

Towards a More Hopeful and Just Future

Looking at social justice through a critical theory lens

Compiled by Marianna Cavezza and Katrina Diener

Land Acknowledgement

We want to begin by acknowledging that this booklet was created on the traditional and unceded territory of the Coast Salish, Kwikwetlem, sə́lilwətaʔt̚ təməxʷ (Tsleil-Waututh), S'ólh Téméxw (Stó:lō), Qayqayt, Stz'uminus, and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam).

We recognize that we are here as uninvited guests and express our gratitude for the opportunity to live and learn on this land moving forward in the spirit of Truth and Reconciliation.

With Gratitude

We would like to thank Geeta, Ilam, Jenny, Kari, Lan, Lina, Sun, Susan, Wendy and Zoe for their active engagement in co-constructing this inquiry.

We would also like to thank Dr. Annabella Cant for her support and guidance along this journey.



Photo credit: Marianna

Social Justice: A Work in Process

Our project unfolds as we see injustices perpetuating around us and recognize the urgent need for change. While education is often regarded as neutral, Eurocentric practices have continually dominated (Battiste, 2013; Freire, 2005; Souto-Manning et al., 2018). As early childhood educators we desire to reimagine early childhood places as sites for activism. In an effort to think more deeply about how this might look, we choose to engage with Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) book, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, with a group of eight other women. Meeting once a week for eight consecutive weeks over Zoom, we co-construct our understanding of social justice as we engage with ideas from the book and our lives.

As we begin this inquiry, we recognize the immense scope of this subject and feel our own inadequacies. Social justice. Equity. These are big issues with many complex layers and the weight of these layers seems to be palpable as the time for our first meeting nears. Yet, with these concerns, we also recognize the significance of these issues and are thankful to be able to engage together in thinking more deeply with Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) timely book.

We come together as a newly-formulated group, not all familiar with one another and coming from different life experiences and stages of life; the common link being that most of us are connected to the field of early childhood. In order to create some common ground we begin by reading the first two chapters of *Is Everyone Really Equal?* (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). This helps us gain a foundation and a familiarity with the key concepts of social justice. The questions that guide us initially are: what does it look like to promote equity in our relationships with those who are different?, how can we "live well together"? (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 12), and how can we be advocates for change?

Through the process of meeting weekly and thinking deeply with these issues of social justice we notice how we are becoming more attuned to these issues playing out. It is obvious that everyone is engaging with a critical mindset, not taking for granted what we have been taught or culturalized to see. Generative conversations develop as we see several key themes emerging: Uncovering What is Hidden and Missing, Becoming Aware, Grappling with Tensions, The Power of Language, The Complexity of Culture, The Roles of Women, Finding Hope, and Putting Our Learning into Action.

One of the first problems we notice as we engage with these issues of social injustice is that much is hidden or missing. For example, children's voices are missing and there are gaps in what we have learned about history. We also see that many issues of social justice are hidden under the surface, making this work more complex and needing a more critical engagement.

This leads us to consider our awareness, what we are aware of and where we have gaps. We consider deeply where we are coming from and what perspectives inform our ways of thinking and acting. We also look around us to become more aware of what is happening in our current contexts.

In the midst of doing this work, we meet many tensions. The complexities of this work reveal to us that there is no easy answer. While we want to try to "fix" the problems, as we dig in deeper we realize the importance of dwelling with the tension and not skipping out on the effort that is required to do this work.

Another important aspect that we encounter is the power of language. As we get into this book we see that we have some confusion around what the terms mean and we work together to gain clarity. We also recognize the importance of how we use language. This comes up particularly in how we speak with children and the impact that our words can have. We are reminded that emphasizing the positive rather than the negative is really important.

The consideration of culture also plays a big part in our conversations as we come from different cultures and approach these issues in different ways. We see that culture has many aspects and cannot be easily understood. Yet, it also plays a big part in social justice issues and so we work to know more.

We also spend much time talking about social justice issues pertaining to women. This comes as no surprise since our group is composed of all women. Facing the social injustice that women endure is a heavy topic, yet as we continue to share our ideas we also find hope.

Hope is another key theme throughout our inquiry. While there is much that discourages us, we also find reasons to be hopeful as we see change happening. Specifically, we find hope as we see how children are being proactive and changes are happening in the educational system.

Throughout this project we are also aware of the importance of putting into action what we are learning. While we struggle with confrontation and facing our biases, we also have the desire to act and realize how crucial this is. We have also realized that we must be the drivers of the change we want to see. So we press on with the conviction that we can move towards a more hopeful and just future.

Even though we discuss each of these themes individually in this booklet, throughout our inquiry we saw them coming and going, overlapping, intersecting and revealing many new connections for us. Over this time together, we have all enriched our understanding of the deeply rooted causes of inequity. There was not a straight line from beginning to end to neatly mark our learning, but much like roots of a tree it went in many directions. Snapshots of this learning are presented in the following booklet. We invite you to think deeply with us as we share some markings of this journey.

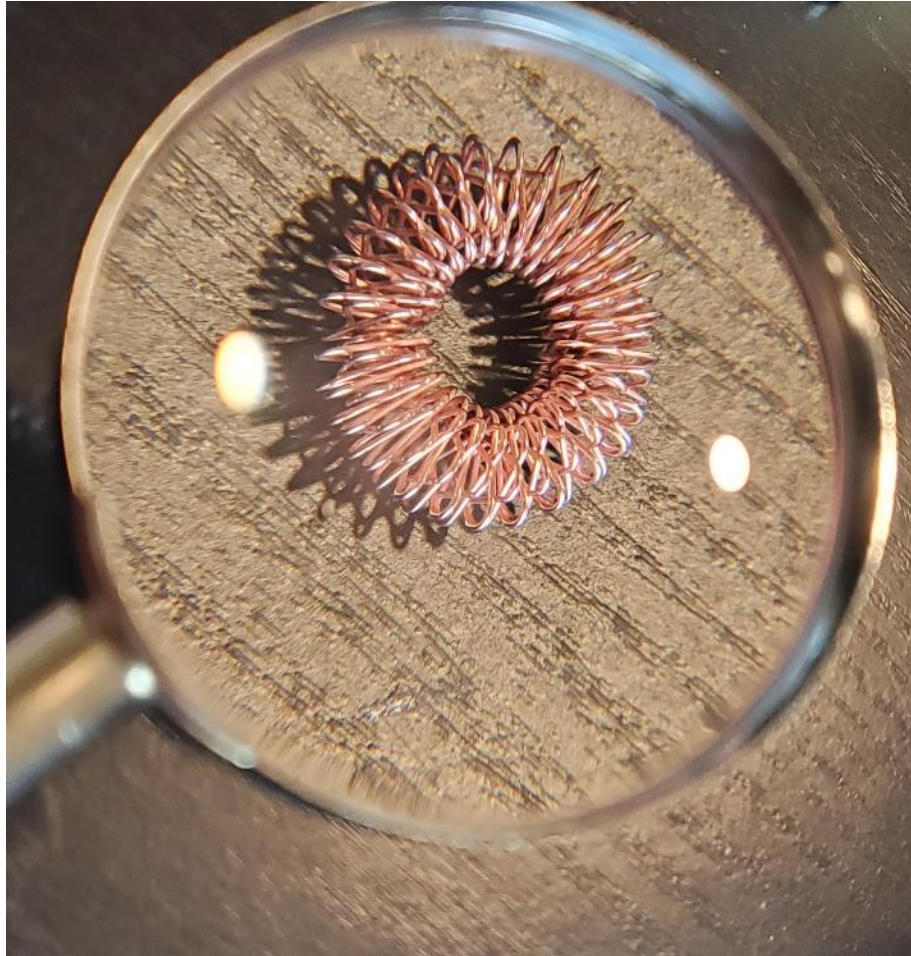


Photo credit: Marianna

We begin this journey by adopting a critical theory lens, as described by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), to approach issues of social injustice. These issues include inequities such as racism, sexism, and ableism. Engaging with critical theory involves a deeper consideration of issues in their context (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The context of any given issue is especially important as critical theory also considers knowledge to be socially constructed rather than objective (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The idea that knowledge is socially constructed affirms that knowledge is not an object to be obtained, but rather created in relationship with others (Freire, 2005; Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013).

Uncovering What is Hidden and Missing

“Because we are socialized to think of ourselves as individuals, especially in our dominant groups, it is often difficult to understand why it is useful to think about people in terms of their social groups. However, when we think in terms of groups, we can begin to see patterns of structural injustice, recognize that key perspectives are missing, and know to pursue those missing perspectives” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 201).

Throughout our journey we discover that there are many hidden and missing aspects, one of which are children's voices. As early childhood educators the loss of children's voices in education concerns us. Education is not a neutral endeavour, but a political one, and thus if educators do not act in ways that come against social injustice they will play a part in continuing the cycle of inequity (Amos, 2011; Bissonnette, 2016; Price-Dennis & Souto-Manning, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014, 2017; Solic & Riley, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2011, 2017; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019).

Lina speaks to how this can play out in early childhood settings with how we view children and the management of their misbehaviour. For example, Lina shares that she is always mystified how educators seem to only understand the physical connotations of the word "capable" in reference to children. She explains that it is problematic to have a preset concept of capable in our minds as often this denotes merely physical tasks and checklists that children can perform and limits our thinking.

In her role as a Supported Childcare Consultant, she has the opportunity to visit many different programs and notes that she has seen educators preoccupied with control and driven by fear in the classroom. Yet she expresses that rather than trying to manage misbehaviour, there is a need to address the why behind it. In fact, children are communicating through their misbehaviour and therefore as educators we need to be attentive to what the children are communicating to us rather than quickly deeming them as problems. This speaks to the need for a radical shift in education away from the traditional focus on categorizing and classifying, largely dominated by Eurocentric practices with minoritized children being viewed as problems to be fixed (Battiste, 2013; Freire, 2005; Souto-Manning et al., 2018).

Lina problematizes this further and says when we are so worried about how the classroom appears to other adults, we miss so much. **“Where are these children’s voices?”** She questions why we have these beautiful spaces? Why do they have to be so neat? Who are they beautiful for? Instead she urges that our energy and focus can be used to create spaces that invite opportunities for children. She envisions these spaces as more democratic and reciprocal:

“Where children can really be children, where they can really express themselves, where they can really show what they are *capable* of doing”

In fact, in order for children’s voices to be heard, education requires an entire restructuring away from a traditional hierarchical structure to one that is more symmetrical, where educators are not placed above children, but rather in an equal relationship with them (Freire, 2005; Skarpenes & Saeverot, 2018). Educators can work toward creating a more socially relevant curriculum by focussing on the power of connection and relationships (Kuby, 2012) and the transformative impact these changes can ultimately have (Freire, 2005; Moss, 2019).

Another aspect of inviting children’s voices into the classroom is fostering a sense of belonging as all children need to be represented (Souto-Manning et al., 2018). Representation means that their identity is reflected in the classroom. In fact, while children need to be seen in stories, in art, in toys, and essentially in all aspects of their world, minoritized children are still lacking representation. The importance of educators questioning the hidden curriculum and what stories are held in their classroom and materials should become part of an intentional repertoire of practice (Souto-Manning et al., 2018). Along with this intentionality comes a commitment to foster deeper thinking into the curriculum so that all children have opportunities to engage in cultural and social issues and begin to understand issues of fairness as well as justice (Bennet et al., 2017; Dyer, 2020; Kelly-Ware, 2019).

Having a commitment to foster deeper thinking into the curriculum also extends to the set up of the classroom environment.

Along these lines, Jenny shares that she wonders why in keeping with a more Reggio philosophy, some early learning centres are removing their kitchen play. She says this is a place where children share culture especially with food and also a place where diversity can be represented.

Ilam adds that there seems to be too much emphasis in ECE on “deep meaning and purpose,” as defined by the educator’s point of view. She has noticed that new children will often go to the house corner as they feel familiar and comfortable there.

We are wondering what is driving the ECE field in the pursuit of “deep meaning and purpose”? Perhaps there is a great concern to be regarded as professionals that is influencing our decision making. Unfortunately, if this is our focus children’s voices will be silenced.



This compels us to engage in a “pedagogy of listening” (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 97), so as to hear and respond to children’s ways of thinking in an attentive and reflective way. Rather than following recent trends, we feel it is important to act with pedagogical intention so that we do not unilaterally make decisions for the wrong reasons.

Photo credit: Marianna

In an effort to be inclusive of children's voices, Lina offers a suggestion to reach out to the children in our own lives, asking them to represent their own ideas of social justice in a medium of their choice. We take up her suggestion and throughout this booklet have intentionally included the voice of several children as they consider what is fair and what is not fair.



Image credit: Ema

Above is an example brought to us by Lina's daughter Ema, 10. She shows us the above drawing and comments that "Everybody should be accepted for who they are."

Another hidden area is introduced to us by activist Leroy Moore (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Intrigued by his work, we find an audio file created by Moore entitled, “Black Disabled History 101” (Moore, 2020, February 5) to share with the group. Afterwards many of us recognize how much of what he shares is unknown to us. It reminds us how many missing voices there are and how subjective history is by portraying certain voices over others. This leaves us to wonder about those voices we do not hear.

Ilam connects this lack of representation to intersectionality. She comments that there are “layers of invisibility” and that in this case the intersectionality of race and disability serve to further marginalize.

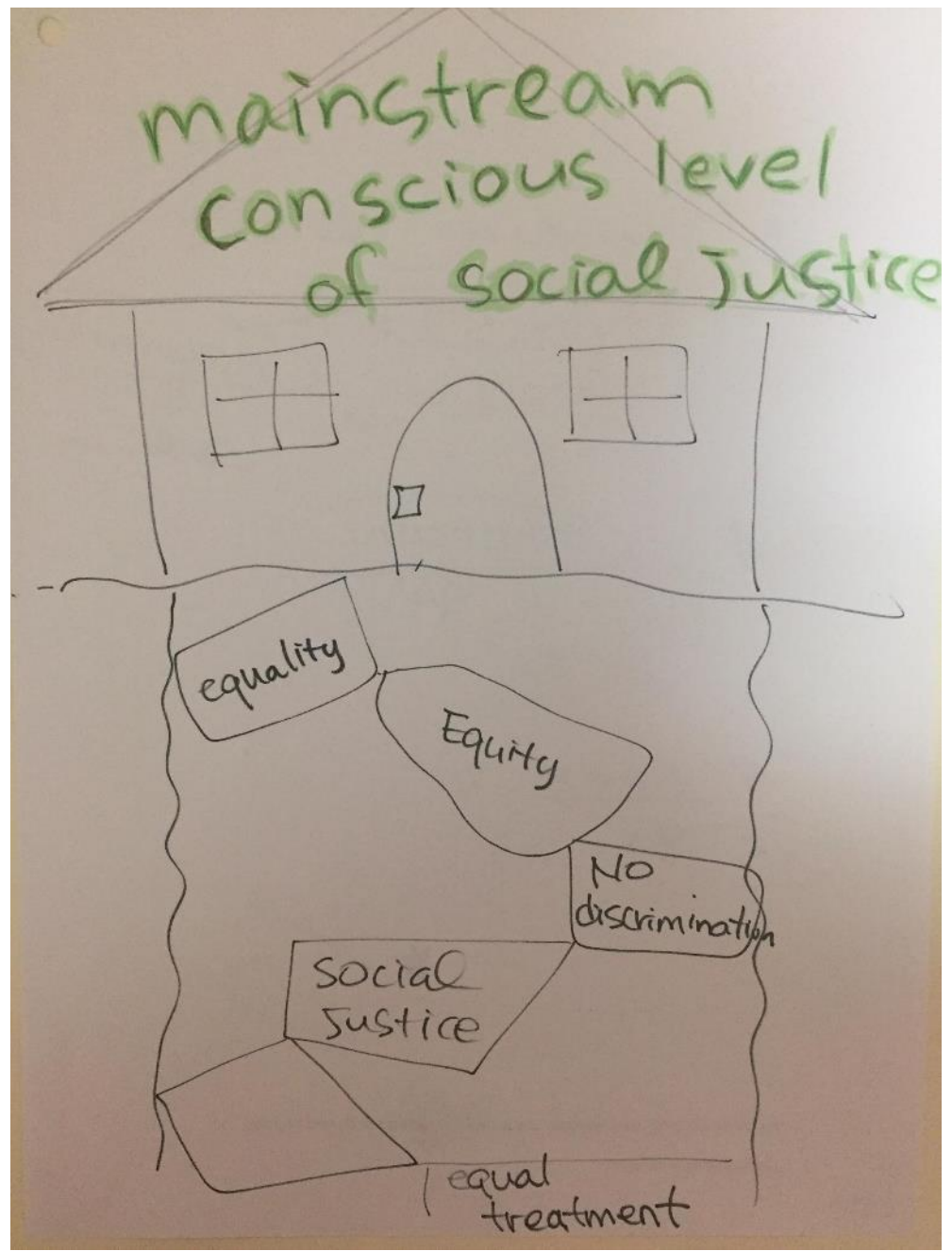


On a more positive note, Zoe shares that on TikTok she has seen several people who are working to share these histories. This is a significant point because we recognize that although these invisibilities exist there are currently many more platforms available on social media to address them.

