



# A Social Justice Lens



## A Teaching Resource Guide

For more information about the Social Justice program at the BCTF, go to [www.bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/SocialJustice.aspx)



# Using the BCTF social justice lens to focus our work

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*revised by CASJ, May 2010*

The BCTF's Committee for Action on Social Justice (CASJ) has developed a lens that applies social justice and critical theory to all aspects of our professional lives. This tool provides a framework in our union and in our schools to help guide policy, plan actions, and evaluate resources for social change. Social justice theory focuses on equity for all and critical theory requires action and systemic change. These two concepts form the basis of the BCTF social justice lens.

Central to all is a commitment to equity requiring systemic change. Often bandage-type solutions are inadequately used to solve urgent and emerging problems. Our social justice lens was developed to assist us to both zoom in to sharpen our focus, to broaden our perspective, and to develop and expand the scope of our work within the bigger picture. It provides a common language to communicate about our work and ensures that we are moving beyond short-term, immediate reactions. It is applicable to the classroom and to our work within and beyond our own union.

The lens has four distinct interconnecting filters—access, agency, advocacy, and solidarity action. Each represents an aspect of social justice work, and, while we may focus on one filter at a time, the true potential of these filters lies in engaging with all four simultaneously. Participatory democracy, civil

society, transformative practice, and systemic change found on the rotating outer ring of the lens are necessary to achieve the ultimate goal of equity found at the centre of the lens.

**Access** is the gateway to inclusion and participation. It hinders or enables an individual or group to take part. As teachers, we recognize the inherent socially just nature of the public education system and strongly voice our concerns to ensure that all students have real access to all programs and educational opportunities. Institutions only open to a privileged or select few have a high social injustice quotient. Restricted societies close off opportunities.

**Agency** means that individuals know their rights. They have the capacity and the ability to voice their concerns and to take actions that create change for the better. Learning how to think critically about the world is a key strategy to develop their agency. In conjunction, a social justice education is imperative for developing socially responsible, democratic participation in a civil society.

**Advocacy** is a deliberate process of influencing outcomes so that change can occur. It requires a set of skills that allows a person to understand a problem and effect change using varied strategies and tactics. Developing the skills to successfully advocate for oneself or on behalf of

others involves awareness (knowing what's happening), analysis (seeing the different parts, their impact, and the importance to the whole), and action plans (knowing what to do and how to do it). Action plans include a purpose, a message, a way to express the message, and an audience. Advocacy can be done individually or in groups.

**Solidarity action** refers to working with others to act for the collective betterment. It requires us to recognize injustice, to work across differences to find a common ground, and to achieve equity. Solidarity action requires coalition building within a group and networking with other groups. Examples of skills that help to achieve solidarity action can include empathy, co-operation, coalition building, and effective mediation and conflict-resolution skills.

Participatory democracy, transformative practice, systemic change, and civil society, like the ultimate goal of equity, are to be kept in mind when developing plans to advance access, agency, advocacy, and solidarity action. Invoking these concepts, we challenge the control of elites, whether they are ruling classes in society or the power structures in our work places. We also must look inside to examine how our own privilege affects our values and actions. These are some ways we choose to do socially just work and the means by which we will achieve greater equity.

# A social justice lens checklist

by Marianne Neill, CASJ—Peace and Global Education Action Group member

Here is a checklist that you can use to assess whether programs, resources, events, and so forth meet the criteria of the social justice lens. If not, you may want to identify alternatives that do satisfy these criteria. Note that some criteria may not apply to the specific item you are evaluating. A scenario using the social justice lens follows the checklist.

## Access

- values a welcoming and inclusive approach to all people equally
- values openness to the ideas and opinions of others as equal participants
- teaches the value of multiple perspectives
- demonstrates respect for democratic processes and civil society
- values community and co-operation
- responsive to all others equally

## Agency

- develops understanding of one's right to create change
- encourages belief in one's ability to affect one's own reality
- nurtures action and empowerment of everyone equally
- develops ability to think critically about social problems
- develops leadership skills
- values recognition and respect for the agency of others

