

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

How to Teach for a Better World

By **Zoe Weil**

I recently came across a story in a local Michigan paper that reported the news of a teacher who showed 5th graders an undercover video of pigs being mistreated in a modern food-production facility. Some parents **complained about the "disturbing" nature of the video** to administrators, raising concerns that the teacher had shown the children graphic and inappropriate footage. According to the article, the school district disciplined the teacher with a brief suspension.

Although this case is just one instance of a single teacher's error in judgement and a district's recourse, it raises a question that calls for analysis: When and how should we teach children about critical real-world issues of injustice and cruelty, ones in which we are often complicit as a society and as individuals? Students, even those in elementary school, should learn about where their food comes from. There are few systems more intricately and intimately connected to personal and planetary health, justice, and ethics than agriculture. So how do we incorporate difficult and often controversial issues into schools in appropriate ways?

As an educator with more than 25 years of experience teaching about global ethical issues, I believe that we must teach students about the interconnected issues of human rights, animal protection, and environmental preservation. But we must take great care to share information about cruelty and injustice in age-appropriate ways that provide students with the tools for meaningful problem-solving. The goal is not to traumatize students but to engage them in awareness. In the case of cruelty in meat production, students need a combination of factual knowledge and intrinsic motivation to examine their personal roles as consumers. They also need to understand the responsibility for engagement in community and legislative action for the humane treatment of farm animals.

These topics can be challenging for teachers to bring up because they do not want to incur the potential negative responses from parents and administrators who would prefer to avoid controversial issues in school. Even teachers who do have the requisite knowledge and

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commitment may still struggle with the least-biased and most-empowering approaches.

Instead of slapping teachers on the wrist or suspending them when they make errors in judgment, we must solve the problems that this can create. Here are a few suggestions:

- Students exposed to issues in inappropriate ways, such as graphic video footage of animal abuse at too early an age, must be given the opportunity to discuss that exposure with informed mentors and teachers who can help them process their thoughts and feelings.

- Students should learn more about issues through problem-solving approaches to understand the role they can play in devising solutions. As the folk singer and environmental activist Joan Baez said, "Action is the antidote to despair." If students experience trauma from exposure to cruelty, they need to be provided with positive outlets for participating in meaningful change.

- School faculties, boards, parent-teacher associations, and administrations should assess how and when to teach students about challenging issues that affect their lives, as well as evaluate curricula and pedagogy for relevance in today's world.

- Schools should consider their own involvement in animal abuse and environmental degradation by assessing choices such as cafeteria food and product and energy use and discussing these choices with their students. In this way, schools can model what is taught in classrooms and reinforce learning.

While it demonstrates poor judgment to show young children graphic depictions of violence and cruelty, the reality is that most 10-year-olds have been exposed to extreme images of violence outside of school through films and TV, video games, and news reports. And many students are already aware of atrocities in the world, whether or not we explicitly teach about them. Several years ago, I asked a class of 5th and 6th graders to share what they thought were our world's biggest problems. Their list filled a whiteboard. What these young people didn't have was hope that these problems could be solved.

In fact, when I asked the students to raise their hands if they thought we could solve the problems they named, only six of the 45 children did so. I asked the children to close their eyes and imagine themselves in a better world at the end of a long life. I described a future without poverty and war, one in which we treat each other and animals with respect. Then I invited them to imagine another child asking, "What role did you play in helping to bring about this better world?" With their eyes still closed, I asked them to silently answer the question and raise their hands if they could now imagine solving the list of problems. This time nearly all students raised their hands.

It is a school's job to protect students' physical, mental, and emotional safety. That safety comes when children learn to have agency; to contribute



—Getty

"Our education system must present ethical concerns through school curricula."

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meaningfully in the world; and to cultivate qualities such as integrity, compassion, and kindness. Our education system must present ethical concerns through school curricula, empowering teachers and students to think about these issues in different ways. We must help students become adept researchers able to examine the complex systems that impact all of our lives. We must ensure, through schooling, that students receive the knowledge, tools, and motivation to be

what I call solutionaries—or problem-solvers—for a healthier and more just world. If we succeed in educating students in this way, they will have the skills to solve challenges with enthusiasm through whatever careers and professions they pursue. That's a win-win situation for children, teachers, and our world.



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