

*Great teaching is about so much more than education;
it is a daily fight for social justice.*

—Secretary Arne Duncan



EMPOWERING EDUCATION

Mindfulness-Based Social & Emotional Learning

Social Justice: Examining Privilege with a Recycling Bin

Level: Upper Elementary (3-5)

Timeframe: 20-30 minutes

Concepts:

- Equity
- Fairness
- Privilege
- Social Justice



Big Ideas For This Lesson

Social Justice is one of those terms that is thrown around so frequently in education that, depending on your experience, it could be cringe-worthy or could have even lost its meaning altogether. Despite the various permutations the term has taken, social justice remains one of the most pressing issues in education.^{1,2} A quick google search on “social justice” will reveal about 10 different definitions within the first few links, with equally numerous and conflicting results for the word **privilege**.

For the purposes of this lesson, we will define social justice as an umbrella term used to describe recognition of:

- *Common humanity*
- *Disparities in power and privilege*
- *Actions needed to work towards an equitable society.*⁴

Privilege can be understood as *a set of unearned benefits given to a person based on membership of a particular social group.*

To be clear, this lesson is by no means a comprehensive overview of social justice and privilege. These are both concepts that require a lifetime of learning, reflection, change, and growth. Moreover, social justice, just like SEL, is not something that is simply ‘taught and then forgot.’ It is implicit in all of your interactions with students and your very way of being.³ That said, this lesson can provide a great jumping off point for focused conversations and reflections on the issues of social justice in your classroom- a critical starting point for you and your students.



Essential Vocabulary

Equity vs Fairness
Privilege
Social Group
Social Justice

Materials

- 1 piece of scrap paper per student.
- Recycling bin or trash bin.



Preparation

Reflect on your understanding of social justice and privilege before teaching this lesson. How comfortable are you talking about these issues? How can you remain open to students' various perspectives while honoring your own?



Teaching Script

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE & CONCEPT MODELING (I DO)

Teaching Note: This lesson 'went viral' in 2014. You can find a simple illustrated guide on teaching the lesson at:

[How to Understand Privilege Using Scraps of Paper and a Trash Bin.](#)⁵

This lesson is best taught with minimal introduction. If you know that your class is typically rowdy during experiential lessons front load a few basic expectations, including:

- a. Do not throw your paper until instructed to do so.
- b. Stay in your seat.

Otherwise, simply instruct students to roll their scrap paper into a ball and place an open recycling bin at the front of the classroom.

The recycling bin should be placed so that it is relatively easy for the students in the front row to throw a paper ball in, but difficult for the students in the back to do so.



GUIDED PRACTICE (WE DO)

Tell students:

All of you represent our society. This recycling bin (point to recycling bin for emphasis) represents your ability to be wealthy, successful, and achieve what you want in life. All you have to do is throw your paper in the trash. You must stay in your seat.

At this point, students in the back may voice concerns over fairness. Make note of who says what, but do not engage or acknowledge student responses just yet. Simply re-state your instructions as needed; emphasizing the point:

Everyone has the chance to be wealthy and successful. All you have to do is throw your paper in the trash. You must stay in your seat.

On the count of three, throw your paper into the recycling bin. This is your chance to really make it! Get ready...1...2...3!

Allow for some silliness and fun here, but continue to remind students to remain in their seat. Cheer on the students who make their paper into the recycling bin.



REINFORCING LESSON CONCEPTS (YOU DO)

Begin the group reflection by asking students to raise their hand if they made their paper into the recycling bin. Prompt students to look around the room and notice any patterns about who “made it” (“who is successful and wealthy”) and who “missed their shot.” There should be a greater number of students in the front row that made it.

Facilitate a group reflection on the exercise. Depending on your students’ age and background with social justice, you will need to be more or less directive in facilitating the reflection discussion. In general, solicit student interpretations before offering your own. Rely on reflections, paraphrasing, and open-ended questions to keep the discussion moving.

Questions to begin the discussion:

- a. *What did you notice about who was successful and who was not?*
- b. *Did everyone have the same opportunity to be successful?*
- c. *Who was more likely to notice it was unfair – the front row or back row?*
- d. *What does this exercise have to do with our society?*
- e. *What are some privileges certain people may have been born into that make it easier for them to be more wealthy and successful than other people?*
- f. *What situations might someone be born into that would make it more difficult for them to be successful?*
- g. *What sort of racial, ethnic, economic, sexual, and gender differences might the front row represent? The back row?*
- h. *What is one privilege we all share? (Education)*
- i. *What should we do about this?*

Teaching Note: You can expect that some of these questions will push students, and you, outside of their comfort zone. This is the point of the exercise! By drawing attention to societal dynamics that are often unspoken, we create a cognitive dissonance that can be the beginning of changes in mindset and action.

If students do not approach topics outside their comfort zone on their own, it is your role as facilitator to highlight this and help move them forward. Simple statements can quickly deepen the discussion. For example:

Being born a white, middle class male comes with certain unearned privileges that make it easier to be successful than being born a black male in poverty.

Being born straight/heterosexual means that you will not have to face certain challenges you may have to face if you are born gay/homosexual.

Know where your own comfort zone is and be willing to move beyond it, but do so with adequate knowledge of the issues to guide an open discussion.

Finally, **be sure there is adequate time and space to bring closure to the discussion.** Without proper closure, this exercise can actually be counter-productive. Key points for closure:

- Privileges are unearned benefits that someone has just by being a member of a certain group (gender, race, sexual orientation, family, education, country of origin, language, physical and mental ability, etc.).
- Having or not having certain privileges is not a guarantee of success or failure; it is simply a different starting point that makes success more or less likely (just like sitting in the front or back row).
- People with higher amounts of privilege are less likely to be aware of their privilege than people with lesser amounts of privilege (e.g., people in the front row were less likely to complain it was unfair). It is up to all of us to notice the people in front AND behind us.
- Many people feel guilty about their own privilege when they first learn about it. The point of this exercise is NOT to make you feel guilty; feeling guilty does nothing to change the situation.
- The point of this exercise is simply to make you aware of your own privilege and the privilege of those around you so that you can make informed choices. Because we are all in this room, we all have the privilege of an education and it is our responsibility to use that privilege to help others.
- The most immediate thing you can do to address issues of social justice and privilege is to be kind, loving, and generous to the people around you – this starts in the classroom! How would our classroom be different if we put other's needs before our own? In what ways can we be more kind to those around us?



EVIDENCE OF CONCEPT ATTAINMENT

Reflect on it

- *What are some privileges that you have?*
- *Has this discussion changed the way you look at the world? Why or why not?*
- *What did it feel like to be sitting where you were?*
- *Did any part of this discussion make you uncomfortable? Why?*

Journal it

- What is one privilege you have that you were not aware of before?
- How can you use this privilege for the betterment of yourself, others, and the world?



EXTENSIONS

Classroom

- Facilitate the privilege walk (see extensions).
- Strive to provide opportunities for all students to succeed and respond to student needs rather than privileges and internal biases (we all have them!).
- Continue these discussions with your class.

School-wide

Racial disparities in school discipline^{1,2} are one of the most pressing social justice issues in education. You are encouraged to take an active role in examining your discipline practices at an individual, classroom, and school-wide level.



REFERENCES

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4. Sleeter, C. E. (2015, February). Deepening social justice teaching. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*. [Online]. Retrieved from <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu/>
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