

Mike: Alright yall, so everyone knows that childcare is essential. We're some of the most influential people out there. Yet, we are often under paid and overworked. So how can you work full-time, have hobbies, show your friends and family love, self-care, and also fine tune your skills and grow more in-depth? That's where we come in. These napcasts, 25, 30 minute segments are designed to help you learn on the go, hear another perspective, spark debate, agree incessantly, and honestly, remind you that you're not alone. We live in a complex world, so allow us to challenge your perspective. So, are your headphones in? Did you turn the volume up? Alright now. Let's get it.

Mike: Welcome to Napcast, a podcast produced by Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle, Washington, on the traditional lands of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish Tribe. The SEC hasn't kicked us off the airwaves yet, so we must be doing something right. This is episode 3 – La Revolucion! Not to be confused with Wisin y Yandel album title. But same concept. We focusing on social activism within young children today.

As always, my name is Mike Browne, pronouns are he/him

Nick: And I'm Nick Terrones, pronouns are he/him

This is one of my favorite topics. Working with toddlers, you see it everyday in their little nuanced ways, especially as they grow and make new observations of the world around them. So I'm excited to dive deeper into it and hopefully help listeners out there figure out ways we can build the resiliency, the leadership, the foundations of critical thinking, and the fire under children's bellies to be able to lead a revolution and fundamentally change the way we govern, lead, live in community with one another. Sounds radical, yeah? Education and learning should be, so let's jump straight into it Mike

Mike: No doubt. Right! Let's do it but before I pick your brain on ways to instill social activist values in children, set the stage for us on a developmental perspective. What are children noticing, feeling, understanding when it comes to justice?

Nick: Well let's start with brains first. By the time a human is 5-6 months old they can distinguish races equally, and by the time they're 9 months old they can recognize their own race more quickly than other races. All the meanwhile, between these ages, their brains are making connections with how the sounds and physical reactions their adult's make in their lives to stimuli they're being exposed to. So, one could say that at a very young age children are already synthesizing how to react to people that are different from them based on their adults' reactions.

Fast forward a couple to a few years, children have quite a skill set of observation, verbalization, and processing to begin to fully participate in the world around them. And developmentally, young children are in that stage of ego-centrism where their thoughts are all about themselves, and yet their in this weird push-pull where they want to be in relationship with peers. At a very young age we start seeing a child's sense of self emerge in relation to their peers; beginnings of empathy.

At first justice is about them, what does it feel like when something is taken away from them, when someone pushes them down, when they're yelled at. Then, hopefully, they begin to see what it's like when someone with a bit more skills advocates for them, they see and feel that power of advocacy. That power of advocacy, again hopefully, is then used to help others, as they see what it means for them to wield that power. It's like a lot of other skill sets that we see develop in children's learning: math for example- you learn to add and subtract, then divide and multiply, word problems, fractions, algebra, geometry, and so

on. I may not have the order right, but the principle is that they with foundational concepts the application gets more nuanced and somewhat trickier.

Mike: Great so we know what children are noticing, so do we just tell them about environmental justice and climate change? In which ways can I boil this down to make what the children are learning is meaningful, relevant to them and something they can apply to real world learning?

Nick: Environmental justice really starts with, like all justices in my opinion, establishing a relationship with that particular environment, thing or person. From this empathy can grow, a sense of belonging and responsibility.

This is something that comes up all the time, especially in the spring to summer seasons. You know. we're outside a lot and that means we eat snack outside, and sometimes we have non-biodegradable trash. When this comes up we simply tell the children, "this trash is not good for our outside. Here's where you can throw it away (and we'll have little container for the trash to go in). If these plastic or paper bits go flying around the outside, a duck or a squirrel might think it's food and choke on it. It might hurt them or make them really sick." Then, in the past, I have talked with children what food-trash might be acceptable: apple peels, sunflower seed shells, bread crusts, etc. But we also want to make sure we're not always leaving these out, and that's where we adults model balance.