([leroy-moore], n.d.)

This leads us to think about the legacy we have as educators in being inclusive of all the voices and ensuring they are shared so future generations are more aware than we are.

As we strive to uncover what is hidden we discover that appearances can be deceptive. At first glance, what we perceive on the surface can be misleading. For example, Sun shares with us a drawing that she has labeled “mainstream conscious level of social justice.” At first Sun just shows us the top part of the picture, which is a house. As Sun explains, the house looks like a solid structure. However, as she shows us the bottom part we can see that this house does not have a solid foundation. The bottom part of the picture shows that the building blocks of “equality,” “equity,” “no discrimination,” “social justice,” and “equal treatment” are not connected and unstable, illustrating the need for us to look below the surface as we critically engage with issues of social justice. Sun’s perception connects to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) when they explain that there is a dominant discourse “that society overall is fair, and that all we need to overcome injustice is to be nice and treat everyone the same” (p. 2). This is part of what complicates the work of social justice, pushing us to take a more critical stance in order to uncover inequities.



Jenny brings up another example of how appearances do not tell the whole story. In her local context, parents all want to bring their children to the “new, shiny school” over the local community school. We wonder, why do we connect the idea of a new school to a better school? As Jenny points out these images are deceiving as the local community school is in fact full of heart and a sense of belonging. She notes the long standing dedication of the principal and other staff and we can see how it is really the individual people that make a difference not the image of how the school looks.

The problem with making assumptions based on appearances is brought up again by Lina’s eldest daughter, Eliana, 15. She created the picture on the following page, representing a girl from a wealthier background who is unhappy, beside a boy with a lower socioeconomic status who is happy. She goes on to explain that, “You can have a lot of money and you don’t necessarily know you are going to be happy. If you have people you love and you have a place where you belong, you can be happy regardless of your income.”

These examples show us how much more important a sense of belonging is to one’s happiness rather than what is just a facade.



Image credit: Eliana

Becoming Aware

“Awareness of ourselves as socialized members of a number of intersecting groups within a particular culture in a particular time and place (social location or positionality) will increase our critical social justice literacy. We need to see the general patterns of our socialization and be aware of ourselves in shifting contexts. In other words, we need to step back and become aware of ourselves shifting gears and examine the assumptions underlying these shifts and the behaviors they set in motion” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 57).

The more we gather together in this book study, the more we see our own awareness growing.

For example, with respect to sexism, Lan mentions, “It’s so common that we forget about it, we actually just accepted that is how it is.” This hits us to the core, leaving us to wonder how much we are aware of what is actually happening, and how much we just accept because “that is how it is.”

Later on, Jenny adds that “as a White person you can get by without learning about so much of this” and there is a need to work at being aware. This challenges us to continually seek out awareness and not allow our past blindness to stand in our way because as Gloria Anzaldúa (as cited in Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) says, “Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.”

With awareness we also see ourselves becoming more attuned to issues of social justice. This brings about further connections to our personal lives.

One such example is brought to our attention by Jenny. As she shares the land she’s currently joining from, we realize our oversight, failing to acknowledge the land we are on. Another example comes from Zoe, who in her role facilitating a group time, worries about cultural appropriation. Wendy sees the impact her current work with Indigenous peoples has on her awareness and positionality as she is more attuned to news articles that address the disparities these peoples face. Some others express their own insecurities with respect to communicating with these intense issues.

We recognize the importance of vocalizing our social justice learning to help us make sense of the world around us. As we seek to lead this group in discussion, bringing chapters and quotes as provocations, we see such thoughtful engagement and reflection from our participants. It is hard to say what exactly provokes their responses, but we continue to co-construct our learning and understanding as we engage in our own collective and individual journeys.

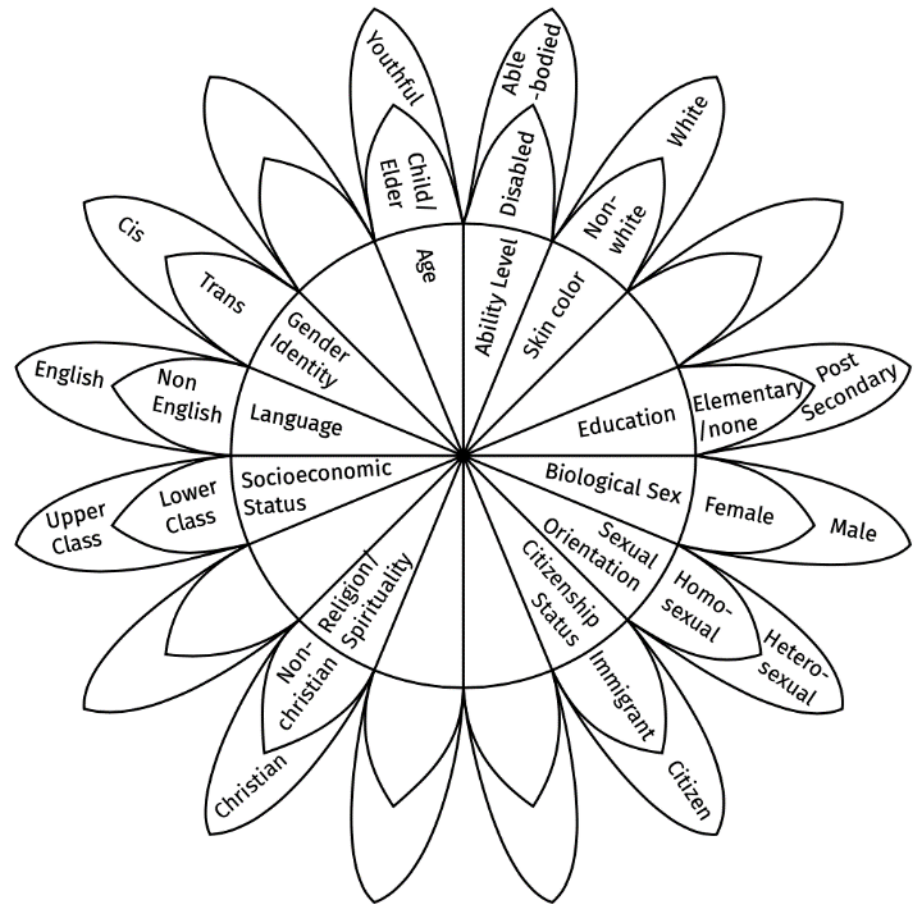
Jenny vocalizes part of her own journey of self-awareness below:

“This journey of self discovery and reflection, of becoming aware of my positionality and privilege, began long ago. Nurturing an ongoing understanding of critical social justice issues came to the forefront of my mind in September when I registered for the Working with Children in Inclusive Group Settings course at Capilano. Katrina and Marianna’s Grad Seminar became an extension of the learning from that course. The book club they created became a place of deeper learning; a safe place to relook at and discuss the ideas in Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo’s book *Is Everyone Really Equal?* I needed this place. I needed somewhere I could further explore these complex ideas. The book club gave me the opportunity to listen openly to other’s stories with them. This is unique to other opportunities for listening on youtube or even a more formal storytelling. The book club also gave an opportunity to respond with empathy, to practice proper vocabulary, and to be actively aware more of the person I am and the person I want to be in our society.”

Jenny's reflection speaks to the importance of being more self-aware and one key part of this is our positionality. Positionality includes the position one holds in society based on various identification points such as race, gender, class, and the like (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). This is significant because one's positionality affects how one views and interacts with the world (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Being aware of our privilege is another important part of self-awareness. In society, certain groups have more privilege due to their position, making it easier for them to navigate life (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

Realizing that being aware of our positionality and privilege is an important part of the work of social justice (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), we invite the participants to think more deeply about these aspects by engaging with what is called a "Power Flower" (Facilitator's Toolbox: Power Flower, n.d.). This flower includes several categories that one might belong to, with positions of power on the outside petals.



(Facilitator's Toolbox: Power Flower, n.d.)

One of the first comments noted about this flower is its limitations. For example, it seems to be missing several categories, such as middle class, middle age, family status, and the like. Furthermore, as Ilam points out, these categories are divided into binaries, while people do not fit into such nice, neat little boxes.

Thus, due to the limitations found with the flower, a couple of our participants choose to express their positionality in other ways. Lina, being inspired by the frames that Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) bring up in chapter three, chooses to express her positionality with a set of glasses.

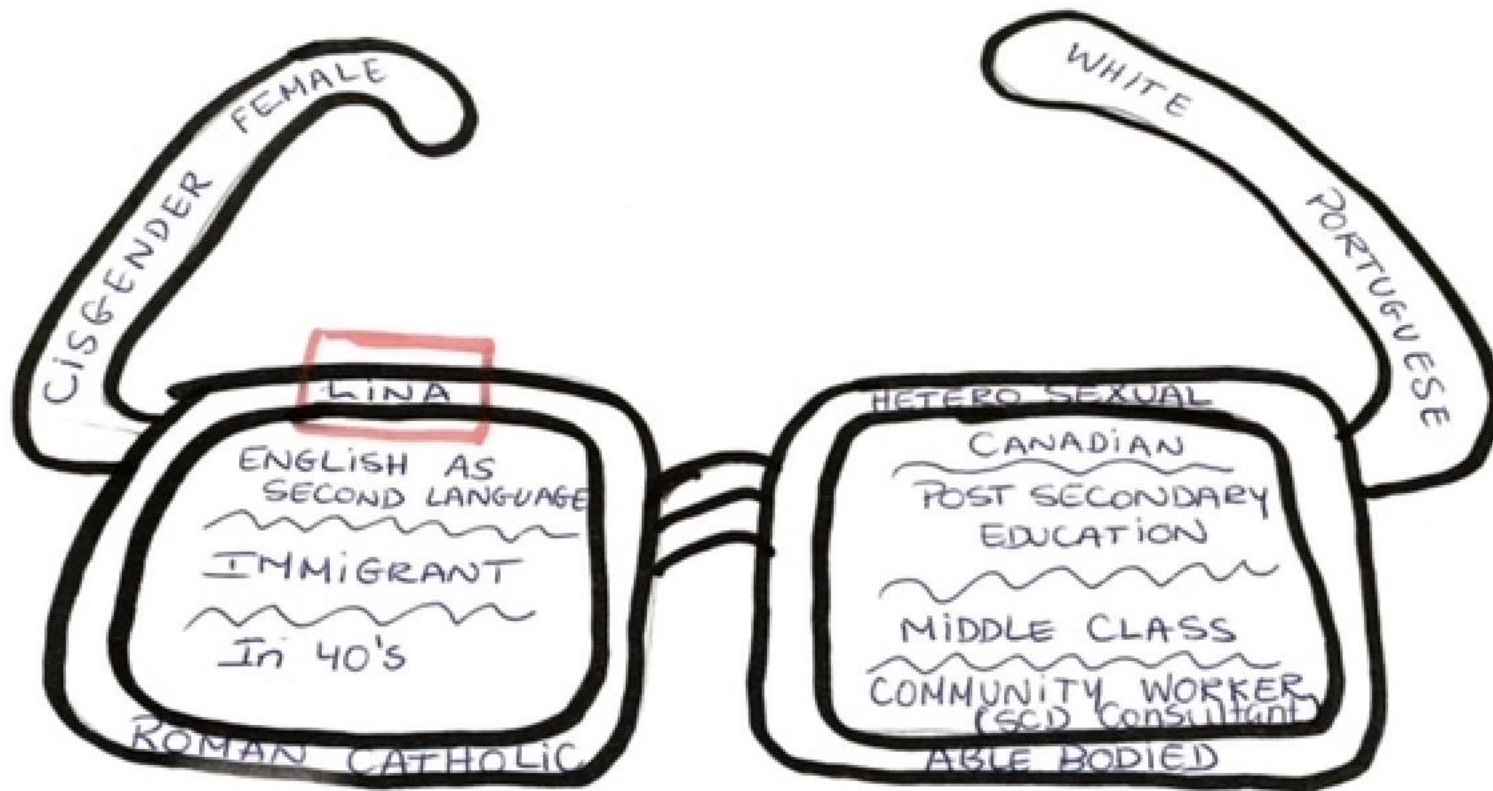


Image credit: Lina

Sun, on the other hand, uses the image of a tree to convey how she sees her positionality. The bottom of her tree also includes the word “human” written into the roots and trunk to express that “we’re all humans...then we grow up” and branch out in various ways. Wendy echoes this common kinship as she expresses how much her own positionality was similar to Sun’s.

