

# Social Justice:

## *The Learning*

## in Service Learning

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In recent months, I have been feeling deeply troubled by the unhealthy state of our national conversation. There is a lot of yelling back and forth, fear mongering and blaming, instead of authentic dialogue that recognizes a basic understanding that our nation is made up of extremely varied perspectives and experiences. It is crucial for us to take pause as educators and focus on what we can do to prepare our students to be able to engage in true dialogue on a national level, and for our students to practice these skills in our classrooms. As educators, we must challenge the basic assumptions that all of our students have the same experiences and we must start to recognize the inequity in our society. We can then help lead young people to understand these inequities as well. This is the basis of understanding social justice.

Where and how can these conversations take place? It is not only about creating the space for dialogue on inequity; we must also guide our students in how we can engage in these conversations. Students must build and practice skills, such as being able to speak from their expe-



periences, and being able to hear and listen to other experiences that are different from their own. This is not as simple as it seems, hence a few thoughts on how and where this type of learning can take place.

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Often times our service learning classes can be opportunities for us to focus on the students' learning skills from their service site, but how often do we allow them to reflect on what they are seeing, the tensions that arise and their own positionality in the space that they are working? Do we prepare our students for resistance to their work? Do we allow them the chance to explore the root causes of poverty and exclusion? Do we allow for conflict and practice resolution in our classrooms? These are important aspects of the learning that must take place for students to really engage and understand their service experiences. At the Urban School of San Francisco, we have incorporated two frameworks that have been extremely productive in helping to set up a class community and pedagogy that

encourages authentic dialogues on issues of social justice.

We need to make social justice real, not just abstract theories and principles and not just words that we throw around when we go out to volunteer. Social justice must be understood as aspects of our students' lives that they witness everyday. We must allow students to connect their own daily experiences to what they are witnessing in the news, and all around us. While social justice can be an abstract term, guidelines and frameworks in both the fields of social justice education and service learning can really support educators on how to engage our students.

## **What is Social Justice?**

Many activists will define social justice as the state where the basic needs of people are met—access to food, clothing, shelter, education and opportunities.<sup>1</sup> As educators who work with student volunteers, we observe that many of our students find themselves providing these services through their volunteer experiences. However, social justice is not only about the provisions, it is also about the transformation of society in which these basic needs are met. This is a common misconception in service learning or community engagement programs. Just because students are working on providing services, does not mean that they are engaging in social justice work. Social justice is more than providing resources—it is also the analysis of the systemic issues that create poverty, marginalization and exclusion. Social justice addresses the structure of society. That is the key

1. See [www.reachandteach.com](http://www.reachandteach.com) for a great overview of activists defining social justice.

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difference. It is analyzing what is causing the needs in the first place. To really understand and work towards social justice, root causes that lead to poverty, marginalization and exclusion within our society must be addressed. This is the learning that needs to happen in service learning classes.

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## Social Justice Principles in Education

As stated above, the Service Learning Department at the Urban School has integrated two essential frameworks into our program that have worked well in creating space for students to engage in dialogue around social justice. The first framework is a Social Justice Youth Development Framework developed by Ginwright and James (2002). This framework incorporates five principles in working with youth that can help structure a class to engage in social justice themes:

### 1) The analysis of power in social relationships

A critical understanding of power and privilege allows students to investigate what the barriers or power structures are that keep marginalized groups excluded.

### 2) Ongoing self-reflection on identity

It's important to allow students the space and opportunity to explore identity. Developing a language and vocabulary with younger students, and then an examination of privilege and how that impacts their own situations with the older students, prepares them to understand what privilege really means and allows students within a structured setting to practice how to have effective conversations around privilege.

### 3) Promotion of systemic social change

Create understanding around systemic oppression and systems of power. For older students, this can really impact their understanding of inequity witnessed in their own service sites.

### 4) Encouragement of collective action & 5) Embracing youth culture

The last two principles speak to how we can pedagogically set up and embrace our students' voices in our classrooms.

The second framework that our department has incorporated into our work is Mitchell's (2008) work on critical service learning. While there is a lot of overlap between the two frameworks, critical service learning also offers suggestions in how to engage with community partners. The critical service learning approach is defined with four main principles:

1) Highlights systems of power

2) Encourages students to think of themselves as agents of change



3) Challenges students to reflect on their own situation

4) Collaborates with community partners so that the relationship is not only about the service event but how the school and the organization can work together.

If you have not integrated social justice into your service learning program, using these two frameworks can significantly help to structure and guide a program.

## Why Social Justice in Service Learning?

We can't ask students to go out and engage without first discussing root causes of inequity. If they don't have a language to dialogue and engage, often times they leave volunteer sites with false notions of solving the problems. By allowing our students to see their volunteer work as complex, that they are both doing good and simultaneously not solving the problem, we help them experience a more authentic understanding of social issues. It is not simple to just start to integrate social justice into service learning. Making the frameworks work for your particular program can be tricky. Urban School recommends three things as a starting place to integrate social justice into a service learning classroom.

### 1) Create spaces to dialogue on aspects of social justice that connect to students' own experiences.

For example, if students are volunteering in

a local public school that is drastically different to their own schooling, create a space for them to explore why that is. Challenge the notion that one school is better than the other. Allowing students to discuss their experiences is vital, and acknowledging the differences can offer students who may have gone to public schools the opportunity to share perspectives of that schooling and how it can be drastically different than the current situation.

### 2) Incorporate activities that allow students to explore their identities.

In our Freshman service learning class, our students are asked to do identity molecules and share significant aspects of who they are with their classmates. We provide vocabulary around race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation so that students have the tools to be able to discuss their identity. This is a great starting space for students to feel comfortable talking about their identity and helps to build community within the classroom.

### 3) Invite community partners into your school space.

Attempting to build a partnership, where students witness collaboration between the school and the community organization, will help to break down the notion that the school is only serving the organization. With our Sophomore service learning class, we have developed strong long-term relationships with four local organizations. One organization comes into the class and trains all of our students in inclusive play habits. Another partner leads discussions on ageism in our local

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communities. Seeing the organizations as active agents for social change helps provide students with a more holistic picture of what is happening in our society, and challenges the notion that just because we volunteer, we are “solving” the problem.

Integrating social justice into our classes serves our students in multiple ways. In service learning, it really helps to frame a more complete understanding of the experience. It also is an excellent way to integrate identity development, which builds on skills to engage in dialogue around difference. The aforemen-

tioned frameworks not only offer guidelines for creating spaces for dialogue, they also help to structure a pedagogy that creates inclusive classrooms where all students can find a space to share and reflect on their experiences. This is essential to helping our students navigate the difficult conversations that are facing our nation today. While often times we may think of service learning as an opportunity to get our students out of the door and into the community, the conversations that happen within the classroom can positively impact how we engage with each other as members of a diverse and complex society. ●

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