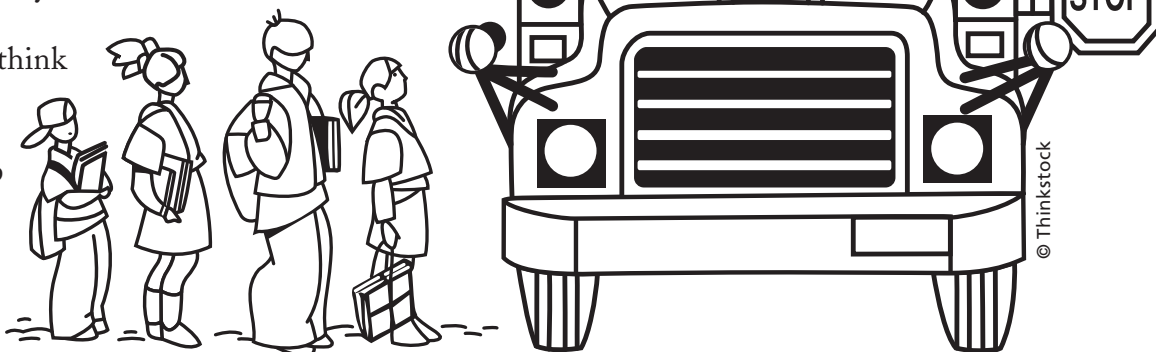
- actively encourages leadership in working towards positive change that benefits everyone
- encourages people to find their own voice
- empowers people
- values participatory democracy
- contributes to the development of ability to participate in the world
- contributes to the development of ability to change the world

## Advocacy

- builds skills needed to effect systemic change using various strategies
- develops an understanding of one's position and privilege in society
- develops awareness of social realities
- develops analytical ability
- develops awareness of how to respond to make change
- develops voice and agency to enhance the ability to influence outcomes
- empowers the voice of disenfranchised and minorities

## Solidarity action

- promotes transformative work for the betterment of others
- nurtures an understanding that an injury to one is an injury to all
- values co-operation and coalition-building
- works across differences to find common ground
- advocates broad interconnections and common goal-setting and actions
- shows recognition of the strength in unity
- shows effectiveness in mediating and resolving conflict to build alliances
- encourages collaboration with disenfranchised or minorities
- nurtures ability to take action with empathy



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# Scenario: Judy's Dilemma

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Judy is a busy Grade 10 teacher. Her school is planning to go out to watch the celebration of a major international sporting event. She has concerns because she knows the event includes commercialization and advertising by multinational corporations, and she has concerns about the slogan “win at all costs.” She decides to apply the social justice lens to assist her in making her decision about whether to participate or not.

## Access

The general philosophy of the event is an inclusive celebration of human achievement. Anyone could apply to participate, and everyone can go to watch it. Once in attendance, the students will be subject to advertising by the corporate sponsors. One of the sponsoring companies has been the subject of international investigations for murdering labour leaders. Judy has concerns that students will get the message that she and the school condone “winning at all costs” and support multinationals that put their financial profits before human rights.

The principal has been putting a lot of pressure on teachers and students to participate. As the event has been framed in the school, there does not seem to be openness to divergent opinions. Teachers have expressed fears that if they choose not to participate, there will be adverse consequences for them.

Using the checklist, Judy sees that the event is widely accessible, open to all, but isn't supportive of multiple perspectives and doesn't really demonstrate respect for democracy, human rights, and civil society.

## Agency

The event sets out to inspire youth to be involved in sports, and to aspire to achieve their dreams. In this way, it does encourage agency and confidence in one's ability to change the world. However, Judy feels that the commercialized aspects of the event send a message to students that excellence can be achieved only by getting corporate sponsorship. She is concerned about the students' ability to critically assess the role of corporate sponsorship in public events. Unless she provides a critical background for her class, the event could have the effect of undermining critical thinking and questioning. The pressure coming from the principal and the lack of consultation with teachers is reducing the likelihood that many teachers will provide students with the critical perspective.

Judy has concerns about the minimal agency students will develop from participating.

## Advocacy

The event purports to model co-operation among diverse cultures and groups. However, only the elite are present from the different countries represented. There is no opportunity to see the realities of those not competing and little understanding offered of the sacrifices made to get the elite athletes to this point. The students will be spectators, relegated to the role of cheerleading. They won't have an opportunity to interact with the athletes or analyze the role of sport in various communities. Prior to attending the games, any dissent with the event itself is being stifled through social pressure.

Judy assesses participation in the event as having no opportunity to develop students' advocacy. In fact, just the opposite is occurring. Dissent with participation is being actively discouraged and speaking out is frowned upon.