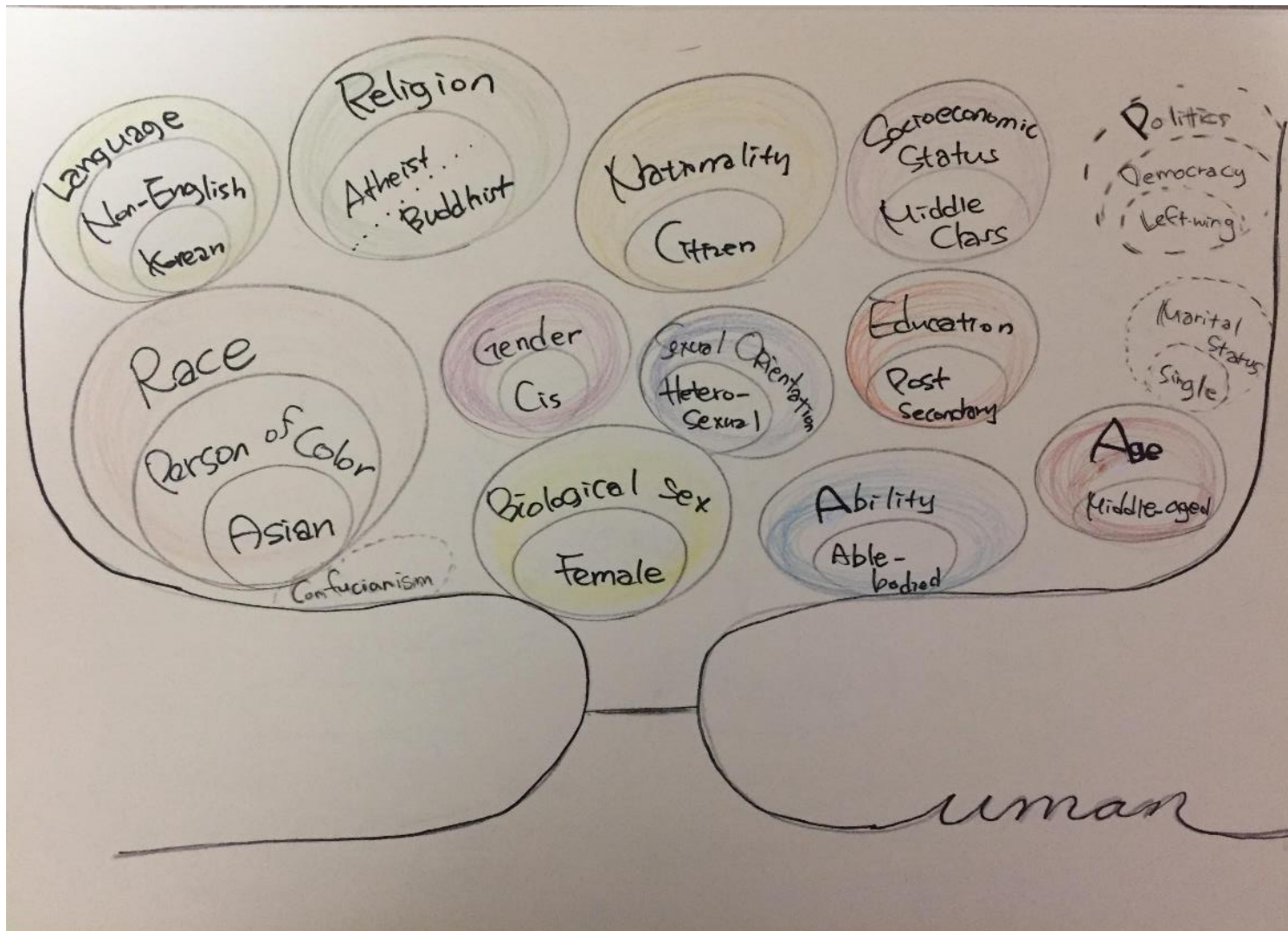


Image credit: Sun

Aside from becoming aware of social justice issues on a micro level, we turn our attention to what is happening around us by inviting everyone to share a current news article pertaining to these issues. Our intention is to see what sorts of articles might be circulating at this time. We are curious about what common threads may be shown.

As the participants share their articles, we see that there is not a shortage when it comes to examples of social injustice as no two participants bring the same article. We also note that more than half of the articles have an element of racism attached to it. We wonder why this particular injustice is so prevalent in current news. We think that this may be because many of us have been deeply affected by all the racial upheaval that has marked this past year of our lives with all the rioting related to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Some of the articles also included aspects of classism, sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, colonialism, and religious oppression. However, we note that ableism is not one that is mentioned and we wonder why this may be. Is it more invisible? Are instances of ableism underreported?

As many of us appear to be more able-bodied, perhaps issues of ableism are not on our radar. Rather we take for granted the ease of movement we so readily experience in our daily lives and have a hard time to fathom otherwise. Yet now as we take the time to consider these inequities, we become more aware and see our responsibility to act.

**Radical, but not too Radical:
Unveiling Racial Disparity in the Art
World**

**Ahousaht couple seeks apologies
after facing racism at restaurant**

**Black US doctor dies of Covid
alleging racist hospital care**

Ongoing violence against Black people sparks conversation in Halifax

Social Injustice Headlines

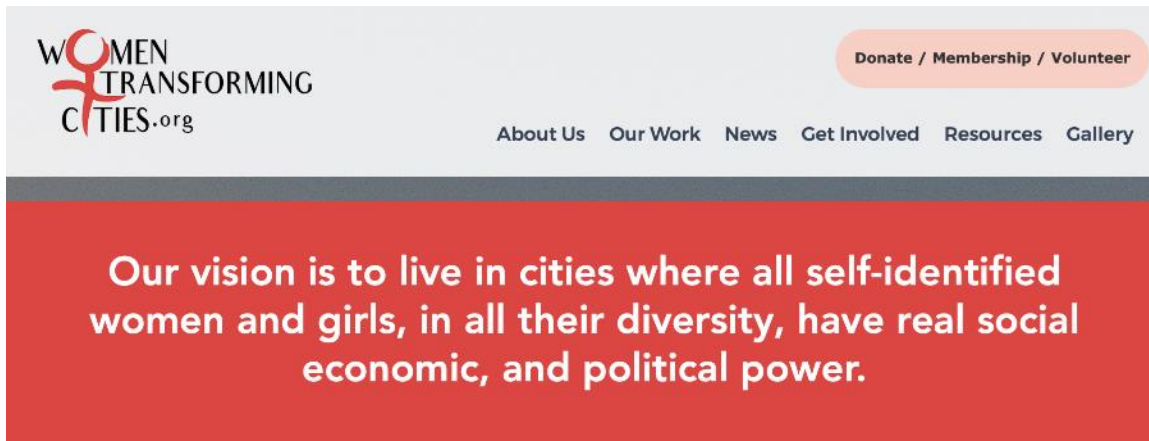
**Got an idea for the Richard McBride school
renaming? You'll have a chance to share it soon**

**Criminal Investigation needed into Death of Joyce
Echaquan, say 2 legal experts**

**The B.C. government apologizes for systemic racism towards
Indigenous people in B. C's health-care system**

**Coming out Under the Gun: Exploring the Psychological Dimensions of
Seeking Refugee Status for LGBT Claimants in Canada**

How 'Everyday Sexism' went from small site to global phenomenon



(Women Transforming Cities, n.d.)

Engage Youth. Build Bridges. Realize Potential.

LOVE supports youth to thrive through programs and healthy relationships that build emotional intelligence and help overcome the challenges they face. Our participants emerge from LOVE's programs with greater resilience, heightened skills, and the confidence to be inspirational leaders.

(LOVE British Columbia,, n.d.)

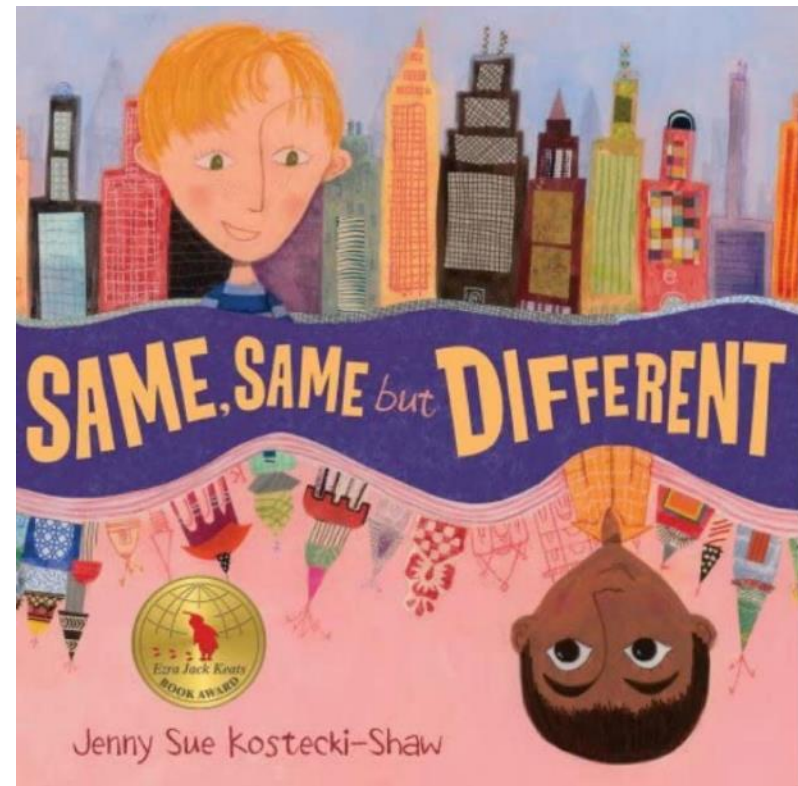
While it is disheartening to see so much injustice in the headlines, through our time together, we are also made aware of organizations that are actively working to bring about change.

Groups that we had not heard about before, such as LoveBC (<https://loveorganization.ca/bc>) and Woman Transforming Cities (<https://www.womentransformingcities.org>), have been brought to our attention. We discuss these groups with our participants and discover that none of them are familiar with them either. Ilam aptly points out that there are many groups doing good work out there, right in our neighbourhood, and questions why it is that we do not hear more about them.

We further ask the group to think about whether they have noticed any difference in their life as a result of addressing social justice issues. Through this conversation we notice how there appear to be many converging influences that have brought about a greater awareness and change in the lives of our participants.

Many of the participants note how the events from the previous year, such as the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, have greatly impacted their awareness. In response to this heightened awareness they also see their responsibility to take action in their specific settings. For example, Susan brings up how they have been talking about these issues with children in the centre where she is working.

Jenny talks about having tough conversations with her neighbour and also mentions how the little things we do can have a big impact. One small change that Jenny says she has been implementing is intentionally changing pronouns in songs and stories to “they” and “she” to better represent female voices.



(Kostecki-Shaw, 2015) Photo credit: Ilam

Thinking further about awareness and intentionality, Ilam questions the lack of representation of the dominant Asian culture in many of our centres. From her own personal experience as an immigrant she says, “I know what it is like to be a kid and no one is like you” and shares that she has found only one book representing her culture, “Same Same, But Different” (Kostecki-Shaw, 2015). She also says her own circles do not include Asian people so “their voices are silent to me” and recognizes that she needs to go looking for these stories and share them.

Another way that we see intentionality in action is by seeking out the perspectives of children in our lives.

Jenny has a conversation with her nieces ages 9, 14 and 6 about what is fair and what is not fair and shares the transcript with us :

Jessie (age 9): “If someone has two cupcakes and they give another person one, that’s fair.

If it’s not fair, then you get to share three cupcakes and one person gets two and the other gets only gets one. There’s no fair reason for that.

It’s fair if someone goes to your house and you have new toy and they let you play with it. It’s not fair if you get a toy and you don’t let your friend play with it.

If someone is playing a game and you include them, that’s fair, but if you don’t that’s not fair.

And, also, when there’s someone new, let them play in your game, that’s fair.

And, if you get a new puppy and you let your friends pet it, that’s fair, but if you don’t, that’s not fair.

If you find something cool and you let someone see it, that’s fair, but if you don’t let them, that’s not fair.

Being nice is fair, being mean is not fair.

There’s so many examples!”

Jenny: “Why do you think people are unfair?”

Jessie: “Well, because they’re a bit selfish. They don’t think about other people, they only think about themselves. When you think about being fair, you’re thinking about the other person and making them happy.”

Rowan (14 years): “I guess, not sure....I think there are plenty of things that are unfair, a lot of it unfair, so it’s hard to think of things that are fair for everyone. I can think of sexism and racism and it’s easy to think of things in a simple scenario, but big things it’s tougher.”

Violet (age 6): “If someone makes four cookies and they bring them to the park and three more of their friends are there and they don’t let anyone else have cookies, that’s really not fair.

Um, if someone got two puppies and they gave the other one to their friend. That would be fair too.”

In response to what these three say, Ilam notes that “it is so black and white for them” and Jenny comments how it seems to be about opposites, “the haves and have nots,” and that it is about the need to “share and be nice.”

Zoe also shares with us what her children have to say about what it means to be fair. Her two-year-old responds that “fair means 8789.” Then when asking her four-year-old to think about what is fair, he says, “I can’t do all this stuff, it’s unfair!”

We realize from hearing these accounts how important it is to share and invite children to think about what is fair and what is not. We feel that this is crucial to help establish a solid foundation for understanding social justice issues at an early age and build social justice literacy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017).

The theme of awareness surfaces yet again as Jenny talks about how for a long time she was unaware that there was still racism in Canada. She comments that she “lived in a world where [she] did not see.” Now, as this has been brought to her attention, Jenny speaks about being more intentional. She mentions her own journey into thinking more critically by doing a self-check when she is unsure about certain words she is using. For instance, at one point in the meeting she heard the expression “gong show.” She was unsure of the connotation so she researched it further. Jenny recognizes that “it’s about doing the work” to inform one’s self about the appropriateness of words or expressions.



In response to this Ilam brings in the socialization piece, talking about how in society we have been “raised to sort of believe these things.” She further makes a connection to Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) when commenting on how the idea of multiculturalism in Canada has blinded us to the reality of racism.

Throughout our time together we see that while each of us is at different points in our journey, we have all chosen to be here and are all working towards change. Sun summarizes this well when she states these are “stepping stones to move forward [to an] equitable society.” This may involve being uncomfortable, yet we recognize that being aware is simply not enough. We need to act and confront the contradictions and tensions.

Grappling with Tensions

“Grappling requires engagement with intellectual humility, curiosity, and generosity; grappling is not dependent on agreement. The goal of education is to expand one’s knowledge base and critical thinking skills, rather than protect our preexisting opinions”
(Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 33).

While we move forward with our increased awareness, we encounter tensions along the way. Lina encapsulates some of these tensions by crafting a poem using words from our discussion as well as Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) book.

GRAPPLING RESISTANCE

Grappling, Coping, Sinking, Projected...

Everyone...Everything... Everywhere.

Stitched into fabric so perfected

Suddenly tossed into the thin air.

Sand easily fits and falls through open textbooks

Wonder and beauty combined in everybody's equity.

Blinded by windy and selfish thoughts in notebooks

Destroyed ideas and knowledge disguised with Integrity...

Perspectives and Values Cutted here, Chopped there...

The clock struck midnight with an informative pang

Engagement, Humility, Opinions, Curiosity may differ

Critical Thinking skillfully arrives with a Bang!!!

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One of the tensions that arises is around the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed. Our thoughts whirl around as we work to clarify our understandings of these roles.

In frustration Wendy questions, “Why is it always the oppressed though that have to be the ones to educate the ones who are dominant?” This reminds us of what Jenny spoke to previously when she noted that “the responsibility to learn and change is on the oppressor, however, not the victim.” We see a connection to what Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) say regarding the dominant group needing to step in to disrupt oppression.

Ilam presents another perspective by explaining that those in the dominant position have it good and so there is no reason to change. This resonates with what Freire (2005) says, “only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both” (p. 44).

With these different perspectives we are left dwelling in some confusion. We have a desire to find clarity in these issues, to know what the role of the oppressed and oppressor is, to have some clear-cut answers. We wonder why? What is it that we feel so compelled to discover? Why do our minds seek refuge in an end to the contradictions and the tensions that are surfacing? What is about our own personal histories that are shaping our views?

With these lingering questions in mind we bring this topic back to our participants to get their input.

