

Common Challenges When Teaching About Equity and Social Justice*

*Please note that this is not an exhaustive list, but merely a list of the challenges that the authors have *most commonly* experienced in their work around teaching about social justice with predominantly white children, educators, and families. These challenges will likely look different for educators who work in more diverse communities. This is also **not meant to be used as a handout for families or other educational stakeholders**, but as a **living resource** for education faculty, staff, and administrators. *Any and all feedback is welcome and may be directed to [Shawna Coppola at shawnacoppola@gmail.com](mailto:ShawnaCoppola@gmail.com).*

| Possible Challenge | Supporting Information |
|--|--|
| <p>Learners and/or their families or caregivers object to your classroom being a “political” space.</p> <p>Language you <u>might</u> hear:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “School is no place for politics.” • “Teachers are supposed to be politically neutral.” | <p>There is a difference between being “political” and being “partisan.” To be <i>partisan</i> is to explicitly advance the agenda of a specific political party (e.g., to assign students to watch campaign ads from one political party and not another), whereas to be <i>political</i> is merely to inquire into or involve oneself in issues around governance, public affairs, and civic life.</p> <p>As education scholar and philosopher Paulo Freire states in his book <i>Pedagogy of the Oppressed</i> (1968), “All education is political; teaching is never a neutral act.” School, like every other social institution, is and has always been shaped by cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. This pertains to everything related to school—from “acceptable” codes of conduct, to the hiring of faculty, to the adoption of textbooks and other curricular materials, etc.</p> <p>In fact, taking a “neutral” stance on any civic issue, no matter how benign, is itself a political choice that has historically shown itself to be designed to uphold the dominant [white, patriarchal] status quo.</p> <p>Questions to consider/explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your beliefs about the purpose(s) of schooling? • Can you help identify an area of our lives that are void of politics? What are they? • Help me understand where you believe this [unit, lesson] turned partisan. |

Learners and/or their families or caregivers consider talking about social justice issues in school to be a form of “indoctrination.”

Language you might hear:

- “Why can’t we just teach people to be kind?”
- “This sort of work is divisive.”

Education, in large part, involves the act of **seeking out facts and information** and **critically determining what is truthful vs. what is not**. Indoctrination, on the other hand, is aimed at influencing people to **uncritically accept or believe in certain facts, information, or bodies of knowledge** without being able to back up these facts with anything but opinion or ideology.

Our aim is not to teach students *what to think*, but **how to be critical consumers of the world** and the seemingly endless flow of information/messages that they are subjected to daily, many of which enact and/or perpetuate harm for those who are, and who have been, traditionally marginalized in our society. Having these sorts of conversations and exploring these kinds of topics can only help to bring individuals from different walks of life to a **mutual understanding** about one another and their lived experiences.

Questions to consider/explore:

- When have there been times in your schooling where you’ve felt that you were indoctrinated? What do you wish happened instead?
- How might appeals to “kindness” help students gain the appropriate knowledge necessary in order to understand complex social issues?

Learners and/or their families or caregivers object to the teaching of “hard history” or of current events that may be upsetting in nature.

Language you might hear:

- “They’re too young to be talking about this.”
- “These conversations will only confuse my child.”
- “Children shouldn’t be learning about such depressing topics.”

While, at times, discussing or exploring certain aspects of equity and social justice **may lead to questions around “heavier” topics** like the enslavement of individuals or the stealing of Indigenous land, merely talking about equity or social justice with children does not automatically or necessarily lead to these kinds of topics. Rather, such conversations/explorations may lean more heavily toward developmentally appropriate issues around, for example, **fairness and the need to treat people humanely** regardless of their identities or lived experiences.

It’s important to note, however, that most children and youth of color, along with most queer and/or transgender youth, **do not have the privilege of avoiding “heavy” topics** when it comes to their identities and lived experiences. Instead, many of these individuals are subject to a daily barrage of messages and media representations that either erase,

| | |
|---|--|
| | <p>dehumanize, or ignore their lived reality, unlike those youth whose identities match more privileged social identities.</p> <p>Questions to consider/explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose history is most often told in the majority of school spaces? Why do you think that is? • What is your response when your child asks a question about a difficult or challenging subject outside of school spaces? • When things we learn about the world are upsetting or confusing, what strategies/resources/information are available to us (learners and families) that we can use to appropriately process these feelings? |
| <p>Learners and/or their families or caregivers question the need to discuss race (<i>which often comes up when exploring issues around equity and social justice</i>) when the majority of the learners are white.</p> <p>Language you might hear:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why are you talking about race when most of the kids are white?” • “We don’t have ‘those problems’ around here. We are a welcoming community!” | <p>Silence or avoidance when it comes to talking about race is a norm in most white families and/or communities, which perpetuates a cycle of ignorance and denial when it comes to race and racism. In addition, avoiding discussions around race with white children, in particular, reinforces the harmful idea that being white means to have no race, which erases the cultural, financial, and societal privileges that are gained in our society simply by being white or white-adjacent.</p> <p>When white children are taught, albeit implicitly, that being white is the “norm” or the “default,” studies have shown that they quickly internalize notions of racial superiority and are overall less likely to recognize and call out racial discrimination when it occurs. This happens with children as young as three or four years old.</p> <p>Questions to consider/explore:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When did you first become aware of your particular race? What was the event or situation leading up to this? • Do you identify “white” as a racial identity? Why or why not? |
| <p>Learners and/or their families or caregivers question the need to explore social justice issues because it may cause undue stress to the child.</p> | <p>From very early on, children internalize messages about power, privilege, and justice regardless of our intentions, “the consequences [of which] are enormous not only for individual children, but also for a society that strives for equality and justice for all” (Hyland, 2010). Failing to explore issues of social justice can lead to children developing implicit biases</p> |

Language you might hear:

- “Children are too young to try to fix social justice issues.”
- “These discussions are causing undue stress to my child.”

based on race, class, gender, etc. and can **perpetuate injustice, inequity, and oppression** about which many individuals, including children, can feel powerless to change.

When children and youth explore social justice issues with trained, caring professionals, the powerlessness that they often feel about the world—and the anxiety that comes with such powerlessness—can be mitigated as they **learn how to use their voices to speak up and take action** to not only educate others, but to potentially stop further injustice(s) from happening. In addition, learning about social justice at a young age **prepares children to be informed young adults** with the skills necessary to speak to topics essential to participating in a just, equitable world that honors and affirms all humans.

Questions to consider/explore:

- “How do we prepare children to use their voice so they feel empowered to make change when they are compelled to do so?”
- “What are some ways that we might disrupt the cycle of socialization (Harro, 1982) that leads to the formation of implicit biases and other harmful outcomes?”

Resources:

Children’s Community School. (2018). [“They’re Not Too Young to Talk about Race!”](#)
Freire, Paulo. (1968). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.
Harro, Bobbie. (2000). [“The Cycle of Socialization.”](#) *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice*.
Hyland, Nora. (2010). “Social Justice in Early Childhood Classrooms: What the Research Tells Us.” *Young Children*.

Huge thanks to Janet Zarchen, Kitri Schaefer, Katherine Lucas, Isabelle O’Kane, Ashley Healey, Whitney Forbes, Salina Millora, Kate Belanger, Colleen Cassidy, Lindsay Geddes, and Jessica Ortolfo for their invaluable contributions to this document.