

How Emmett Till Changed Our Lives: *A New Perspective for Teaching Social Justice*

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The authors, from the left: Alison Kenney, Cathy Grace and Danika Aday

This two-person account by graduate assistants (GAs) at the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning at the University of Mississippi constitutes a reflection of “new to the field” early childhood educators on how place-based experiences influence how and what you teach. The two students present their own stories in their own voice and combine thoughts with their guide in a concluding section, which challenges all seasoned educators to reflect on our own teaching.

Background

The graduate student (GA) experience is as successful as one chooses to make it. Given the interests of the major professor, the focus of the work varies. It is understood when someone is a GA at the Graduate Center for the Study of Early Learning, a trip to the Mississippi Delta is expected. The purpose of the Delta trips, according to our supervisor, is to experience the real life of Delta residents along with the history, up close and personal, not just words written in a text. We see small towns that are filled with boarded up stores and pot-hole filled streets. We hear stories that illuminate the lives of those who stay in

these nearly dead communities and who are all too often trapped by poverty. By taking this trip, you have the opportunity to feel and understand the true essence of the Mississippi Delta, even if for only a few hours. The Delta is a very unique place to say the least. Many students who attend the University of Mississippi are from out-of-state who have never heard of the Mississippi Delta, much less visited it. This trip was created to show people from other states, countries, and even the Mississippi natives what life in the Delta is really like. Multiple lessons can be drawn from the Delta trip including; the impact of generational poverty, racial discrimination, cultural differences, resilience, lack of access to high quality education, social injustices, and inequalities. The Delta trips provide graduate students with opportunities to take these lessons to heart and transform impressions and ideas into teaching practices upon graduation. It is by learning about the lived realities of children that we begin to build connections with their experiences. The ultimate hope is that real change and enhanced teaching will take place.

The Trip

The most recent trip involved driving to the southern portion of the Delta, but not taking the I-55 route. Instead, we took the back roads, right through the heart of the Delta. We traveled through small towns that we had never seen before. Getting to see how students different from us were living was an eye-opener. Coming from small towns ourselves, we knew the possibilities for different living situations existed, but these areas were like nothing we had ever seen before. Poverty is such a real thing, and this was evident while driving through these small towns. While in one Delta town, we visited a local public

preschool and observed two pre-kindergarten classrooms. One thing that struck us was how segregated the schools appeared to be where we visited. In the Delta, most schools are not racially integrated. Basically, white children attend private schools and black children attend local public schools. It appears in most Delta towns, neighborhoods are still segregated and defined by railroad tracks; the white families on one side and black families on the other. Historically towns have always been racially divided and unfortunately, it does not appear to have changed.

Child care and early education policies are often shaped by a history of systemic and structural racism (Johnson-Staub, 2017). It appears from what we saw and heard it is true in this Delta town. On one side of the tracks there are nice looking privately funded schools, and on the other side of the tracks poorly funded public schools with poorly kept buildings. The private schools are located in "safe" areas of the community where affluent homes are located. The public schools are located in areas of the community where streets and homes are in disrepair, which gives a sense of potential crime. The public schools are almost always completely gated, resembling a prison more than a school. When we arrived at the school, it did not seem very welcoming from the outside; however, the teachers had done a wonderful job at creating a welcoming environment for students on the inside.

High quality early education is extremely important and has long term benefits for children. Knowing this, our supervisor works with the public schools to provide training for pre-kindergarten (pre-k) and kindergarten teachers and teaching assistants. She wanted us to see what an appropriate pre-k classroom can look like in even one of the most impoverished areas of the state. Many teachers in Mississippi work and live in high needs school districts and it is important for us to know how to set up classrooms and teach with little to no resources, especially considering many of my fellow graduates will be serving in the same type setting.

During our visit, we witnessed centers developmentally tailored to meet the learning needs of four-year old students. The students behaved and transitioned between the centers in unbelievable ways. In the centers, the students interacted in appropriate dramatic play, as well as worked on writing skills, fine motor skills, and social skills. The students' art was displayed across the room as well. A lot of what was seen around the room can be obtained at little or no cost or by donations from community partners and on teacher resource sites for free.

The next stop on the Delta trip consisted of visiting Money, Mississippi, the community where one of the most horrific events related to racial unrest in the country's history occurred. While there, we learned about Emmett Till, a young black teen who sparked the civil rights movement. We got to see where Emmett was accused of flirting with a white woman back in 1955, the location of where he was accused, and a museum, Sumner Courthouse Museum that was created in remembrance of him which was also reported as the place his body was left after his murder.

Emmett Till is a major part of Mississippi history and the civil



The historical marker at the Bryant Grocery site where Till was accused of whistling at a White woman. Years later she recanted her accusations that led to his death.

rights movement; sadly however, Emmett's story is not taught in some schools. It appears that some educators believe that to promote change they have to educate students according to what truly happened in history, while others want to bury the past and continue down the same road we've always traveled. We come from both sides of this teaching philosophy: one of us was taught Emmett Till's story and the other was not. The event had a lasting impact on how one of us viewed society and this region of the country where people of color have been treated and still are in some ways. The trip had a different meaning for the one of us who did not know Emmett Till existed and never would have if it wasn't for this trip to the Delta.

Teaching Social Justice

This new information has been a catalyst for thinking differently about equity issues in and out of school. As teachers, we need to acknowledge that social injustices make up our history and do our part in ensuring that social justice occurs in our classrooms and communities. According to Oxford dictionaries (2020), Social Justice is justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society. One way to incorporate social justice education is by using the K-12 social justice standards which are divided into four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. With today's diverse classrooms and society, it is important for teachers to be knowledgeable about these standards and incorporate them into lessons. These standards and resources can be found on tolerance.org. Just like the state's College and Career Readiness Standards, the social justice standards have a complete set of anchor standards, outcomes, and scenarios for each section.



and the children engage with each other and their teacher than in a civics' lesson.

