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Using Social Justice to Promote Student Voice

Preteen students can gain confidence in their ability to navigate complex topics by using intersectionality to investigate social issues.

By **Lorena Germán**

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As a Dominican immigrant mother and wife to a Black-skinned Dominican man, I was hit hard by the killing of George Floyd and other recent events in our country. As many were, I was also frustrated by the ongoing killings, the lack of accountability, and the fears of what could be for my husband and son.

While we march and protest and join our voices to the national outcry that Black Lives Matter, I see my classroom as another form of activism. I currently teach at a small, independent, predominantly White school, where I designed and teach a course called Middle School Social Justice. My students and I focus on learning about social injustice and practicing advocacy. Together we research, discuss, and learn about a wide variety of national social issues.

One of the main issues middle school students share with me is their feeling of isolation and neglect when parents or guardians have in-depth, critical conversations about social issues and don't include them. They also struggle with not knowing exactly where they stand on issues and not having the language to articulate their thoughts on these matters. Often, young people don't have spaces in which they can really dig into what they're thinking, process what they're hearing, and ask questions to better understand what's going on. My course is a place where they can do all that.

I'm fortunate to be able to do this as a full course; teachers who can't do that can still offer something like this as a unit, even in distance learning—for my last unit in the spring, like nearly everyone else we were home-based due to Covid-19. We weren't able to do our usual out-in-the-field learning exercises such as visiting local nonprofits to see work related to the topics we were studying. So, as a final assessment for the semester, and as a way to practice the tangible skill of advocacy, we took on argumentative speeches with a twist.

PROMOTING STUDENT VOICE IN DISTANCE LEARNING

The students' task, which we designed together, was to define their position on an issue they were passionate about in a speech lasting no more than three minutes. They had to introduce their topic, clearly state a claim, reference

several important viewpoints, and conclude their speech in a strong manner. That sounds like your typical argumentation speech or assignment. However, we added intersectionality and systemic issues, which we had previously studied. For example, we talked about the gender wage gap and how that is compounded for women who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. We watched videos, read articles, listened to guest speakers, and discussed the issue.

We took the same approach with their speeches: Regardless of the topic they chose, they had to address ways that race, gender, or other social identities were related to their issue and impacted the experience of the people involved in the issue. It's critical in a course like this to keep people at the center. We talk about issues, government, and problems, but we never forget that the statistics and the issues are all people. Racism is dehumanizing, so to be antiracist means to remember and value all humans.

Centering student voice was crucial. Students chose what they researched and how they presented their information—some began with a question or hook to get the listeners' attention, others began with startling statistics, and still others started with a clear thesis to clarify for listeners what they wanted us to take away. There wasn't a one-size all approach—they made choices best suited to their purpose.

I was very intentional in providing them with a step-by-step process so that I could facilitate the learning along the way. After setting the assignment goals together, I had students select topics based on their interests. Some students struggled with this, so I asked questions like these to guide their thinking:

- What issue do you care about deeply for which you can address various intersectional issues?
- What issue do you want to know more about and want to find out how various issues impact it?
- When I knew a student well: I know _____ is an issue in your family. Do you want to explore your own position considering how it might or might not be systemic?

Once they all had topics, I taught them the process of structuring an argument. Then they did research, and I met with them privately—in a Zoom breakout room—so they could practice their claim and go over their outline, and I could offer feedback.

Finally, students presented their speeches while their peers listened, and I offered a rebuttal question to offer them an additional layer of challenge.

DEEP LEARNING AND A READINESS FOR THE FUTURE

One student focused her speech on abortion and the way income and socioeconomic status intersect with it. Another student took on global warming, current politics, and Indigeneity. Two others chose to look at arguments about vaccinations as they prepared for Covid-19 conversations with their families. They talked about health care and economic access, too. One student talked about mass incarceration, the death penalty, and Black male over-representation on death row.

While many of these issues are age-old, what was most powerful was how these preteens were able to develop a research-based position and a nuanced understanding of very polarizing topics. Way too many adults, particularly White ones, struggle to see how these issues are not simple binary ones—that the gray areas are where we will find a holistic understanding of the problem. It's only through this understanding that we can arrive at comprehensive solutions.

What I learned from this assessment is that young people are ready, willing, and able to engage in difficult conversations. They are interested in fighting for their lives, our lives, and their nation. They are leaders—even the quiet ones.

There is power in student voice, and it isn't a voice any teacher can give. We don't give voices. We make space for them in our curricula and classrooms, or we don't. Especially in times like these when our nation is burning, we should listen to the young people. We should center their voices through choice of their tasks, choice of what they want to study, and overall handing them some leadership opportunities. How else will they practice taking over the world?