

CHRIS HASS



Social Justice Talk

Strategies for
Teaching Critical
Awareness

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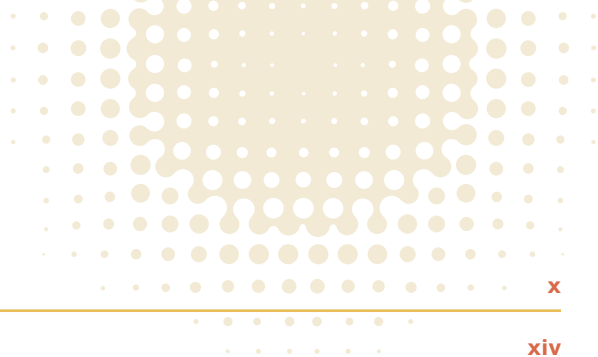
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**This book is dedicated to
every teacher who has ever
chosen what is just
over what is expected.**

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Introduction

Love Is Not Enough

What does it mean to teach for social justice? If you had asked me this question many years ago, I likely would've told you it means to teach our children to love all others—not despite their differences but *including* them. At the time, I wholeheartedly believed a multicultural curriculum was the solution to confronting racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and the myriad of other oppressive ideologies at play within our society. Teaching students to respect and appreciate all people, I thought, was *the* solution to combating the injustices, both subtle and blatant, so many experience on a daily basis. I was wrong.

My error was in oversimplifying the systems of oppression interwoven into the fabric of our society. Good, loving people unknowingly contribute to systems of oppression every day. *I* unknowingly contribute to systems of oppression every day. So do you. Given this, it's not enough to care for or even love someone. Love alone doesn't protect marginalized communities from the effects of systemic injustice nor does it guarantee we ourselves are somehow free from maintaining these very systems, directly or indirectly, through our own unexamined beliefs and actions.

I was reminded of the limitations of love a few years ago when talking to a friend about a local incident at a neighboring high school. A white school resource officer had been caught on video using extreme force on a Black female student. I believed the officer's violent actions came from seeing students of Color as inherently more threatening, and thus deserving of greater force, than most white students. This was supported by documented accusations made against him previously from other people of Color in the community. This history of violence made little difference to my friend as she drew upon the notion of goodness—the ability to love—to claim racism had nothing to do with the school resource officer's motives. "I just don't buy it," she argued. "He can't be racist. His *girlfriend* is Black." Her understanding of racism was informed by the belief that loving an individual person means one can no longer hold any preconceived notions about the groups to which they belong. I was quick to point out that in our lifetimes both she and I had known quite a few men who were incredibly sexist yet married to women they cared for deeply. No, love is not enough. Not to overcome centuries of learned prejudice and discriminatory action.

But if not love, what else? Let me begin by saying love *is* an essential piece of the social justice puzzle. It's vital that students learn to better understand and value all people of the world. This begins with recognizing and celebrating what each child brings with them to the classroom. If a social justice education is one dedicated to building a more just society, then we have to begin by helping our children build positive social identities using their cultural knowledge and histories, while also extending these same efforts to better understanding and appreciating the diversity all around us.

So yes, teaching love—love for oneself and love for others—is a great place to begin. But if we truly want to disrupt societal injustices, we have to boldly push into cultural criticism. We have to help students first question then disassemble the particular beliefs and practices that maintain oppression. In doing so, we begin to expand what it means to teach for social justice.

Learning to Read the World

This book will detail how to facilitate rich discussions that disrupt the harmful social beliefs and practices that maintain injustice. To accomplish this, you'll learn how to work alongside your students to *read the world*. As advocated by critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970), reading the world calls on us to become mindful observers who question and critique all we see. This integral work allows students to begin noticing and naming the practices they feel are unfair (say, the overrepresentation of white males in the Oval Office) and then identifying what beliefs create these unjust conditions and even make them seem inevitable or natural in the eyes of many. This act of noticing and naming is essential. Our primary goal is generative critique that allows students to continue noticing, questioning, and critiquing far beyond the reaches of our classrooms.

It's important to recognize this practice of reading the world, rooted in a critical curiosity that promotes student-led questioning and meaning making, goes against the grain of what we've learned classrooms and teacher–student relationships should be. It's not often teachers allow their students' questions to guide the curriculum or their tentative understandings to count as legitimate knowledge. Classrooms are often places where students blindly accept the wishes, knowledge, and perspectives of the teacher. But what does this get us? Too often, it produces silent spaces where students not only become detached and cynical but also learn to become passive receivers of information. This robs students of valuable opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and the sense of agency they'll need to take proactive stances in the future. Cornelius Minor (2019) astutely points out that we'll achieve a more just society not through our content but through our methodology. If our methodology is one that positions learners to remain silent and to willfully accept all they are provided—in the classroom and out—we will never achieve our goals of creating a better and more just democracy.

Essential Understandings for Social Justice Work

As with any author, I'm going to make certain assumptions about my readers. I assume you're genuinely interested in helping students learn to identify, explore, and address issues of injustice in the classroom and beyond. And I assume you're willing to push yourself to grow just as much as your students, if not more so. Yet, before we can begin this work, I first need to establish some essential understandings that underscore all efforts to address issues of social justice in the classroom. Read over them closely while carefully considering their meaning to you on a personal level as well as to your classroom teaching.