## Solidarity action

The image of athletes coming from all over the world to participate peacefully helps create a sense of hope about making connections across cultures. Athletes are generally competitive with one another, not supportive, although the rare acts of selfless support that occur really stand out because of that. Also, knowing what she does about the human rights abuses and lack of regard for communities of the companies advertising at the event, Judy once again feels that the value of working to change the world for the betterment of others is not primary. No matter what the human rights record of the companies might be, the acceptance of corporate values of high-stakes competition and self-interest are entirely counter to ideas of coalition building, unity, and support for the disenfranchised. Also, the “win at all costs” slogan is antithetical to values of co-operation, collaboration, and attainment of one's personal best.

Judy gives the event a low grade on the potential for solidarity action.

In the end, Judy feels this event does not pass the social justice litmus test. She tells the principal she will not participate in the event. She provides opportunities for her students to gain a critical perspective before they attend, and gives them as much freedom as possible with regard to attendance and expressing dissent.

# How socially just is my classroom?

by Sasha Wiley-Shaw, CASJ—Status of Women Action Group member

When I look at my classroom through my teacher’s eyes, I see a wide variety of individual circumstances, learning needs, and skills. On the surface, it may appear to be just an average

classroom; however, when I look at it applying the social justice lens, a range of challenges and opportunities emerge, and by addressing the question of how socially just my classroom is, I can provide a richer learning

environment that fuels positive social change.

Here, divided into the areas of the lens, are issues I would look at in my classroom.

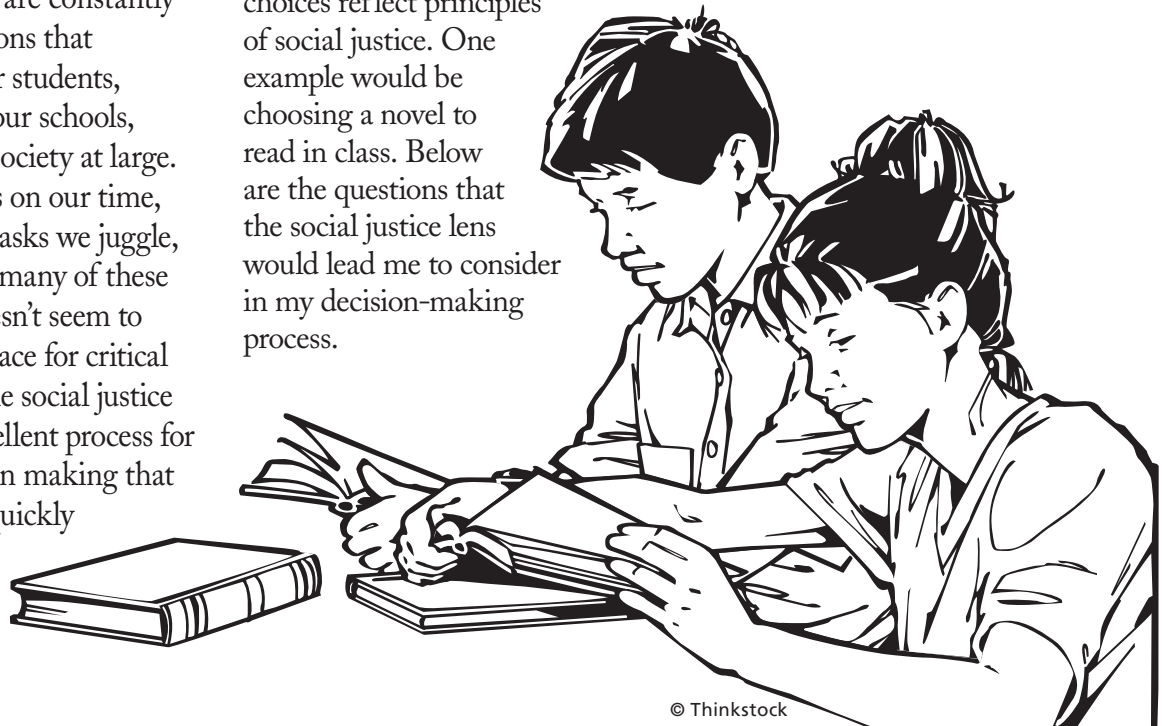
ACCESS	AGENCY
<p><b>Do all students have access to learning and success in my classroom?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do I use multiple presentation methods to try to address the needs of different learning styles or challenges?</li> <li>•Do all students have access to the supplies they are expected to use in my classroom?</li> <li>•Are there students who have life situations that may get in the way of their ability to live up to my homework policies or standards?</li> <li>•Do all students feel safe and supported in asking questions when they need clarification or don’t understand?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Is my classroom a place where students see themselves and are treated as individuals with the right and ability to cause change?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do students have a genuine voice that is heard when it comes to setting classroom policies?</li> <li>•Do I make sure to include stories of individuals in my teaching materials so that my students are exposed to models of personal agency?</li> <li>•Do I support my students in finding effective ways to take action, whether they encounter injustice in society or chafe against a non-progressive school policy?</li> <li>•Do I explicitly value and emphasize the importance of students developing their own opinions on issues?</li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<p><b>Do we study issues of social injustice with an eye to transforming hierarchies and eliminating inequity?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•When generalizations are made that presume levels of affluence or membership in dominant groups, do I problematize them and encourage students to consider how things might be different for other groups or in other places?</li> <li>•When students experience problems or injustice, do I guide them to make connections to global issues or systems?</li> <li>•Do I actively undertake to help students understand the power of collective action?</li> <li>•Do we examine hierarchies and power structures with regard to how they privilege certain groups or world views over others?</li> <li>•Do we deconstruct inequality and view it as systemic rather than accidental or individually constructed?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Do students gain the skills needed to improve the lived experiences of others?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do I have classroom policies that promote cooperation and students supporting one another?</li> <li>•Do I explicitly emphasize empathy skills and encourage students to imagine themselves in someone else’s position?</li> <li>•Do students have the framework necessary to understand individual hardship as resulting from systemic inequity?</li> <li>•Are students aware of legal frameworks and decision-making processes that shape our society and are they aware of how to have a voice in them?</li> <li>•Are students informed about political organizations, advocacy groups, and NGOs through which they can help work for social change?</li> </ul>