That also comes up when daisy and daffodils are sprouting, when we see little red berries popping out on a bush, and when we come across birch trees which has bark that peels off. With all of these natural materials, children know they can be plucked and peeled from where they come from. And again we adults can model balance and conservationism by saying "if we take too much, there won't be any for the next group, or for you when you come back. We need to let these things regrow." And we might work with the child on a plan to use the material, but again, emphasize that this won't always happen. We also bring it back to the material, and what its purpose may be: birds feed on the red berries and may not have enough food if we take too many, or the birch tree may not stay warm if we peel a lot of its bark off.

Mike: So let's take that a step further. Let's keep on with the environmental justice theme and let's pretend we're not in the state of Washington where we are environmentally focused.

It's a proven fact that lower class and those suffering from income instability, which are predominately BIPOC folks (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) are the ones suffering greatly from climate change – socially, economically, culturally, politically and institutionally.

As a center who engages in play-based learning, how would you introduce this topic into the classroom, what other provocations would you introduce to extend the ideas of the children, what other supports would you bring in to move from talking about it, to theory, to make the learning visible or tangible?

Nick: Relevancy is key here, especially for toddlers and young preschoolers. You know for our particular setting, we're situated by a ship canal. There's a nice place to walk, grass to run on, and tables to picnic at. Naturally this invites humans to be inconsiderate, and usually leave their trash laying about. And naturally, many of us adults can't help but share out loud our disappointment at seeing this. We had one educator who, several years back, called the city to see what could be done, how he and his class could help.

Fortunately there's a program that provided those long-arm grabby things to pick up trash, so you didn't have to touch it, safety vests, trash bags, and even some safety gloves.

After he and his class went around picking up the litter, they decided to make signs that read: No more littler! Put your trash in the garbage can! Things like that.

Again this was an example of empowering children with a sense of advocacy, and helping them wield that power responsibly. These children were 3-5 years old.

Mike: See what I like about that a lot is that it combined so many different forms of activism. Showed the kids to phone up their local representatives, showed them that they can roll up their sleeves and help out, marches, I'm sure they read books and did activities together. This is cool to see children being empowered to come up with actual solutions themselves and then promote it to the community.

Okay so what about a younger age group? Toddlers. Do you have a story to share about advocacy and empowerment with this age group? Let's stay away from race. Since most social activism is focused on race. And rightfully so. We have an ugly history and current reality when it comes to race relations in the United States.

Nick: For my toddler classroom, there was a time when we took a trip to the Seattle Center, a local tourist trap, and great place to run around the grass. While we were all running around, and climbing park benches, a couple of my children noticed two people sleeping on separate benches nearby. To the adult eye, one could suspect, with some accuracy, that they were homeless.

The two children had been climbing on all the other benches, and with some caution, approached these ones that were occupied. They somehow managed to get on to a part of the bench and jump off before moving on. The whole time you could see their faces observing, calculating, and thinking about who was on the bench, while their play propelled them to keep going.

My instinctive, protective side of me wanted to intervene the very moment I saw them making way for those particular benches. But I allowed myself to observe instead, to not make a not-so-scary situation all of the sudden be scary to these playing children. This moment happened and lasted for maybe 15-20 seconds, like many of the significant learning moments toddlers have.

Mike: Okay, okay. Valuable lesson learned right there. So, you packed up and went home and never talked about it again right?

Nick: Well, that same day as we sat down to eat a picnic lunch, I asked them what they had noticed. One said that "someone was sleeping, maybe taking a nap, like me at school." The other child, agreed and also said, "I sleep like that. On my couch. I have some holes in my pants too. They have a bed?" I hadn't expected that, but it's an example of how observant toddlers are and that they are making meaning of these sorts of experiences!

We casually talked about how I didn't know if they those people had a bed, that they could be homeless, which meant they did not have a house like them. And maybe they sometimes slept outside or sometimes they shared a house with people--the idea of a shelter. About a week later, I began to notice that these two children were building benches to sleep on in their pretend play, and sometimes they'd build homes and invite their friends to be in.