Tool

What We Need to Understand About Self

- Growing up in this society has caused me to unknowingly develop prejudices. Having these prejudices does not make me a bad person. However, I do have a responsibility to acknowledge and dismantle each of these as they reveal themselves to me over time.
- There are times when I'm so used to things being the way they are I fail to recognize the presence of injustice or oppression in the lives of others. Yet, just because I've not been aware of these myself does not mean they aren't real.
- There's no such thing as being neutral. Any attempts on my part to avoid facing hard truths or engaging in critical work alongside my students only serves to support the many systems of oppression at play within our society. My silence and inaction make me complicit in the harm done to others.
- I shouldn't mistake my comfort for my safety. The same is true for my students. This is hard work and I should expect it to push each of us in ways we're not used to being pushed. Though it is uncomfortable at times, it's necessary for real growth and change.
- I'm unlikely to see an end to racism, sexism, xenophobia, and most other forms of oppression in my own lifetime. Yet, all the same, I'm willing to do the work because small victories, accumulated over time, bring us closer to a more just society.

What We Need to Understand About Society

- Oppressive beliefs and practices are intended to maintain unjust power imbalances in our society so those within the dominant culture can protect their privilege. Furthermore, deliberate efforts are made to protect these privileges.
- Our actions as individuals are heavily influenced by the larger social systems to which we belong. These social systems (neighborhood, school, religious/spiritual community, and so on) shape our understanding of the world and how to live in it. Were we to live within other social systems, we would likely view and experience the world differently. For this reason, the way we make sense of the world is no more than a singular view of *reality* and one that could be expanded by spending more time listening to and learning from others who are different from us.
- Race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and all other means of grouping people are not based on any proven science but, rather, socially constructed. There are countless other ways people could be grouped instead and those currently in use within our society hold no more credibility than these other possibilities (say, handedness, hair color, height, or agility).

My Classroom, My Positionality

The classroom transcriptions and vignettes in this book come directly from discussions and engagements I've had alongside second- and third-grade students over the past ten years. To make sense of these structures and those participating within them, it's important to take a moment to provide some information about myself, my classroom, and my kids. Who we are matters. It matters because our perspectives, investments, desires, and fears provide the lens through which we see the world—and critique it.

Several years ago, I gave a presentation about this work to a group of educators. After spending an hour sharing student artifacts, classroom vignettes, and feedback from families, a professor of Color from the nearby state university raised her hand and asked, “Because we don’t see a whole lot of white teachers talking about race in the classroom, could you speak to how being white affects your ability to discuss race with a diverse group of kids?” With just a couple moments left before attendees were to move on to other sessions, I felt the gravity of this question weighing on me

Watch



The Value in Teacher Restraint: In this clip, Chris reflects on the importance of teacher restraint in social justice teaching.

Conversations for Mutual Respect: Parent Judi talks about how the conversations that happen among children in school are transformational for society.



and I fumbled it. Badly. Speaking to what my whiteness meant in regard to how families had accepted, questioned, or challenged our classroom's social justice work in the past, I failed to address the most critical aspect of her concern: *How can someone of privilege, having never personally experienced the effects of individual or systemic racism, speak from a position of authority within a group of children for whom these discussions are not just academic but extremely personal?*

This is a question I grapple with on a daily basis when engaged in critical discussions with my students. It's imperative that I'm always aware that I speak from a position of privilege as a result of my whiteness within discussions of race, my maleness within discussions of gender, and my heterosexuality within discussions of relationships and family structures. As will be discussed at multiple points throughout this book, the perspectives I take and the importance I give to particular aspects of a current event or student question are largely based on the limitations of my own experiences. That's not to say I don't know a good bit about these topics. I do. However, in each case my understanding is detached because my knowledge has come from discussions with friends, family members, colleagues, and peers as well as a large collection of observations, films, speeches, books, articles, and so on. I have no lived experiences to help me truly understand what it means to be Black, female, gay, trans, Muslim, wheelchair bound, or a refugee, to name just a few.

No matter who you are, this will always be the case. Each of our students represents an intersection of the many social groups to which they belong. For this reason, we cannot—and should not—ever allow ourselves to assume we are an authority capable of resolving our students' every question or concern. In fact, one of my primary goals in writing this book is to

help you see the power and importance of placing your kids at the forefront of the meaning-making process. Our kids provide a diversity of experiences and thought that are invaluable to the collaborative nature of this work.

The students represented in this text, a composite spread out across multiple classes over the years, constitute a diverse group. My classrooms are typically 50 percent white, 45 percent Black, and 5 percent Asian-American. The vast majority of children are active Christians and a small handful are Jewish, Muslim, or atheist. With regard to the political leanings of families, I teach in the Southeast, which is an ideologically conservative region. That said, based on pieces of information that find their way into our classroom discussions about a variety of topics, including upcoming elections, the families in my classroom seem to be about two-thirds liberal and one-third conservative. About 25 percent of students in my classroom receive free or reduced lunch. I don't share any of these statistics in an effort to have you paint a picture in your mind of who you think my students are in relation to your own. None of these statistics fully tell the story of my children, their families, or our community. However, this information does provide some context to better situate the work presented on these pages.



