

What does 'fair' mean? Exploring social justice issues with children

by Janine Brodyk

Young children make sense of the world around them by observing and interacting with the environment and the people in it. Children grow up accepting the ethnic background, religion, socio-economic status, family structure and community in which they are reared. They make judgments about how they see the world and how they treat others by observing and interacting with those around them, including family members, peers and educators. People are treated differently and have access to different opportunities in life depending on which social class they belong to, their gender, age and abilities. So how can educators help children to understand what is fair and just, to respect and accept diversity and address social justice with them?

What is social justice?

Social justice is based on the concept of human rights, equality and a just and equitable society. Social justice as a secular concept emerged mainly in the late twentieth century and was influenced primarily by the philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) and his writing *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

More recently, in 1989 in the United States, social justice in early childhood education emerged through the writings of Louise Derman-Sparks and the Anti Bias Task Force in the book *Anti-bias*



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.1, 1.2, 1.5, 3.1 and 3.4
OSHCQA Principles:	1.1-1.3, 2.2 and 4.2
QIAS Principles:	1.3-1.5, 2.2 and 4.2

curriculum: Tools for empowering young children. In the Australian context many educators and writers, including McNaughton and Robertson, have promoted the importance of educators advocating for social justice.

Derman-Sparks outlines the four core goals of Anti-Bias education as being:

1. Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.
2. Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human difference; and deep, caring human connections.
3. Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
4. Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions. (Derman-Sparks and Edwards, 2010, p. xiv)

These core goals can be related in the Australian context to the learning outcomes of the *Early Years Learning Framework* as children:

- Learn to interact with others with empathy and respect
- Respond in a positive way to diversity
- Become aware of what is fair and unfair
- Develop social and emotional wellbeing and self-worth.

How can educators begin thinking about social justice issues?

People are often defined in groups by their gender, ability, race or ethnicity, religion, class, age, sexuality and/or socio-economic status. In each category there is a perceived way of looking or behaving. Judgements are made about people and certain groups and individuals are defined as superior or inferior. The challenge

for educators is to critically reflect on socially constructed images of normality and to question how these can be challenged to create a more just world.

Many educators working with children in early and middle childhood settings may question why it is necessary to discuss social justice with children, and whether it is appropriate for them to take on this responsibility.

Adults sometimes think that young children don't notice difference and that they are too young to understand diversity and injustice. Some educators may also feel that this subject matter is inherently political and personal in nature and therefore should not be discussed with children, and in particular with very young children.

Pelo (2006), however, notes that teachers can act as agents for social change:

We understand teachers as facilitators of children's passionate pursuits and as guides and mentors for children's learning creating a context in which children can take up the issues that matter to them including issues related to unfairness and equity.

Most young children have a basic understanding of what is fair and unfair. Educators can play a sensitive and valuable role in helping children to reflect on and talk about what they perceive as being fair and unfair, and to consider why they have these beliefs. Addressing social justice issues with children is not about teaching them about what is 'right or wrong' but rather, is about helping them to develop the skills to analyse events and circumstances to make their own informed decisions about equity and justice.

As educators, our role is to expand on children's understandings and perceptions of equity and fairness to include a focus on people and communities both within and outside the children's immediate environment. Pelo and Davidson see educators and children as activists for change, suggesting that 'anti-bias activism is a natural outgrowth of children's awareness of what's fair and what's not fair, a natural response to their readiness to act for fairness. Activism is an important validation of children's observations and experiences' (Pelo and Davidson, 2000, p. 8).

Conclusion

As children are asked to think critically about how people are treated differently because of their culture, gender, race, religion, sexuality or abilities they are also given the challenge of how they as individuals and as a community of learners can rectify inequality, prejudices and injustice. Although it may be challenging, by discussing social justice with children, educators can advocate for a more just and equitable society ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

References and further reading

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