

# Recognize, Ask, Do: Teaching Young Children to Act on Injustice by “ReADing” the World

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the racial unrest in the U.S. has highlighted the ways in which children, even young children, are not only aware of injustices and unfairness, but how they are developing solutions to address these injustices. Brianna (age 10) and Ashley (age 6) started a business, **duck + chick**, to raise money to help others in need. Jahkil started **Project I Am** when he was 8 years old to provide hygiene supplies for senior citizens and people who are homeless in Chicago. And 7-year-old **Cavanaugh** created a COVID-19 community pantry to help families experiencing food insecurity. During 2020–21, young children created mask drives, made cards for individuals isolated in nursing homes, started food drives, and raised money by creating and selling items (bake sales, **keychains**, etc.) to be used to help those in their communities. Young children are participating in **children’s marches and rallies** across the U.S. to protest and speak out against racial discrimination and police violence. You may be skeptical and think these children are only doing what they are being told by the adults in their lives. However, Cavanaugh, Jahkil, Ashley, Brianna, and many of their young peers are initiating their participation in these causes, often dragging the adults along with them. They are asking their parents, caregivers, and teachers challenging questions about why the world is unfair and unjust. These children are modeling what it means to take action against injustices and are showing leadership in their communities and society. This highlights the power and purpose of social studies in action. Social studies and social justice education help children develop knowledge, skills, and values to create meaningful change in their communities and in society to improve the rights of others, especially those who are marginalized.

In this piece, we unpack a heuristic developed by the Great

First Eight curriculum for helping young children to recognize and act on injustice. First, we explain the rationale behind the heuristic, known as **ReAD**, and the inspiration behind its creation. We then detail a series of seven practical principles that can help you incorporate ReAD into your classroom, regardless of what curricular materials you use.

## What is ReAD?

The Great First Eight (GF8) curriculum acknowledges the work of the children highlighted in this article by believing young children can be activists who can, in developmentally appropriate ways, address the injustices they notice in their world. GF8 is a full-day, asset- and project-based curriculum for children 0–8 years old that is closely aligned with national standards in science, social studies, mathematics, literacy, transformative social and emotional learning, and social justice. The curriculum is designed to be implemented in metropolitan areas and thus far has been implemented in childcare facilities and schools in Michigan, New York, and the District of Columbia. GF8 centers equity and justice, and the ReAD approach is one of the curricular strategies taught in the curriculum.

Powerful, meaningful, and authentic social studies instruction provides children with the skills to “thrive in a world of continuous and accelerating change.”<sup>1</sup> Children face situations where they personally witness injustice or unfairness as well as learn about historical injustices, and the ReAD approach provides a framework for children to critically think and respond to those situations. Children use their “multi-disciplinary awareness, information gathering and analysis, inquiry and critical thinking, and communication”<sup>2</sup> with the ReAD approach. It is important to note that the ReAD

Figure 1. Kids Climate March at the Minnesota March for Science in St. Paul, MN in 2017



(Lorie Shaull/Flickr/CC BY 2.0)

approach is not suggesting that children solve the injustices of the world, but rather the approach supports children in critically understanding the injustices they notice in the world and supporting them in the actions that they want to make in response to these noticings.

We contend that social justice and transformative social and emotional learning (SEL) are foundational in supporting children as activists. You have likely heard of SEL, as SEL efforts have become prevalent in school districts across the U.S. However, *transformative SEL* may be new to you. Transformative SEL uses an equity lens to understand and implement five SEL competencies—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making—by identifying causes of inequity and developing potential solutions to inequalities in one’s community and society.<sup>3</sup> GF8 teaches and meets the standards for both social studies and transformative SEL, providing children with the skills needed to help them develop into justice-oriented citizens. Social studies education equips children with the knowledge, attitude, and skill to make change. Similarly, transformative SEL facilitates equitable learning environments by addressing issues of power, social justice, privilege, and discrimination and developing children’s capacity as responsible decision-makers. Young children are capable of recognizing when something is unfair or unjust;

in fact, they do this as early as 3 to 4 years old.<sup>4</sup> To facilitate children’s development of strategies for acting in response to their noticings, we developed a heuristic using the acronym **ReAD**. There are three steps in the GF8 **ReAD** process: **Recognize, Ask, and Do**.