Jenny explains that her understanding of the responsibility of the oppressor comes from her experience with a friend, commenting that “being an ally is not about asking all the questions... you need to do your own research.”

Ilam adds to this by noting the importance of the oppressed having more representation in positions of power. She sees that both the oppressed and the oppressor have responsibility to take up, yet ultimately, because of the systematic oppression that is present, the oppressors must give way for change to occur.

Lina connects to the quote from Freire (2005), mentioning that from her understanding of Freire’s work, he places much emphasis on “re-examining yourself.” She further elaborates that “it’s not about fixing something, it’s about re-examining what’s already in place and bring[ing] a new perspective into that.”

With these additional thoughts we see again how much more complex the relationship between oppressed and oppressor is. We also are challenged to seek out and take up our responsibilities so as to be a part of the change we want to see. Freire (2005) reminds us that, “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity”(p.47). With this in mind we see that when doing the work of social justice our action could be better directed by focussing on the particular context before us rather than on the roles individuals play.



Photo credit: Marianna

Silences

Uncomfortable silences mark our journey as we work through these tensions. The unveiling of these issues brings about frustration as the complexity of it all overwhelms. This leads to moments of silence that engulf us as we grapple with the heaviness.



We wonder what to do with these silent moments? Is this a sign that we should respectfully pause and wait? Or should we try to get at the heart of where the silence comes from? We feel uncomfortable with these moments of silence and our uncertainty of what to do in these moments intensifies the uncomfortableness.

Photo credit: Marianna

We invite our participants to share what they feel about the silences we have been encountering during our meetings. We are intrigued to learn that silence embodies a multiplicity of meaning.

Lina begins the conversation as she comments that silence allows for active listening and is a “powerful tool.”

Ilam furthers this thought by commenting that “silence is a blessing” and she sees how the dominant group tries to keep us distracted with all the noise.

Then, Zoe connects silence to an umpire analogy showing how often our responses are so intertwined with social perceptions. She explains that “the more sure the umpire is, the longer it will take to make the decision, but the more sure he wants to seem the faster he will answer.”

Jenny also explains that in having White privilege, we feel we have the right to be heard. She explains it is a struggle to know when to speak so as not to dominate and allow other voices.

Sun also explains to us after everyone has left that she missed her opportunity to share, but that she believes “silence could mean lots of things.”

Listening to the many different interpretations of silence we realize how many different ways there are to view silence. While we had found it uncomfortable, most of the feedback we receive indicates that it is not perceived as a negative. Rather, silence is seen as an opening.

The Power of Language

“Language is not a neutral transmitter of a universal, objective, or fixed reality. Rather, language is the way we construct reality, the framework we use to give meaning to our experiences and perceptions within a given society” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 70).

Working through the uncomfortable silences helps us to recognize how crucial it is to be mindful of the language we use. We see that with respect to social justice, there needs to be a shift in the common terminology utilized. Lina shares that in her own role as a Supported Childcare Consultant they intentionally omit “special needs” from all their forms and rather focus on the strengths of the child over the deficits. She further adds the importance of including the voice of both the child as well as the families. She also explains that they choose to pay attention to the language they use so that families can celebrate their child with language that is clear, simple and positive. However, Lina also acknowledges that not everyone is receptive to these changes and we recognize how difficult the journey can be to ultimately enact necessary changes. There seems to be a push and pull force that can take hold as we try to make change, we meet resistance from what is known and familiar and so we have to persist.

The power of language is so impactful that we hear over and over again the importance of moving away from labels and seeing the human face behind these labels. Here is a glimmer of hope as some of this change has a ripple effect on other organizations. It becomes clear that while initiating this change takes courage, it can also have the capacity to build bridges and connect to other positive realms for a child, their family, and community.

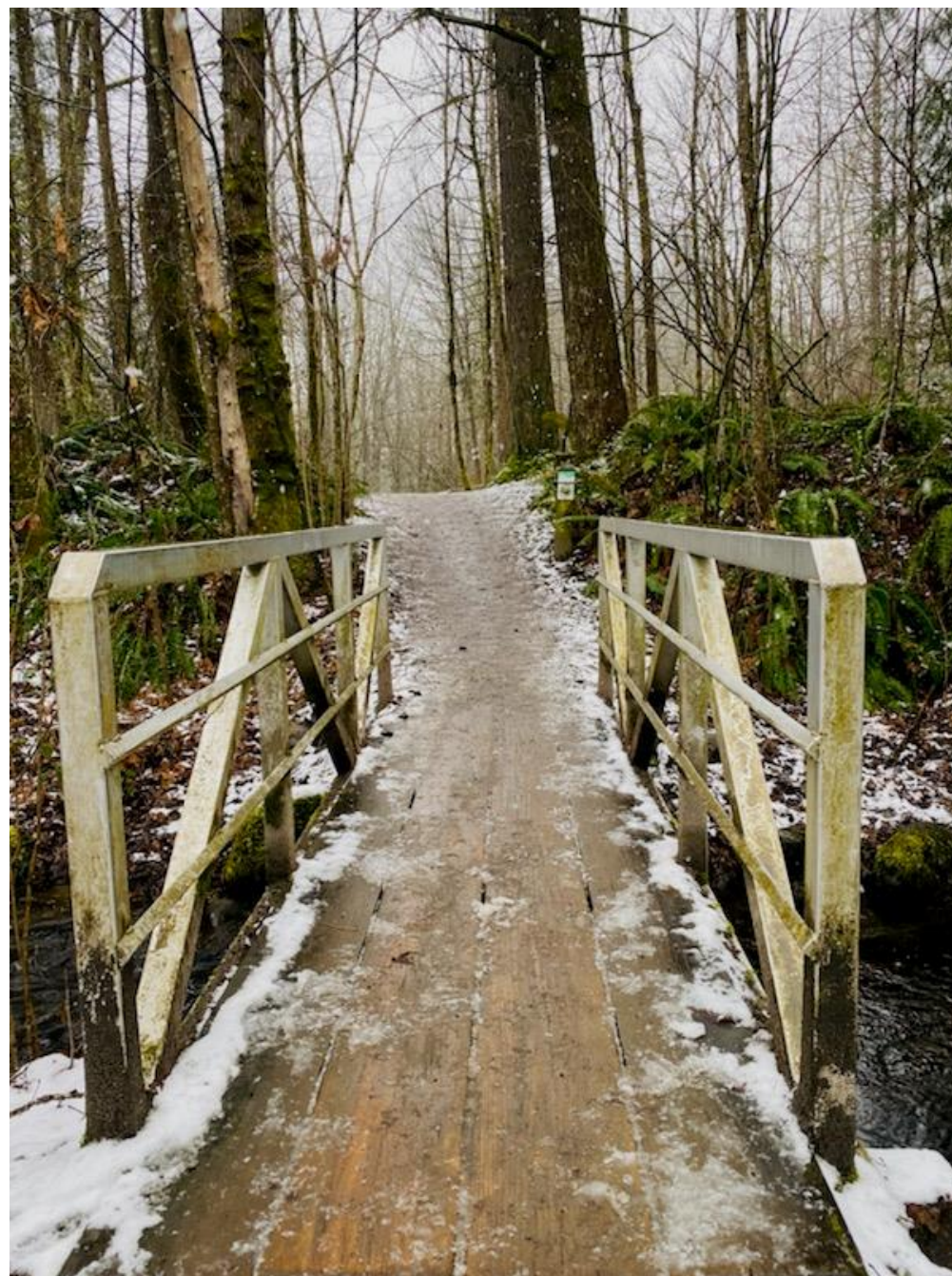


Photo credit: Ilam

Another consideration with respect to language is to speak positively rather than negatively. Lina speaks to this when she explains that we can show appreciation and gratitude even though we may disagree. While recognizing that it is difficult to do, Lina likes to step away from a situation to take time to think and see the positives. She elaborates that as humans we have to resist our desire to fix and rather explore the possibilities. Lina continues by noting that children can feel this negative energy so we really need to pay attention to our language, especially the use of the word “no.”

Zoe adds, “we are training [children] to enter the society of no.” She goes on to share the startling statistic that toddlers hear “no” 400 times a day, which inevitably affects their self-esteem. Then she further elaborates that she has seen that in some cases people think that “children are not humans simply because they are children.”

We are witnessing once again the power of language and how much deliberation is needed in order to convey the intended meaning of our words. Clearly, taking the time to pause and reflect is an invaluable skill. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain that, “in a pluralistic society that claims to uphold the ideals of equality, speech must be chosen in ways that are cognizant of the context” (p.193). As educators, we want to be more mindful of our contexts and aware of the impact of our language. Our words can carry great weight in the mind of a child and we may never know what the effects may be.

Another aspect of language that grabs our attention is how we interpret and use words. This comes up as we think about our interpretation of equity.



Created using Word Cloud
Generator in Google Drive

As indicated from the cloud, the word “fair” is the most popular. However, as the participants explain the reasoning behind their words, we realize that this may be misleading. For example, Wendy explains that the first word that comes to her mind is “despair”, yet she chooses to write “fair”. She later goes on to clarify that the word despair comes from a place of darkness, because as Wendy says, “our day to day is the complete opposite of where we want to be with equity. Is equity even possible? It’s like a pipe dream.”

Wendy is not the only one to filter her thoughts regarding equity. Sun also explains that the first word that comes to her mind is “ideal”. However, she chooses to write down “dream”. Sun notes that the reason she chooses “dream” is because it has both a positive and negative connotation. On the one hand, she sees the positive side of a dream as something that you are striving for, but on the negative it can be perceived as being “*just* a dream.”

Reflecting on this activity, we wonder at the reasons behind the choice to filter the first word that comes to mind. Is it more common to filter our thoughts when we are dealing with complex issues? Are we afraid of being judged? Are we afraid of the darker side of these issues and how we interpret and internalize these events?

As we continue to talk about equity, Wendy mentions that she is unclear about the difference in meaning between equity and equality. We also notice that some of the participants use these terms interchangeably. This seems to point to the widespread ambiguity around the understanding of social justice that Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) indicate is a present reality. In the midst of discussing the differences between these terms, Marianna remembers that Jenny has a drawing comparing the terms inequality, equality, equity, and justice and invites her to share it with us.

Her illustrations give us a way to visualize one way of seeing the differences, while at the same time we recognize, as Jenny says, “there will always be issues with any diagram that anybody ever makes.” Thus, we will continue to grapple with what these terms mean and look like in our everyday situations.

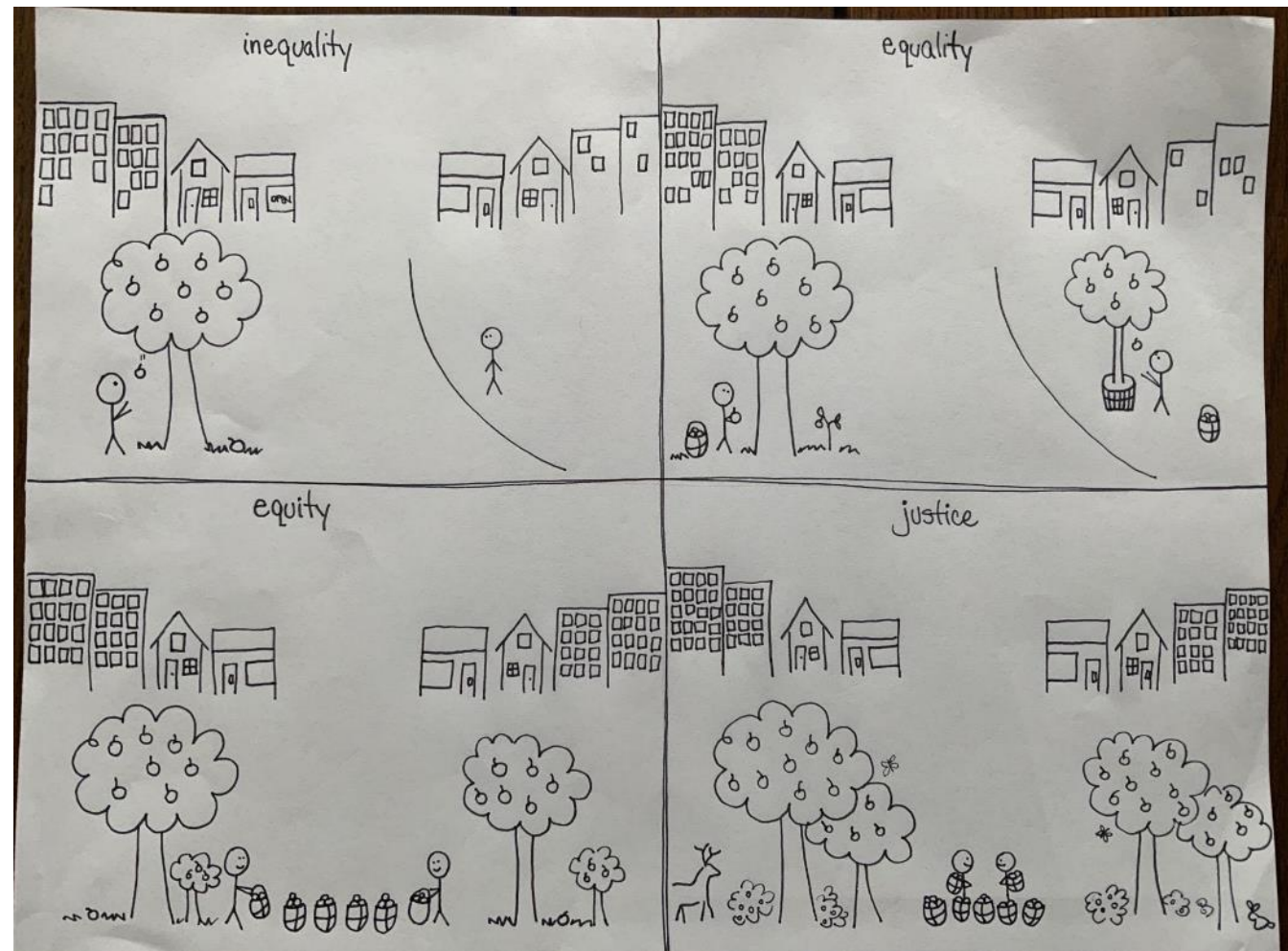


Image credit: Jenny

As we consider our use of language our attention turns to the relevance of the word multiculturalism. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) observe that multiculturalism has been a significant part of policy implemented in Canada since the 1970s, yet they also note that while it is meant to “promote the idea that all groups are positioned equally in Canadian society...[it leaves] structural inequality unaddressed” (p. 123). With this in mind, we invite our participants to think with the first few minutes of “The M Word” (Krishna, 2007), a documentary that considers the relevance of multiculturalism in Canada from several points of view.

In response Ilam notes, “I don’t really hear that word these days... it has been replaced with diversity.” Additionally, she comments that the idea of multiculturalism seems to portray the fact that there are many cultures here in Canada, but is “not an acceptance of difference.”

Lan also says that she does not hear the term used much anymore. She thinks that maybe it is a word more commonly used with new immigrants and it is not necessarily as well understood by others.

Sun shares that her understanding of the word multiculturalism is “respecting and embracing all the different cultures,” but also notes that in reality it does not always work as intended.

Jenny comments that she thinks we should use the word multiculturalism more and “make sure people know what it means.”