Identity

Knowing Ourselves



For many years researchers willed themselves to believe their identities didn't matter. They didn't acknowledge that who they were influenced how they viewed the world and that this played an unspoken role in their research—from how participants interacted with them to how they interpreted their data. Thankfully, much has changed over the past few decades—at least in the social sciences. One example of this is the research Jonathan Harvey (2013) has conducted into the experiences of people rehabilitating from severe traumatic brain injuries. As someone who's sustained a traumatic brain injury himself, Harvey understands his identity as a survivor helps him more easily catch nuances when listening to the experiences of other traumatic brain injury survivors. Yet, at the same time, his insider status poses the threat he might misinterpret other survivors' experiences through the lenses of his own journey to rehabilitation. The identities and experiences of researchers cannot help but have an impact on how they make sense of everything they see, hear, and do in the field.

The same, of course, is true of teachers. Teaching for social justice requires you to acknowledge that who you are plays a significant role in your work—from how you interpret your kids' questions to how you make sense of issues facing your communities. To gain a better sense of how the particulars of your social identity shape the work you do in the classroom, select an aspect of your identity from Figure 1.1 that places you within the dominant culture of American society (listed here as “Non-Target”). I'm defining dominant culture here as the cultural practices or ways of being that hold the most power or privilege in American society.

Where Do You Fall in Historically Excluded and Included Groups?

| Types of Oppression | Variable | Non-Target Groups | Target Groups |
|------------------------|---|---|--|
| Racism | Race/Color/Ethnicity | White | People of Color (African, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx) |
| Classism | Socioeconomic status | Middle, Upper Class | Poor, working class |
| Elitism | Education Level/ Place in Hierarchy | Formally educated, Managers, Exempt, Faculty | Informally educated, Clerical, Nonexempt, Students |
| Sexism | Gender | Men | Women, Transgender, Intersex |
| Cissexism/ Transphobia | Gender Identity/ Gender Expression | Cisgender, Appearance and behaviors are congruent with the Gender Binary System | Transgender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, nonbinary gender |
| Heterosexism | Sexual Orientation | Heterosexuals | Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Pansexual, Asexual, Queer, Questioning |
| Religious Oppression | Religion | Christians/ Protestants | Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Agnostic, Hindu, Atheist, Buddhist, Spiritual, LDS, Jehovah's Witness, Pagan |
| Anti-Semitism | Religion and Culture | Non-Jewish | Jewish |
| Militarism | Military Status | WWI and II, Gulf War veterans | Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan veterans, Pacifists |
| Ageism/Adultism | Age | Young Adults, Adults | Elders (40+ by law), Children |
| Ableism | Physical, Mental, Emotional, Learning Ability | Currently able-bodied | People with a physical, mental, emotional, and/or learning disability |

Where Do You Fall in Historically Excluded and Included Groups?

| Types of Oppression | Variable | Non-Target Groups | Target Groups |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------|---|
| Xenophobia | Immigrant Status | U.S. born | Immigrant |
| Linguistic Oppression | Language | English | English as a second language, Non-English |

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Note: Please note that this chart is not presented as definitive, authoritative, or “the right or only way,” but rather as a meaningful starting and reference point for a common language and approach to dialogue.

Figure 1.1

Where Do You Fall in Historically Excluded and Included Groups?

I’ll engage in this practice alongside you, selecting my gender (male). Now mentally list all the unearned privileges you’re afforded solely for being part of this particular social group. I’ll warn you, unless you’re used to this kind of analysis, it can be challenging at first. This is because over the course of your lifetime you’ve likely never been forced to reflect on such realities. Not having to think about the ways society works in your favor is, in itself, a privilege. Here’s a small sampling of my privileges as a male member of American society:

- I can expect others to focus on my intellect and character rather than my body, age, or style.
- I can expect others to accept my strength and physical capabilities without surprise and without the use of the qualifier “for a boy.”
- I can expect to struggle with something new without having this be seen as a deficit of my entire gender.
- I can expect to be granted implicit and explicit messages of my importance and power on a regular basis (i.e., overrepresentation in street names, memorials, and statues as well as overrepresentation in legislative, managerial, and boardroom roles, and so on).
- I can expect the historical contributions of my gender to be placed at the center of all mandated curricula.
- I can expect legislative issues to be taken up from a male perspective.

- I can expect to enter nearly every field of study or profession without fear for how I might fit in or be treated by colleagues based on my gender.
- I can expect greater chances of reaching positions of power and influence within most every profession than my female counterparts.
- I can expect that no one will be surprised by my success in a given field.
- I can expect that my assertiveness in the workplace will not be met with efforts to label me as aggressive, overbearing, or a “bitch.”