- **Recognize:** Children are naturally and constantly surveying their world. This step acknowledges this skill by helping young children notice and identify things that are unfair, unjust, or wrong in their world.
- **Ask:** Once children identify injustices, they are encouraged to *ask* questions and reflect on the injustice that they have recognized. These questions include “What is wrong here?” and “Who or what is being harmed?” This step allows children to wonder aloud about what they are noticing and experiencing in the world as unjust.
- **Do:** The third step focuses on the children engaging in action to address the identified injustice. Children *do* create a plan of action. This plan of action may include strategies for what children can do to address the injustices that they recognize. It also acknowledges their age and power within our society by noting that

their plan may need to include the adults around them to help address the injustices.

A critical and necessary component for the ReAD process to work in early childhood classrooms is a supportive teacher. Teachers have to listen and engage with their young students to support them in asking questions and in helping them develop a plan to address the unfair and unjust issues they identified. This means that teachers have to honor students' agency and worldview in the classroom.

In the ReAD heuristic, children are active agents in the world who can develop plans and solutions to the injustices they notice. It acknowledges young children as experts. Children often develop unique solutions (*Do* step) to difficult problems.

### Inspiration for ReAD

We designed ReAD because we understand children—even children in kindergarten and first grade—have the power to act for change in the world. Our belief in children as agentic change-makers is so strong that it is represented in the first principle that guides our work as curriculum developers: “The Great First Eight Curriculum prioritizes children’s engagement and agency, including through providing real-world purposes, connections to, and audiences for children’s work...Children are naturally motivated to learn, to share their knowledge... and to shape their environments.”<sup>5</sup> Schools are contexts that can, and we argue should, support children’s agency.

Our ReAD approach is informed by the work of social justice scholars and was designed to align and be connected to the National Council for the Social Studies C3 Framework, Learning for Justice’s Social Justice,<sup>6</sup> and SEL Standards.<sup>7</sup> The alignments of these standards facilitate the promotion of equity and anti-bias education in ReAD. Teachers can connect to inquiry-based learning, such as using the ReAD approach to learn more about a compelling question or expand on

the children’s understanding of Dimension 2 components (e.g., civics, history).<sup>8</sup> For example, children can learn about activism and citizenship through this approach because they can “begin to understand fairness with simple problems such as sharing something equally among classmates”<sup>9</sup> then can connect to broader concepts of injustice that occur in society in the past and present.

In Great First Eight, children explore many historical events where people used their power to make change (e.g., voting rights) and connect to the ReAD approach to understand how to act against injustice. When children learn about showing care in GF8, they use the ReAD approach to respond to any injustice they may witness at school or in their local community that does not support care for self and others. This connects to Dimension 2’s civics standards as well as Learning for Justice and SEL standards, thereby providing interdisciplinary learning connections for children.<sup>10</sup> This approach connects with the teaching of anti-oppressive social studies in that children learn about the injustices of the world but also ways to respond to those injustices.<sup>11</sup> For example, in one of our GF8 first-grade pilot classrooms, children used the ReAD approach to notice injustice in play spaces at their school and in their local community. They made a plan of action to make play more accessible and just for all, especially for a child at their school who uses a wheelchair. They presented the plan to their school principal, who agreed after hearing the children’s plan to take action to fix the play space. The teachers of these students shared that the children used social studies and social justice vocabulary (e.g., *accessible* and *just*) to describe other spaces or issues of injustice in their school and community throughout the school year. Children, even in early childhood education, can and should learn about issues of injustice that are prevalent in our society, such as race and racism.<sup>12</sup>

The ReAD heuristic provides both teachers and their young

Looking for examples of types of injustice that are developmentally appropriate for teaching ReAD to young children? Try these! Examples of questions you could guide children to pose in the *Ask* step of ReAD are offered for each topic.

