

Chapter 1


Fostering Social Justice Awareness through Classic Children's Literature in the EFL Classroom: Insights from an Observational Study at an International Kindergarten

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ABSTRACT

Guided by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, this qualitative observational study examines how children's literature can sensitize EFL kindergarteners to race, disability, and gender inequalities in an international kindergarten in Switzerland. Participants included one kindergarten teacher and fifteen EFL learners aged five to six. Data were collected through the observation of four literature-based lessons, student artifacts, field notes and interviews with the teacher. Thematic analysis revealed four themes: i) Cracks in gender stereotypes, ii) Beyond visible disabilities,

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iii) Celebrating racial diversity, and, iv) Understanding empathy. Findings suggest classic children's literature can foster young EFL learners' awareness of overt and covert oppressions related to gender, disability and race by simplifying abstract concepts through relatable narratives and triggering critical discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Over several decades, scholars and researchers in early childhood education (ECE) have voiced concerns about young children's attitudes towards social justice issues and have repeatedly stressed that social justice teaching should be integrated in ECE curricula (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Ehrlich Harper & Bonnano, 1993). Teaching for social justice involves recognizing various forms of oppression and actively working within classroom walls to disrupt and challenge these oppressions. It aims to explicate, critique, and ultimately transform beliefs and behaviors that marginalize individuals or groups. As Freire (1993) argues, the first step in this process is awareness—becoming conscious of social injustice. Thus, teaching for social justice is a form of raising awareness (Freire, 1993) that facilitates students' engagement with social justice issues in a manner that heightens their sensitivity and make injustices seem unacceptable. Consequently, social justice teaching is not, and should not be, approached as a theoretical subject to be taught in isolation, but rather as a reflective and action-oriented process embedded within daily pedagogical practice.

Nevertheless, despite the growing momentum for pedagogies underpinned by social justice, young children globally still exhibit negative attitudes toward those perceived as different (Beneke, 2021; Bigler & Pahlke, 2019; Gutierrez et al., 2020; Hawkins, 2011; Skočajić et al., 2020). Empirical findings show that early childhood (EC) educators often downplay and avoid teaching about harmful overt forces like dehumanization, transphobia, homophobia, and various -isms, including racism, ableism, sexism, classism, and linguicism, as they find it a complex task for young children (Daly & Kelly-Ware, 2025; Nguyen, 2022). Additionally, recent works reveal that EC pre- and in-service educators themselves are prone to dysconscious -isms, particularly ableism, racism, and sexism, due to inadequate understanding of equity and diversity (Hancock et al., 2021; Johansson, Hedlin & Åberg, 2018; Prioletta, 2018).

In this study, we focus on three of these -isms, namely ableism, sexism, and racism as well as one vital construct of social justice education, empathy. Ableism involves ranking individuals based on “normalcy,” “intelligence,” and potential output, deeming those with disabilities as “weak,” “inferior,” and “problematic” (Lewis, 2019). Racism encompasses societal structures and beliefs sustaining white

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