Moving Toward a Justice-Driven Curriculum in the Balanced Literacy Classroom

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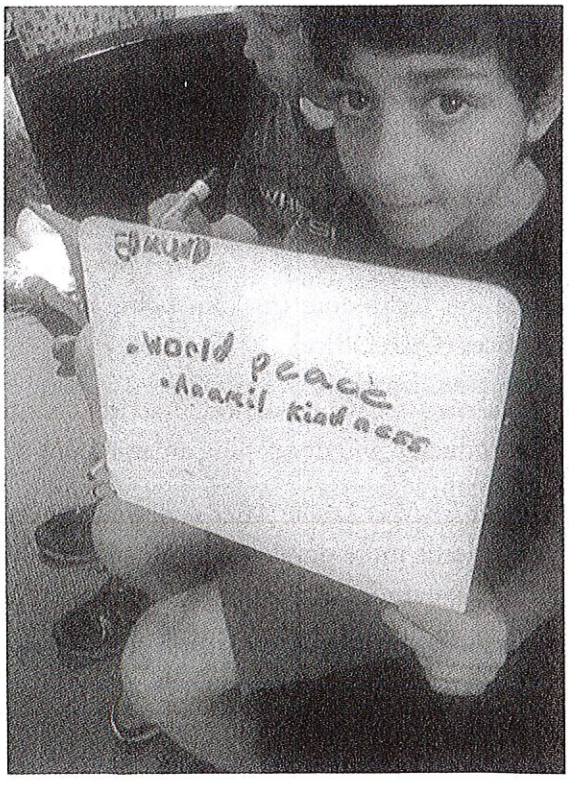
Introduction

Recently, during our university-based Summer Literacy Clinic, we observed a teacher posing the following questions: "How far would you be willing to go to stand up for what you believe in?" and "Would you be willing to go to jail for what you believe?" These were some of the opening questions which led to background discussions that took place when 5th- through 8th-grade students were getting ready for an interactive read-aloud and being introduced to the book *15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March* by Lynda Blackmon Lowery (2016). Hearing these questions posed, we were quite curious and interested in how the students would react as the teacher asked them to write their responses on a white board. As we moved around to get a glimpse and catch the responses, the students were engaged, serious, and appropriate. The responses included a range of topics such as "Human Rights," "Equality," "Animal Kindness," "Freedom," and "World Peace" (see Figure 1).

Next, the students were asked to share their responses with those sitting around them, and this eventually led to whole group discourse. Most impressive were the rigorous conversations surrounding such important topics. Once again, the students were interested and eager to participate in the deep conversations. In a recent publication, Fournier, Irwin, and Rosa-Vaccarelli (2018) discuss the sensitivity around issues of race, gender, and faith in the classroom and propose that educators can use these topics to enhance learning and celebrate diversity.

About five years ago, we made a deliberate decision to focus on or move toward a justice-driven curriculum in our Summer Literacy Clinic. In an effort to move toward the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and instructional shifts, we were most interested in finding ways to add nonfiction and informational texts into the curriculum in a more meaningful manner. This decision highlighted the use of informational texts with justice-driven themes spread throughout the balanced literacy block routine.

Figure 1. Interactive Read-Aloud Response



This was a big change from previous years during which most of the texts used were narrative in scope and less sophisticated in topic density. Transforming to a justice-driven curriculum originally seemed like a daunting task as there was some concern about "What will the parents think?" At first, we did not name it or label it; but as time pushed on, we were braver and more comfortable in identifying it as a justice-driven curriculum. Therefore, the purpose of this article is threefold:

1. To provide a rationale for using informational and complex texts to build on and move toward a justice-driven curriculum.

2. To understand and describe what constitutes *social justice*, including the evolution and meaning behind the dense concept.

3. To offer examples of what this looks like and how to go about setting up a justice-driven curriculum.

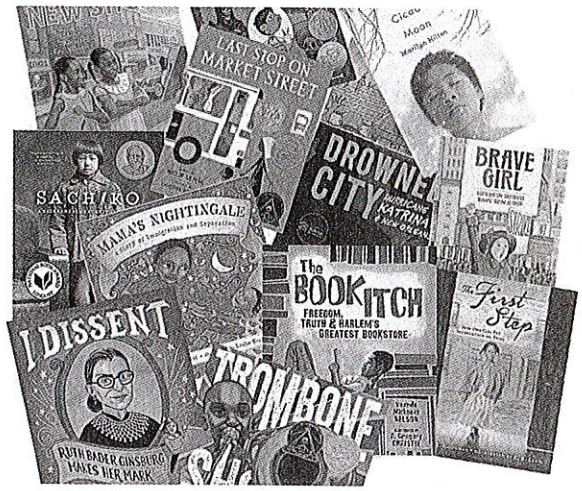
Why Use Informational Texts?

