

Theory of Social Change

When I look at my students, I want to be optimistic about the world they will live in in the future. I want them to live in a world in which oppression and inequality do not exist. I want them to never have to worry about violence or prejudice. I want society to never impose restrictions or stigmas on them based on their identities. Unfortunately, these things may never happen in their lifetimes. Therefore, I can not teach them with the expectation that they will live in a perfect world, instead, they must be prepared to live in a world that is imperfect, in which they will face difficulties and have to stand up for themselves and others.

In some classrooms, student voices are not heard, problem solving skills are not valued, and students are simply expected to recite information that their teachers have recited to them. When I think about my own education growing up, I can remember history teachers reciting dates and outcomes of battles, English teachers reciting Shakespeare, and science teachers reciting the periodic table, but I would rather recall the experiences that turned these facts into skills, such as connecting history to current events in history classes, sharing our own interpretations of literary works in English classes, and performing experiments in science classes. These experiences helped me become who I am today, because I was given the opportunity to come up with my own ideas and relate what I learned at school to my own life experiences.

As I navigate teaching my own students, I remind myself that they need to be taught skills that they can build upon throughout their lives, and build upon the skills that they already have. Learning facts is important for students as they make sense of the world we live in, but in my time teaching, I have found that my students are not taught how to live fulfilling lives in an

imperfect world by only reciting facts. They also need to build upon these facts to learn the skills necessary to live in this world and navigate its imperfection.

The ability to create social change is a skill that should be taught to all children from a young age. In order to grow up to become adults who are aware of the injustices that exist in their communities and are capable of making change, students need to begin to learn and practice these skills as soon as possible.

One morning during free play time at the preschool I work at, a two-year-old-child came up to me complaining that another student had accidentally hit her with an object. I replied “Did you tell her to be careful?” expecting that I would have to talk to the other child myself. To my surprise, she marched up to the other child, who was easily twice her size, and said firmly but clearly “Be careful”. The student had already clearly communicated to me the problem and the solution, but did not have the exact words to say to the other student. I try to teach my students, starting as young as possible, the skills they need to stand up for themselves and others, and how to listen to others when concerns are brought up. Originally, the other child did not take the interaction well, but after another teacher and I briefly explained to her that the child was simply trying to have a conversation with her because she wanted her to be careful, she was open to listening to us and the other child.

Since I wrote about this story in my original draft of this paper, my perspective on it has changed. I am no longer as surprised about how the two-year-old child handled the situation, because I have seen her and other students of mine stand up for themselves in this way many times since. Children can often resolve conflicts on their own or with minimal teacher intervention, and saying “Did you tell them [whatever the other child needs to be reminded of]?” when a child has a complaint about another child’s actions has become one of my favorite ways

to help children resolve conflicts, because it gives the child the words they need to resolve the conflict by themselves.

Not all children have the skills to stand up for themselves and others like the child in this story, and not all children, or people in general, are as open to discussing difficult topics when they have been called out like the other child in this story. I believe it is every teacher's job (and the job of anyone who works with children or has children of their own) to help children work on these skills. Learning these skills looks different for every child. While the children in my story needed minimal guidance from adults to solve their issue, other children may need more time to learn how to communicate effectively in difficult situations. It is important to take this time for every child to ensure that they learn self-advocacy, the importance of open-mindedness, and other communication skills that will help them solve problems independently in the future and create change when they identify that it is necessary.

Good communication skills are just the first step for children to learn how to create social change. I took CYES 210, in which we discussed civics education, primarily for k-12 students. A common theme that we noticed is that if young people are taught civics skills, such as connecting with others in their communities, identifying inequity in their communities, and proposing and carrying out solutions to the issues that their communities face, they are more likely to take action that creates positive change in their communities and more likely to participate in civic action in the future. This creates communities of engaged citizens that can stand up and create positive change whenever, wherever, and for whomever it is needed, and are capable of doing whatever is necessary to create this change, from helping out a neighbor to organizing a protest. Unfortunately, some students, especially younger students, are not taught these skills in school, either because their school does not offer sufficient civics education, or because the way that

civics is taught in their school is only fact-based and does not focus on civics skills in addition to civics knowledge. Additionally, young people's voices, especially those of young people with marginalized identities, are often not valued by society.

“Social change” is a broad concept. Change can occur on a variety of different scales and can attempt to solve a variety of different problems and concerns, but one thing all social change has in common is people who are committed to seeing the change happen and have the skills to make it a reality. As a teacher, I often feel like all I can do is hope that my students will grow up to become active citizens who can create positive social change, and hope that I can create positive social change myself by teaching them well, but there are skills I can teach them that will make these dreams less of a fantasy. These skills are complex, but can start with steps as simple as encouraging a student to stand up for themselves in the classroom.