This prompted me to start hanging up pictures of different kinds of residences from around the world, but making sure that I represented what was relevant to our community. As time went on we casually discussed these different kinds of domiciles, and talked about where they were in the world, who might be the people who lived in them, and how were they the same and different from their homes. Again, this

was all casual with me finding ways to keep them thinking about the relation to their observations and to their personal lives.

Mike: You have this certain standard that you bring with you into the classroom, in convos with me, with the children. And you hold yourself and others accountable in that. And I appreciate it because its real, its you. It's just one of many characteristics and traits you intentionally focus on. So is there like one that you place above the others, so to speak, to help build children's social activism and justice lens?

Nick: Critical thinking. This is the key concept that drives my intention. I believe that children, bring an innate ability of understanding the world, as well as a deep capacity for thinking. And to really help children capitalize on this, we educators and adults in their lives, need to be willing to engage in tough conversations. To talk about injustices that drive this world as a matter of fact, and to use real information to back it up. It's also important, and I encourage it for all adults, to not know! I truly believe there's value in not knowing and modeling that for children, because frankly most of the time we do not know!

Mike: We'll be right back..

Commercial: Hilltop Children's Center is a high quality preschool, afterschool program, and professional development institute of early learning and inquiry serving the Seattle community since 1971. Together, we are working with the next generation of inventors, leaders, thinkers, artists, and social activists. For more information on our professional development and community outreach including workshops, presentations, blogs, coaching and consulting, and of course, this napcast, please visit www.hilltopcc.com

Mike: Alright, so Nick, reflective practice is kinda what we are known for at Hilltop. You've embodied that. And you bring that reflective mindset to everyone no matter how short or tall they are. Its cool to see how it spur imagination, creativity, courage in others.

What's the magic sauce? The sauce you use to create the conditions in your classroom for reflective practice in regards to social activism?

Nick: Honestly, I think it's having the courage, which I think emerges in stages, and in no particular order:

1. Having courage to identify and live values. And to courageously engage other adults in the classroom to think about these and to share their own. Get everyone on the same page essentially.
2. Taking action on that courage and engaging the children in a meaningful and relevant way
3. Have the courage to trust the children as thinkers. That they'll be able to think through, and eventually, make sense of the information.

Also, I am always thinking about the purpose of education, especially early childhood education: On one side it's a means to perpetuate the norm, to maintain the status quo. On the other side of the matter it can be a way to disrupt the status quo and to address the needs of the times, to develop critical thinkers to help shape a more equitable, more democratic society.

Mike: Oh yeah? Say a little bit more about that.

Nick: Well, for a long time education, of all levels has reflected the ideas and principles of one particular group: Caucasians, and of course sprinkle in a little religious flare into it. And somewhere a long the line this became synonymous with what it means to be an "American." The vast majority of us were taught about pilgrims, western expansion and manifest destiny, and all men were created equal, but these were

all superficial lessons with no regard to the lives and cultures lost, impact on the environment, and nuances of who equality was actually meant for.

However, in recent times I feel like many great thinkers are giving voice to the injustices of the past. You know the cliché, history repeats itself? Well, it isn't so much that history is repeating, but the institutions that keep perpetuating it. And now there is a good amount of people, on behalf of education, saying no, this isn't just and fair, this isn't accurate, this is enough. And so we reconfigure the pedagogy of the institution that is education.

This concept is derived from the Structural-Functionalism framework, by of social science thinker Talcott Parsons....check him out!

Mike: Children are the best. They are forever in awe of the world and ask so many questions about it. At Hilltop, if a spicy topic such as sexism, racism, homelessness etc. interest them and they bring it up, we are not afraid to engage in these difficult conversations with them in age appropriate ways. There has been a couple of times where the adults will sign off on it and then become upset that we are talking about non-binary, child separation at the border, etc.