With the sharing of these points of views we see that multiculturalism does seem to have a place in Canada, but we also want to ensure that it is not used simply as rhetoric. If it is only a term used in policy, but not implemented in ways that address inequality it is as Wendy says, “putting lipstick on pig essentially.”

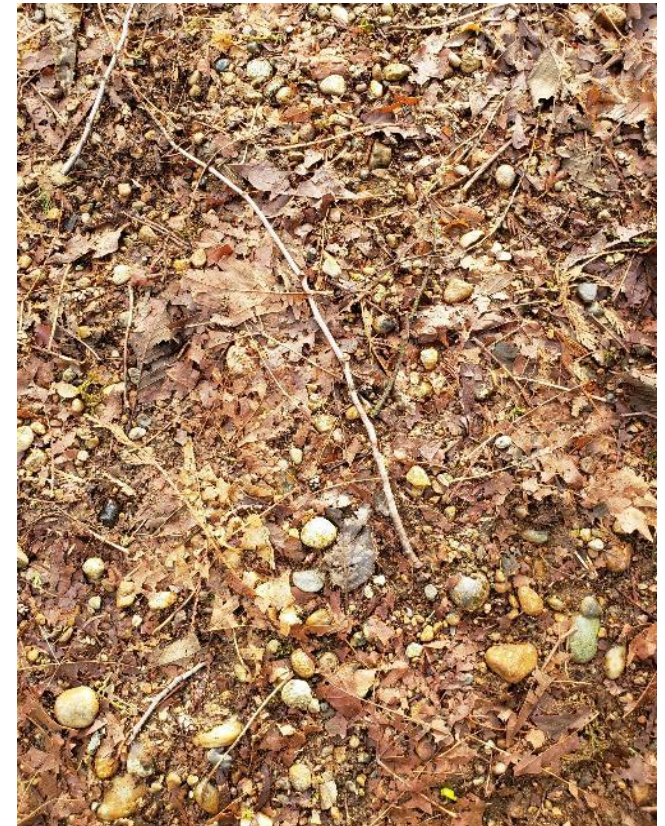
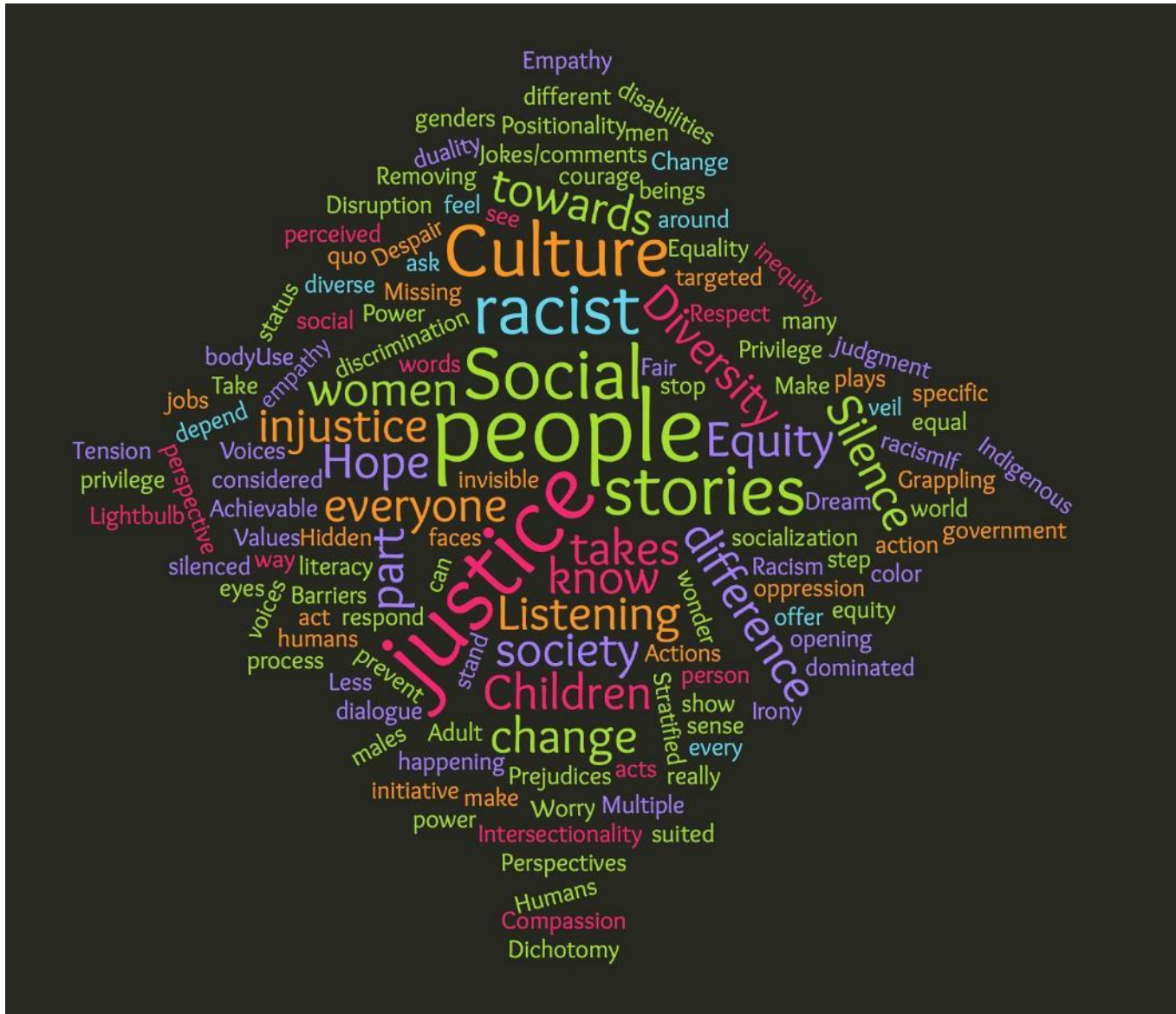


Photo credit: Katrina



Created using Wordclouds.com

With such varied understandings of words, we are intrigued to know how our participants are making sense of the concepts, so we invite them to create a mind map. We compile all the words from these mind maps into a word cloud.

As we reflect on the words represented here we are drawn to the word “towards.” It seems to speak to the relational piece of this work, as well as the movement involved in doing social justice work, with it being a continual, changing process.

We also see how some words, such as people and culture, are more prominent, showing how we have collectively placed a greater importance on these words.

The Complexity of Culture

“Culture refers to the characteristics of everyday life of a group of people located in a time and place. Some of these characteristics are visible and easily identified by the members of the culture, but many (indeed most) of them are below the surface of everyday awareness”
(Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 36).

Since culture has had such a prominent place in our discussions, we invite our participants to fill out this Cultural Competence Self-Assessment and see what they notice.

Lina sees a connection between number 7 and 19 on the assessment. She states we should not assume we know where people are coming from. Rather, we should recognize that their experiences will impact how they engage with and trust us.

She further notes that in her work with children often the educators tend to label children without considering how their background may have impacted their behaviour. Lina remarks on the injustice in this and of not trying to see the situation from the child's perspective. As she explains, when we do this it can often lead to the very behaviours that we have been trying to avoid.

		Almost Never		Sometimes		Always
1	I am aware of my own biases and how they affect my thinking.	1	2	3	4	5
2	I challenge others when they make racial/ethnic/sexually offensive comments or jokes.	1	2	3	4	5
3	I speak up if I witness another person being humiliated or discriminated against.	1	2	3	4	5
4	I do not participate in jokes that are derogatory to any individual group.	1	2	3	4	5
5	I know the stereotype(s) of my ethnicity.	1	2	3	4	5
6	I encourage culturally diverse people to speak out on their concerns, and I validate their issues.	1	2	3	4	5
7	I avoid assuming others will have the same reaction as me when discussing or viewing an issue.	1	2	3	4	5
8	I understand that I am a product of my upbringing and believe there are valid beliefs other than my own.	1	2	3	4	5
9	I do not take physical characteristics into account when interacting with others and when making decisions about competence or ability.	1	2	3	4	5
10	I recognize that others stereotype me, and I try to overcome their perceptions.	1	2	3	4	5
11	I include culturally diverse people in team decision making processes that impact them.	1	2	3	4	5
12	I actively seek opportunities to connect with diverse people, and I seek to build rapport.	1	2	3	4	5
13	I believe "colour blindness" is counter productive and devalues a person's culture or history.	1	2	3	4	5
14	I try to learn about and appreciate the richness of other cultures and honour their holidays and events.	1	2	3	4	5
15	I believe there are policies and practices in place that negatively impact people outside the majority culture.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I realize that people of other cultures have a need to support one another and connect as a group.	1	2	3	4	5
17	I can honestly assess my strengths and weaknesses in the area of diversity, and try to improve myself.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I understand the definition of internalized racism and how it impacts people of colour.	1	2	3	4	5
19	I know and accept that a person's experiences and background impact how they interact and trust me.	1	2	3	4	5



Photo credit: Katrina

Also in reference to the Cultural Competence Self-Assessment, Sun brings up that because she is living in South Korea, which she describes as “mono-ethnicity and mono-culture,” she has to “rely on [her] imagination and [...] previous experiences in foreign countries.”

Lan recognizes that “being in Canada is different than being in a more homogenous country.” She gives an example of when she saw a tall blonde White woman for the first time and says, “I couldn’t help but stare at her.” In comparison, after living here for so many years she says today she would not even give the encounter a second look.

Ilam recalls being at a gas station in Port Moody with two blonde children staring at her and she thinks to herself maybe they have never seen a brown person because “many people don’t actually interact with people of different cultures and different races.”

This ties into what Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) tell us when they talk about how even in a country where there are many different cultures and races, we still live very segregated lives. They go on to note that these segregated communities did not happen by accident, but rather that “all-White neighborhoods are the end result of centuries of racist policies, practices, and attitudes that have systematically denied peoples of Color entrance into White neighborhoods” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 139).

As we continue to think about culture, Jenny notes how difficult change can be due to our cultural background, saying “a lot of what we were taught when we were little, we hold really close.”

We are also once again reminded of all that is below the surface as Marianna shares an incident from her workplace of a parent complaining that she could not find a book in English to read to her child, but instead found many books in other languages. In response to this Susan comments, “I think culture plays a part [as well as] how we are raised.” In this story the fact that this individual did not recognize her own racist views until much later speaks to us about how entrenched and valid our own thoughts can be in our minds. We wonder, what lens was this parent looking from?

Jenny adds another story from her own experience that speaks to the hiddenness of culture. While at work, she shut the door in order to ensure the children’s safety, but leaving it unlocked, thinking that the parents could enter when they arrived. However, she noted that the parents did not just enter, but rather knocked on the door. Jenny explains that she did not understand this until someone mentioned to her that there was a cultural difference. These parents came from a culture where it would be disrespectful to simply enter the classroom. Jenny notes that this was a big learning moment for her, to recognize how small and subtle cultural differences can be.

These two stories not only highlighted for us the complexities of culture, but also the incredible value of stories. We see how stories give a living aspect to issues of social justice and help us to see how these issues can play out in real life. Jenny also shares with us how meaningful stories have been in her continuing work towards equity. She notes how much she has treasured stories, both the ones she has experienced and heard, as a part of her learning process.

While we are seeking to learn more about culture, we also recognize how much room we have for growth. One example of this comes forth as our own lack of cultural awareness is brought to view when we miss out on a voice, namely Sun's. In talking with Sun, she mentions how she struggles to know when to speak up, and she sees how this struggle is amplified due to her cultural upbringing, which taught her to be silent and listen to the teacher.

For our own part, before the meeting we had discussed how perhaps given that these subjects can be so intense and potentially trigger people, we would not call out our participants to engage. Instead, we thought we would allow the conversation to flow naturally.

After hearing from Sun, we recognize how our own respective cultural lenses impact our way of thinking and blind us to how other cultures might interact. This inspires us to be proactive in checking out our assumptions. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) note that "the majority of culture is below the surface" (p. 37). Thus, we see the need to go below the surface of our assumptions, expanding our own cultural awareness by digging deeper and inviting a plurality of difference.

We thank Sun for bringing this to our attention and wonder how many more similar interactions we experience in our daily lives that remain below the surface.

When we share our oversight with the group, we are struck by how generative the discussion becomes:

Sun shares her struggles to communicate especially at finding the right moment. She equated this experience with trying to fit in to a foreign country. She explains that she was often told by people in the dominant group the old proverb, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Sun further adds she “wonders if there will ever be the right amount of mutual effort for people from different backgrounds to understand one another.” We can recognize the complexity that culture presents as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) explain that all of us “are immersed from birth in the deep water of our culture” (p.36) and need the help of others to navigate and understand the varying depths and intricacies that culture signifies.



Photo credit: Ilam

Ilam adds to this by stating, “culture is at the heart of everything we say and do and plays such a pivotal role in our work with families.”

Jenny goes on to express her gratitude towards those that have corrected her in the past. This leads to Lina’s recognition and gratefulness of vulnerability and how necessary she believes it is to expose oneself in order to forge ahead with courage and openness.

In response to this sharing, Wendy voices that she will choose to be more silent and “honour the voices I want to hear more than my own.”

Reflecting on how much conversation was generated by this point, we can see how inequities are further revealed in the process itself. Through open communication about our process, we gain deeper insights into these issues and how we might respond to them in the future.

Marianna's daughter Lorena, 8, brings in another voice with her interpretation of fair as "every colour in the rainbow."



Image credit: Lorena

As we reflect on this interpretation we consider how each of these colours are beautiful in their own right, however they must all be together to be a rainbow, to have this collective identity. It reminds us again of the power of diverse cultures coming together.

The Roles of Women

“Today, women have the right to vote and a multitude of other rights afforded to them by law, and many women in the United States and Canada would argue that women’s oppression is a thing of the past. However, sexism is a cogent example of how oppression adapts over time and how the cultural “water” is difficult to see while we are swimming in it” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 103).

From examining our culture we have seen many differences, but as we turn toward sexism we find common ground in our womanhood. This topic comes up as we engage with chapter 7 in Sensoy and DiAngelo's (2017) book, which addresses sexism and in the process unsettles many of us. We find that this topic hits close to home and leads to much dialogue. Some of our participants connect with the double standards and dualities they face as women. For example, Sun recognizes how she has been immersed in these roles: on the one hand supporting feminism, yet on another being biased under the influence of patriarchy.



Photo credit: Katrina

Geeta, in reference to the startling statistics in the book, uses the word “scary” to explain that sexism “exists in every society” and sheds light on how we falsely assume that because we live in a progressive country, we think it does not happen here. We wonder why this is. Why do we think we are exempt? Perhaps it has to do with only seeing individual cases, while not being exposed to the dynamics presented by group patterns. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) note, “the way that dominant culture focuses on individuals obscures group-level patterns” which in turn makes it “harder to see everyday and ongoing sexism” (p. 106).

Lan also mentions “sex sells” and that “is how society is.” Ilam responds to this by noting that we can make a choice, that “we don’t have to use sex to sell. It has no longevity.”

On the other hand, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) also challenge us to consider how much of a choice there really is. With structural oppression integrated into society, going against cultural norms can be costly. This shows us how complex and conflicting these issues are. There is no easy solution and the freedom of choice really seems more of an illusion.

We made Virginia Slims especially for women because women are dainty and beautiful and sweet and generally different from men.

Regular or Menthol

Virginia Slims.