# Selecting resources using the social justice lens

by *Sasha Wiley-Shaw, CASJ—Status of Women Action Group member*

As teachers, we are constantly making decisions that affect ourselves, our students, and more broadly, our schools, communities, and society at large. Given the demands on our time, the multiplicity of tasks we juggle, and the urgency of many of these decisions, there doesn't seem to be much time or space for critical analysis. For me, the social justice lens sets out an excellent process for analysis and decision making that can be done quite quickly and helps me ensure that my

choices reflect principles of social justice. One example would be choosing a novel to read in class. Below are the questions that the social justice lens would lead me to consider in my decision-making process.



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## ACCESS

- Does the story include characters from diverse backgrounds so that students who don't belong to the dominant group will be able to connect and/or feel represented?
- Are there assumptions about cultural background knowledge that may impede understanding for students with different backgrounds?
- Are there representations of individuals or groups that rely on generalizations or stereotypes that could make students feel alienated or marginalized?

## AGENCY

- Does the story and its representations of individuals and groups reinforce existing hierarchies or social inequities, such as showing minority groups in disempowered roles?
- Does the story show proactive problem solving or activism, as opposed to resignation to the status quo?
- Are characters able to affect change in their individual lives, community, and/or society?
- Is diversity or difference depicted as a liability to be overcome or as a strength/ opportunity?

## SOLIDARITY ACTION

- Does the novel interrogate or highlight existing prejudices, stereotypes, or social injustices?
- Do characters prompt/promote student empathy for those who are different from themselves?
- Are there empowering models of being an ally, such as groups or individuals receiving support from others while still retaining their own voices or dominant groups making space for the voices of minority groups?

## ADVOCACY

- Is the novel likely to lead to greater understanding of different groups and their conditions of life?
- Will the events or characters engage students in challenging existing prejudices or preconceptions?
- Does the way problems are solved suggest or imply real life actions that could be taken to oppose or reduce social injustice?
- Will it inspire students to want to take action or become advocates themselves?

# How socially just is the practice of democracy in our governance structures?

by Roz Johns, former CASJ—Poverty Action Group member

The concepts of leading from behind, leading from above, top-down organization, top-forward organization, grass-roots organization and election with a prescribed mandate often enter into the debate about how a particular committee or group organizes itself. As new members become involved in an organization, a system for ensuring easy access, the right of participation, support, and networking needs should be clear. How is the type of committee governance chosen? Do decisions

include various perspectives and majority and minority points of view? Is there a sense of inclusion and fairness? How are individual responsibilities assigned? What is the process for follow through? Does the governance structure reflect and meet the needs of the total membership? Socially



just governance structures better ensure inclusion, full representation, and meaningful and responsible participation of all members.

