



What is Social Justice Education?

Social justice education provides information to children through which they can develop social and political consciousness, a sense of agency, and their own social and cultural identities (Gutstein, 2007). Through social justice education, children learn to critique the roots of inequality in their classrooms, school structure, and in the larger society (Dover, 2009). This education focuses on the concept of teaching children about human rights, equality, and the idea of a just and equitable society; it should be engaging and come from an anti-oppressive approach² (Kelly & Brooks, 2009). It includes anti-bullying interventions and fostering a safe environment for learning where needs of the victimized take precedence over those who have perpetrated racism, even inadvertently or with ‘good intentions,’ as well as teachable

moments of tolerance or acceptance of difference. It includes knowing oneself and understanding others’ viewpoints and perspectives, and providing children with opportunities to evaluate and to take social action to address differences and make informed decisions on implementing fairness and equity (De Gaetano, 2011). A social justice education also connects school-based learning to students’ out-of-school lives and engages their parents, families, and other members of the community as partners in learning and as allies. Reynolds argues that, “[i]n activist cultures, an ally is a person who belongs to a group which has particular privileges, and who works alongside people from groups that are oppressed in relation to that privilege. The hope is to create change and increase social justice in relation to this oppression” (Reynolds, 2010, p. 13). This approach allows for those who do not have the ‘particular privileges’ to teach

and to guide their allies in a way that is appropriate to their needs.

Research substantiates the finding that most parents and students support socially just content and policy in schools (Dover, 2009). It is important to provide support, guidance and safety for children involved in social justice education and social justice movements to ensure a just and equitable world for the future. Along with support, adults should be co-creating spaces and opportunities for children and young people to learn early about being engaged in social justice initiatives. According to Fontaine and Atnikov (2012), “[k]ids are drawn to justice. They know what is right and wrong. They are geniuses at creative thinking. We need to foster and protect these skills so they don’t grow to be apathetic” (p. 2). As children have the right to “freedom of expression” and the “freedom of thought, conscience

² The Centre for Anti-Oppressive Education (n.d.) acknowledges wide ranging definitions for ‘anti-oppressive education’ but in general terms, it includes “approaches to education that actively challenge different forms of oppression” (para. 2). According to the Toronto District School Board, anti-oppression means being inclusive, accessible, equitable and socially just. The TDSB operates within an anti-oppressive framework, which aims to help students “unpack the systemic factors that affect their lives” (TDSB, n.d., para. 1).

and religion,” it is the responsibility of adults to provide opportunities for children to learn about the world so their environments, which are often highly structured, controlled and conservative, do not contribute to apathy (UNICEF, n.d. Article 13, 14). It is also the responsibility of educational institutions to encourage and foster this type of learning so that widespread transformation of education and schools in Canada can occur. Schmidt (2009) notes that, children, “with guidance, can go from passive spectators to activists, focusing their energy on solutions that could save an ecosystem, a species, or a life” (Sect. 2, para. 8).

Many different people in children’s lives can teach social responsibility and awareness, mainly their caregivers, teachers, and other mentors. Parents and caregivers are the first early educators and clearly have an influence on how children perceive the world. Mentors or role models like Cindy Blackstock of the *First Nations Child and Family Caring Society* and Mary Gordon from *Roots of Empathy* can influence children’s knowledge and understanding of social justice issues facing First Nations children. However, this paper focuses on the role of schools and teachers in social justice education for children.

Social Justice Education About Inequities Faced by First Nations Children

Teaching for change begins in the school, and building social justice awareness starts in the classroom (Kelly & Brooks, 2009). Schools, it is said, are often the first sites that reproduce injustices as they are wrought with structural inequity (Dover, 2009). It is crucial for institutions to become engaged in change as structural inequity becomes ‘the norm,’ which is often discriminatory since it assumes that all children follow mainstream culture and values. According to Reynolds (2012), teachers have a duty to provide a moral,

Mary Gordon

Mary Gordon is the *President of Roots of Empathy* (<http://www.rootsofempathy.org>) and *Seeds of Empathy* (www.seeksofempathy.org). Mary is recognized internationally as an award winning social entrepreneur, educator, author, child advocate, and parenting expert who created programs informed by the power of empathy. *Roots of Empathy* focuses on raising levels of empathy, resulting in more respectful and caring relationships while also reducing levels of bullying and aggression among children. *Roots of Empathy* strives to break the intergenerational cycle of violence and poor parenting. *Seeds of Empathy* grew out of *Roots of Empathy*. It is a program that fosters social and emotional competencies and early life skills and attitudes in children three to five years of age in Early Childhood settings.

Cindy Blackstock

Cindy Blackstock is a renowned First Nations children’s advocate in Canada. Cindy is working to build a strong social movement to change the discriminatory policies and actions towards First Nations children in Canada. Through the *First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada* (www.fncaringsociety.com), Cindy is building a new child welfare system by working directly with both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities to help them move from constructive and reconciliatory visions for child welfare into positive actions that contribute to more equality for First Nations children. Today, thousands of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children have become the Caring Society’s biggest funder and the most powerful change agents to date.





socially conscious education, particularly in view of historic, current, and ongoing human rights abuses, colonialism, war atrocities, and environmental devastations. Many educators agree that to prepare children to be critical, analytical thinkers, there is a need to encourage, support, and extend students' awareness of social and political issues into the classroom (Allen, 1997). Social justice education in the classroom is not just about raising young people to think critically and independently, it is also "about being part of a student's journey as a life-long learner and problem solver – it is about teaching students to be critical thinkers and to look for opportunities to apply their knowledge in a transformative way" (Fontaine & Atnikov, 2012, p. 2).