When I was first pressed to consider the privileges I’m gifted as a male, I was already aware of many. Certainly, I knew men are better represented in politics and dominate positions of power in most professional fields. But there were a number of others I’d never considered (say, the fact my struggles won’t be seen as a condemnation of the abilities of *all* males). Suddenly aware of these “hidden” truths, I rushed to share them with my wife, thinking for certain she’d be blown away by the sheer number of male privileges we fail to recognize even exist. Turns out the *we* was just *me*. As a woman, she’d known this all along. She patiently heard me out and casually responded, “Uh, yeah!” At that moment I realized I’d been living in a protective bubble of ignorance. This bubble protected me from having to confront my own privilege or consider my own role in the daily maintenance of these injustices. This meant that I could love a person (or even an entire group of people) and still unwittingly hold beliefs and take daily actions that work to oppress them. As teachers who facilitate daily discussions around injustice, we *must* become increasingly aware of the aspects of daily life we’ve failed to recognize as a result of our own social identities. To successfully teach for social justice, it’s critical we first acknowledge the blinders we wear and then work to remove them. The purpose of this chapter is to help you begin this work.

Social Identity as a Threat to Discussions of Injustice

Earlier, I shared the story of a presentation where someone asked, “Because we don’t see a whole lot of white teachers talking about race in the classroom, could you speak to how being white affects your ability to discuss race with a diverse group of kids?” If you’ll remember, I fumbled this question badly. The truth is I wasn’t wholly prepared for it. Though the significance of my whiteness (and maleness, heterosexuality, and so on) were topics I reflected on quite often, I hadn’t realized just *how* important all these were in relation to my role as a facilitator of discussions around injustice. I’m not alone in this. Many white teachers walk blindly into discussions of race without first understanding the dangers their social identities pose to potential outcomes. No matter how much we work to create classrooms where everyone has a voice that’s

valued, we can never escape the fact we, as the teacher, have an incredible amount of power when it comes to creating new knowledge in the classroom. For example, consider the following hypothetical scenario playing out in an elementary classroom. While doing so, see if you can identify the moves Mrs. Miller, a middle-class white woman, makes that are well intentioned yet work to affirm an oppressive narrative about law enforcement and communities of Color (Figure 1.2).

Mrs. Miller describes herself as an ally to all marginalized groups. She uses culturally relevant teaching that includes helping her students begin to question and take action against injustice. As part of this work, she embeds daily opportunities for her kids to share current news articles. One morning a handful of her students, after hearing multiple stories over the course of the year about interactions between police officers and unarmed Black men, began questioning why so many unarmed Black men were being falsely arrested, brutalized, and even killed by local police. Unsure how to respond, Mrs. Miller did her best to assure them they were safe and that such incidents would be investigated.

Near the end of the school year Mrs. Miller accepted an offer from one of the children's parents to visit the classroom and read a book. This guest, by chance, was a white police officer who showed up in full uniform. After the read-aloud was finished, the kids were given an opportunity to ask questions. One young Black boy raised his hand and bravely asked, "How come the police keep killing all these Black people who don't even have a gun?" The room fell silent. As Mrs. Miller shifted uneasily in her chair, the children's faces turned slowly back to the officer to see what he had to say. The officer took a moment to consider his response and then explained how difficult and complex these situations can be and assured the kids police officers react based on their training, not an intention to harm any particular group of people. He pointed to the beautiful diversity of faces found in the classroom and explained his job is to help maintain safe communities for all people no matter their race. Mrs. Miller politely thanked the officer for coming and breathed a sigh of relief after getting him out the door.

The next day the young boy returned to school with a news article to share. His article detailed how days of silent protest in Baltimore had turned to rioting in some parts of the city in the wake of a funeral for Freddie Gray—a Black man who'd recently died of a spinal cord injury while in police custody. A diversity of ideas emerged as the kids sat around the circle sharing what they'd heard about the case, the protests, and the riots. They asked questions of one another and debated whether or not it was right for people to be destroying businesses and burning cars. It was a rich opportunity to make sense of what was happening in the company of a diversity of peers. To wrap up the discussion, Mrs. Miller reminded

her students of the officer's visit the day before and the fact the police serve and protect our communities in many ways. She ended by saying, "And I think we can all agree that violence is never the answer. People can be upset but they need to protest peacefully—just as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us."

Figure 1.2

Mrs. Miller: How One Perspective Limits Truth

We can all applaud teachers like Mrs. Miller for having the courage to explore critical issues alongside their kids. In a time when the realities of high-stakes standardized testing tend to narrow the curriculum, these teachers buck this trend to ensure their students develop as civic beings invested in the problems facing their local, national, and global communities. However, as well intentioned as Mrs. Miller may have been in facilitating an exploration into the topic of police violence, the limitations of her cultural lenses as a white woman and the power she held in determining how meaning was constructed in her classroom created a very troubling result. Her intentions to create meaning with her kids were derailed when, despite her own limited understanding of this topic, she took a key role in creating meaning *for* her students in three critical (and dangerous) ways. Specifically, she:

1. determined who was (and was not) given voice by virtue of classroom visits
2. controlled what perspectives would be allowed as potential truths during class discussions
3. used her power to claim the final word in naming what should ultimately be taken away from these discussions.

This power to create meaning for students should *always* be brought into question because our social identities—as determined by our race, ethnicity, religion, and a whole host of other social groups to which we belong—inform how we view a particular event or issue. To fully understand this, let's consider how Mrs. Miller's social identity as a white teacher informed the decisions she made.

Who Is Given Voice to Speak to These Matters? Who Is Not?

