

What is more important than content in a physical education class? What matters more than physical activity? Is there anything we should focus on more than the grade level outcomes created by SHAPE America? A student's self-identity is more important than anything else. This is what shapes their thinking which will influence every decision they make. Race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, and sexuality all contribute to our self/personal identity. (6) Understanding the idea that our thinking drives our decision making, and that self identity drives our thinking, should make us refocus on not only what we teach but also how we teach it.

In order to address personal identity in our class we need to look at teaching Physical Education (PE) through the lens of social justice. Dr. Brian Culp a professor at Kennesaw State University, stated back in 2011 that "current demographics in the United States have made issues pertaining to social justice central to the evolution of PE as a discipline. With this knowledge, the time to refocus efforts in respect to ensuring equity regardless of ability, race, class, gender, sexuality, or religion has arrived". (2) Seven years later that statement is more true than ever! Social justice belongs wherever PE is taught whether that be in the gym, on a field, under a pole barn, or on the black top.

You may be asking yourself what exactly is social justice in education?

"According to Marilyn Cochran-Smith, a leading scholar in education, a social justice framework is one that "actively address[es] the dynamics of oppression, privilege, and isms, [and recognizes] that society is the product of historically rooted, institutionally sanctioned stratification along socially constructed group lines that include race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability [among others]. Working for social justice in education means guiding students [and often being guided by students] in critical self-reflection of their socialization into this matrix of unequal relationships and its implications, analysis of the mechanisms of oppression, and the ability to challenge these hierarchies." (link)

We have to become comfortable with the idea that it is our job to teach through, and about social justice. The idea that what and how we teach is neutral is a fallacy. We are either addressing issues of power in our class or we are ignoring them, thus reproducing power relations. Either way we will be teaching our students what we believe about it one way or the other. Ignoring social justice reinforces the current system where the hegemony of white supremacy, Eurocentric, Judeo-Christian, male dominated curriculums that that are currently the norm. Social justice is recognizing and acting upon the power that we have for making positive change. (3)

Once we understand how important it is to address race, gender, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality in our class we can start our social justice journey. The first step in that journey is to look at our biases, beliefs and truths. How we think as a teacher shows itself in our teaching. We cannot separate our thoughts from our actions. "Human tendency to place significant value on personal views emphasizes the need for educators to develop awareness

of their perspectives and engineer how they can be enlarged to avoid bias.” (1) One way to test our biases is to take the Implicit Bias Test online that was created by Harvard University. Simply becoming aware of our bias is a great first step in figuring out how we can change our teaching.

After we reflect on our bias we hit the history books. How has our country marginalized different groups of people? That question alone has taken me years to learn and I am not even close to an answer yet. I learned a lot by reading Howard Zinn’s book *A People’s History of the United States*. This link will take you to FREE copy of the book. Most of us have learned a white-washed sanitized version of our history. Why else would we celebrate Christopher Columbus who never even stepped foot on North American soil; or believe the Civil War was about states rights? Our schools have indoctrinated us with a false history that we must re-learn if we are going to truly understand how to teach with social justice.

The next step is examining what we are teaching. Are we focusing on the sports and skills that highlight soccer, basketball, hockey, baseball, and lacrosse? How can we implement sports and activities from outside North America and Europe. A great start is checking out this great document created by Seth Martin and Sarah Gietschier-Hartman. This document will give you four activities from countries outside the United States to implement and they also have a link to the Teaching World Games for Understanding Spreadsheet that has over 100 games from all over the world. Each game comes with a quick description, the country of origin and link to resources of that game.

How we teach is even more important than what we teach. “...many of the practices that demonstrate a social justice orientation are also reflective of best practices in teaching. Social justice is not an “add on” for classrooms. This is a both/and proposition. Teachers can both maintain high-quality content instruction and create a classroom with a social justice orientation.”(3) The easiest way to start is by simply asking students about their lives. This opens the door for discussions about what they did over the weekend or at night. They will willingly share about the religion class they went to or the celebration that their family had highlighting their ethnicity. This is also an authentic way to broach subjects with the class. Not only are you bringing in their experiences to the class which gives them shared ownership of the class but you prevent forcing a preconceived agenda.

Another easy way to teach through social justice is to create a classroom community that encourages open and honest dialogue. I use restorative justice practices for students to address the harm that they caused each other. Check out this article written by Emily Riley on how she is implementing these practices in her class. This dialogue helps break down the social hierarchy that exists in schools. Students will share with each other what happened and how they felt during and after the incident. Once this is done they will figure out a way to repair the harm that was done to each other. Most of the time an apology is enough. When this is not the case I step in and figure out what an appropriate way for the harm to be

repaired is.

As a PE teacher I relish the role of the enjoyable class. Our subject naturally lends itself to happiness, pleasure and meaningful experiences because we have our students moving, collaborating and listening to music. Music and movement release dopamine and endorphins which naturally make us experience fun and joy. (4) We do not have the rigorous demands of standardized testing breathing down our necks, which eliminates fun and joy, and I wouldn't have it any other way! However, this does not excuse us from actively teaching issues that affect our students now and in the future. That can only be done when we change our teaching and start addressing how and what we are teaching in PE.

MURRAY O. A Call for K-12 Schools to Invest in Social Justice Education. *Education Digest* [serial online]. January 2011;76(5):60-64. Available from: MasterFILE Elite, Ipswich, MA. Accessed January 17, 2018.

Culp B. The Strategic Application and Assessment of Social Justice in PETE Programs: A Primer. *Physical Educator* [serial online]. Fall 2011 2011;68(3):130-139. Available from: MasterFILE Elite, Ipswich, MA. Accessed January 17, 2018.

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/creating-classrooms-for-social-justice-tabitha-dellangelo>
<http://www.bbc.com/news/health-12135590>

[*Hacking Into Your Happy Chemicals: Dopamine, Serotonin, Endorphins, & Oxytocin*](#)

[*What Makes Up Your Identity?*](#)