all curriculum, than what are the means and the materials? There is no manual for teaching social change, but the more awareness of social problems that we can bring students, the more informed and effective they will be in developing solutions. But what should this look like in the classroom, and what is the role of the teacher and school?

## ***What Is Social Justice and Why Teach It?***

The National Association of Social Workers defines social justice as “the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities... social justice is much more than just a “view,” social justice is both a goal and a process/product (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). This means that social justice isn’t solely about teaching right from wrong and raising awareness of social justice topics, it is also about action. As Lucey and Laney (2009) explain:

Teaching for social justice involves advancing children’s moral and ethical development and helping children learn how to (a) value differences between people, (b) identify social injustices in the world around them, and (c) take collective action to remedy the social injustices they find. (p. 261).

**As** the diversity in the U.S. continues to grow, the importance of implementing social justice topics into instruction will follow. Social justice issues related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion (to name just a few), have been at the forefront of political and media agendas, and educating students on these topics is vital in helping them become active citizens (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Teaching social justice issues in the classroom develops a sense of agency and responsibility within the students and assists them in discovering and exercising their own power as knowledgeable and critical citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

## **The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework**

Social justice issues don’t present themselves in a singular manner, nor can engagement with them be taught through direct means of instruction. Doing so requires the critical examination of oneself, of others, and of events, in order to find patterns of inequality or oppression, and then requires an exploration of possible resolutions to the problems identified. Social justice advocates hope to create a society in which individuals have equal access to resources and receive equitable treatment regardless of their race, gender, religion, sexuality, income level or disability (Hackman, 2005).

The social studies classroom is a fitting environment for encouraging a social justice focused teaching style, since effective Social Studies instruction promotes open inquiry, in which diverse viewpoints and perspectives are shared and analyzed reflectively (Banks, 1985). In addition, the involvement of students in making sense of social issues of the past and present in order to inform future decisions has long been an important feature of social studies (Samuels, 2014). Further, since social justice is aligned with and can be woven throughout multiple aspects of the National Council of the Social Studies C3 curriculum (2013), Social Studies offers opportunities to foster this style of pedagogy and provide voices to marginalized populations (Banks, 1985).

While teaching for social justice is easily manifested in the social studies classroom through the C3 framework, taking such an approach is often too specific to social studies and cannot necessarily be applied to other subjects. A cross-curricular framework that addresses social justice issues is central to creating the “world changers” among their students that so many teachers hope to develop.

Bringing theory into practice however, can sometimes be challenging for classroom teachers and teaching for social justice is no exception. However, following a framework that creates a conscious environment, shows relevance, develops critical thinking skills, and creates plans for action can move instruction in the right direction, as described below in The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework (Figure 1).

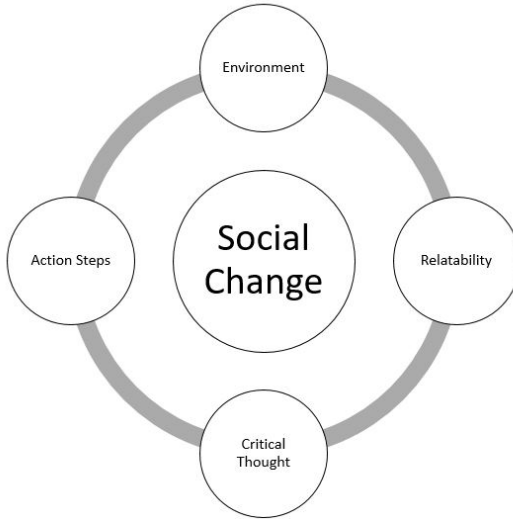


Figure 1. The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework.

First and foremost, a classroom environment conducive for social justice education needs to be consciously implemented. This can be done in a number of ways, but should begin by encouraging students to develop self-love, knowledge, and respect for others (Picower, 2012). Teachers should provide students with opportunities to learn who they are and where they have come from. In the process of doing so, students should study different characteristics of their identities and the histories associated with them and should deconstruct stereotypes about student identities.

Furthermore, teachers should provide students with opportunities to share knowledge about their own cultural background with their peers, and should create a climate of respect by learning to listen with empathy and kindness to the experiences of their peers. Helping students see each other as co-learners rather than as competitors is crucial to creating such an environment. If students don't view the classroom as competitive, they can move to treat the learning process as a route to solving problems instead of as a path to achievement only available to a few students. By creating this sort of classroom environment, teachers enable students to build each other up in conversation and action (Hackman, 2005).

Beyond this, the content discussed in the class needs to be relevant and relatable. Once a proper learning environment is established, conversations about real-world topics can ensue. Both students and teachers need to be able to answer the question, "Why is this information important and how does it affect me?" (Delpit, 1995).

Here, teachers should provide opportunities for students to explore how diversity can be experienced as oppression that has marginalized populations, and should make links between that oppression and the impact it has on people today. Teachers may also showcase examples of movements addressing social injustices and help students understand that working together, ordinary people have united to create change. Students need to be able to recognize real world problems and engage with these issues (Picower, 2012).