There has been a thoughtful evolution in practice over the last several decades that has led to the changes in the selection of texts used in the classroom from narrative to informational (Bradley & Donovan, 2010; Duke, 2004, 2007). With the onset and development of the CCSS, there has been a clear shift in thinking about all classroom text selections. This shift has involved the use of more informational and complex text with an emphasis on close reading, finding evidence from text, building argument, developing opinion, and more (Shanahan, 2013). What we have observed is that with CCSS, text selection practices for read-alouds, guided reading, classroom libraries, and more have taken a remarkable turn as narratives have been traded in for more informational and complex texts. The instructional shift has demanded that at least 50% of the texts used for classroom instruction be informational and complex (Policastro & McTague, 2015). With this change in practice, teachers have had to rethink their choices, and schools have begun to access these types of books. Schickedanz and Collins (2013) discuss the importance of reading informational narratives to young children. They stress that giving children opportunities to understand the content knowledge that is central to the story is key. Terrell and Ward (2012) discuss informational texts as having a major emphasis on providing information about social sciences, sciences, and art through a variety of texts, including newspapers, magazines, nonfiction, textbooks, and more. The CCSS further defines informational texts more broadly and includes nonfiction resources such as biographies, autobiographies, and books about history, social studies, science, and more.

We began to gather texts that had a clear focus on justice-driven themes and highlighted these as part of the clinic curriculum. We were not sure how very young children would respond to these types of selections and were quite pleased at how children going into Kindergarten had no problem grasping the information. In fact, the children were quite outspoken about the lack of fairness and justice in the texts read. We even heard from parents that their children were coming home and discussing topics of social justice. As Yopp and Yopp (2012) state, "Educators should seize the opportunity to expand not only the quantity but also the breadth of subject matter addressed in those texts. Let us move beyond animal books to more fully include texts on a wide range of topics" (p. 489).

Within all of these genres, there is quite a rich array of books (as represented in Figure 2) that address social and contemporary issues to which students need to be exposed via many different formats. More specifically, Agarwal-Rangnath (2013) discusses how to build a curriculum in which "students connect the stories of struggle and resistance to contemporary social justice issues and make connections between historical events and present day circumstances" (p. 3).

Figure 2. A Selection of Justice-Driven Books



The Need for Moving Forward with a Justice-Driven Curriculum

In the summer of 2016, we introduced the book *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* by Edwidge Danticat (2015). This book presents information about a family experiencing separation through immigration and is a compelling story of courage and an example of how one family endured the hardship of imprisonment with a happy and enduring ending. Two years ago, little did we realize that we would be where we are today with immense issues of immigration and separation facing us daily. Two years ago, the teachers collaborated and agreed that this informational text would require special planning to implement it and that they needed to make sure that students were introduced to the topics gradually. Indeed, the need for moving forward with a justice-driven curriculum is both essential and critical. Flash forward to today, during the 2018 Summer Literacy Clinic, students arrived and asked many questions about immigration and the children being separated from their parents. They voiced concerns of it not being fair for this to happen. Many said they were "sad" that this was happening to families. What was different from 2016 is that the children brought the topic up and wanted to discuss it. This topic has been student-driven and supported within the curriculum by the teachers. When children can hear information that is told in a story format, it helps them to understand and make sense of their world. Koss and Williams (2018) discuss how "teachers need to find ways to create classroom climates that encourage productive dialogue on politically and emotionally charged topics" (p. 3). Hardly a day goes by without the media sending out a flurry of information regarding the civil unrest of current events. Minor (2018) discusses that in many of our classrooms and schools "institutional silence in the face of discrimination against transgender people, disabled people, people of color, women and others has become the uneasy norm" (p. 29).