ACCESS	AGENCY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What mechanisms exist so that everyone understands the mandate of the committee?</li> <li>•How does the committee ensure that available information about a topic is accessible to all?</li> <li>•What structures exist for the inclusion of minority points of view?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What mechanisms are used so that everyone understands how they can participate in the process and have a voice? For example, round table discussion, Robert's Rules of Order, talking stick.</li> <li>•How does the organization overcome systemic or hierarchical barriers to ensure that all points of view are considered?</li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What processes are in place to identify the impact of the systemic change?</li> <li>•What processes are in place to include all members in the outcome?</li> <li>•How does the committee and the work of the committee connect with other committees in the larger organization?</li> <li>•How does the committee connect with the membership?</li> <li>•How does the larger group network with outside agencies?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What mechanisms are in place to ensure systemic change?</li> <li>•What is the process for considering multiple solutions to a final response/solution?</li> <li>•What mechanisms are in place to ensure that decisions are implemented?</li> <li>•How do committee members participate in promoting the interests of the committee?</li> <li>•How are individual needs met and initiatives given support?</li> </ul>

# Rethinking fee-run programs in our public schools

by Karen Whyte, CASJ—Peace and Global Education Action Group member

As a music teacher in Victoria, I view with concern the policy of charging students for instruments, music books and supplies, and participation in field trips. I worry that, even with parent-requested fee exemptions, some children may be excluded from the enjoyment of being involved in music programs and trips.

The same applies to participation in sports academies. There is no doubt that boards of education need these academies to help fund other programs. However, implementation of fee-run programs is simply one way of proliferating our present

government's goal of creating a two-tiered system of education based on who can or cannot pay for services. Consider the United Way commercial showing a young boy applying for a job so that he can play hockey. Why not have open access to all programs for all students as is the practice in many other countries? The next Mozart or Henri Richard may be washing dishes late at night to pursue their dream activity during the day, albeit with less energy than a more privileged student.

I decided to consider a proposed secondary school level music trip to Europe through the social justice lens so that I can decide

whether to recommend this to my students or not. The cost for this trip would be \$4,000, of which an unspecified amount could be raised through fundraising. Using the social justice lens, I would ask myself the following questions.



ACCESS	AGENCY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Is this field trip available to all students regardless of their ability to pay or not?</li> <li>•Do students have adequate and accessible opportunities for fundraising for this field trip?</li> <li>•Can fundraising be done with family support or will it be extremely time-consuming for the student, thereby interfering with precious afterschool and weekend family time or activities?</li> <li>•Does the field trip promote acceptance of music from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds or promote ethnocentric based learning?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Will my students see that this is a trip that will benefit them in their learning and view of the world?</li> <li>•Will my students look forward to this trip as a shared experience with many friends?</li> <li>•Will they all have adequate funds available to enjoy the many historic and cultural sites on the trip?</li> <li>•Will they have adequate funding to purchase extra nourishment and personal items as required?</li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Will my students be able to share their experiences with family and friends upon their return?</li> <li>•Will the trip lead to greater understanding of different cultures and ways of life? Will the trip dispel myths and stereotypes students may have held about other cultures?</li> <li>•Will my students feel inspired to continue in music and other fine arts?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Will my students be able to comfortably communicate with other students and teachers during the trip?</li> <li>•Will my students feel free to express themselves about their own culture while making this trip, or will they feel segregated and unrepresented because of historic and cultural differences?</li> </ul>

# Water as a social justice issue

by Louise Gonsalvez—CASJ, Status of Women Action Group member

The moral imperative to do what is right and just requires education, advocacy, policy, legislation, and law. Building a social consciousness about water issues is important. Through

education we can build awareness of water issues and establish a better water ethic and morality. We can also educate people so they know they have the right and ability to speak out about water policy.



