

# The Uncompromised Curriculum: Videos of Teachers Teaching Social Justice Issues

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**D**espite pressures to narrow the curriculum and focus only on testing, there are teachers who continue to work social justice issues into their elementary lessons through the subject of social studies. These teachers speak of education as an instrument for the public good. They persevere in the spirit of Audre Lorde, who said, “This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the meaning, ‘It feels right to me.’”<sup>1</sup>

In this day and age, it can be hard to find teachers with such determination. After months of scouring teacher-created websites and contacting colleagues, I disappointedly came up with very few examples. But, over the summer, with a little grant money from Hunter College, CUNY and the expertise of the college technology team, I set out to videograph three New York City school teachers in their effort to bring topics of immigration, child labor, and discrimination into the elementary classroom.<sup>2</sup> The result was three short videos, posted online at [socialjusticeteaching.tumblr.com](http://socialjusticeteaching.tumblr.com), which show the extraordinary work of three elementary school teachers as they broach topics of social justice in hopes of cultivating a more aware and compassionate citizenry. For educators who might feel intimidated by pressures to compromise the social studies curriculum, these vignettes reveal the creative possibilities and the depth at which teachers can engage important social issues with young children.<sup>3</sup>

## Teaching Social Issues

In the first video, Callie, a fifth grade assistant teacher at Public School 9, facilitates a discussion on how immigration policies have targeted different ethnic groups throughout American history. She uses a conceptual map to first enter the discussion, then divides the students into expert groups where they collaboratively draw upon text and media that present details of a specific immigration policy, proposal, or event. These

include anti-Italian sentiment in New Orleans in the early 20th century, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the recent Arizona Senate Bill 1070, and one Latino family’s recent tribulation with deportation.

In the second video, Paula and her first grade students at Manhattan New School, review months of research on how and where their stuffed animals were manufactured. Using an array of resources, the students created a global map of factory locations, peeked inside their stuffed animals to discover what they were stuffed with, researched into the conditions of factory work, interviewed labor union delegates, and discussed the possible reasons and consequences for outsourcing certain types of work. As a culmination, they wrote and performed a play to an audience of school administrators and parents.

In the third video, Juliette, a second grade teacher at Hunter Elementary School explores with her students the concept of beauty in hopes of nurturing a more caring and less discriminatory classroom. She begins her lesson by asking students to use their literacy skills in listing adjectives to describe famous athletes. She facilitates a conversation that asks students to open their minds to a variety of body shapes and sizes. In the end, students create a comic strip that portrays a character intervening on behalf of a person who is being bullied because of his or her physical appearance.

## Moving Forward, Dreaming On

I hope these videos not only serve as an inspiration and reminder of the work of elementary school teaching, but also become pivot points for discussion in professional development settings and teacher education courses. Possible avenues for exploration may include: pedagogical and curricular choices; organization and management of the classroom; use of language; concept building; alternative ways to broach a sensitive topic; the depth

of a topic discussed with elementary students; missed opportunities; children’s voices and responses; political positions and open discussion; and democratic teaching.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I hope that showing these videos to social studies professionals will create discussion space for honest reflection about values and beliefs, including our assumptions and shortcomings, so that we might explore what teaching means in a changing world. In the end, with our evolving visions for a more just world, I hope these videos force us to consider the ethical implications of compromising our curriculum and in the end push us forward in refining our visions and practices for a more just world.<sup>5</sup>

### Allaying Our Fears

Young teachers and preservice teachers with whom I work often ask: Where is there time for us to explore urgent social matters? Will I get into trouble by administrators or parents? Am I forcing my political ideals upon my students? What if I lose my job in this market? Is such talk even appropriate with little children? Even before entering their first classrooms, teachers who care about social justice seem shaken. This is unsurprising. In some communities, raising issues about social justice results in labeling the speaker as anti-American, and anti-freedom, when in actuality, the struggle for social justice is central to our nation’s history. Concern about the common good and the rights of the individual, no matter how humble in social

standing, transcends politics and holds a definitive place in the realms of morality, ethics, and federal law and therefore, in the world of teaching social studies. We, as critical educators, must make decisions about what we feel education is all about. The teachers in these short videos do so with compassion, and without compromise. 🌐

### Notes

1. Raised in New York, Audre Lorde (1934–1992) grew up to become a leading African American poet and essayist who gave voice to issues of race, gender, and sexuality. She is known for her 1980 book *The Cancer Journals*, and she received the American Book Award for *A Burst of Life* in 1989. Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.
2. Faculty Innovations in Teaching with Technology (FITT) Grant, Hunter College, CUNY, [www.hunter.cuny.edu/fitt/overview](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/fitt/overview).
3. The “About” section of [www.tumblr.com](http://www.tumblr.com) states, “Tumblr lets you effortlessly share anything. Post text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos, from your browser, phone, desktop, email, or wherever you happen to be.” Our video is posted at [socialjustice.tumblr.com](http://socialjustice.tumblr.com).
4. Additional literature on social justice teaching: Ayers, W., Kumashiro, K., Meiners, E., Quinn, T., and Stovall, D. *Teaching Toward Democracy: Educators as Agents of Change* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010); H. Giroux, *Teachers As Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1988).
5. This project would not be made possible without the contribution of Paula Rogovin, Calabria Gale, and Juliette Guarino, their students, and principals; the technology team under the direction of Joe Pelaez, and the generous funding from Hunter College, CUNY.

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