The need to move toward a justice-driven curriculum does not come without challenges. Massey (2018) discusses the need for professional development and supporting and assisting teachers "with conversations and reflections related to curriculum, pedagogy, and social action" (p. 52). The social action component is an important and needed aspect moving toward a justice-driven curriculum. The boxed text is from a co-teaching reflection after the students read an article titled "Social Media Generates More than $15 Million to Aid Separated Immigrant Families" (2018). Following the reading lesson, the students developed plans for setting up fundraisers to take action on a justice-driven topic.

The Meaning and Evolution of Social Justice

As we read the signs of our times, we realize that we each have a role to play, and we must be consistent in shaping, defining, and promoting a society based on the common good. We are to be engaged in the lives of real people, analyze trends, and perhaps act as an influence formulating public opinion. Where would be a better place to sow these seeds but into the ground of the young who will carry them forward? To effectively institute a justice-driven curriculum,

At the Summer Literacy Clinic, a classroom of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders read an informational text from *USA Today* adapted by *Newsela*. This text was about recent fundraising to unite parents and children who were separated when crossing the border. The students read the text silently or with partners and then the class held a discussion about the topic. Some students made connections to previous content discussed. For example, one said, "This is similar to the Holocaust text we read. Why are they doing this? Didn't they see how wrong it was during the Holocaust?" Some students were confused about the separation of families. They realized the need for the fundraiser. They stated things like "I learned more about separation and illegal immigration. Why do they still separate the people?," "People are crossing the borders to get a better, new life in America. They are risking their lives and families should not be separated," "Families were getting separated when crossing the border illegally. The separation makes me feel badly for the families," and "Aren't we all immigrants? All of us have come from different countries." Students also expressed the other side of the issue with comments like "Our borders should be stronger because too many people are entering illegally" and "People should not cross the borders; they need to realize they could be separated." This discussion led to questions about the immigration process and the role of a passport. Students began making connections about immigrants in their families and what being a citizen of a country means.

–Ashley Edwards and Lizzy Murray (co-teachers, 2018 Summer Literacy Clinic)

educators need to have deep knowledge of the meaning and history of social justice and its significance in education. The *Business Dictionary Online* defines *social justice* as "The fair and proper administration of laws conforming to the natural law that all persons, irrespective of ethnic origin, gender, possessions, race, religion, etc., are to be treated equally and without prejudice" ("Social Justice," 2018). Additionally, Granata (2014) discusses social justice from the point of view that all people deserve to enjoy the same economic, political, and social rights, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, gender, or other characteristics. She further believes that preparing young people for the 21st century includes teaching social justice in the classroom.

In regards to social justice being used in education, Paulo Freire (1998), in his article "First Letter: Reading the World/Reading the Word," addressed social justice and reading by stating, "'reading of the world' should be understood as the 'reading' that precedes the reading of the word and that, equally concerned with the comprehension of objects, takes place in the domain of day to day life" (p. 19). Furthermore, it is imperative that teachers give students strategies to process social justice topics. Freire says, "Just as bricklayers require a collection of tools and instruments, without which they cannot build a wall, student-readers also require fundamental instruments, without which they cannot read or write effectively" (p. 22). For example, one tool that teachers must hand students is the skill to self-question the issues pertaining to social justice. As Freire states, teachers and students must be "continually ready to rethink what has been thought and to revise their positions" (p. 17).

The concept of social justice has been around for over a century. The idea first evolved from liberal social philosophers in the late 19th century. Interestingly, the first book published on the topic was titled *Social Justice* and was written in 1900 by a political science professor at Johns Hopkins University named Westel Willoughby (Miller, 1999, p. 3). Willoughby (1900) states, "The general duty of all, in the pursuit of their

own words, to recognize others as individuals who are striving for, and have a right to strive for, the realization of their own ends. In other words, there is the general ethical mandate to be a person, and to respect others as persons; to treat others as ends, never as mere means to one's own ends" (p. 24).

The arrival of the Industrial Revolution brought with it issues of landownership, industry ownership, and private wealth. These changing economic times brought with it issues regarding the distribution of social resources (Miller, 1999, p. 3). Progressive social movements of the 19th and 20th centuries brought a belief that people do not have to wait for change but can be catalysts for change themselves. Movements during this era dealt with issues and instituted change in the areas of racial equality, unionization, child labor laws, civil rights, and urbanization (Cook & Halpin, 2014, p. 1).