There are many ways to incorporate social justice education in our future classrooms using literature, Emmett Till's story being one of them. *Emmett's Story* (Crowe, 2018), to be read by adults in preparation of lessons taught, can touch many lives and that is why it can be used to teach his story and make his life real to second and third graders in an age appropriate way. Younger children will grow in their understanding of equity from stories such as *The Story of Ruby Bridges* or *We Are All Born Free*. Creating a classroom environment that is open to discussing the realities

In the K-3 classroom, identity is about self-discovery, who their family is in society, and their likes and dislikes. The diversity standards look at the student and how they compare and feel toward others. The justice standards look at fairness, how students and citizens should be treated, and how students when they know something happened that should not have. The action standards take a step up from the justice standards and allow the student to learn the choices they have when injustices occur.

Practical Lessons Learned

From this trip, we gained many take-aways that can be used in our future classrooms, including the need for early childhood education related to social justice/injustices. While deliberating on how to incorporate what we learned into our own classrooms, we think about where we will be teaching. No matter the location of the school, classrooms should be an open place where students feel safe and comfortable enough to discuss sensitive topics. Observations and experiences lead us to believe that white privilege and racism is still alive and well. We have asked ourselves why teach in areas of the state with racial challenges? Why not just stay and make an impact in places like the Delta? We can take what has been learned and make an impact in an area, regardless of physical geography. Knowledge of racism, poverty, and social injustices can be used to make a difference in the thinking and lives of the students we will be teaching.

Teaching all subject areas are required at any grade. How the learning standards for each grade are met are, in part, a result of the teacher's creativity and understanding of how children best learn. In thinking of how to teach social justice and equity to young children, it is more in how the classroom is managed

we see in the world will be a top priority. We can discuss both sides of a story, review the facts and learn to develop our own opinions while exploring ways to help the situation. Even for minds as young as five years it can be powerful.

In a K-3 classroom, teaching young children about social justice and equality can be difficult. As teachers, we need to consider our own views on social justice and equality, and how we will extend those views to our students. We also need to consider the community in which we will be teaching, the demographics of that community, and how to incorporate the community values into our class lessons. Teachers need to be intentional with the content they teach students following evidence-based practices as well as those that are age appropriate. A teacher needs to intentionally incorporate equality and social justice in their classrooms. For example, at dramatic play centers Caucasian, African-American, Hispanic and Asian baby dolls should be available for play instead of only ones from one race. It is important for young students to be familiar with the content of topics being taught, such as incorporating community sightings and providing them concrete examples when teaching new content. Some familiar community sightings would include local restaurants, factories, or stores they visit frequently or where their parents are employed. In the dramatic play centers or writing centers, common places from around the community can be featured. Students can act out their job as someone who works at a local restaurant or write a letter to a local store about what they like about the store. Through their interactions with others, they will be put in both positions of leader as well as follower. This dichotomy allows children to figure out how it feels when you are not treated fairly as well as to demonstrate how to practice treating fairness through group play situations.

The "egg lesson" (A to Z Teacher Stuff, 2018) is one used to

demonstrate to young children using a concrete example of “sameness.” Teachers can adapt this lesson to fit their classroom and different variations of it can be found online. Two eggs are shown to the class, one brown and one white. The children are asked questions about similarities and differences of the appearance of the eggs. The eggs are broken open and shown to the students. The eggs that looked different on the outside were the same color and had the same components and consistency on the inside. In the egg activity teachers explain that eggs are like people; we may look different on the outside, but on the inside, we are similar. We have hopes, dreams, wishes, families, likes, and dislikes just like everyone else no matter what color our skin and we must help each other to ensure that equality prevails.

Another way to incorporate social justice, equality, and fairness is by choosing multicultural books to read as a class with follow up activities surrounding the main topic of the story. *The Barefoot Mommy* blog (Gienapp, 2018) has multiple lists of multicultural books for young children and ways to address social justice to students through activities. Another great tool from this blog (Gienapp, 2018) is “Nineteen ways parents and educators can introduce children to social justice.” This is a great start up guide for intentionally incorporating social justice into your classroom and how to do it. Millions of books are easily available for teachers to select and utilize in their classrooms and are one of the easiest ways to introduce social justice education into the class.

The K-12 Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016) can be incorporated into classroom lessons through the four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action. Identity Standards can be accomplished by having show-and-tell days that allow the student to freely talk about the item they are showing and what it means to them personally. One way to incorporate the Diversity Standards is to promote sharing and acceptance of everyone’s families. One student may be raised by their grandparents while another student has two dads. We need to let students know through our actions a family is comprised of people who love and care for one another, regardless of the gender or race of the parents.

A way to incorporate Justice Standards is by educating students and adults on how we should act toward one another. Students should know when they see injustices, such as bullying of classmates at school because of skin color differences, they should come talk to the teacher about it if they cannot peacefully resolve it on their own. Creating a safe and open classroom environment is a major priority. A way to incorporate the Action Standards is by teaching students how to handle and take action in situations they may encounter in the future. For instance, if one student is being unkind to another, the observing student can step in and explain why the behavior is not acceptable and if necessary, call for the teacher to mediate. Through consistent modeling by the teacher, students can learn how to resolve differences in peaceful fashion resulting in an equitable solution.

This is not an easy topic to discuss with peers, because we often feel unprepared to do so. More discussions will bring us closer together as a profession. More discussions will allow us to come together as a community with a shared vision for all of our chil-

dren. We must have “the talk” over and over until we get it right and our classrooms reflect it.

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