

Through the Looking Glass of Social Justice: A Synthesis of “*Teaching Mathematics and Science Through A Social Justice Lens*” and an Interview with Special Education/Math Educator Jason Grenchke
by Robert James Cross

The article “*Teaching Mathematics and Science Through A Social Justice Lens*” by Roland Ghollam Pourdavood and Meng Yan was about pre-service educators delving into the murky depths of teaching Math and Science with a social justice lens and what that might look like in their future practice. Throughout the article, there were multiple instances where the pre-service educators began to grow awareness towards realizing how far Math and Science instruction had strayed away from the “need” for social justice and how promoting social justice in those subjects could help students. Pourdavood and Yan surmise that raising awareness of global issues such as climate change and environmental justice could promote student engagement in the classroom. Overall, the article provided some implications that intertwining social justice with Math and Science would help cultivate critical thinking and enhance the learning outcomes of all the students who participated in the lessons.

I interviewed Jason Grenchke, a Special Education/Math Educator at Whittier K-12 Special Education Center, about how he would integrate social justice into a Math lesson and if he had ever done it before. Before becoming a teacher, Grenchke was the lead singer and guitarist for the Alternative 90s Rock Group, Fulflej, who saw airplay on MTV and toured with The Smashing Pumpkins. I interviewed him for the last RAR and I felt like I had to for this one as well, since he had a Math background. “Look at the news! There is Math everywhere. Data everywhere! If you can’t find something that connects Math to what is going on outside then you’re probably not paying attention” (J. Grenchke, personal communication, April 25, 2024). I knew he was right as he was saying it. You could turn on any television or read any internet news site and find a story to connect to a lesson on Science or Math. We talked for about an hour. During this time we compared beliefs and teaching methods more than we ever had before in the nine months we have known each other. One thing that surprised me was the stories he told about his prior teaching in a corrections facility. “The inmates didn’t have a grasp on anything going on beyond their walls and bars. They got letters and visits but they got most of their news and knowledge from guards and people like me. I never connected my Math lessons to anything because we had a strict outline of what we were supposed to teach and most of it was written for me. I suppose if I had been given free rein to teach whatever I wanted and if it had to have a social justice spin then I would have tried to connect incarceration data with my Math lesson” (J. Grenchke, personal communication, April 25, 2024). This was an excellent answer, I responded to it by telling him that incarceration data might set the inmates off, which I guess is what you want from learning. I hope that whatever data my group chooses to use in the lesson cultivates at least a touch of interest and emotion from the students.

I am constantly on the hunt for ways to engage students in English and History. A lot of the time I’ll try to make the lesson as individualized as humanly possible but that can sometimes

be tedious and grading it becomes its own chore. Math and Science have it easier, I feel anyway, because there are definitive answers to most of the questions. Inserting data or stories from different sources and cultures may spur some nuance but there is often a correct answer at the end of the day. English and History don't have that luxury. A lot of what I have seen and what I have experienced in answering questions or coming up with my answers to things revolved around whatever perspective I could prove. And now, with the internet and millions of articles and writings online, I can easily find any perspective to interface with my own. The key thing that is missing though is individuality. Anyone can write an argumentative essay that proves a point with a bevy of corresponding proofs and articles to back up that argument. It takes a person who has lived experience with an argument to add that touch of authenticity that a teacher rarely sees in their assigned work. Take for instance the article I read for this assignment. There is a section about a lesson looking at social justice data concerning healthcare issues that were connected with the AIDS epidemic. Now, my mother, my father, my stepmother, and my baby stepsister, all died of AIDS. I watched them suffer greatly leading up to their passing. When I read the section in the article, I had memories of my mother having trouble getting certain medications because of government-mandated red tape and also because of welfare cuts that prevented her from paying for the medication. Medication that may have kept my mother alive longer. If I was ever asked to write about it, I am sure my heart would be spilled upon those pages.

Here's an article about my mother from the Los Angeles Times:

<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1997-04-06-mn-46036-story.html>

References

J. Genschke, personal communication, April 25, 2024

Pourdavood, R. G., & Yan, M. (2022). Teaching Mathematics and Science Through A Social Justice Lens. *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, 15(2), 41–63.
<https://doi.org/10.21423/jume-v15i2a406>