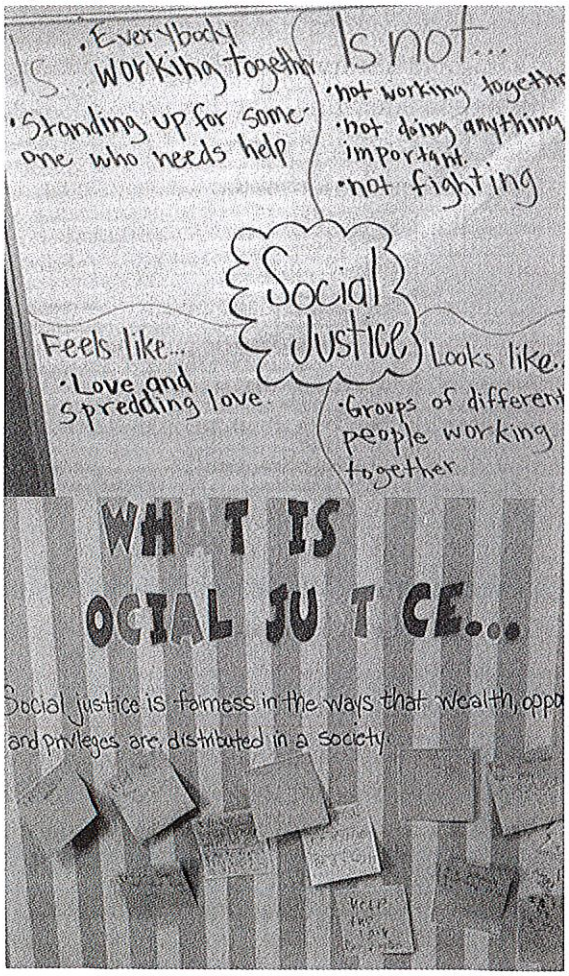
The 21st century has presented a digital information age that allows for information to be distributed quickly. The digital age and the growth of social media have provided a means for news and current events to spread quickly; hence, issues of social justice are prevalent topics of discussion in the everyday world. Good or bad, this technology brings with it opportunities for educators to easily present information on current issues to their students to encourage thinking and discussion. As a consequence of our beliefs, we strongly believe there ought to be more awareness of conscience and the moral decisions that drive our motives. We stand ever mindful of real people who face hardships in economic conditions and support the benefits of education in understanding as we teach and learn.

Starting a Justice-Driven Curriculum

When we began this initiative, the teachers started by introducing the ideas of social justice to the students. We were pleased that children in pre-Kindergarten (PK) to 8th grade were able to grasp the concept. In fact, the PK and Kindergarten students had no difficulty in beginning to understand the notions. The teacher began with the following questions: "What is social justice?," "What is it not?," "What does it feel like?," and "What does it look like?" As a class, they had discussions which moved into classroom discourse to answer the questions (see Figure 3, top).

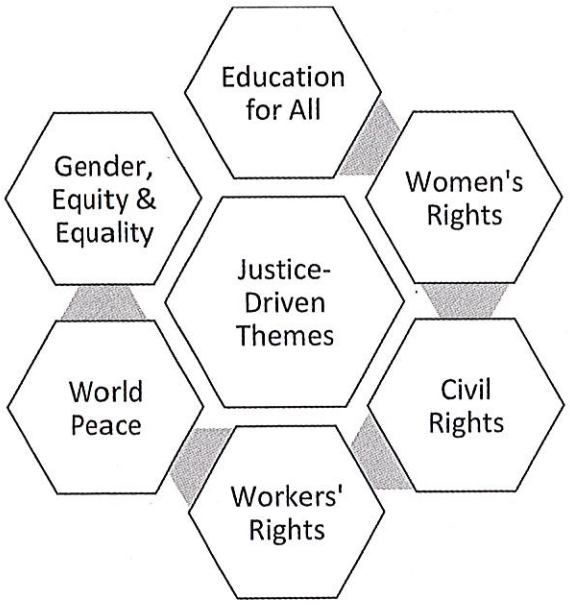
Another teacher began by posting the definition of social justice and having the children respond to it with their own ideas on a sticky note (see Figure 3, bottom). While these introductions were happening, the interactive read-aloud selections focused in on issues of social justice, and these were spread throughout the literacy block routine. As the themes surrounding social justice continued, students added to their knowledge base of what social justice entails by finding evidence from the

Figure 3. What Is Social Justice?



text selections. One way to introduce topics of social justice is to "weave social justice concepts and processes into your existing curriculum" (Hernandez, 2016, p. 21). Introducing social justice concepts through literature is a subtle way to teach and empower students to understand peace, equity, and other important global issues (Figure 4). What makes these informational books special is that they help children to understand important content knowledge that might not otherwise be presented (Policastro, 2017). In Table 1, it can be seen how by beginning with the topic of women's rights, for example, students can move throughout the entire balanced literacy block, selecting different texts for each of the tenets of balanced literacy.