You've come a long way, baby.

In the midst of our conversation the topic turns to socialized gender norms.

Zoe mentions that she saw a video in which a man was expressing jealousy over not having what he considered to be womanly traits, such as being “kind”, “gentle”, and “soft.”

In reply, Ilam notes how crazy that is as the traits described are “human traits.”

This reminds us of an advertisement that was brought to our attention by Wendy, as displayed here. As can be seen, this advertisement illustrates some traits that have been stereotypically associated with women.

Through this we see the powerful role that socialization has in defining gender stereotypes (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and wonder at how we might combat these stereotypes in practice.

The importance of being proactive in combating stereotypes surfaces as we talk about living our lives in a patriarchal world.

Lan shares a personal scenario about a female friend who holds a PhD and is a CEO of a tech company and yet does not experience the same respect as a man in this same role. For example, her friend has found some business associates unwilling to do business with her because she is a woman. This clearly demonstrates the difference between rank and status as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) define it. While she holds the powerful status of a CEO, yet because of her rank as a woman she is not given the respect she is due.

Likewise, we discuss how women in the entertainment industry struggle with the pressure to conform to stereotypical images of women. As Lan explains, it seems like a conundrum. On the one hand, should one go along with society's standards in order to become famous and then have a platform to affect change? Or should one refuse to comply, but in the process perhaps lose the platform you could have to speak out against these issues? In response, Ilam uses a counter example with Billie Eilish whose image is all about standing against sexism and body shaming. This causes us to wonder, what is it about Billie Eilish or about the times we are living in now that make it possible for her to push against societal expectations.

Sun also shares a comment by Emma Watson in a speech at the UN expressing her own rights and choice around how to use her own body. Clearly, these women can use their fame and status as platforms to make powerful statements and bring more awareness to the deep rooted issues of sexism in society. As Sun so wisely states, "it takes time to change what people are thinking about sexism."

As a way to engage with sexism around us, we ask our participants to share an image of a woman from popular culture. From the images that are shared, a variety of words are used to describe the women in them, illustrated below. This prompts us to think of the classic woman illusion and how we can look at one image and see something different depending on our perception.

powerful

visibility

appearances

diverse

proactive

problematic

vulnerability

power

activism

([Diane], n.d.)

non-conforming

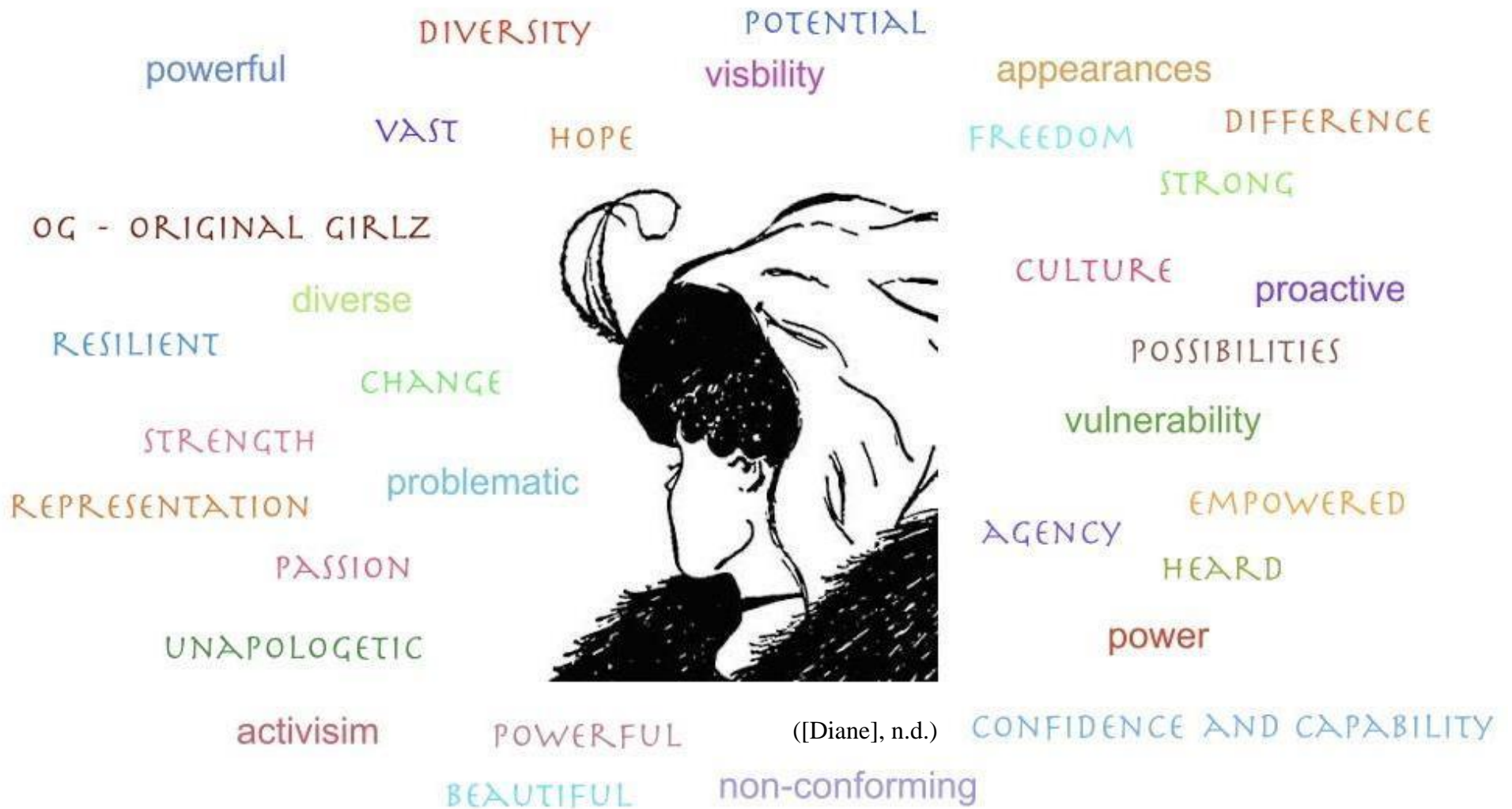


We then compile all of the images that were shared into a collage to show our participants, inviting them to think about what words come to mind with all the images together.



(ANI, n.d.; Gross, n.d.; JStone/Shutterstock, n.d.; K. Hoskin, personal communication, January 28, 2021; Mazur, 2020; Mitsui, Wilson, Wyld, Raham, Nelms, & Cowan, n.d.; [Queen Elizabeth the Second], n.d.; Scott, n.d.; [“You’ve come a long way, baby” Virginia Slims Ad], n.d.)

Reflecting on these collected images, the new words that emerge (shown below with capitalization) are overwhelmingly hopeful. This portrays to us the strength of women coming together.



Finding Hope

“[The work of social justice] is unquestionably very challenging but can also be personally rewarding as we gain insight, expand our perspectives, deepen our cross-group relationships, align what we *believe* and *say* with what we *do*, and increase our personal and political integrity” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 185-186, emphasis in original).



(thhomeedit, 2021, January 20)

Connecting to our thoughts around women, Ilam fittingly shows a photo that speaks to the strength of women in positions of influence coming together. She says that seeing these women gives her hope because, “I think in order for us to move forward and address injustices it’s going to take women to be a part of that process.”

Susan adds to this by commenting that she always sees rainbows as hopeful because they represent diversity and inclusion.

The recognition here is that women are drivers of change. Seeing them collectively, their actions and voices are strengthened as we are reminded of the importance of diversity coming together. This gives us reason for hope.

A lot of things in life are equal
but not fair. Fair but not equal.
It is very difficult to achieve
both at the same time.

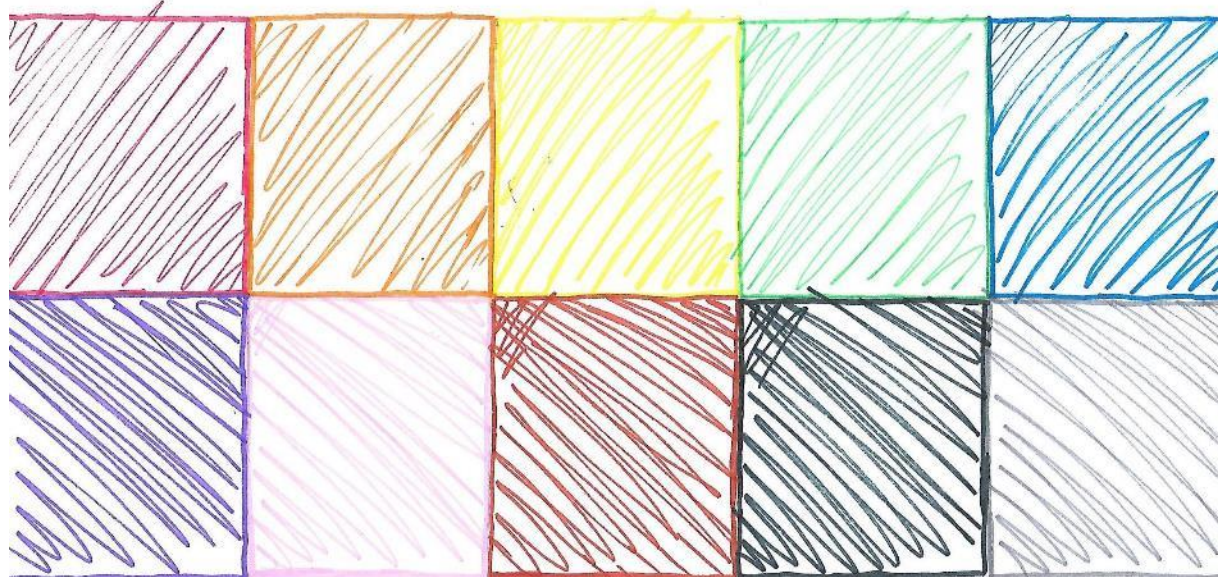
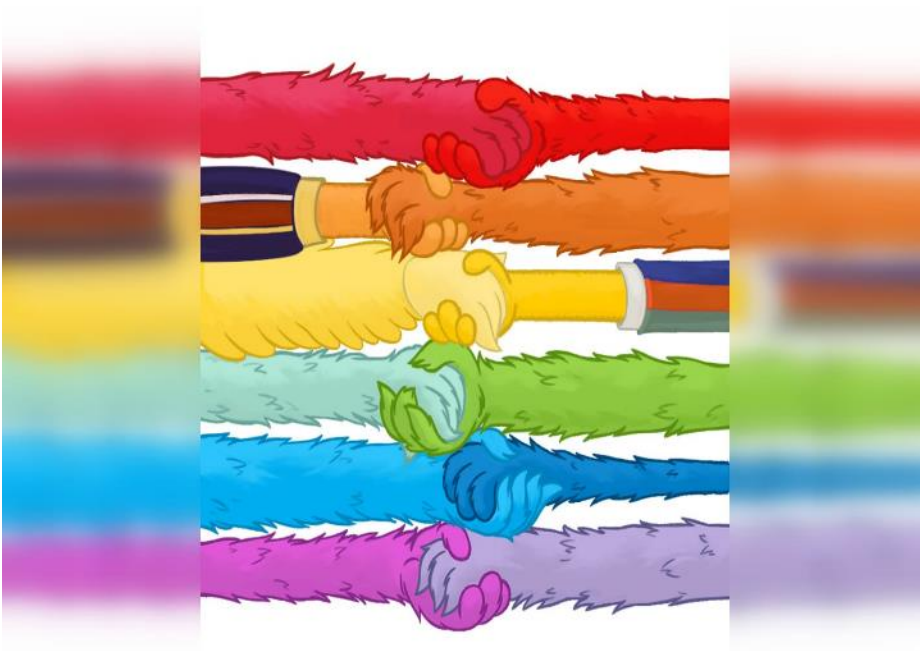


Photo credit: Elizabeth

Thinking with the theme of hope we are reminded of Elizabeth's, 10, interpretation of fair. As she says, "A lot of things in life are equal but not fair. Fair but not equal. It is very difficult to achieve both at the same time." She further explains that her teacher gave many concrete examples demonstrating the difference between equal and fair. Lan also shares that she finds hope in what is being presented to children as she explains how her son's class has been going through the book "Wonder" (Palacio, 2014) as a part of the curriculum. We are encouraged by these examples of giving children these different entry points to formulate their own ideas of social justice.

Wendy also comments that she has hope because children growing up can have a multitude of perspectives presented to them at an early age. To illustrate this, Wendy brings in two images from Sesame Street, one highlighting their commitment to diversity and another highlighting the use of Indigenous language.



(Sesame Street, n.d.)



([Mohawk Sesame Street], n.d.)

Kari and Jenny add to this as they both mention that their daughters bring them hope because of their proactive responses to social injustice.

We are intrigued by how much children are connected to our idea of hope. We are wondering about what image of the child is being reflected in this connection to hope.

While reflecting on children as hope, our participants bring in further insights. Ilam shares that she is amazed by her daughter's perception of life especially around injustices and inequalities in her school. Ilam continues with,

“I don't feel hope because I believe children are a magical cure to remedy all that ails society. My hope lies more in the possibilities for change as children are becoming exposed to multiple perspectives from a very early age. Their world-view is more realistic and hopefully, this will lead to more action towards addressing inequity and injustice.”

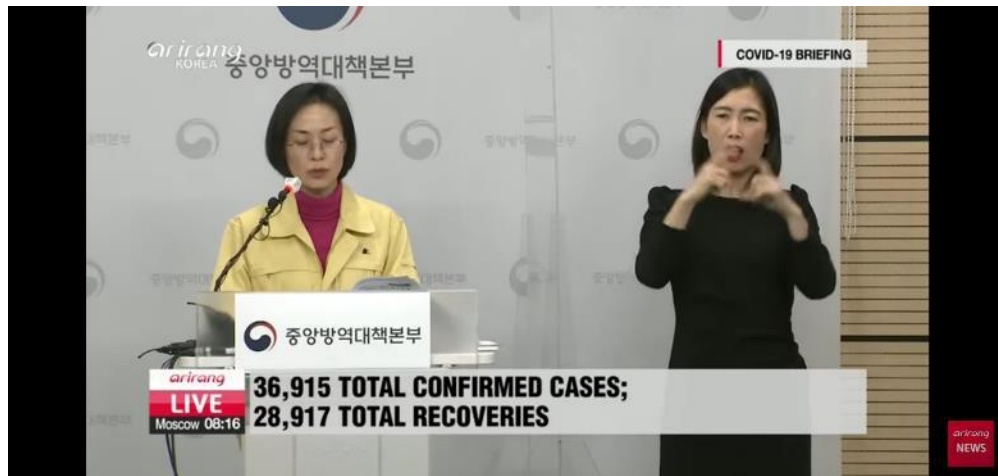
Jenny also mentions she is curious about how her own daughters' exposure to issues of social justice education will play out for them as adults. There is a recognition of change in education from our own childhoods to the present and we are wondering what it will look like in the future.

Hearing from Ilam and Jenny reminds us that there is also a need to shift our image of the child from innocence (Vintimilla, 2014) to one of agency and activism, which is more aligned with social justice (Freire, 2005; Moss, 2019; Riordan et al., 2019). Children are not isolated from the troubles of the world but rather must be regarded as citizens fully engaged and capable to participate in the issues of our world.

