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## Interpretations of Social Justice

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# Interpretations of



By Brian G. Johnson, GVSU Faculty, and Aliya Armstrong, GVSU Staff

## History of Youth Advancing Social Justice

Young people have played critical roles in the advancement of social justice throughout history. In 1960, Ruby Bridges was six years old when she advocated for educational equality (Cardwell, 2000). In 1965, at the age of 25, future Georgia Congressman John Lewis marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to fight for voting rights (Newkirk II, 2018). In 1955, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was 26 years old when he boycotted against racial segregation

on buses in Montgomery, Alabama (King, 2015). He was assassinated at the age of 39 (Hanna, Simon, & Gast, 2018), but the civil rights advancements he made within those 39 years would leave a lasting imprint on the civil rights movement.

Fifty years after the assassination of Dr. King, inequities within the justice system still exist, and young people continue to play pivotal roles in advancing social justice. Yolanda Renee King, Dr. King's granddaughter, reiterated the importance of her grandfather's "I Have a Dream"



speech when she spoke in protest of gun violence at a March for Our Lives rally in March 2018 (Calfas, 2018). Ms. King was nine years old.

Several other recent examples highlight the power of young voices. Youth led coordinated school walkouts against gun violence involving thousands of students throughout the United States (Helm, Lang, & Svrluga, 2018). Eleven-year-old Gitanjali Rao developed a device to detect lead in water. She was inspired by the water crisis in Flint, Michigan and wanted to create a more accurate device to test drinking water for lead (Wamsley, 2017). Howard University students voiced their concerns about current campus policies through student protests, which ultimately led to a hearing where administrators listened to and honored certain requests (Romo, 2018).

For every young person advocating for social justice by protesting gun violence, fighting for clean water, or promoting reform policies in higher education, there is a teacher instilling the importance of social justice in his or her classroom. Teachers are natural social justice advocates because they fight daily against injustices and inequalities that interfere with students attaining quality education. They “see schools and society as interconnected” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 24) and have the awesome responsibility of preparing students to adapt, learn, and thrive in an ever-changing society.

## Injustices in the Field of Education

Yet this poses a critical challenge—what does it mean when we encourage teachers to support their students in social justice activities while there remain inherent injustices in the field of education itself? One such injustice is reflected in the makeup of the teacher workforce. Typical teacher demographics are not representative of the increasingly diverse student population. During the 2016-2017 school

year, the average teacher in Michigan was a white woman in her 40s. Overall, public school teachers were 92% white and 77% female (Mack, 2018). However, one third of K-12 students in Michigan are minorities (Mack, 2017). Nationally, students of color account for almost half of the public school population (Partee, 2014).

Teacher retention and pay pose additional social injustice challenges. New teachers and teachers of color leave the profession at disproportionately high rates (Lindsay, 2017; Partee, 2014). Teachers of color cited social injustices as one reason why they left the teaching profession. These injustices include students of color being treated unfairly—even as criminals (Long, 2017). Teacher salaries in the United States are substantially lower than teacher salaries around the world (Berr, 2016). Teachers in Arizona, Oklahoma, and West Virginia recently staged protests regarding low salaries (Kuhn, 2018).

## Advancing Social Justice in the Field of Education

Most teachers still find that the benefits of teaching far outweigh the injustices. A 2008 review of studies found that people become teachers because they want to work with students, see teaching as a way to make a difference, and view teaching as what they were meant to do in life (Hellsten & Prytula, 2011).

Advocating for social justice includes listening to others’ points of view. Listening to teachers and current college students interested in becoming teachers is a great place to start. In a 2016 survey of 3,328 public school teachers, a majority of participants indicated they did not feel their voices were being heard in relation to policies that affect students at the local and national levels (Will, 2016). A problem exists when teachers are charged with advocating for the well-being of students but, far too often, do not

have a voice in the discussions of how policies and social justice issues affect that very well-being. Further, young teachers who are just beginning their educational journey into teaching only recently became removed from the social justice issues prevalent in schools today. Millennials make up a majority of new teachers and 38% of the United States workforce (Hodges, 2016).

We must seek an understanding of how our future teachers perceive social justice and how they plan to promote social justice in their classrooms. This study sought to do exactly that by interviewing undergraduate students who were interested in becoming teachers in order to gain further insight into how they perceived issues related to social justice as college students and as future teachers.

## The Right to Be Heard: Surveying College Students

Participants consisted of undergraduate students who indicated an interest in becoming teachers. All responses were anonymous and were recorded via an online survey. After completing an online consent form, participants answered the following questions:

1. What does social justice mean to you?
2. As a teacher, or within your future profession, how do you plan to promote social justice?
3. What are examples of social injustice that you currently face? How do you deal with social injustice?
4. In your opinion, what are some of the most pertinent examples of social injustice that we face as a society?

Eight participants provided feedback in response to the questions. Excerpts from their responses follow.

### *Question 1: What Does Social Justice Mean to You?*

Participants discussed the importance of being treated equally and fairly based on one's actions and despite one's race, ethnicity, class, or disability. One participant stated: "To me, it's respecting a person despite their race, gender, sexuality, or disabilities. To make sure to create safe spaces for people. To make sure that everyone is respected despite their opinions."

