

MAGAZINE FEATURE

Advice for New Social Justice Educators: "I Wish I Had Known"

The Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board shares what they've learned as they've worked for justice in schools.

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Illustration by Zachariah Ohora

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This summer, the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board gathered in Montgomery, Alabama, for three days of learning, fellowship and planning for the year ahead. Our board is composed of educators working in a range of fields, at all stages of their careers and from all corners of the United States. Sharing their expertise, their ideas and their voices with us, they play an invaluable role in the work of Teaching Tolerance.

During this year's gathering, they took the time to share their personal experiences as social justice educators. They talked about what they'd learned over years of doing this work and what they wish they'd known when they began. In this collaborative piece, the 36 members of the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board welcome educators new to the work of social justice, reflect on their own journeys and share some of the wisdom they've harvested along the way.

I WISH I HAD KNOWN...



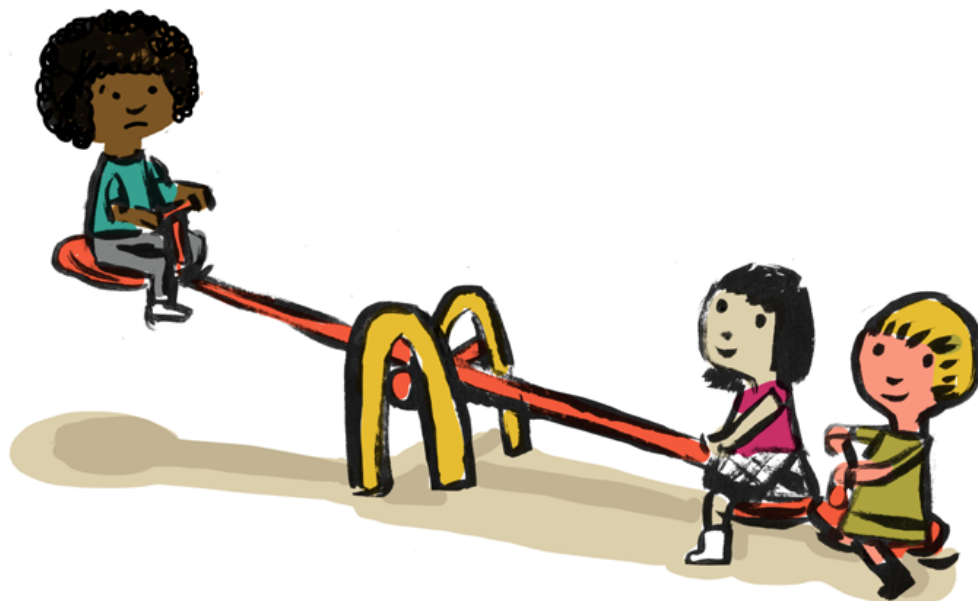
This is about the kids. Building community is survival.

I wish I had known
this is about the kids. Constantly undoing the layers of my own internalized
oppression
even though I may never be completely free.

I wish I had known
how powerful I truly am to effect change within myself as well as my community.
That internal conflict is where my magic happens.



I wish I had known
that some of my actions replicate the oppression I seek to end.
That it's essential for white teachers to have a full understanding of this country's
history
of white supremacy and how they benefit from whiteness.



I wish I had known
that systems and institutions in this country are not made for
people of color to succeed.

I wish I had known to trust my inner voice. Meet people where they are. Build
coalitions.

Journey together to mitigate the loneliness of leadership.

I wish I had known
that my voice and my perspective mattered.
That openly sharing my struggles does not make me weak or less than.

I wish I had known
I can work in a school and not be fired for doing anti-racist work.

I wish I had known
this is about the kids.
White people may let me down, and people who look like me may betray me.
This work should not fall upon the shoulders of marginalized people.

I wish I had known
how many things would change, if not always the way I thought they would.



I wish I had known
my power would multiply over the years with my experience, but I
am still sometimes invisible.

I wish I had known
that teaching consists of a lot of meetings
and paperwork that can make you forget your main purpose.
That a snack and cold sparkling water is magical at 2 p.m.
That I *can* and *should* leave work at school.
That exhaustion is not a badge of honor,
and I need energy for my students.

I wish I had known
this is about the kids. Accountability means speaking up and owning my mistakes.

I wish I had known
to minimize appropriation,
to empower the voices of those of us who are systemically silenced,
to find courage in the stories of resistance past.

I wish I had known
the words of Audre Lorde:
Caring for ourselves is not self-indulgence,
it is self-preservation
and that is an act of political warfare.



I wish I had known
how to have fun.

I wish I had known
that behavior is communication.



I wish I had known
that passion is not enough.
And that patience is your friend
and hard to muster.

I wish I had known
this is about the kids.
Our students watch us closely
and model themselves after what we do
—not what we say.
Act, speak, love, fight and organize accordingly,
so that kids can do the same.

I wish I had known this is about the kids.

X

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