So how do you navigate these situations with adults when our philosophy which is very much forward thinking and socially conscious, contrasts from what parents, guardians may believe in?

Nick: Fall back on values. Like you said, and we remind families: this is what we do. This is what our curriculum looks like. And, fortunately, we've been able to pair it with emerging science on brain development. This stuff is hard to talk about, for everyone, no doubt! For myself included, I know many educators who are not going to just back down and stop addressing children's observations. Keeping the dialogue going is important for both families and educators, as the more we talk the more is revealed. It also helps that we educators rely on each other to think through situations, to help find language that communicates our intentions and values. These instances, fortunately, do not come up too often, and the worse I've seen it is that it's gone to the school's board, in which the board basically told the family take it or leave it, you do have a choice.

I think it's important to point out too, to reiterate, that *their children bring these things up!* Yes there are times when educators want to acknowledge truths that are being erased from social consciousness like indigenous land, Black and Latino History months, but when we take children out in the community and they ask 'why is that person sleeping on the bench?' or even 'is that Mike or Nick?' because they see a black or brown man as educators we can either a) take this opportunity to engage and expand their thinking or b) ignore or shun their thinking and possibly communicate that their observation and thinking is somehow wrong or unwanted.

Mike: Social Justice is not just an activity you do in the classroom. It's not something you just try to teach while at school. For me, it carries with me throughout my day. Bringing to light the ways white supremacy lives, operates, and infiltrates every fabric of our society. Helping people understand that gender has a race component to it. Dismantling patriarchy and toxic masculinity in our society. I live and breathe this because my very existence as a Black male depends on a white person not viewing me as a threat, or the police officer not using bias in their decision, or my teacher not suspending me.

I wrote a blog on what I need from white people months ago. Check it out at <https://hilltopcc.com/institute-blog/ally/> and it encourages yall to

1. Use your privilege to confront the racist employee at your local supermarket.
2. Use your power to set up structures, environments, and conversations that highlight ways we can thrive together, in multiple learning environments.

3. Use your resources to develop and support strategies to tackle this together with your administration, your district, and your community.

And more. Part of white people's job as a self-proclaimed anti-racist, social justice warrior, or whatever you want to call it, is to interrupt racist moments. It's not just something you do 9-5, its something you take out with you in your everyday life. But what I need is not what you need Nick. So can you speak on that a bit? What does you, your family, your community need from white people?

Nick: Oh man, this is weighted! Honestly, from my perspective and experience the idea of social-justice hierarchy comes to mind. A lot of the times it feels like there's a treatment of who has or had it worse and one group of people is in need of more saving or justice than another. Related to that, keep in mind that not all people of color have the same or even similar stories! This includes people who are of the same race: my story and perception of the world is a lot different than my best friend Raul's, and we both identify as heterosexual Mexican American men. The same may be for you and your friends, Mike.

Take this into account in your workplaces too, especially when you're seeking out ways to make things more equitable and inclusive. For example, there was an instance I know of when a white female colleague asked an Asian American woman, who is a consultant and leader in the field, if we should hire a white or person of color facilitator for a project and was advised to hire someone white. While, an African American colleague thought that someone of color should have been hired.

Mike: That was me haha. And it stems from the fact that we center whiteness in this work. We assume white people have a better understanding and knowledge of the effects of white supremacy than folks of color. White people often lack accountability to Black, Brown, Indigneous People of color because their lives doesn't depend on it whereas our lives does. Let me repeat that, my life literally depends on white people not being racist. And I need a POC facilitator who has that critical race analysis to help bolster white people's ability to interrupt racist moments so I can continue to be alive.

Nick: The point is, you're not going to do it right, and that's ok. And don't beat yourself up over it, instead think about how maybe you can step aside so we people of color can be empowered to take the reigns.

Mike: Thank you Nick.

Nick: Thank you Mike.

Mike: We have one shot at being kiddos. Before the bills, before the drama, before responsibilities. Let's make sure we give them a joyous one. Until next time y'all take care.