

Social Justice Leaders and Neighbors

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Dr. Brenda Williams Harewood and Eric Jacobson, two social justice leaders are neighbors in the racially and socioeconomically segregated education system on Long Island, New York. Dr. Harewood serves in the predominantly African American and Hispanic lower socioeconomic Uniondale School District and Mr. Jacobson leads in a private school in the predominantly Caucasian, upper-middle class Merrick. While they are neighbors a mere mile apart, the student populations are separated by the chasmic divides of race and socioeconomic class. These steadfast principals, however, have shown that social justice leadership may be successfully implemented in any neighborhood.

All social justice leadership does not look the same. Dr. Harewood applies the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy and Mr. Jacobson is guided by the philosophy of neo-humanism.

Dr. Harewood approaches social justice through culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which is a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in 1995 in an attempt to move away from a deficit model of viewing African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The author wanted focus placed on the unique experiences and knowledge these students brought to their education as a way of connecting to and shaping their knowledge and learning environment.

Dr. Harewood's position as principal before retiring from Uniondale Pre-Kindergarten School, which has a majority of Hispanic students and a minority of African American students, created a school culture representative of the students, avoiding dependence on superficiality such as sharing of cultural foods. Teachers and administrators endeavor to familiarize themselves with students' families for deeper connections. Rich and culturally diverse literature

is available and used to ensure students see themselves reflected in the stories as well as the rest of the world. Under Dr. Harewood's leadership, a deeper understanding and enveloping of students' cultures and ethnicities was undertaken and incorporated into instruction and throughout the learning environment.

As a significant component of CRP, family and community engagement is a major element in the schools of Uniondale School District led by Dr. Harewood. A strong home-school bridge was also developed and parents are encouraged to visit and contribute in meaningful and valuable ways. Family activities are scheduled at various times during and after school hours for parents' availability with meals or snacks provided as well as child care. Parents are greeted with hugs by the principal and teachers and welcomed into the building. The Uniondale Pre-Kindergarten School has positioned itself as a model for encouraging family and community engagement.

In neighboring Merrick, Mr. Jacobson addresses social justice at the Progressive School of Long Island by different means and with different objectives. He is raising awareness and developing empathetic social justice leaders. As the founder and principal, Mr. Jacobson is guided by the idealistic philosophy of neo-humanism; a holistic ideology steeped in equity and spirituality with a focus on love and universal oneness.

Social justice is embedded in the multiple areas of the curriculum at the Progressive School. The social studies program features deep investigation and expanded learning that takes place over weeks. Through electives, students are encouraged to engage in deep research and explore their interests and questions. The science curriculum focuses on ecology with an emphasis on global sustainability of resources. As a whole, the curriculum takes on a global perspective and students view themselves a part of an intertwined system of interdependency.

This leads to many students developing empathy and activism for social justice of oppressed groups.

Civic engagement is an important part of the curriculum at the Progressive School and carries a goal of raising awareness and developing social justice leadership skills. Jans (2004) stated that children are affected by the same issues as adults in society and children in western society are also increasingly being viewed as individuals with their own rights and interests. They should therefore equally engage in relevant issues in their community and the world. The service curriculum, which begins in the kindergarten and culminates in the eighth grade with year-long projects, helps students understand current and relevant issues in their community and around the world thereby developing future social justice leaders.

The ideology and practice of neo-humanism at the Progressive School can help students shift attention away from material possessions and focus on caring for one another. Four mornings a week, Mr. Jacobson leads Quiet Time in which all students practice yoga, meditation, and singing together. The school's focus is on molding kind, compassionate, and caring individuals who are dedicated to sharing their gifts with the world for the purpose of peace, love, and betterment for humanity.

Dr. Harwood and Mr. Jacobson are social justice leaders in neighboring but dissimilar towns on Long Island, New York. They both approach and implement social justice from different perspectives with their different student populations, yet their success is well-documented and recognized in their respective communities.

References

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