While children may come to school aware that society values some groups more than others based on physical characteristics associated with race and gender (Allen, 1997), curriculum in mainstream schools can actually have an oppressive effect on students. This is due to 'hidden messages' within the representation of people's lives in school literature that can shape children's perceptions about the world and their role in society, and which can socialize children to maintain the status quo rather than work toward equality (Allen, 1997). For example, many students have not been taught about the history of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, their contributions to Canadian society, and their colonial history, including treaty systems, the *Indian Act*, and residential schools. All of these factors have contributed to the

current situation for Aboriginal people in Canada, including health disparities and troubling social conditions found in some Aboriginal communities. For First Nations peoples, there are common stereotypes related to funding; for example, that First Nations peoples living on-reserves receive an abundance of funding from the government. However, how could this be true when over half of Aboriginal children in Canada live in poverty (Statistics Canada, 2013) and when First Nations communities have little to no public services on-reserves (Nadjiwan & Blackstock, 2003)?

De Gaetano (2011) believes children need to be exposed to positive ways of responding to difference and to adopting an anti-racist stance in their lives before racism takes hold in their thinking, and

before they have to “unlearn racism and other problematic attitudes” (p. 72). Rothstein and Jacobsen (2009) reiterate that it is not enough to just teach the basic academics in school; teaching and developing skills to produce socially responsible citizens should also be a strong focus. If done well and early enough, social justice education can increase young people’s civic engagement and social responsibility later in life (Levine, 2009; De Gaetano, 2011). Research has shown that teaching social justice to students has been linked to positive academic (McGlone & Aronson, 2007), behavioural/motivational (Hänze & Berger, 2007), and attitudinal outcomes (Rodriguez, Jones, Pang, & Park, 2004).

Further, students who are engaged in social action do better in life (Levine, 2009). In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a free tool kit for educators, a collection of electronic resources to assist teachers in incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into their classes: *Aboriginal Perspective: A guide to The Teacher’s Toolkit*. The tool kit could also be useful for students, parents and other role models. *Project of Heart* is another initiative that engages students to learn about residential schools and invites them to take action toward reconciliation and working together for better outcomes for Aboriginal communities (Native Counselling Services of Alberta, n.d.).

Social Justice in Action: Health and Wellbeing of First Nations Children

Most young children have a basic understanding of what is fair and unfair. When provided the information, they have the capacity to develop their own opinions (Wyness, Harrison, & Buchanan, 2004). Children engaged in social justice education often want to take action for those who are less fortunate. First Nations children both on- and off-reserve have poorer outcomes in health and education, and many children perceive this injustice and want to help. Their capacity



to understand and potential to bring attention to various social justice issues and bring positive change in their world is demonstrated by the following examples.

- *Shannen's Dream*: Shannen Koostachin³ was a young girl from Attawapiskat, Ontario who with her classmates, lobbied for First Nations children in her community's right to an education and a school like others in Canada. She produced a YouTube video⁴ pleading to the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for a "safe and comfy" school. Shannen believed that every child has the right to education and her dream launched one of the largest youth-led movements in Canadian history.
- *Northern Starfish*: Wesley Prankard is a young man who raised funds for a playground for the community of

Attawapiskat First Nation. He has set his sights higher and aims to raise enough money to put playgrounds in all First Nations communities across Canada. He is also working towards the goal of building shelters in his community because they face a housing crisis and overcrowding. (www.northernstarfish.org)

- *Have a Heart Day and Our Dreams Matter Too*: On February 14, *Have a Heart Day* and June 11, *Our Dreams Matter Too* walk, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children from across the country plan annual events and letter writing campaigns for culturally-based equity for First Nations children. The idea of both events is to ask the government to ensure equality for all children in peaceful and respectful ways. Both events started in 2012 to support social justice movements

for First Nations children, mainly *Shannen's Dream, I am a Witness and Jordan's Principle*.

- *Letters to Canada*⁵ is a video documenting the opinions of Canadian children on the unequal treatment of First Nations children in Canada. The video was to be shown as the opening statement at the Human Rights Tribunal hearing on First Nations child welfare that began February 25, 2013 (www.fnwitness.ca). This video demonstrates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children's understanding about the discrimination facing First Nations children in Canada.

It is clear that these young advocates have been effective in voicing their concerns about a number of inequitable and unjust situations.



³ Shannen was among one of 45 children nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize by the Nobel Laureates in 2008. Unfortunately, she passed away tragically on June 1, 2010 when she was just 15 years old. The *Shannen's Dream* (www.shannensdream.com) campaign, named in her memory, engages Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to better understand education inequities and works to actively ensure that all First Nations children and young people get to attend good schools, receive education that prepares them for life ahead, and achieve their dreams. Such schools will allow First Nations children to strengthen their identities and to be proud of their distinct cultures, languages, histories, and communities.

⁴ www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJNpMHYZPus&playnext=1&list=PLA2EAD4AD470D3B88&feature=results_main

⁵ This video was produced by Dr. Cindy Blackstock (University of Alberta and First Nations Children's and Family Caring Society) and can be seen at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHPHUHYq8A8.



Conclusion

Addressing social justice issues for First Nations children with other children is about presenting the facts and trusting that they understand what is right and wrong. It is also about helping them to develop the skills to analyze events and circumstances that have affected First Nations children and families to make their own informed decisions about equity and justice, and allowing them the opportunity to take action. Although it may appear to be challenging, through the discussion of social justice issues, parents, educators, and other role models can help children and young people see and bring about a more just society, thereby contributing to improving health inequities for First Nations children.

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NATIONAL COLLABORATING CENTRE
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DE LA SANTÉ AUTOCHTONE

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA
3333 UNIVERSITY WAY, PRINCE GEORGE, BC V2N 4Z9

1 250 960 5250
NCCA@UNBC.CA
WWW.NCCA-CCNSA.CA