Next, the teacher must focus on content mastery and critical thought. According to Hackman (2005), information acquisition is the basis for learning, and without complex sources of information, students cannot effectively advocate for positive, proactive social change. Furthermore, critical thinking skills need to be developed, because content mastery alone is insufficient to adequately prepare students to become active agents of change and social justice in their lives and communities (Hackman, 2005). Students need to be able to look at information and analyze, synthesize, and evaluate in order to develop a deep understanding of the topic. The gaining of information alone does not translate to this deep understanding, which in return does not create a pathway for action (Hackman, 2005).

In relation to this, Freire (1973) has argued that the presentation of information as truth without engaging in the questioning of that information runs the risk of creating strict and rigid environment that is not conducive to social justice learning. Freire argued that in a social justice-centered classroom, all content must be subject to debate and critique. This encourages students to move beyond passively accepting the messages they encounter in their lives, and to look at such messages in a more thoughtful and critical manner.

Finally, a social justice perspective on education is not complete without action. Action is a crucial and irreplaceable element of a social justice perspective on education (Brown, 2004). This type of pedagogy instructs future teachers to be proactive rather than reactive and to embrace conflict rather than ignore it (Brown, 2004). Here, teachers provide students with opportunities to bring awareness and action plans to social justice topics by allowing students to teach their peers about the injustices and advocate for action opportunities. Teachers may help their students gain the skills needed to create change firsthand by including activities such as creating petitions, protesting, or writing letters to officials.

## Implementation

In my 6th grade classroom, I implemented *The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework* at the beginning of the year to help create the type of environment I thought to be most conducive to learning social studies. The students whom I taught were mostly from white affluent backgrounds, however, my classroom was also home to almost a half dozen different ethnicities.

Using the resources from the Teaching Tolerance (2018) program, I decided to use photographs to help teach students about social justice and oppression. Photographs may tell a story or make a statement about an idea and sometimes photographers use these ideas to convey messages. When students take a more critical view of pictures, real learning begins. In one lesson, I used a picture of a woman who looks like she was participating in a march (Teaching Tolerance, 2018). The

women has a focused look on her face and she is holding both an American flag and a Mexican flag.

In trying to encourage a conscious and reflective environment before I showed students the picture, I asked my students to go home and ask their parents or relatives where they were from. Thus, the students began to explore their own identity, many for the first time in their lives. As the students began developing their sense of identity, I gave them opportunity to research their histories and to share their cultural background with classmates who background differed from theirs. This began creating a climate of respect by helping them learn to listen with empathy and kindness to the experiences of their peers.

Next, I showed the students the picture. I did not give any instructions or any explanation of the picture, but I allowed the students to study it and discuss their thoughts for a few minutes. I then read the caption to the students. The caption explained this was a Mexican woman holding the two flags during an immigration march in Detroit. Doing this brought relevance to the topic because their school is within 60 miles of Detroit, and several of the class members shared the same cultural background as the women in the picture.

Once environment and relevance had been established, I then prompted the students with the following questions to elicit higher order thought to create a deepening understanding of the topic through group discussion.

- Describe the person in the photograph. Just make note of what you see; don't draw any conclusions.
- Why do you think the person is holding two flags? One is a U.S. flag. See if you can figure out where the other flag is from.
- What do you imagine the person in the photo is thinking about and feeling?
- What feelings do you have when you look at the photo?

Finally, I asked my students how we could apply what we had learned to influence our classroom environment for the year. The students in the class recognized the diversity in our classroom and understood the importance of inclusion and celebration of those different cultures. The students did not want any of their classmates to feel oppressed or discriminated against, so they decided to create action steps to positively address the diversity their school. The students chose to take action steps including staying informed on current events by designating 10 minutes at the beginning of each class to watch CNN10; researching other cultures when they were first mentioned or discussed in the class; and learning about and breaking down stereotypes in the classroom through activities created by Teaching Tolerance Program.

## Conclusion

An overarching goal of teaching from a social justice perspective should be to prepare students for participation in our democratic society. Whether we are exposing the students to these topics through the curriculum, through current events,

through extra-curricular activities, or through spontaneous teachable moments, this exposure is vital to the development of active citizenry. The more awareness of social problems we can bring to our students, the more informed and effective they will be in developing solutions. However, implementing this type of instruction has proven to be difficult. Teachers often have the motivation to teach for social justice but lack a proper framework for follow through. By using The Social Justice in the Classroom Framework, a simple and clear framework, teachers can implement social justice topics into everyday lessons and conversations. Maybe then, we may help cultivate responsible, active, world-changing citizens.

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## About the Author



About the Author: Briton C Moore received his Bachelor of Science in Human Development and Family Science from The Ohio State University and Master of Education in Middle Childhood Education from the University of Toledo. Briton's areas of interest include implementing critical thinking skills into his social studies classroom to develop active and engaged citizenry.