First, the only two voices of authority granted an opportunity to explain their perspectives on police brutality both came from white members of the community. One was the police officer and the other was Mrs. Miller herself. One way we create new

beliefs is through authority—having a trusted source tell us something is true. We can assume it was not Mrs. Miller’s intention to silence Black voices as sources of authority on matters of race relations, policing, and forms of protest. Yet this is precisely what she did.

Which Perspectives Are Included? Which Are Left Out?

Second, Mrs. Miller failed to consider the officer’s explanation from a perspective other than her own. In doing so, she did not allow her students to explore the tensions that often exist between communities of Color and law enforcement. Had Mrs. Miller been a teacher of Color or had a greater understanding of cultural bias, she would have been more likely to ask the officer follow-up questions about learned prejudices and the role they play, consciously or not, in the way we read particular situations and people. In failing to do so, the officer’s perspective that the law enforcement community doesn’t act based on their own biases (something *all* of us do every day whether we are aware of it or not) went unchecked and unchallenged—both in the moment during his visit and within the class discussion the following day.

Who Gets to Decide What This All Means? Who Does Not?

Lastly, despite the fact that Baltimore has a long, troubled history of police brutality, unequal justice, and economic disparities leading to significantly shorter life spans for those living in Black neighborhoods, Mrs. Miller’s summative takeaway from the class discussion (“violence is never the answer”) failed to acknowledge that these important contextual realities existed and ultimately placed the blame back on the Black community for having some among them so angry and fed up with it all they felt the only power they had left was to put their anger on full display. In a discussion that built upon centuries of oppression and brutality perpetrated on Brown bodies, Mrs. Miller not only avoided addressing acts of police brutality raised by a young Black student but also tasked those within the Black community with peacefully accepting such abuse. Yes, violence as a response to injustice should always be questioned and critiqued. But when this questioning and critique occur in the absence of a parallel inquiry into the centuries of violence leading to such riots, we have white-washed any efforts to help students truly understand the complexity of the issues so many face today. Therein lies the problem with Mrs. Miller—or any other teacher drawing on their own limited experiences and knowledge—when attempting to boil complex social issues down to a single learning outcome.

The Trap of the Good/Bad Binary

How does this happen? As demonstrated in the previous vignette, a great deal of it has to do with our inability to see outside of ourselves. We fail to acknowledge our understanding of a given issue as just that—*our* understanding. It's not until we begin to question our personal beliefs (from how they were developed to whether or not they are even true) that we begin to create opportunities for true growth and learning. Yet, in discussions of race this is often difficult for white teachers. Becoming reflective of our own beliefs inevitably leads to the realization that not only are some of our beliefs not true but some are rooted in underlying prejudices. Prejudices—the preconceived notions each of us hold that aren't based on any real knowledge or experience—frighten us because we have a tendency to see these within the context of a good/bad binary.

The good/bad binary, as explained in Robin DiAngelo's book *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (2018), is constructed upon the belief that to hold prejudices automatically makes one a bad person. Therefore, to be viewed as “good” one must do all one can to demonstrate purity of thought when it comes to race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and so on. The problem with this is twofold. For one, it assumes we can somehow navigate the social systems we inhabit while remaining unaffected by the endless supply of negative messages we receive about difference on a daily basis. One step we can take to avoid derailing discussions of injustice and inequity is to admit to the fact we hold certain prejudices—even if we're not aware of them. These prejudices have been shaped by the cultural lenses through which we see the world. Speaking to how these cultural lenses develop, DiAngelo explains

I can be told everyone is equal by my parents, I can have friends of color, and I may not tell racist jokes. Yet, I am still affected by the forces of racism as a member of a society in which racism is the bedrock. I will still be seen as white, treated as white, and experience life as a white person. My identity, personality, interests, and investments will develop from a white perspective. I will have a white worldview and a white frame of reference. In a society in which race clearly matters, our race profoundly shapes us. (2018, 72–73)

The second problem with the good/bad binary is that any efforts to see ourselves or have others see us as “good” only serve to keep us from thinking critically about our own role in maintaining systems of oppression. Likely, this was a barrier for Mrs. Miller. Her desire to protect the “goodness” of the white police officer (and by extension, herself as a fellow white person) kept her from helping her students demand a more honest discussion about the role of implicit biases and their relationship to patterns of harassment, racial profiling, and police brutality across the nation. Furthermore, she could have turned this on herself and spoken to the ways her own actions

and inactions allow these prejudices to continue—beginning with the fact she had attempted to remain neutral when it came to discussions of police brutality and had avoided offering public support of organizations such as Black Lives Matter in a show of solidarity with communities of Color and their fight for improved policing and justice. Of course, to make this concession Mrs. Miller would first have to come to the realization all whites, by virtue of their racial blinders, play a role in the brutalization of Black and Brown bodies whether or not they’re the ones brandishing a weapon or throwing a punch. Figure 1.3 details the decisions Mrs. Miller unknowingly made to affirm an oppressive narrative that places blame on the Black community while turning a blind eye to the injustices thrust upon them not only by law enforcement but by our society as a whole.

