

BOOK REVIEW

**What Does Injustice Have to Do with Me?
Engaging Privileged White Students with Social
Justice**

Reviewed by
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**What Does Injustice Have to Do with Me? Engaging Privileged White
Students with Social Justice**

Author: David Nurenberg
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Background

In the wake of social unrest after the murder of George Floyd in 2020, some educators began to question how they might infuse topics related to race, equity, inclusion and justice in the classroom. Specifically, educators were beginning to ask, what is the role of the white educator in using their power and privilege to advance social justice conversations in the classroom? Some white educators began seeking resources to become better allies while engaging in teaching and learning.

Scholars suggest that true allyship is best defined as people who work for social justice using their positions of assumed power which requires continual reflection, examination of history, personal perseverance, and moving beyond words (Reason and Broido, 2005). Using this definition,

allyship is wrought with difficulties when done purposefully. When teaching white students about historic injustices, the greatest fear of white allies is the risk of students shutting down and parents reacting negatively to the topic. Further, many allies fear being personally ostracized by family, friends and colleagues who believe that we live in a post-racial world. Others may even fear acts of violence against them for attempting to provide an anti-racist education. These are merely a few of the difficulties that help explain why so few earnestly engage in dismantling systems of oppression by teaching white students about their role in helping to create a more just society.

In his 195-page book, *What Does Injustice Have to Do with Me? Engaging Privileged White Students with Social Justice*, the author, David Nurenberg, immediately discloses his identity as a white, privileged, cisgender, Jewish, male who possesses assumed power and privilege in society. He deftly introduces that his motivation for writing the book was the result of an experience with a student who, for a writing assignment wrote a well-constructed essay critiquing the use of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in class because it was not relevant for a white audience. Nurenberg reflects that in that moment he realized there were deficits in how white students were being taught about social movements and their role in systemic injustices. Nurenberg further cites his [2018 TEDx](#) talk in Washington, DC as a pivotal moment that convinced him there was a demand among white teachers for information on teaching topics of privilege, power and racial inequity.

Since the work of educating white allies often falls to students and teachers of color, Nurenberg decided he would use his shared identity to write and speak to white teachers of privileged students. Citing the work

of Matthew Kay, Nurenberg rationalizes that it takes more than “pop-up race conversations” for white educators to teach and lead discussions.

Content and Organization

The book is organized in seven chapters with compelling titles that include: 1) Who are the Privileged Students and How should they be taught? 2) Warming up the Room, 3) Self and Other, 4) What does Injustice Have to Do with Me, 5) Privileged Victims, 6) Struggling to be the Change: Allyship, Activism and the Dangers of the Savior Trap, 7) Choosing Between What is Easy and What is Right. Before immersing the reader in a cultural competency framework, Nurenberg uses chapters one and two to offer context, theory and his thoughts on practical preparation for teachers who seek to undertake meaningful non-toxic conversations about race and privilege. Each chapter is written to offer pointers to white allies on how to use their privilege and power to amplify social justice learning in the classroom.

The overarching framework of the book is arranged around Diane Goodman’s, *Cultural Competence for Social Justice*. There are seven competencies that inform the range of awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to conduct ally-related teaching. The competencies include 1) Self-awareness, 2) Understanding and valuing others, 3) Knowledge of societal inequities, 4) Skills to interact with diverse people, and, 5) Skills to foster equity and inclusion.

Before going in-depth into using the competencies, the author’s acknowledgements and introduction are worth reading since these sections offer profound insights into Nurenberg’s identity, personal motivations, and his in-depth understanding of the delicate ecosystem of privilege, power and teaching. He describes that he seeks to model norms for

teachers and students to establish as they learn more about social justice while allowing “permission to fumble.”

Chapters 2-7 use Goodman’s competencies to help educators navigate their role as an ally with colleagues and then go on to create lesson plans, lead classroom activities and facilitate discussions. Throughout the book Nurenberg is mindful to acknowledge the contributions of scholars of color, white scholars, teachers and activists who have produced work related to critical race theory, education and anti-racism. He further admits that he has personally made mistakes in his efforts to engage in social justice work, which credibly humanizes him.

Contributions of this Book

This book would not be considered a textbook that contributes to public relations education in the traditional sense. It is best described as a toolkit to help white educators navigate their teaching and learning on matters of race and social justice. The author openly admits this book is primarily written for white educators. However, as universities and corporations endeavor diversity, equity and inclusion courses or initiatives, this book could be a useful resource for white employees, parents, staff, and students to cultivate self-awareness and learn from Nurenberg’s personal stories, practical advice and teaching tools.

Strengths/Weaknesses

Since the summer of 2020, the work of defining social justice became a greater burden to people of color as allies sought out resources. The strength of this book is that Nurenberg has well-researched each chapter, offers actionable, practical tips to white allies willing to engage in self-examination. The book is written in a conversational, instructional tone and may lessen the fear of making mistakes. One difficulty with this

book is that Nurenberg refers to his own anti-Semitic experiences which could be viewed as yet another white liberal seeking to center himself in the narrative of a timely societal topic. When white allies write about social injustice, it is difficult to avoid being viewed as a performative ally. It will be Important for Nurenberg to continue his work on advancing an authentic anti-racist agenda in his own teaching, learning and speaking.

Conclusion

In summary, *What Does Injustice Have to Do With Me?* is a book as much about pedagogy as it is about self-awareness, shared power, and authentic allyship. Overall, the author effectively analyzes the need for white educators, especially those who teach white students, to learn more about unequal systems and outcomes of oppressive systems on society. Nurenberg pragmatically argues that social justice education is critical to not only advance society but it affects everyone. He alludes that this learning will help white students emerge from a lack of empathy and the cynicism that surround topics of race. This book is useful for white educators because it is written from the perspective of a white educator who has personally experienced, researched and fumbled with the iterative process of social justice work. Perhaps Nurenberg's identity will resonate with other white educators and help avoid performative allyship.

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