

**Sara Falls
Language Arts
Abraham Lincoln High School**

Research Question:

What does it look like when I incorporate issues of social justice into my teaching?

Context for Research:

I teach at a large, crowded high school of approximately 2,500 students in San Francisco. The school has a number of success stories and continues to be a high-performing school. And yet, like most schools across the country, our school continues to be concerned by an achievement gap, which puts low-income Black and Latino schools at the low end of academic performance. My school's academic plan for this and coming years focuses significantly on the data which show this trend, based on standardized test scores in both English Language Arts and Math, as well as suspension rates. Over the coming years, our focus will be on addressing the needs of our low-performing population.

This is an especially important focus as our school population has been changing over the years, shifting to a more diverse population (For instance comparing the class of 2005 to the class of 2008 shows a 5.1% increase in Latino students up from 7.3 to 12.4%, a 5% increase in Black students, up from 3.2 to 8.2 %, and a decrease in Chinese population of 6.2 percent, from 56 to 49%. 41.9% of our population qualifies for free or reduced lunch).

My classroom mirrors trends at the school; it is diverse and mixed along ability levels. One of my largest struggles this year has been my students' diverse needs. In my three classes of Tenth Grade English, I have 102 students: 13 are indicated as gifted and talented, 17 receive special education services, and 18 have grade level standing below their grade in school due to low credits. This final group of students is the students I have focused particularly on this year: the majority of them are academically capable but have not bought into the school culture. They often cut class and don't complete assignments, and they are very often the kinds of students that don't want to fit the model of a "good" student. I focused much of my research on these students.

As a member of the school's leadership team we had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Jeff Andrade from San Francisco State University, who describes U.S. education as a "crisis" for Blacks and Latinos. A couple girls, inspired by his work became leaders of something they eventually called "The Movement," a club of sorts at our school intended to not only create a support network for Black and Latino students, but also to educate their peers about the social injustice in education, the inequity of this educational crisis.

Most of the students who are part of The Movement are specifically students who have struggled to be academically successful in school. They can be disdainful of "good students" because their image of what this means includes being subservient to authority and quiet. But The Movement's message is different: the message here is doing well in school is about being powerful, not about being "good." Being educated is about fighting back against "the man"—or the students' perceptions of authority and racism they face. The Movement's goal is to reclaim education and reframe why students should want to succeed in school.

I was inspired by the students' stories and energy, and much of their anger reflected my thinking as an educator; hence I wanted to investigate ways I could bring similar ideas into my classroom.

Findings:

Explicitly bringing social justice issues into my 10th Grade English classes was relatively easy. In the past, the course has been called "The Ethnic Experience" and has focused on ethnic writers in the United States. The course has been changed to fit with a move towards standard-based education, but many of us teachers decided to keep an ethnic literature focus. Hence my curriculum already addressed issues of racism, cultural identity, and "otherness." My goal generally is to help my students connect with literature by sharing their own stories through writing and discussion. This year, on top of this curriculum, I made specific attempts to bring in questions of equity with students in one-on-one settings (such as reminding students who complained about how much they hate reading that being literate was often a revolutionary act for disempowered groups in this country's history) and to empower students as teachers of their experiences and ideas (for instance, I invited a former

student of mine from last year to guest teach my classes helping students to think about ways to address the racism they see at school).

It is evident to me that generally students are engaged with classroom activities that deal explicitly with social justice issues. Discussions on these topics were always exciting, and many students who don't typically engage in classroom activities were engaged. One discussion in particular about institutional racism led to such a fiery discussion that many students didn't want to leave when the bell rang. One student in particular who was failing my class because of her poor attendance and lack of work and who rarely spoke up in class was the most vocal. At one point she said, "The people who are in power in this country don't want us [racial minorities] to be educated; they want to keep us dumb so that they can control us!" This engagement and anger was a very exciting moment for me as a teacher and definitely one of the highlights of my year; I followed this comment up by encouraging my students to think of their education as a way to be powerful.

Other students responded to these discussions through unprompted writing in their journals, thinking through what these ideas meant for their own lives.

Ultimately, I had hoped that creating an awareness of social justice would help inspire students to be more academically successful. At this point in my data collection, I cannot conclude that this is necessarily the case: of the students who were failing my class due to non-engagement, one of them (the vocal girl mentioned previously) continued to fail and was transferred to a continuation school. One other student who often made such statements as "I love to talk about racism. Talking about racism is *my life!*" continued for several weeks to fail my class. Within the last marking period, I have seen a marked improvement in her work completion and attendance, but it has definitely still been a struggle. The one student who is involved in The Movement has been the most successful in terms of shifting from non-engagement to engagement. He failed the first semester of my class, but, in meeting with Dr. Andrade, expressed his outrage and explicitly made the decision to take his education seriously. He actively sought out another teacher at our school as a mentor, and that first marking period he went from an "F" in my class to a C-. He continues to strive to pass, and I've even heard him bragging about his 2.2 GPA.

Perhaps more importantly, he has actively sought to build more of a relationship with me. He has come to me outside of class to get help on work and seems to enjoy my class and talking with me.

Policy Implications:

- Teachers need to have control over their curriculum. A standards-based education is justifiable and even necessary, but teachers should be given the freedom to determine how to meet these standards. A move towards more scripted curriculum does not give teachers the freedom to bring in relevant, engaging ideas to the class as they see fit.
- Professional Development that creates awareness amongst teachers about the inequities in schools is crucial. Teachers should have the resources and time to learn best practices for reaching traditionally low-performing students.
- Schools should be encouraged to create support for low-performing students. This might mean creating mentorships, or support groups; it might also mean creating service-learning projects that help students feel powerful making changes in their communities.