| Event | Mrs. Miller’s Choice of Action | The Result | Other Possibilities That Were Available |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>A young Black child asks the classroom guest (a white police officer) why unarmed Black men are being shot by police.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sits and listens, without comment, as the police officer explains that law enforcement reacts based solely on their training and without any intention to harm particular groups of people | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Silences Black voices and experiences while the singular perspective of a white police officer is allowed to define the reality of the policing of Brown and Black bodies Constructs meaning for students (through authority) without further critique or questioning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask follow-up questions of the officer about the presence of learned prejudices that affect how we respond to various people and situations Invite a diversity of speakers to share their own experiences and understandings of the tensions between law enforcement and communities of Color Invite kids to continue these discussions at home and report back to the class |
| <p>The same student shares an article about riots developing in Baltimore in response to the death of Freddie Gray.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides an opportunity for kids to share what they’ve heard about the case as well as ask follow-up questions of one another | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions students as primary meaning makers who expect to collaboratively explore issues in their communities, the nation, and the world Teaches children to be curious and to care about what is going on around them Allows students to engage with multiple perspectives and speak back to those things that do not make sense or trouble them | |

(continues)

| Event | Mrs. Miller's Choice of Action | The Result | Other Possibilities That Were Available |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>The same student shares an article about riots developing in Baltimore in response to the death of Freddie Gray.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reminds students of the officer's visit and message from the day before | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses the officer's authority to support her own accepted narrative about the relationship between race and policing (thus, a white person referencing another white person to explain the experiences of the black community) Reaffirms the officer's authority and ability to create meaning for the class without any further questioning or critique Protects the status of whites as "good" | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain to students the limitations of hearing only one perspective on an issue—especially when that perspective comes from the dominant group rather than those being marginalized and oppressed Ask students who else they need to hear from to better understand the complexity of this issue Invite people of Color to come in and speak to their experiences and understandings around this issue |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wraps up the discussion by taking the final word and explaining violence is never the answer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positions teacher as the primary meaning maker even when discussing a topic with which she has little to no personal experience Whitewashes the complexity of the issue by boiling everything down to a single, oversimplified talking point Places blame firmly on the Black community for protesting in a fashion unacceptable to Mrs. Miller (despite the fact similar responses from the white community are celebrated when studying protests and acts of defiance during events such as the American Revolution) Ignores all that has happened both historically and in the present to bring about such anger and hostility from certain protestors | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoid the desire to always have the final word—especially about topics where she has no firsthand knowledge Invite students to learn more about this topic together and to collaboratively develop the big ideas they feel are most important Identify her role in maintaining a society that allows communities of people to be judged based on implicit biases Instead of wrapping up the discussion with a final word and providing false closure, ask students what they should work to do as individuals and as a class to address some aspect of this problem |

Figure 1.3
Analysis of Mrs. Miller's Approach

No Teacher Is Immune

Our social identities and cultural lenses affect all of us no matter our race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, or socioeconomic status. There are two reasons for this:

1. Many forms of injustice are at play in our society and we are positioned differently to each of these.
2. Our social identities are not singular because they exist at the intersection of the multiple social groups to which we belong.

While a Black, Christian teacher might find times when their own identities align them with a marginalized group in relation to one issue (systemic racism), there will be times when this same teacher is positioned as part of the dominant social group in relation to other issues (say, religious persecution). Just because someone knows what it's like to be oppressed based on the color of their skin does not mean they have an equal understanding of what it means to live as a Muslim in post-9/11 America. Yes, Black Americans can certainly empathize with many of the emotions, frustrations, and fears the Muslim community experiences, but unless they are Muslim themselves, they will inevitably have their own cultural blind spots and prejudices to overcome when addressing the specifics of such issues. Third-grade teacher Nozsa Tinsley knows this feeling of separation between our own experiences and those of students who experience the world differently than she does as a Black woman. In speaking to a particularly challenging class discussion immediately following the 2016 presidential election, she explains:

I taught at a school consisting mostly of Black and Brown students. As the students trickled in, you could feel the sadness that came from seeing Donald Trump elected. I decided to let the emotions happen because it needed to be processed. As we gathered on the carpet for Morning Meeting, I could just tell this was going to be a long discussion.

Each of the kids shared how sad and angry they were. To be honest, I shared those same emotions. Yet, I was surprised when one of my kids told us he was not sad or angry. He was afraid. At first, I was confused. I asked him to tell us more. He explained how certain he was his family was going to be sent back to Mexico. I wanted to tell him it probably wouldn't happen. I wanted to tell him politicians say lots of things to get elected they don't follow through with. But most importantly I wanted to convince him he shouldn't worry or be afraid. But I couldn't. His wasn't an emotion I could directly relate to. I didn't know what it meant to live with a fear of deportation.

What was most important during this Morning Meeting was listening, empathizing, and creating a safe space for his thoughts and emotions to

be voiced. As teachers, we don't have all the answers or even relatable experiences to draw upon. But as compassionate humans we have the capability to set aside what we think we know to allow students to let us know how they feel.

Even if we share membership within a particular social group, it doesn't mean our individual experiences and understandings are universal to all others within the same group. This is due, in part, to the intersectionality of our identities. Intersectionality speaks to the fact we are more than just our race. We are more than just our gender. Our identities lie at the confluence of the many groups to which we belong (our religion, class, sexual preference, education, and so on)—though some will have much greater social ramifications on our daily experiences than others. On top of this, the experiences each of us within a particular social group brings to a given topic (such as racism) will differ. As a kindergarten and first-grade teacher, Tiffany Palmatier wrestles with this on a regular basis. She toes the line between helping her students understand how race is taken up in America and acknowledging she could never offer a definitive voice on this or any other related topic. She explains:

When my kids take on issues related to race, I'm careful to avoid allowing myself to become the voice of *all* Black people—especially since I know my lived experiences impact my personal beliefs. I know I can't speak for an entire group of people. I can only speak from my position as one Black woman because our identities are complex and ever changing. Yes, I'm Black but I'm many other things at the same time.