Figure 4. Justice-Driven Themes



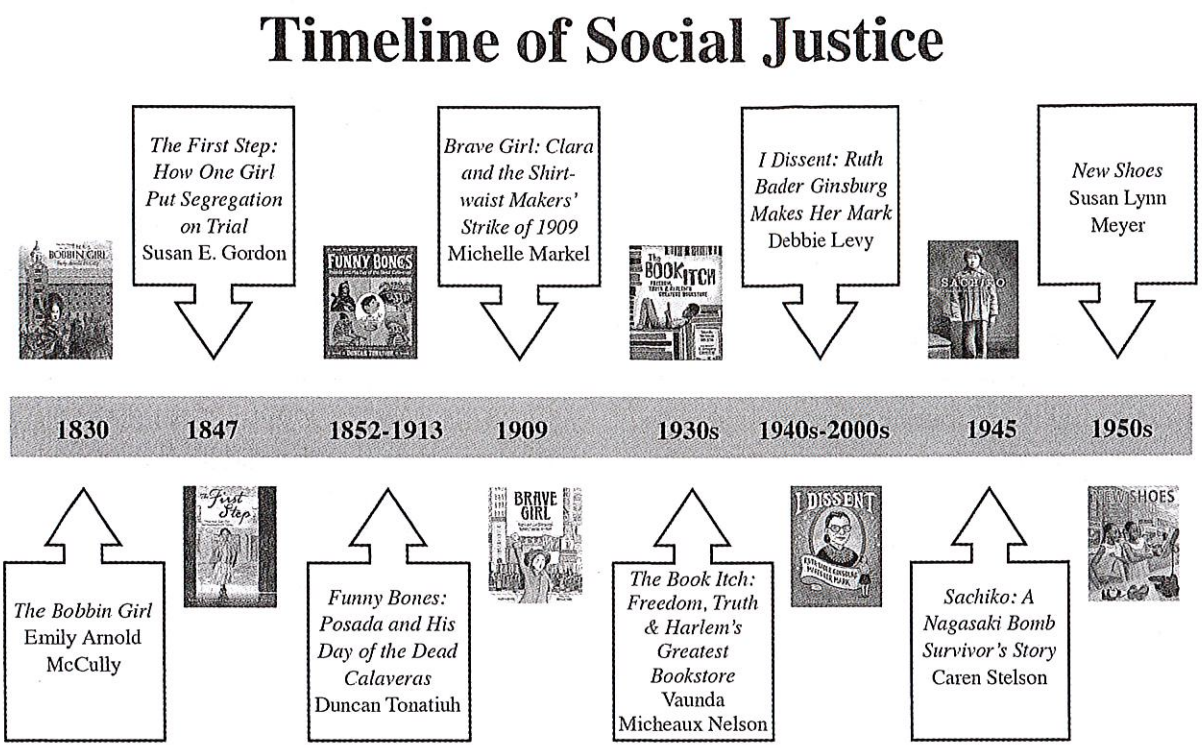
Imagine a Timeline of Social Justice

Just imagine a classroom that features a timeline of sorts that moves around the entire literate environment. Within the timeline is featured several hundred years of justice-driven topics. The timeline can begin at any point with any book. More specifically, the books can be read in any order but could also follow the historical timeline as well. For example, in one classroom, the students began with *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* by Michelle Markel (2013), which falls in the middle of the timeline. From there, they read *The Bobbin Girl* by Emily Arnold McCully (1996), which takes place in the late 1800s. They continued to fill in the timeline with various sorts of justice-driven topics up to the late 1950s (Figure 5). Within each of these selections, the time period was studied in depth by looking at many areas such as the art, music, politics, and current events of the time periods. Geographic locations and settings were studied as well. Consequently, the timeline provides historical, geographical, and political information for each text featured. Another asset of the timeline is that the students can see a visual accomplishment of the texts they have covered over a period of time. The timeline can also be an interactive tool to which the students can add information. In one classroom, the students added postcard notes about the books as the timeline grew. This gave students a sense of ownership as they contributed to it. Other classrooms had the students draw the book covers as they created the timeline.

