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CHAPTER

1

Know Yourself

Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.

—Mother Teresa

Who am I?

That is certainly a question that has fueled philosophers, poets, scholars, and spiritual leaders across the span of human existence. The quest to understand ourself never ends, partly because how we define ourself changes across experiences. Forging an identity as a social justice educator begins with deepening your understanding of yourself.

It is a common misconception that being a social justice educator requires you to leap in and do something to change others: to change students, colleagues, and systems. Of course, taking action in the name of social justice is important, even noble. However, for those actions to result in the desired outcomes, educators must first be reconciled with their own self-identity—understanding what evokes emotion, awakens passion, and inspires a call to action. What truly matters to you, and what drives your behavior? This first chapter is designed to help you explore your identity.

Becoming a Social Justice Educator

Self-knowledge is foundational to the work of social justice educators. Exploring our own cultural influences and identities gives us insight

Becoming a Social Justice Educator: A Guide With Practice by Zachary Scott Robbins, Dominique Smith, Sarah Ortega, Oscar Corrigan, and Bryan Dale. Copyright © 2024 by Corwin Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

into the frame through which we see the world—and how that frame also limits our view. The interactions we have with others who have a different frame often lead to misunderstandings between us. And our frame also informs how we perpetuate institutional and structural barriers that continue to do a disservice to children and communities. When others speak of dismantling systemic barriers, we must remember that we are a part of that system—and we may even unconsciously contribute to maintaining it. If we don't first identify who we are as we seek to cultivate a social justice mindset and then adjust our approach as needed, how can we possibly expect others to change?

What's "Culture," Anyway?

Traditional definitions of culture, the ones we learned in school, usually focus on the explicit and implicit patterns of behavior, language, symbols, and values that make groups different. We suppose that definition works in a historical sense, when it describes a geographically isolated group of people who never intermingled with anyone else, but in a world connected by modes of travel and telecommunications, the idea that a person is a member of only one culture doesn't really fit. Think of all the possible cultural influences inside this person:

A fifteen-year-old cisgender boy growing up in Atlanta loves crunk music, practices his family's religion but has questions, and aspires to be a social media influencer. His parents, both physicians, don't support this dream. His grandparents fled Iran with their daughters in 1979 to escape the revolution. His grandparents speak Arabic. He knows a few words and phrases but has difficulty communicating deeply with them. When he goes with his parents to his grandparents' house, he enjoys *masgouf*, a traditional Iraqi dish. He also loves Mexican American food, especially the fish tacos his boyfriend introduced him to. He and his boyfriend keep their relationship secret from their families; however, they are "out" as a couple at their high school.

Could you ever assign a single "culture" to this adolescent? Our first cultural influences are usually derived from our families, but our perspective and identity continue to transform as we have more experiences and interact with others outside our family. Understanding the frame through which we see the world begins with looking at our own family experiences. How much warmth we experience in a family unit influences how we forge our respective self-identities (Benson & Johnson, 2009). In particular, the amount of conflict we experience among and between our family members—and our predisposition for coping with conflict—influences how we forge our self-identity. We are influenced by how our parents and guardians monitor and control our behavior



Pause and Ponder

Begin your own cultural autobiography with a reflection about your family of origin or your family of choice. Note that some of the questions may not apply to you, but we encourage you to consider each of them as a potential shaper of your identity.

QUESTION	REFLECTION	HOW HAS THIS IMPACTED YOUR SELF-IDENTITY?
When and where were you born?		
Where did you live between birth and age eighteen?		
Where did your parents or guardians grow up?		
Where did your grandparents or extended family or caregivers grow up?		

QUESTION	REFLECTION	HOW HAS THIS IMPACTED YOUR SELF-IDENTITY?
<p>What events did you celebrate as a family growing up?</p>		
<p>When there was a big decision to make in your family, who participated? Was there anyone who had the final word in major decisions?</p>		
<p>As an adult, how are major decisions in your family made?</p>		
<p>As an adult, with whom do you discuss your thoughts and feelings? Why?</p>		
<p>As an adult, do you discuss your thoughts and feelings with people outside of your family?</p>		

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