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You Have the Right to Remain Silent ... But a Voice to Make a Difference! (Ten Starting Points for Introducing “Social Justice” in Your Language Arts Classroom)

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You Have the Right to Remain Silent... But a Voice to Make a Difference! (Ten Starting Points for Introducing “Social Justice” in Your Language Arts Classroom)

There is no hotter topic in the classroom right now than social justice. Students and teachers across the United States are being confronted with a jarring notion: their privilege is tied to others' poverty. Kind-hearted people are coming to grips with the realization that they are part of the equation that leaves hundreds of millions without clean drinking water, an elementary education, or a birth certificate. For those who feel social justice is a new topic, I offer Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words from 1967: “And before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world.” And for those still on the fence about stirring things up in the classroom, I offer the maxim of William Shedd: “Ships are safest in harbor, but that's not why they were built.”

Five Concepts Students Need to Know...

1. *There are millions of slaves throughout the world right now.* “Who ended slavery?” is the trick question I ask my students each year when introducing social justice. While we agree that Abraham Lincoln is responsible for making slavery illegal in the United States, we also recognize that there are approximately twenty-seven million slaves on our planet, more today than any other time in history, thousands in the United States. Many of today's slaves are like the plantation slaves we might recall from our textbooks, but millions of others are forced domestic and sex workers, a large percentage of whom are children.

*Recommended resource: *Half the Sky*, by Kristof and WuDunn

*Possible activity: Students will take part in an ABC Scavenger Hunt on slavery to gather their thoughts on the issue by seeing how many words

they can connect to the topic starting with each letter of the alphabet.

2. *The lack of easy access to clean drinking water leads to millions of children catching diseases, missing school, and being sexually assaulted.* Today a young girl will walk miles by herself to get water for her family, all the while dreaming of being in school, and simultaneously worrying about being raped on the way home. Something as simple as building a well can create countless opportunities for people and their communities.

*Recommended resource: Oprah's “Building a Dream” dvd

*Possible activity: During their school's walkathon, have students volunteer to carry a gallon of water (which weighs just over eight pounds) for a memorable “in-their-shoes” experience.

3. *The world is upside down.* Each year I put a world map upside down on a PowerPoint slide. “Mr. D'Amato, you made a mistake!” a few students call out immediately. “What do you mean?” I play along. “It's supposed to be the other way,” they add. “Says who?” I counter. “Do you believe there is an actual top and bottom to the world?” Think about the message the typical world map subconsciously sends to a child: North America, Europe, and Asia are on the top. Latin America and Africa are on the bottom.

*Recommended resource: *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, by James Loewen

*Possible activity: Spontaneous upside-down map discussion.

4. *Micro-lending is a new way to help people run stable small businesses in countries with severe unemployment*

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rates. Since many people in developing countries cannot secure a loan in the traditional way due to lack of assets, this Nobel Peace Prize-winning idea provides entrepreneurs with the start up and maintenance cash required to get a business off its feet and running, with the money being borrowed from regular people like you and me, through the help of an intermediary. I once visited a store in Latin America supported by microcredit and the workers held their heads up high with pride—they were obviously valued in the community.

*Recommended resource: www.kiva.com

*Possible activity: Using posters, teams of students will create and present a marketing campaign for an actual business from the Kiva website and the winning group will have \$25 donated to the business they researched.

5. *Factories of many of your favorite clothing brands are in developing (poor) countries because people there will work for much less, rarely complain about work conditions, and not unionize.* When a company is presented with the option of not having to worry about strikes, lawsuits, providing health care, or fines for polluting the environment, it becomes a matter of simple math when choosing where to build its next factory. By exploiting people who are desperate, companies can guarantee that their stock holders will have another profitable year.

*Recommended resource: www.storyofstuff.com

*Possible activity: Students will take part in a “no logo” day by covering all the company symbols on their clothes with tape and then reflect upon their experiences.

Five Things Students Can Do Right Now...