Table 1. The Justice-Driven Theme of Women's Rights Across the Balanced Literacy Routine

Balanced Literacy Routine	Informational Texts
Interactive read-aloud	*Fancy Party Gowns* by Deborah Blumenthal (2017)
Guided reading	*Newsela:* The Women's Rights Movement
Language & literacy centers	Use above *Newsela* texts. Create a center around finding evidence from these texts to develop an argument on women's rights.
Independent reading & writing	Read about and research Elizabeth Blackwell. Begin with *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?* by Tanya L. Stone (2013).

Figure 5. Timeline of Social Justice



It's Not All Serious Texts

Moving toward a justice-driven curriculum does not mean that the entire curriculum needs to focus on serious issues of social justice. Rather, we believe that a balanced literacy classroom should be fun, joyful, and allow children to read and be in contact with a variety of genres and texts. Consequently, we have developed some lessons for implementation that move from the "not-so-serious text" to "serious text." We believe that this forms a nice balance for students to gradually move toward a justice-driven curriculum without giving up other texts. One example would be starting with an interactive read-aloud with the book *New Shoes, Red Shoes* by Susan Rollings (2000), which is a fun and whimsical book about all kinds of new shoes. Guided reading can continue with informational texts about shoes, students can create/design shoes at a center, and the students can research the history of shoes as part of their independent reading and writing. This can then move to a more serious theme on civil rights as the students listen to the book *New Shoes* by Susan Lynn Meyer (2016), which covers discrimination toward African Americans buying shoes during the 1950s. Each of the not so serious texts in Table 2 are paired with a more serious justice-driven text.

Begin at the End of the Book

As you prepare for your balanced literacy routine using justice-driven informational texts, be sure to check out the back of the book (not just the book jacket). Informational texts have a wealth of information and sources that can include an author's note, which is full of important information on how the author gathered and collected data and information to write the book. Often there is a selected bibliography as well. Primary sources and websites are sometimes also included. This background knowledge and information on the topic will help you build the necessary prior knowledge to get

Table 2. Moving from Not So Serious to Serious Texts

Not So Serious Texts	Serious Informational Texts
The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant (1985)	*Ruth and the Green Book* by Calvin Ramsey (2010)
Brave Irene by William Steig (1986)	*Brave Girl: Clara and The Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* by Michelle Markel (2013)
The Magic Ball of Wool by Susan Isern (2013)	*The Bobbin Girl* by Emily Arnold McCully (1996)
New Shoes, Red Shoes by Susan Rollings (2000)	*New Shoes* by Susan L. Meyer (2016)

the children ready to listen to/read the book. We often tell teachers, "Begin at the end of the book." Too often, the book will be read, and the information in the back will be missed. This information also serves as a great starting point for teachers to become informed on the topic as well. With the resources provided, teachers can learn with their students about important issues surrounding unfairness, oppression, abuse, and more. These resources will provide important information about the causes for which people have decided to take action.

You will want to teach and model this skill of looking at the end of the book to the students. This will be vital for independent reading and writing time when students will be checking out these books in your classroom library. Perhaps you can develop a lesson that centers on just looking at the back of the book for very important information. This could be a close reading activity as well.

Conclusion

Moving toward a justice-driven curriculum in the balanced literacy classroom and school does not need to be a daunting task. Rather, we like to think that teachers can start with small steps and gradually move forward. A good place to start is with some justice-driven informational books that tell stories of struggle, courage, fighting for freedom, civil rights, and more. Begin with interactive read-alouds and move the classroom discussions and lessons into the balanced literacy block routine—that is, follow-up the read-aloud theme with text and discussion within guided reading lessons. Have children do independent reading and writing on the topic or theme and, of course, build centers around these important debates. Most of all, have fun, and make your learning community a joyful environment where all perspectives and opinions are respected and discussed through civil classroom discourse. Make a conscious commitment to help your students contribute to a thriving and just sustainable world.

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