- Gendered language: Who do we exclude when we say, “Boys and girls”? What could we say instead?
- Classroom management practices: How do practices such as the “clip” system affect our community?
- Depictions of different family structures: What kinds of families do we see in books children read? What about in-school forms and letters? What kinds of families are missing?
- Holiday observances: Whose holidays do we get days off from school? Why? Is that fair?
- School policies around dress codes and hairstyles: What kinds of clothes and hairstyles are considered appropriate for school? Who decided? Do these rules leave anyone or anyone’s culture out?
- Talking about food: What kinds of things do people say when they see someone else eating something that may be new or unfamiliar to them? How might that make the other person feel?

students with the structure to engage in critically reading about the world and developing a plan for transformation that is developmentally appropriate. Paulo Freire, an influential educator and philosopher whose critical pedagogy uses literacy as a tool in civics education, argued that teachers need to support children in critically examining their world and partner with children to make transformations in the world around them.<sup>13</sup> We also take inspiration from Gholdy Muhammad, a literacy and language professor and former middle school teacher and school administrator who specializes in culturally responsive and equitable instruction. Her work calls for educators to design lessons to leverage and develop children's identity, skills, intellect, and criticality.<sup>14</sup> ReAD helps children develop identities as activists and change-makers for justice, "to do something with the knowledge they [gain]—and put knowledge into action."<sup>15</sup> We think ReAD helps children read the context, or in Freire's words, the world, with an eye for the mechanisms and structures of power.<sup>16</sup> Teachers must start from the perspective of their students.<sup>17</sup> This entails examining the context and utilizing one's experiences to follow the lead of children as they read and critically examine the world around them.

ReAD connects with the teaching of anti-oppressive social studies by having children learn about the injustices of the world but also ways to respond to those injustices.<sup>18</sup> This early learning allows for children to feel empowered "with the tools needed to resist bias and oppression in their everyday lives"<sup>19</sup> connecting to national social studies standards. Children can also dig into historical learning through the ReAD approach. For example, in GF8, children often learn about history through rich children's literature.<sup>20</sup> Teachers are encouraged to pause during read alouds to provide children with opportunities to use the ReAD approach to identify the injustices they notice in the story and to think about how they would respond to the injustice(s).

## 8 Principles for Teaching ReAD

Now that we've explained the "what" and "why" of ReAD, we'll dig into the "how" by offering a few practical principles for how you can incorporate ReAD into your own classroom, whether you use Great First Eight or other curricular approaches, to support children's agency towards justice.

### 1. Start early.

ReAD supports the development of a just and equitable classroom community from the beginning of the year. In GF8, we introduce ReAD in the very first project of kindergarten, titled *Kindergartners Care! Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Idea of a Beloved Community*. In this project, the children brainstorm and create a plan on how to take action to make their school community a more beloved, caring, and just place. To achieve those goals, the children must engage with noticing (*Recognize*) and acting (*Do*) on injustice. We recommend

integrating ReAD into your beginning-of-the-year community building.

### 2. Dedicate multiple days at first.

One day is not enough time to introduce ReAD, particularly given the complexity of the vocabulary—*injustice* is a big idea for young children! We suggest first introducing the ReAD acronym early in the school year, across multiple days. Children can then explore noticing and recognizing when something is unfair, unjust, or wrong throughout the school year. They can reflect on their noticings by **asking** themselves, "What is wrong here?" and "Who or what is being harmed?" They can create plans of action for what they, or adults around them, will **do** to respond to the injustice.

### 3. Give time to practice.

After learning about the approach, children can explore various scenarios that demonstrate injustice, and they can practice how they would use the ReAD approach to respond. These scenarios can be presented through photographs, videos, or literature. They can use puppetry, acting, or sociodramatic play to practice using the approach. Scenarios should be developmentally and culturally appropriate for children; in other words, the scenarios you choose should reflect things the children in your classroom are likely to experience in their everyday lives. (See the sidebar for some sample ideas to get you started.) Cross-age partnerships are also a good way to practice; Kindergartners could pair with second graders, for example.