Sun makes other connections to hope when she notes that a “little, tiny brilliant idea really can make a difference.” She then goes on to share with us one such idea that gives her hope: a South Korean woman who had an idea to help children have the opportunity to go to school rather than work, as well as providing electricity for their families. This shows an example of technology being used innovatively to displace some of the inequities regarding basic needs in the majority world.



(YOLK, 2020, November 3)



(Arirang News, 2020, December 4)

Sun also had another image that brought her hope, the image of a sign language interpreter standing right next to the speaker at a briefing in South Korea. As Sun explains, usually the sign language interpreter is in a little box at the edge of the screen, but at this briefing they were making the interpreter more prominent and easier to see. This image shows a move towards equity in that sign language is being recognized as its own language in equal relation to spoken language.

These examples of hope are generated as we ask the participants to think about what fills them with hope. We had expected that this would be a very uplifting time, but as participants talk about hope, we are surprised by how quickly the conversation turns to despair.

This is revealed as Kari begins by sharing how appalled she is about a recent news event regarding a transgender girl who was bullied in Mission.

Lan also speaks to this incident, sharing that she has despaired over how much people seem to use their phones to record events rather than stepping in to help.

When talking about examples of hope we have the expectation that hope will overflow and so are taken aback to hear so much despair being mixed in. With reflection we realize that we are falling into simplistic thinking that wants to categorize everything, putting our experiences into neat little boxes of either hope or despair.

With hope so deeply intermingled with despair we see how immense these issues are. There is no simple solution or magic formula that can lead us to a place of equity.

Illustrating this theme of hope being intermingled with despair, Lina uses words that were spoken over the course of our discussion and beautifully encapsulates our collective thinking.

Privileged Silence....

Slave to the label the privileged child
Personally discriminated
Mistakenly masked, by oppression piled
In a world by others dominated...
Silence, where are you?
Among pardon, hurry, smiles, perspectives
Hopes filled, shedding light into me, into YOU
Past, Future, entanglements and connectives

Hope, and jumbled colonized languages
Images of Sesame Street so sweet and magically
Ingrained in our memories like bandages
Privileged, disturbed, photographically
Thoughts of Wonder in books and movies
Bullying floating in silence day in, day out...
Hopes and hearts filled with rubies
Privileged, Non-privileged they shout

Instincts and caution slowing us down
The danger of the single story
Keeps following and floating around
Is silence hidden or housed in glory?
The more you see, the more you want to see...
The invisible becomes a SPECIAL need
Questions asked unsuppressed by YOU and ME
Labelling words in many ways indeed

Inclusion, diversity ingrained in WHITE
Stepping stones, waiting to be the changed
Stories about Somebody, Anybody, Nobody tonight
Illustrations in books always and carefully arranged
Silence where are you now?
Hopes of grappling hearts in a book club
Truth and Reconciliation is Today, is NOW
Practices of Listening, engraved 101 in a hub!

Putting Our Learning into Action

“We must understand our own positions within these relations of unequal power. We must be able to think critically about knowledge. And most importantly, we must be able to act from this understanding, in service of a more just society” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 199, emphasis in original).

With all of our reflection on these issues, we turn our attention to how all of this plays out in action. It is apparent that we cannot enter into social justice superficially, as it takes deliberate and intentional work on our part to affect change. What action should be taken will vary from place to place, and context to context, but making a commitment to act against social injustice and for equity is a key component in disrupting the unjust status quo (Blanchard et al., 2018; Boyd & Noblit, 2015; Solic & Riley, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2011, 2017; Souto-Manning & Winn, 2019).

One example of how this unfolds in a particular context surfaces when Zoe invites feedback on her real life situation. She is looking to host a book club to educate parents and children about inclusion and is concerned about cultural appropriation. Although she feels she may be overstepping, she recognizes the importance of somebody doing this work. Yet, as a White person, she wonders, “Is it inappropriate for me to be that person?”

The response from all the participants is overwhelmingly supportive of Zoe as we all see this as a true to life example of *doing* social justice.

Ilam powerfully makes the point that it is Zoe’s responsibility as a part of a dominant group to take on this work. As she notes, marginalized groups cannot be expected to shoulder the whole responsibility for getting these issues out there.

Geeta adds further to the conversation by bringing up a humorous story that illustrates our accountability with issues of social justice. The story goes as follows:

This is a story about four people named **Everybody**, **Somebody**, **Anybody** and **Nobody**.

There was an important job to be done and **Everybody** was asked to do it. **Everybody** was sure **Somebody** would do it. **Anybody** could have done it, but **Nobody** did it. **Somebody** got angry about that, because it was **Everybody's** job. **Everybody** thought **Anybody** could do it but **Nobody** realized that **Everybody** wouldn't do it.

It ended up that **Everybody** blamed **Somebody** when **Nobody** did what **Anybody** could have done.

(Who's job is it anyways?, n.d.)

This story reminds us that we need to accept our own active role to engage with equity and not shirk away from personal responsibility. Geeta sums this up by saying, "You have to be the change."

One example of taking personal responsibility comes from Sun. She shares that as she goes about her everyday life, she notices that her biases lay below the surface. She explains that her biases spring up in her life, illustrated by the coil springing in her image below. This prompts Sun's desire to work to "be aware of [her] unconscious thoughts."

Sun's illustration emphasizes the importance confronting our hidden biases. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) speak to this when they talk about the importance of being aware of how our socialization impacts the way we live our lives. If we remain blind to the biases we possess we may continue to act in ways that promote social injustice because the way "we act in the world is based on how perceive the world" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p.196).

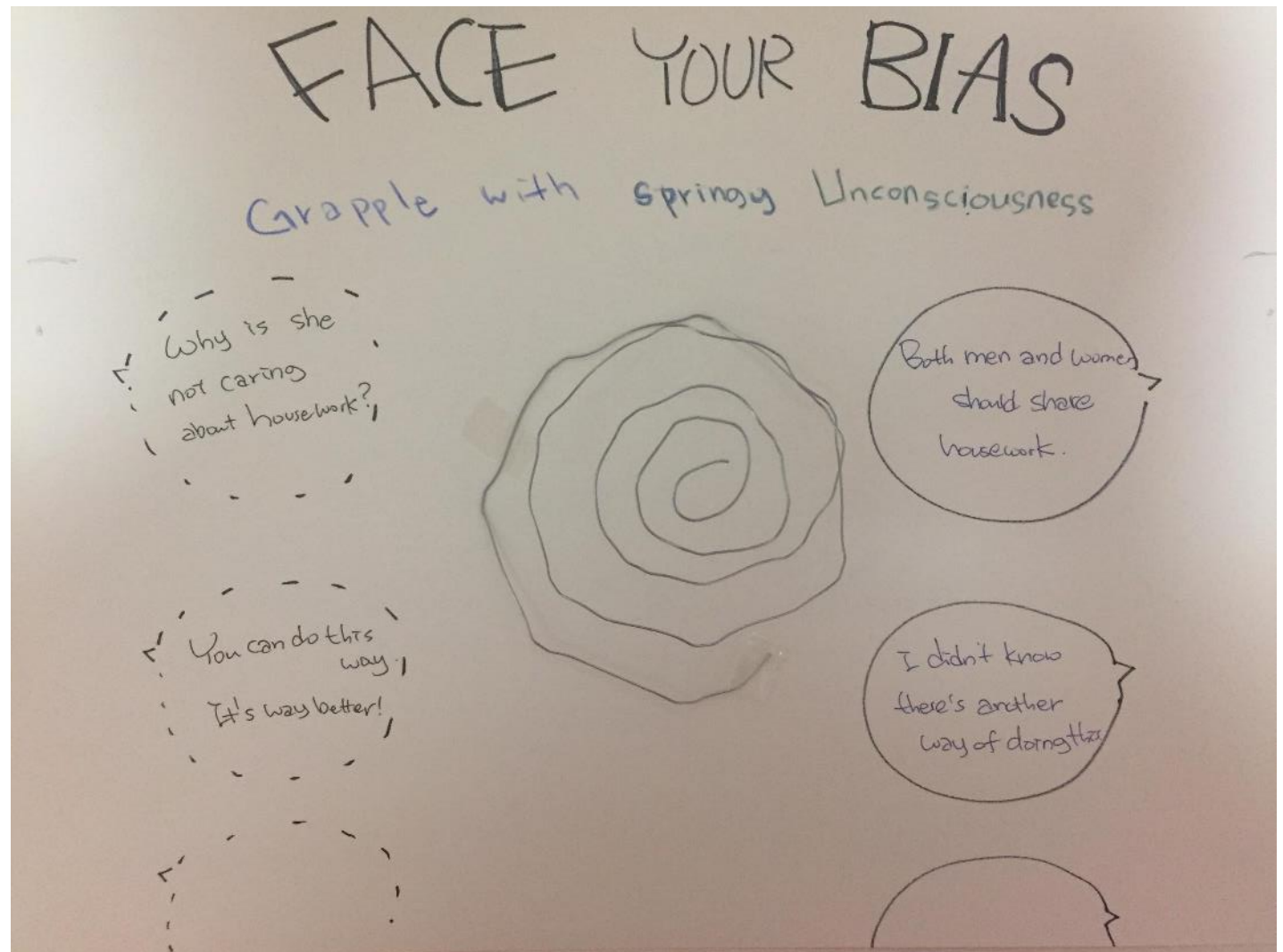


Image credit:Sun

In taking up personal responsibility, challenges continually arise. For example, the majority of us find confrontation to be difficult and try to avoid it.

Zoe brings up that she finds it easier to confront those with whom she has a good relationship. She also notes that having the appropriate vocabulary to engage in these kinds of discussions as well as confidence helps to meaningfully counteract these forms of social injustice.

Jenny offers another point of view in that sometimes it is the people you are closest with that you might have the most challenge to confront because they can be stuck in their ways and not receptive to hearing other ideas.

Ilam points out that these conversations can be difficult because it is “hard to navigate reacting” due to the emotion involved. She wants to be diplomatic rather than emotional in her response.

Wendy also touches on the difficulty of confrontation due to the emotions involved. She says, “I do call out behaviours... I should do it more... but for my own mental health I cannot wallow in their darkness, their bitterness, their hatred.”

Lina, on the other hand, has no problem with confrontation. She notes that “people need to be called out because sometimes when you don’t know you assume.”

We see a common link in our desire to confront, but there are many reasons that stop us, including our own readiness. While we are all at different points in our journey, we also recognize as we think with Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) that we have a responsibility to “align what we *believe* and say with what we *do*, and increase our personal and political integrity” (p. 186, emphasis in original).

Marianna's daughter Isabella, 10, creates a piece that illustrates to us this idea of being at different places on this journey toward social justice.

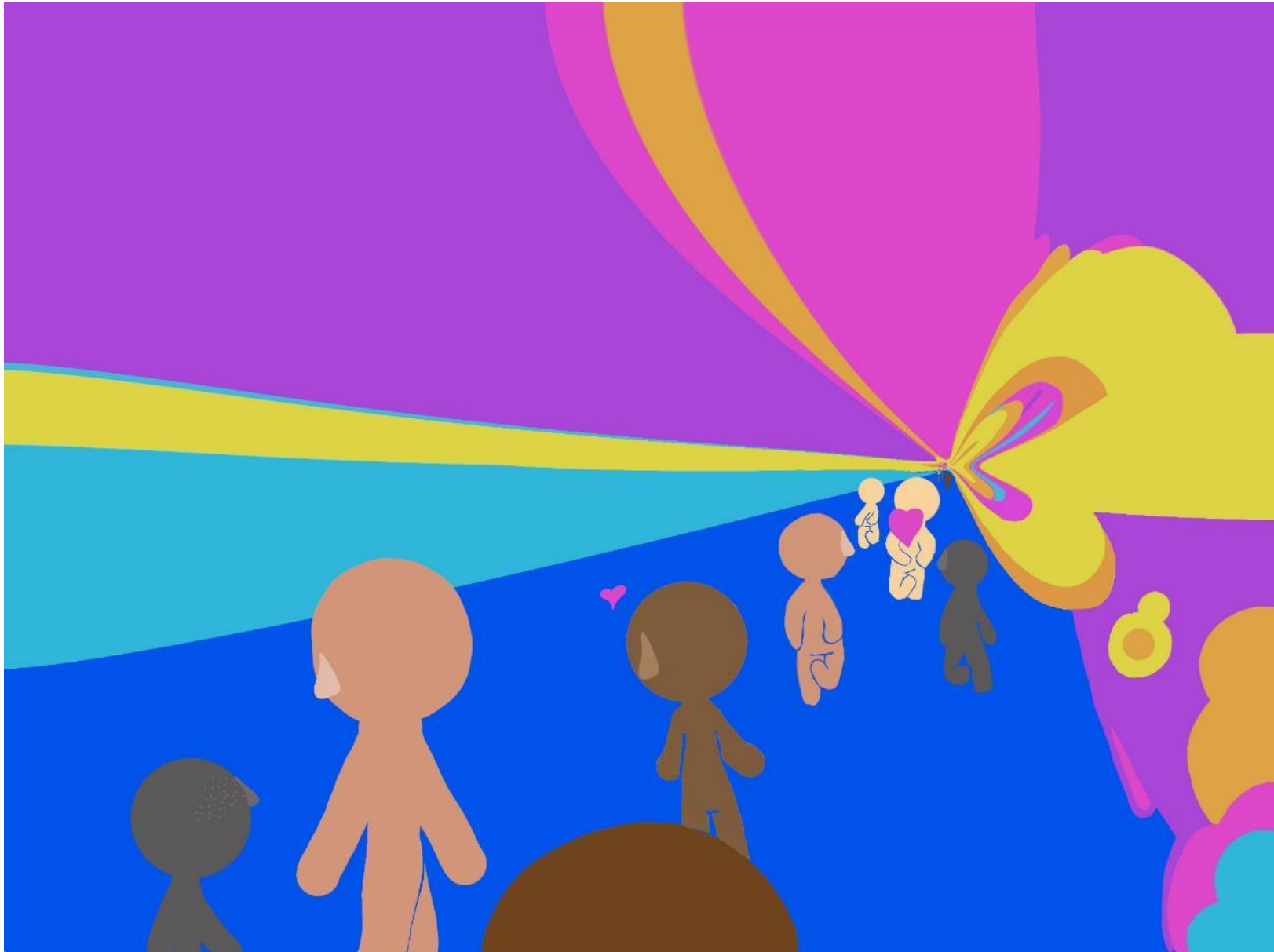


Image credit: Isabella

This provokes us to think about where we are along this journey. Ilam beautifully illustrates her pathway toward social justice in the following poem:

Flowing Threads

The flow is smooth, rough, bumpy,
at times dangerous even
bodies encounter many obstacles
on journeys forward and backwards
unwanted, unexpected, a resistance
fighting back, fighting against
letting go and pushing forward
cautiously, slowly
welcoming the glimmer
an essential part of living
of life
always in flight, in motion
rejuvenated, restored
with every bump
every torrent
enfolded into the fabric
the stitches threading anew
weaving possibility
renewal
life



Photo credit: Ilam

Jenny also shares with us where she is along her personal journey with social justice explaining how she “wanted to choose a symbol out in the world that could be a reminder to do more of this work.”