I was raised in a single-parent household in a small, rural town. I grew up poor but didn't know it. Much of who I am and what I advocate for stems from the treatment I received during my early schooling. I had countless teachers who didn't try to help me or others who looked like me reach our fullest potential. It was as if "being Black" somehow told them 100 percent of what they needed to know.

While I'm sure there are Black children in my classroom who can identify with this small portion of my identity, I can't assume this is the case for them all. For some, the emotional trauma from my childhood circumstances is all too familiar. For others, this isn't relatable at all.

Navigating Complex Discussions Despite Our Cultural Blindness

To say we have prejudices and cultural blinders that make this work challenging is not to say we should shy away from the challenge. Not at all. The first step is acknowledging this work needs to be done.

A few years ago I was engaged in a discussion about social justice teaching in elementary classrooms when a kindergarten teacher raised her hand and reasoned, “I just don’t think this is necessary with my babies. They *already* love each other. They don’t even talk about race.” A handful of others nodded in agreement. But it’s not enough for kids simply to be kind to one another. Kindness fails to address the myriad of systemic injustices plaguing our society. In addition to helping our children learn the value of kindness, we need to commit ourselves to disrupting the harmful beliefs and practices that bring about such injustices. Although there are many paths to making such strides, I’m going to discuss four important steps to take on this journey: (1) take stock of your own social identities, (2) engage in discussions with a diversity of peers, (3) access texts that expand your cultural competence, and (4) engage in reflective thought.

Take Stock of Your Own Social Identities

Tool 

Earlier I invited you to select one aspect of your social identity that places you within a dominant social group in our society for the purpose of identifying any unearned privileges this membership affords you. These privileges often include the fact you don’t need to spend much, if any, time thinking about how this group membership affects your life. But don’t stop there. To the best of your ability, make a list of *all* the social groups you belong to. Some of mine include:

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Middle-aged | Raised blue-collar | Currently middle class | PhD |
| White | Male | Able-bodied | English speaking |
| Heterosexual | Married | Father | Cisgender |
| U.S. born | Native Midwesterner | Transplant to the South | Adoptive parent |
| Liberal/independent | Formally educated | | Atheist |
| | | | Educator |

Like me, you’ll likely find some of these place you within the dominant social group and others leave you at the margins. For instance, my identity as an atheist now living in the South definitely places me outside the dominant culture. This is a topic I think about quite often because it’s not always easy for me to navigate with my classroom families. Whereas people in St. Louis (the largest metropolitan area near the small town where I grew up) often liked to ask where someone went to high school to get an initial reading of who they were and where specifically they came from, those in my current Southern community are much more likely to seek out the same information by asking where one goes to church. Because my response is sometimes accompanied by a form of judgment questioning my morality, I speak carefully but truthfully in these discussions. I see my role as helping students and

their families expand their understanding of what it means to be atheist—beyond false information or stereotypes.

Not surprisingly, these experiences have provided me a particular cultural lens through which to view both religion and religious institutions—a lens not shared by many in my classroom. For this reason, I have to be aware of how I’m positioned to the topic of religion when one of my students chooses to engage us in a discussion about religious beliefs. I certainly don’t want to indoctrinate my kids into obediently adopting my personal beliefs. But more than that I want to be mindful about how my social identity as an atheist, and the cultural blind spots growing out of this, potentially shape my contributions to our classroom discussions.

Engage in Discussions with a Diversity of Peers

Knowing that one of the most challenging and dangerous barriers we face is our own ignorance around a wide variety of issues, it’s imperative we seek out discussions with others whose experiences are different from our own. Of course, this begins by taking a closer look at the people with whom we choose to surround ourselves. If the answer is others who are just like us in most ways, we’re not apt to find ourselves in fertile discussions all that often—certainly not ones that challenge us to see the world anew. If you find your inner circle of friends is largely a reflection of your cultural self, you might begin by stepping outside this “birds of a feather flock together” tendency and form some new relationships that can provide greater richness.

Beyond a potential ignorance about particular issues, another key challenge teachers have when engaged in classroom discussions of social justice is the fact many of us have not engaged in these discussions very often ourselves—certainly, not within a diverse setting of perspectives. As such, we attempt to construct a complex structure in our classroom with very limited real-life experience to draw upon. For this reason, teachers must begin entering into genuine exploratory discussions of their own.

However, I should share one piece of advice for those entering discussions where you are positioned as a member of the dominant group. It’s this: listen far more than you speak. This can be hard, listening. Yet it’s crucial. There’s already far too much white-splaining, man-splaining, straight-splaining, and various other forms of the dominant group attempting to draw on incomplete and misguided understandings to explain to marginalized groups what *really* happened or how they *should* feel about something.