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ACCESS	AGENCY
<p><b>How can we ensure that access to free safe drinking water is fundamental to community, government, and institutional practices?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do all people have access to free safe drinking water in your community or are there unfair barriers?</li> <li>• How are water scarcity and distribution issues dealt with in your community?</li> <li>• Does your building provide free safe public drinking water?</li> <li>• Are you willing to confront power structures that promote the privatization and misuse of water?</li> </ul>	<p><b>How can we educate people that they have the right and the ability to speak out about water use policies and laws?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we address wasteful water consumption practices?</li> <li>• How do we educate people to use public water systems?</li> <li>• Do we know that we are able to voice our views on school, municipal, provincial, national, and/or global water initiatives that can detrimentally or positively influence how water will be used and distributed?</li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<p><b>What organizations can we work with to address the issue of water privatization?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are we educating students and colleagues about corporate control of water?</li> <li>• Do we network with agencies that support water conservation, free public drinking water, and who ban the sale of bottled water at their work sites?</li> <li>• Do we work with other organizations, unions, and institutions to exert public pressure against the increasing commodification of water?</li> <li>• Do we participate in protests, public forums, and letter-writing campaigns?</li> <li>• Do we support political parties that support free safe drinking water policies, regulations, and legislation?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Do students gain the skills needed to improve the lived experiences of others?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do we advocate for institutional water policies that support public water and prohibit the sale of bottled water?</li> <li>• Do we write letters to our mayor, municipal councilors, MLA, and MP regarding our concerns about the increasing commodification of our waters?</li> <li>• Do we advocate for those who do not have access to free clean drinking water?</li> <li>• Do we advocate for those who can't afford to pay their water bills?</li> <li>• Do we advocate for water as a public resource in our daily conversations?</li> <li>• Do we advocate for the right to free drinking water and safe air to breathe?</li> </ul>

# Social justice lens or rose-coloured glasses? What are we using to view our pensions?

by Susan Ruzic, CASJ—Antiracism Action Group member

Teachers who are concerned about social justice issues in their classrooms are often just as concerned about these issues as they pertain to their own lives. Some teachers want to examine how our teachers pension fund is invested and what types of investments our funds are invested in.

Reminding ourselves that social justice is one of the three pillars of the BCTF, it is important to advocate for pension plans that support our beliefs. It is all too easy to adopt a “head in the sand” attitude and continue to accept the status quo. But too often the status quo involves suffering on the part of other people when products are

produced in sweatshops or involve the sale of unhealthy products such as tobacco. In order to have a pension fund that is inclusive of all teachers preferences, we can apply the social justice lens as an evaluative tool of our pension decision-making processes. Below are the questions that the social justice lens would lead me to consider.

ACCESS	AGENCY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do all teachers have a say in determining how they would like to see their pension funds invested?</li> <li>•Are the documents easy to access so that all teachers may see how their funds are invested?</li> <li>•Are all teachers able to take part in decision making around their pension funds?</li> <li>•Are there pension funds that rely on investments that could make teachers feel alienated, marginalized, and uncomfortable?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Do all teachers feel that their opinions on pensions will be appreciated?</li> <li>•Do we allow diverse opinions as to what people would like to invest, as opposed to resignation to the status quo?</li> <li>•Are teachers aware that their investments could be used to:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-manufacture weapons or military machinery</li> <li>-produce tobacco</li> <li>-contribute to systemic human rights’ violations</li> <li>-contribute to severe environmental damage?</li> </ul> </li> <li>•Do teachers show concern that their investments are in funds that:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-have fair labour practices</li> <li>-have sound corporate governance and meet the targeted actuarial assumption?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Are existing funds interrogated to expose social injustices carried out by certain funds?</li> <li>•Do all parties involved with the pension fund work together to make sure that all voices are heard and that a consensus is reached that will satisfy all groups?</li> <li>•Does the dominant group make space for the voices of minority groups?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Are there ways to inform teachers about the consequences of their pension choices and why they should care?</li> <li>•Is there an opportunity to challenge the current funds to create ones that are acceptable to all?</li> <li>•Does the pensions committee take all teachers’ viewpoints into consideration when discussion about funds allocation takes place?</li> <li>•Are opportunities given to all to meet with the pensions committee to have their input heard?</li> </ul>

# How socially just is your social justice grant or project?

Use these questions to help you plan your project. Please provide details on how your grant application fits with the social justice lens.

NAME OF PROJECT

ACCESS	AGENCY
<p>How does your local social justice project or grant provide equal access for students and teachers from different schools or grade levels to work together?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p>How will students and teachers have the opportunity to have input into the scope of the project and determine the product(s) at the local level?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
SOLIDARITY ACTION	ADVOCACY
<p>How does the grant/project allow for networking with community groups; coalition building to effect systemic change on this social justice issue at the local level?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p>How does this grant/project help students and teachers to develop concrete skills to effect change locally and globally? (i.e., personal awareness, analysis of the issue and action)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>

# Our social justice lens as a tool

**THEME/IDEA/QUESTION/CONCERN**

**ACCESS**

**AGENCY**

**SOLIDARITY ACTION**

**ADVOCACY**