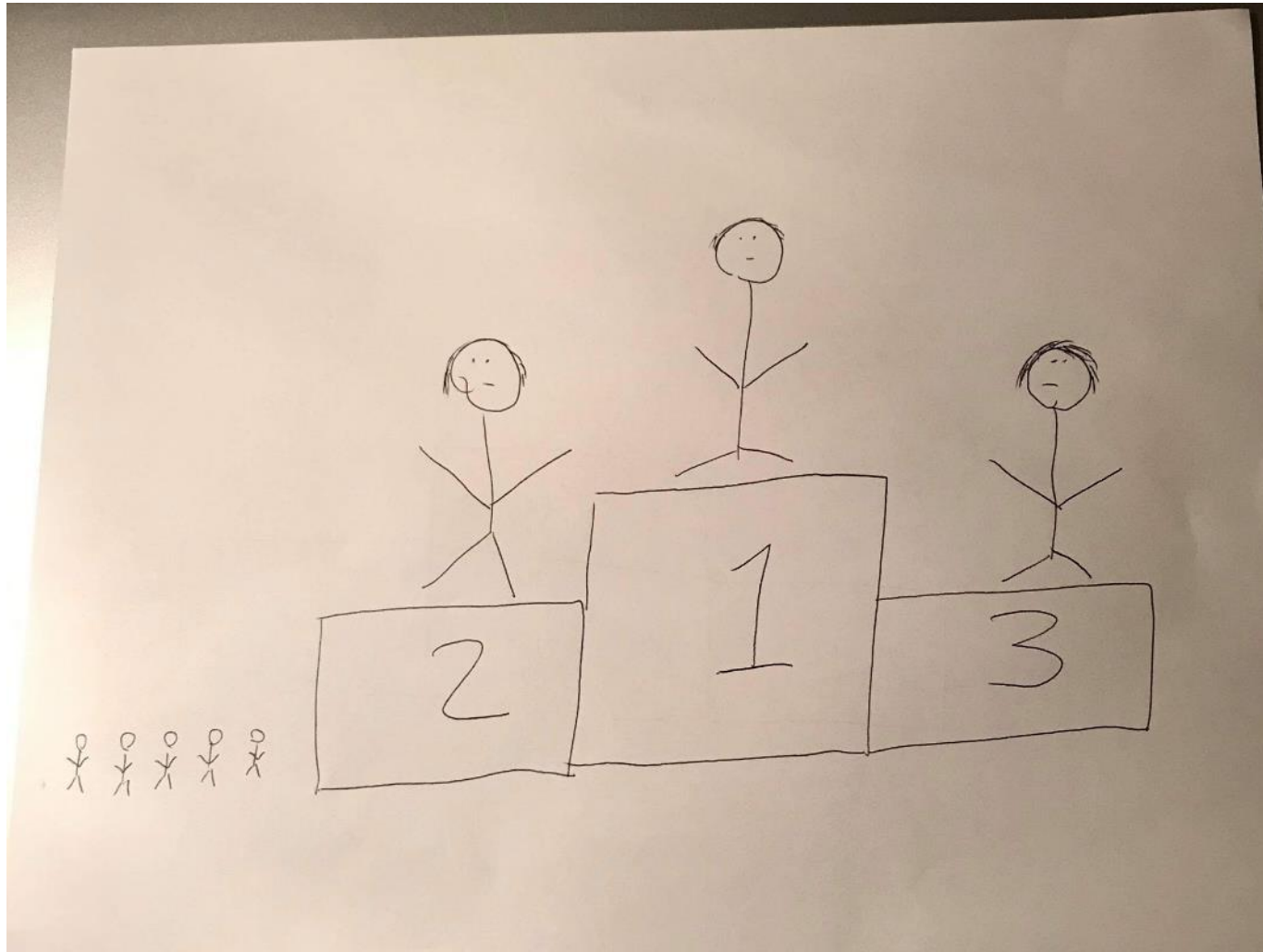
She continues:

“It should be something I see often, in my home, workplace, and community. I chose a feather. Feathers are seen everywhere! They are incorporated in designs and artwork, and have personal meanings to countless (and diverse) people. Best of all, birds wear them in all shapes and sizes with pride! They drop them out and about in the world, so I see them both on their bodies and off. The Lenape story of the Rainbow Crow is a favourite of mine. This story taught me to see crows and their feathers as even more beautiful (and interesting) than I already do. I have asked people from various indigenous cultures if it would be “okay” to use feathers for art purposes with children, and they told me feathers are not representative of any clans, so feathers are free to use for whatever reasons. However, I recognize there are many cultures whose stories I have yet to hear who have deep connections to certain birds. These birds and their feathers are sacred ... In many Nations, feathers can be used as a talking stick; they are passed around a gathering of people and whomever is holding the feather is the person to whom we should all be listening. Having listened to these stories, feathers have become meaningful to me. Holding certain feathers in your hands can be very empowering. For these reasons, I think feathers will be a personal reminder to me of the equity work that I am committed to engaging in for the rest of my life.”



Photo credit: Jenny

While we spend some time reflecting on our personal journeys we also see the need to address issues of social injustice on a larger scale. Susan presents an example of this with an image representing “how society thinks about people.” As she explains, it is a hierarchy, with the White, male on top and people of colour and those with disabilities at the bottom as they “are oftentimes disregarded by society.” She goes on to note that advocacy is important and she feels “hopeful that society could change.”

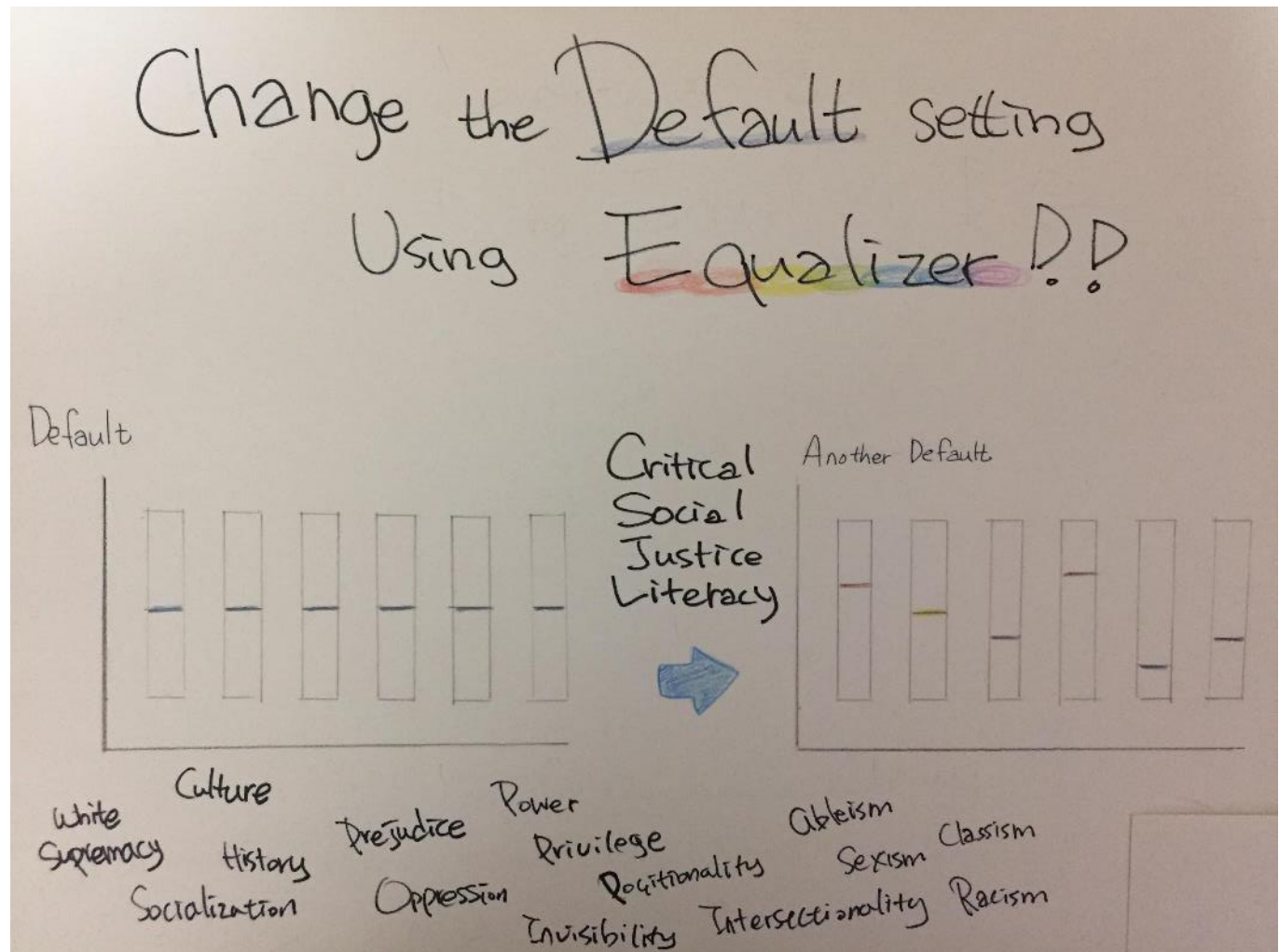


Susan’s drawing illustrates how problematic it is to not engage critically. As Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) say, “Dominant discourses socialize us into seeing our positions in the hierarchy as natural” (p. 71). We are reminded of the need to engage with these issues critically if we want to be advocates for change.

Image credit: Susan

Sun shows how being an advocate for social justice issues can unfold by becoming more literate in critical social justice. She explains how the word “default” stands out to her and is defined as “the thing that exists or happens if you do not change it intentionally by performing an action” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Sun goes on to share how this word is related to settings on a computer or music player. On a music player she found that there is a setting called an equalizer that one can play around with and she relates this to our efforts at addressing issues of social injustice. She shows us this illustration, in which critical social justice literacy is the equalizer.

She notes that as we engage with critical social justice literacy we can change the default of inequity into a more socially just society. This ties into what Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) state, “the societal default is oppression” (p. 203). Sun goes on to share that, “It’s not just about rebutting with shallow knowledge, [it’s about] using informed knowledge with deep understanding.”



Conclusion

“Developing critical social justice literacy requires a lifelong commitment to an ongoing process” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 215).

SOCIAL JUSTICE LEARNING

QUESTIONS (UN)RESOLVED

✓ (In)equity vs.
(In)equality

✓ Intersectionality
& Positionality

✓ Dominant vs.
marginalized

✓ Challenging
the status quo



With whom does
responsibility for
equity lie?



Is marginalization
ever a choice?

Is being an ally
enough?



Am I
marginalized?



Are inequities
implicitly ranked?



Is equity
achievable?

As we draw near to the end, Wendy shares some of her learning with us. She uses pink to show what is more clear for her now and green to show areas that are still unresolved.

Wendy explains that previously she has never connected inequity to social justice and that she is embarrassed by this. She also speaks to feeling ashamed about this “lack of education and total ignorance” and once again we are reminded of the intense feelings that are involved when doing this work. Her understanding of equity now is shaped by the image she has of “people trying to see over a fence” and needing different resources to do so.

She also shares that she has never thought of herself as marginalized and felt very uncomfortable recognizing this. This helps her to relate to how people of colour must feel on a regular basis. She also has lingering questions like whether even being an ally is enough if people feel marginalized every day. Wendy shares that this intentional time during the book club “has opened her mind to issues that [she] never gave a lot of thought to.”

Lina adds to Wendy's sentiments through her gift of poetry, illustrating how we have struggled together with these issues and explaining, "I don't think we are leaving here as we arrived, with the same frame of mind... we've grown as educators, as women, as citizens, as human beings."



Social Justice....

As I sat at the edge of the Creek today
With many encounters Screaming to stay!
Memories, persistently Grappling
As Single Stories still are happening...
We have sat in uncomfortable silences
Dearly holding to..., Emptying..., Listening...
Are we there Yet? Where are we Going?
As social justice, Arrives in despair... Repositioning
New perspectives Flowing in a creek...
We look at the Time, we look at the Clock, we look in the mirror
We sit in agony wanting Time and the Children to Speak!!!
While the River of Life flows unknowingly nearer
Counter cultures Fight, Protesting strongly...
For equal civil rights... We've struggle to go to where we are
As we Walk along the Sidelines Safely alone and Far..
Wanting to get Immersed with life's journey Scars...
Fractions of the sun, Afraid, Begin to Lift away,
Into a pond of hesitation, wanting to Speak about Social Justice
Afraid, and wanting to Fall Asleep we struggle to Stay
Seeing Hope, and Entangled relationships ... Learning to Give Away!

Reflecting upon this journey, two main themes appear: questions and hope.

First of all, we see that we still have many questions. As participants share their learning, they also share lingering questions and spark more questions in other participants. Lan comments that, “It brings more questions, now it seems like you need to look within yourself.” Sun notes, “This is the last session, but there’s still lots of question.” She also comments that “it’s hard to embrace ambiguity. I still find myself trying to find a certain answer.”

We see here a desire to have answers, to wrap things up neatly. However, Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) remind us not to be too hasty in coming to conclusions because “the desire to jump to the ‘end’ or to the answers can be a way to avoid the hard work of self-reflection and reeducation that is required of us” (p. 197). So, we choose to stay with the questions and the struggles that they bring up.

The other main theme we see is hope. Throughout this last meeting we notice how the word hope continually surfaces. Although we have all of these lingering questions, we still feel that we can move forward with a sense of hope to address inequities in our communities.

Much of the sharing around hope also has had a close connection to children. We recognize that children are citizens and that they are not sheltered from these issues, but rather that these issues are also an everyday reality for them. This reminds us again of the importance of engaging with children in this work, to represent their voices and share their thinking and encourage their activism.

We will not go back to normal. Normal never was.

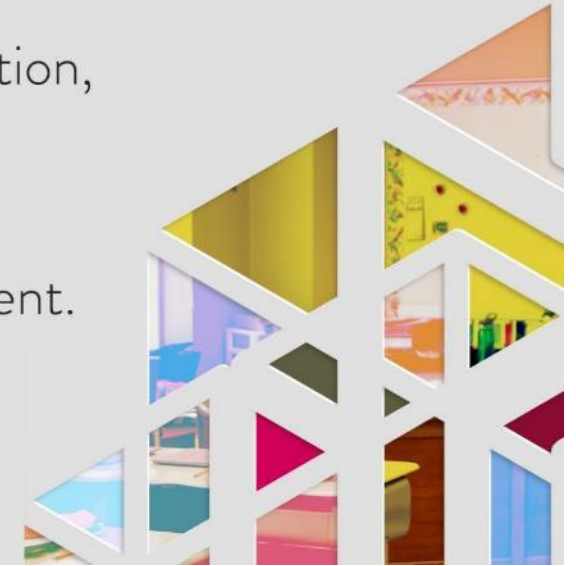
Our pre-corona existence was not normal other than we normalized greed, inequity, exhaustion, depletion, extraction, disconnection, confusion, rage, hoarding, hate and lack.

We should not long to return, my friends.

We are being given the opportunity to stitch a new garment.

One that fits all of humanity and nature.

Sonya Renee Taylor



([Sonya Renee Taylor Quote], n.d.)

We move forward with many questions still unanswered, yet with hope brimming in our hearts. We move forward with the desire to continue engaging in this work, to grapple, to struggle, to see progress. We recognize that this work involves a lifetime commitment (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017) and so we also move forward with renewed commitment towards working alongside others to tear down inequities and make something new, something better.

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