Teaching Environmental Justice in Our Classrooms
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Particularly given the results of the latest report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we must ask ourselves some critical questions about how we prepare our children to face the world they will be inheriting, and the harsh truth of today’s conditions and dynamics. How do we ensure that our youth emerge from their studies with an understanding of the intersection between our social, economic, cultural, political, and environmental status in society? How do we teach them their role as influencers of what’s happening in their environment, now and in the future?

The reality of being a youth of color and/or a youth living in a low income community means that, due to socio-political marginalization, already one is more likely to be located next to a polluting facility and/or living in a county whose air quality is in violation of already lax federal standards. And, such youth are more likely to have the very building that houses their institution of learning built on toxic, contaminated land. We see how this plays out in high rates of asthma, attention deficit disorder, learning problems, and even violence, all of which are tied to exposure to toxins. We also see this manifest in missed days of school for children, missed days of work for parents who are sick themselves and/or caring for sick children, etc. We also see lower property values because of proximity to toxic facilities, which means under-resourced schools and compromised education. These youth are caught in a cycle of pollution, illness, poor education, negative interactions with the criminal justice system, economic blight, which detracts from youth’s ability to achieve and their families’ capacity to thrive. While environmental issues are statistically more present in low-income and minority communities, these resources can be used to educate children from any background.

Our classrooms must integrate the concept of intersectionality into instruction in order to make lessons relevant to the reality of the lives of these youth, resulting in helping students identify how they can be agents of change in their lives and in their communities. There are numerous inspiring examples of youth who have seized the reins and are making a transformational impact on their communities and we need to foster more. Youth in Curtis Bay, MD through the United Workers committee, “Free Your Voice”, are actively fighting back against a proposed incinerator which would further contaminate an already pollution-burdened community. Youth organizing with UPROSE in Brooklyn, NY youth are learning to plant, compost and harvest to ensure better food security in their neighborhoods.
In Western Massachusetts, the Toxic Soil Busters, a youth-run worker cooperative, is making sure their community is protected from lead that contaminates their land while creating jobs. In Richmond, CA youth with Communities for a Better Environment are engaging on fighting pollution from the Chevron Oil Refinery and stewarding the transition to clean energy. These are just a few of the types of tip-of-the-spear leadership being exercised by youth across the country.

Systems focused on profit instead of the planet and her people, resulting in irresponsible practices, have left today’s youth with a polluted, climate change threatened/impacted earth that they must now try to clean up to improve quality of life today and to mitigate the coming catastrophic conditions. Studies show that youth of color are underrepresented in Science, Engineering, Technology, and Mathematics (STEM) Studies. This leads to underrepresentation in key industries such as the energy and environmental sciences sectors, and, by extension, decision making and implementation bodies such as the Public Service/Utilities Commissions, the Environmental Protection Agency, etc. We have an obligation to motivate and equip our youth with the framing, analysis, tools and space to utilize their emerging leadership, intellect, and creativity to fulfill a vision of a sustainable planet for themselves and future generations.

This Environmental Justice Class Resource Guide provides a list of clearinghouse websites with multiple environmental justice (EJ) resources for various age groups, a list of individual EJ lesson plans for various age groups, books and toolkits which teachers may find helpful, and a short list of hip-hop videos/songs to help engage youth in classroom settings and beyond.
Please let us know if there are other resources we should add to this list! Also, please let us know if you have feedback to share as you use the various resources. To do so, please contact us at ECJP@naacpnet.org. We wish you well in using these tools to integrate EJ into your classrooms, and/or community work, and/or advocate for others to do the same.
Environmental Justice Classroom Resource Guide

RESOURCE LIST WEBPAGES

- National Institutes for Environmental Health Sciences — Resources for Educators
  http://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/scied/teachers/
- eGFI - EPA Teacher Resources
  http://teachers.egfi-k12.org/tag/superfund/
- Taking it to the Class: Green Projects for the Classroom
  http://www.edutopia.org/environmentally-conscious-lesson-ideas
- Environmental Justice Teacher Resources
  http://www.lessonplanet.com/lesson-plans/environmental-justice
- Environmental Justice Curriculum Resources
  http://worldsavvy.org/community-resources/sustainable-communities-theme-resources/curriculum-resources/
- Center for Ecogenics and Environmental Health—Resources for Educators
  http://depts.washington.edu/ceeh/educators/k12-resources.html
- National Education Association- Environmental Justice
  http://www.nea.org/tools/72106.htm
- Zinn Education Project
  https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/?cond[0]=themes_str:Environment
- Duke University - Environmental Justice Lesson Plans
  https://sites.duke.edu/ejworkshop/resources/lesson-plans/
- InTeGrate - Environmental Justice Activity Collection
  https://serc.carleton.edu/integrate/workshops/envirojustice2013/activities.html
- Voices from the Valley - Teaching
  https://www.voicesfromthevalley.org/teaching/activities-assignments/
- Teaching Tolerance - Environmental Justice
  https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/lessons?keyword=environmental+justice
- Environmental Justice Unit Designed for 3rd and 4th Grade by Jenna Harmsen
  https://jharmsenenvironmentaljusticeunit.weebly.com/unit-overview.html
INDIVIDUAL LESSON PLANS
- Climate Justice in British Columbia: Lessons for Transformation
  https://teachclimatejustice.ca/
- Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?
  http://www.unnaturalcauses.org/discussion_guides.php
- Environmental Racism
  http://www.asanet.org/introtosociology/LessonPlans/Lesson%20PlanEnvironmentalRacism042408.htm
- What Is Environmental Health?
- Teaching the Levees: Katrina and Environmental Justice
  http://teachingthelevees.org/?page_id=54
- Indoor Air Quality
- Coal, Chocolate chip cookies, and Mountaintop Removal
- Teaching Tolerance: Reporting Environmental Racism
  https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/tolerance-lessons/reporting-on-environmental-racism
- Whose Backyard? Toxic Waste Management Meeting and Environmental Injustice
- Groundwork USA- Environmental Justice Literacy Curriculum

YOUTH FOCUSED SONGS/VIDEOS
- 7 Billion Strong: Power to the People
  http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/environmental-justice-middle-grades
- Global Warning—Earth Amplified
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aV3C-e2ukWw
- Clean Up The Air
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLaE0QZlyKs
- Gallo—Ima Push
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXBlFqQKSMY

BOOKS/ Toolkits
- A Peoples Curriculum for the Earth: Teaching Climate Change and the Environmental Crisis edited by Bill Bigelow & Tim Swinehart
  https://www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/a-people-s-curriculum-for-the-earth
- Learning to Give: Environmental Justice Toolkit
  https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/environmental-justice-toolkit
- Mighty Girls go Green: 25 Girl-empowering Book for Earth Month
  https://www.amightygirl.com/blog?p=11850
- How to Construct an Environmental Justice Lesson Plan