When interpreting what social justice means to them, participants also discussed the importance of equality within the justice system. One noted:

"Social justice means that a case should be viewed blind to the color or culture of the individual, but rather contingent with constitutional values and in respect to the circumstance being called into question."

### *Question 2: As a teacher, or within your future profession, how do you plan to promote social justice?*

While the results to this question varied, one theme that emerged was the need to treat students and others fairly and equally:

"I plan to promote social justice by being fair to every individual I encounter. Being the voice of reason, or being a resource to others, hearing out others' perspectives."

"I will treat all of my students equally. Not one student will feel isolated or different."

Participants discussed the importance of promoting social justice as teachers by providing opportunities in their classrooms to learn about and express their feelings regarding social justice issues. For example:

"[I plan to promote social justice] by reading books about social justice to increase classroom knowledge on it."

"I plan to ... have constructive conversations to get to the root cause of why some people don't acknowledge them and why others support injustices. This will be an integrated topic of discussion, facilitated by literature and other credible resources."

Along with promoting the importance of dialogue in their classrooms relating to social justice, the importance of creating a safe space for students was critical. One person stated:

"I want to make sure my future students have a safe space despite their identity. Recognizing different experiences and perspectives in the classroom, and allowing discussions, may help decrease bullying and harassment among students."

*“Recognizing different experiences and perspectives in the classroom, and allowing discussions, may help decrease bullying and harassment among students.”*

***Question 3: What are examples of social injustice that you currently face? How do you deal with social injustice?***

Some participants expressed experiences of social injustice due to their race and/or financial status. For example:

“My race is a constant reminder to myself that life is not fair, and that I am a constant threat and target to people who deem me inferior.”

“A student that is raised in an urban city does not have the financial background like others to pay for college, or opportunities such as scholarships.”

“The most injustice I tackle is racism.”

Another participant expressed concern about encountering racism as a future teacher:

“I may encounter students or parents who outright dislike me because of my race.”

Some participants expressed their approaches for addressing the social injustices they face, including through education, disregarding negative comments, dialogue, and hopefulness for change. Students stated:

“I deal with that by working hard and pushing myself to get through college because education is power, and that is something no one can take from me.”

“I pay no attention to it. I do not let their words have power.”

“I eventually learned that it is important to seek support and talk about it instead of being silent.”

“I do try to address any topics that surface in the media. I try to create an opportunity to have those tough conversations and/or voice my disposition when an opportunity presents itself.”

“I hope for the best and continue to encourage students to speak respectfully despite their upbringing.”

**Question 4: In your opinion, what are some of the most pertinent examples of social injustice that we face as a society?**

Participants listed a variety of social injustices pertaining to race, culture, gender, disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and religion. A major theme that emerged was disproportionate treatment in the justice system based upon race. For example:

“Our justice system is broken. So many African Americans are killed by the police, yet there are never any consequences for the officers. Also, there are so many people of color who are in jail for crimes they did not commit, or they are in jail for the same crimes as white people, but they have longer sentences. I think that it is hard for us to trust our justice system when it constantly fails us.”

“There is the issue of stop-and-frisk to people of color, specifically to African American males and Hispanic males. There are several cases of African American males that are killed, without arms, by the police.”

“The disparities in the criminal justice system are heart-wrenching and atrocious. The overrepresentation of men of color in the prison system; the undermined funds and support in primarily minority schools seems to be a pipeline indicator and factor to the trajectory of these so-called criminals. Most recently, the killing of unarmed black men across the nation with *no* recourse in the policing system.”

## Implications: Interpreting Social Justice

Despite efforts across generations, access to education and opportunities in the field of education remain critical issues for social justice. Education is, by its very nature, a social justice issue. One of the core components of social justice is making sure all voices are heard. Just as young people played a pivotal role in contributing to the civil rights movement and continue to play an important role in advocating for current social justice causes, young people are critical to the advancement of equity in the teaching field. It is important that their thoughts and perceptions

regarding issues of social justice be heard. Also, it is necessary to hear current interpretations of social justice to increase retention of teachers.

This study provided a glimpse into why students are entering the teaching profession and the social justice causes important to them. The study’s findings revealed that participants interpreted social justice as the need to treat others fairly. They noted methods they would use to incorporate social justice in their classrooms, such as creating a safe classroom environment for their students and promoting dialogue and conversations relating to social justice.

Participants also indicated disproportionalities within the justice system, such as killings of unarmed black men, as a major issue of concern and social justice inequality. It is no surprise that these killings would affect students who are interested in becoming teachers in a monumental way. Each time a killing occurs, the investment, encouragement, and knowledge that a teacher instilled in one of his or her students is thwarted.

As students who were interested in becoming teachers, this study’s participants also expressed disparities in the justice system based upon race and socioeconomic status. Yet they expressed coping with these injustices by continuing their education, remaining motivated, and ignoring negative actions that were counterproductive to attaining their education.

The participants’ interpretations of social justice emphasized treating students fairly and equally. If these college students decide to become teachers, the causes that are important to them and some of the social injustices they experience will provide them with motivation to advocate on behalf of their students. It will remind them of the importance of making sure their classrooms are safe for their students. And when the teaching profession becomes challenging, as it certainly will at times, it will emphasize to them that they are needed as teachers because they are natural social justice advocates.

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