### 4. Continuously reinforce ReAD throughout the year and across multiple academic years.

When teaching a topic as complex and consequential as working for justice, it's important to develop and reinforce children's noticings and learning throughout the year. This will only happen if you plan for it! In GF8, we introduce the ReAD approach for two consecutive sessions of the first unit, and then extend it in other units throughout the kindergarten and first grade years. One way that we do this in kindergarten is dedicating a week of our transformative SEL lessons exclusively to ReAD. We then continue extending the practices of ReAD and what it means to be a just community into first grade (and beyond!). Through this reinforcement, children deepen their understanding of what justice and inclusivity look like in a community and how to respond when those are not being achieved.

### 5. Don't silo ReAD to one domain (i.e., only social studies or SEL).

Capitalize on "teachable moments" that occur throughout the day. For example, you might engage children in a ReAD-focused discussion following an incident at recess. Or, you might connect children's noticings about the prevalence of

trees in their community to a conversation about environmental justice.



**Figure 2.** Amariyana “Mari” Copeny speaking at the March for Science in 2018. In 2016 at 8 years old, Mari wrote a letter to President Obama asking him to address the Flint, Michigan Water Crisis. Today, she continues her action against environmental racism.

#### 6. Do a “deep dive” into one step of ReAD.

In our transformative SEL week on ReAD, we spend the first day of the five-day week identifying and asking questions about an injustice children notice in their local community and the remaining four days doing a deep dive into the *Do* step. Children, with the support of their teachers, identify multiple options for the *Do* step and children are guided in thinking about which action(s) might be feasible and effective for them to engage in. For example, children learn about protests and direct action, mutual aid, writing a letter to a person in power, and making personal lifestyle changes.

#### 7. Use children’s literature to provide additional contextualized examples.

Many children’s books and stories offer concrete and accessible examples of injustice that children can notice and discuss. Ask questions like the following:

Who is being hurt [physically or feelings] in this story?

Do you agree with what [character] did? Why or why not?

What should [character] do next?

How can [character] be more inclusive of [other character]?<sup>21</sup>

#### 8. Consider how you will assess children’s developing social and emotional competence as well as their social studies knowledge and conceptual understanding.

We recommend systematic, assets-based observation of students demonstrating transformative SEL and social studies learning in action. For example, in terms of transformative

SEL, you might look for examples of children being able to name and identify various emotions or developing positive relationships with their peers. Children who act when they notice injustice or mistreatment are demonstrating social studies and social justice in action. These are examples of observable behaviors that can be assessed systematically. We recommend taking observational notes in a dedicated notebook or Google Sheet so you can easily track children’s progress over time, keeping in mind that these skills can take weeks or months to develop. The focus is on seeing children’s strengths to understand ways you can support children’s development in these areas. This is *not* about assigning a grade.

## Conclusion

Powerful social studies call for teachers to engage young learners in opportunities to understand how to act against injustice using criticality, problem-solving, and decision making.<sup>22</sup> Through using the ReAD approach, teachers are supporting and promoting children’s SEL competencies and the use of these skills to transform children’s communities by addressing issues of injustice and unfairness. Young children notice injustices as early as 3–4 years old, so the old adage of “protecting” children from challenging topics is a falsehood. The ReAD heuristic provides a developmentally appropriate, easy-to-remember way for children and teachers to *recognize* and label injustices, critically *ask* questions about those injustices, and *do* something against those injustices. It honors the identities of children, their families, and teachers while working to identify causes of inequality while helping children create solutions to community and social problems that they have identified. ReAD is a powerful approach in the Great First Eight (GF8) curriculum that teachers can apply and lead in their own classrooms and schools. ■

## Notes

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Edited by Bethany Vosburg-Bluem, Margaret Crocco, and Jeff Passe

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