Many times I've desperately wanted to speak so I could offer what would amount to a half-baked rationalization for a very real problem. But I've learned it's much more important to listen closely. For instance, I can remember being surprised by how much some fear the sound of a police siren. Within a discussion of abuses of power, a fellow PhD candidate of Color told of being pulled over and having the officer draw his gun, point it directly at her, and scream instructions to place her hands on the dashboard. Her perceived misstep was reaching into her purse to get her license. This experience was so visceral for her that she sobbed heavily when recounting the story. As I make sense of the hypothetical story of Mrs. Miller and the young boy wanting to understand why the police are killing unarmed Black men, I can't help but think about the image of my classmate's body shaking as she relived her encounter with a police officer who, based on his own biases about the Black community, assumed she was a potential threat. I wonder how knowing this woman's experiences as a Black woman who had stared down the lethal end of a police officer's sidearm would instruct Mrs. Miller on how best to handle her student's question about the policing of the Black community.

This is important because when I sat in that university classroom listening to my classmate's story of the police officer and the gun, I really wanted to explain it all away for her. As happens too often, it would've been easy for me to offer up excuses intended to somehow make it all OK, and then expect my perspective as a white man to be accepted as truth. Those from dominant social groups do this all the time when devaluing the lived experiences of those who've been minoritized and marginalized for centuries. For this reason, we must learn to listen more closely as we open our minds and hearts to the fact not all people experience the world as we do.

Access Texts That Expand Your Cultural Competence

Reading is another tool to expand our cultural competence. I'm defining cultural competence here as the ability to take stock of our social identities, its impact on us and others, as well as the cultural being of others. Just because you may have been the unknowing victim of a colonized education that rooted itself in the histories and stories of white America doesn't mean you have to continue to remain largely blind to the experiences, accomplishments, and issues of others. Seek out historical and political texts, biographies, memoirs, and fiction focusing on people who are markedly different from you in numerous ways. The perspectives found within these texts allow us to begin seeing the world from a more just and informed vantage point. In fact, many age-appropriate texts are available to share with your class as well so you can develop greater cultural competence alongside your students (as you'll see in later chapters).

Engage in Reflective Thought

Finally, as you engage in this work, take care to reflect on your social beliefs, assumptions, and expectations for others. To do this you might consider the following questions:

How did these beliefs, assumptions, and expectations develop?

How do (did) they shape how you read and interact with others?

What role do (did) they play in establishing your larger worldview?

If they have evolved over time, how did this happen?

Engaging in reflective thought not only allows you to peel away the layers of bigotry society has strapped you down with but also helps you better understand how we come to accept beliefs in the first place. When I think back to how I first began developing the earliest versions of my worldview, I see much of it came within the context of having grown up in a largely sheltered community as a child of the '80s. I grew up in a small steel mill town about half an hour from St. Louis. Short of driving into the city, which we rarely did, I was not exposed to much racial, economic, religious, or linguistic diversity. Outside a small handful of foreign exchange students in high school, we didn't have much ethnic diversity either. For this reason, much of what I learned about the world and the people in it came from television, movies, and music. I relied on media to help me make sense of the world; the characters placed before me often played into oppressive stereotypes validating the marginalization of entire populations of people. These stereotypes were blindly accepted by many in the dominant culture, including me. An example of this were the many movies and television programs reducing the diversity found in the Latinx community to no more than a collection of maids, criminals, and struggling immigrants.

If this is how some of my earliest beliefs formed, how did they shape the way I read and interacted with others? Well, for one, I unconsciously came to accept that white, male, straight, Christian, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class Americans were the model by which all others were to be judged. Not surprisingly, for the longest time I assumed this model represented the essence of what everyone across the globe aspired to become. My formal schooling did nothing to challenge this. In fact, my classwork supported this self-serving worldview. All my studies—from literature to science to history—consistently focused on the attributes and accomplishments of white, male, straight, Christian, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class Americans while turning a blind eye to most others. Given this, it shouldn't be surprising there was a time when I saw those who did not fit within this particular group as needing a "hand up" so they too could live up to such standards. This isn't to say I lacked an ability to care for all people. Rather, I felt a sense of pity for them, believing something must be holding them back from becoming all they could be. In what I hope you're beginning to see as a theme, I demonstrated an ability to love all people yet still held on to particular beliefs that were degrading and oppressive.

So, how did my beliefs evolve? By taking the very steps I'm laying out for you right now. I learned over time, with the help of many friends, colleagues, professors, and texts, to take stock of my social identity while learning more about those who experience the world differently than I do. Over time I've learned to decenter whiteness, maleness, straightness, and all the other social groupings that are granted unearned privileges. I haven't completed this journey. Truth is, I never will. But as I continue down this path in hopes of constructing a more just society, I also afford myself the opportunity to reflect on my growth in a way that helps me better understand the evolution of social beliefs and practices so I'll be prepared to meet the needs of my students as they navigate their own paths.

Watch 



Teacher Identity: In this clip, teachers Chris Hass, Nozsa Tinsley, and Tiffany Palmatier discuss how they navigate their own identities in social justice teaching.



The Purpose and Goals of Social Justice Teaching: In this clip, Alexis, a teacher and mother of one of Chris Hass' students, talks about the purpose and goals of social justice teaching.