1. *Your dollar is your vote* – We vote several times every day: the clothing we wear, the transportation we take, and even the candy we buy. At my school the students learn about Fair Trade chocolate and distribute fliers about the issue. Fair Trade products may cost a few cents more, but your purchase is a firm vote that says you globally support people working in safe conditions, making a dignified wage, and afford their children an education. The Montgomery Bus Boycott was successful because people stopped pumping money into a discriminatory system.

*Recommended resource: equalexchange.coop

*Possible activity: At a school dance, students can set up a table in the lobby and hand out fliers they created in class highlighting global issues.

2. *Move beyond charity* – Fund raisers are very helpful, but too passive for my liking. I enjoy getting my hands dirty and wrestling with an issue until I have a strong grasp of the causes and effects. Margaret Mead once said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever does.” I’d rather see a group of ten students taking action than a thousand collecting donations for the same cause.

*Recommended resource: *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, by Paul Farmer

*Possible activity: Make a Difference PBL – Students will develop a plan of action on a family, peer, school, or community level to make a social impact.

3. *Don’t blame the victims* – When learning about injustices throughout the world, my students often ask, “Why don’t they fight back?” Discuss the topic of the have-nots with adults and eventually you’re bound to hear the trite, “Why don’t they just get an education?” To this comment I remind people that while public schools around the world offer a free education, many require school uniforms, the purchase of books, and registration fees which may be hard to afford if you are one of the billion people on the planet living on less than \$1 a day. It’s convenient to convince ourselves that it must be something they did or didn’t do because it allows people to distance themselves from feeling a responsibility to act.

*Recommended resource: www.unicef.com

*Possible activity: Each student will choose a developing country to research and write journal entries from the perspective of one of world’s bottom billion.

4. *A closed mouth doesn’t get fed* – There are two types of people in the world: those who care about “me” and those who care about “we.” Those who take responsibility for injustices others face all take the same first step: awareness. With that awareness people then express their ideas, the more passionate the better, and that inevitably leads to action. Recall the words of author Alice Walker, “Activism is my rent for living on this

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planet.” You can be a voice for the voiceless, or your silence will be your consent.

*Recommended resource: *A People’s History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn

*Possible activity: For a culminating activity on a unit about a major global issue, have the students participate in a Day of Silence in school to express their solidarity with those who are voiceless.

5. *Be sensitive* – Words are powerful and it is crucial to use terms that empower and never degrade. That means good-bye to “poor nations,”

“prostitutes,” “victims,” and “illegal aliens.” Instead, we make a commitment to “developing countries,” “sex workers,” “survivors,” and “people without papers.” It may sound like the simplest of all tasks, but in many ways it is the most meaningful.

*Recommended resource: *Rethinking Schools* magazine

*Possible activity: Create a socially conscious meme, post it on a social media website, and write a reflection on the feedback received.

Michael James D’Amato is the bestselling author of *The Classroom* and *Roam Italy*. His work has been highlighted in magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. His latest book is *The Dominican Experiment: A Teacher and His Students Explore a Garbage Dump, a Sweatshop, and Vodou*

The Incorporation of Education

Status strangling test scores plummet
Beneath waves of mediocrity
World-class expectations miserly financed
Sharpened digits pointed with scattered accusation
Insidious portrayals of blasé pedagogues
Vernal equinox signaling mandated standardization
Harvests of fear and insinuation
Climates of clichéd intimidation
Machine-tooled mayhem and monotonous misery
Egalitarian mistrust and malice
Division fomenting division
Creativity crystallized
Passion apprehended
Insight transformed to incite
Ink transformed to Inc.

- Joseph S. Pizzo

A veteran teacher of 39 years at the Black River Middle School in Chester, **Joe Pizzo** serves as an adjunct professor at both Centenary College and Union County College and has taught at the College of St. Elizabeth. Joe’s book *New Jersey ASK 7 Language Arts Literacy Test* is going into its third printing with revisions and a name change to fit NJ PARCC. Our former NJCTE Co-Director and a staff announcer at WNTI-91.9FM, Joe is a member of the NJ Schools to Watch Core Team, NJAMLE Leadership Team, and WWOR-TV CH. 9’s A+ for Teachers Hall of Fame.