

Interview of the month

June 2019

Liz Kleinrock
Educational Consultant, Anti-bias Educator
Founder of Teach and Transform



SheCanHeCan: For our readers who are not familiar with your work, can you introduce Teach and Transform and its objectives?

Liz Kleinrock: Teach and Transform began as a way for me to compile a digital portfolio of my social justice and anti-bias work with students. I had hoped to build connections with other like-minded educators, because this work can often feel isolating and emotionally exhausting. Now nearly two years later, it is still a way for me to share lessons and units of study that I've developed in my class, but I've transitioned to also offering coaching and professional development for other educators, parents, and caregivers. I deeply believe that adult education needs to evolve alongside our children, and my hope is to help adults consistently reflect on their own identities, biases, and beliefs, and recognize ways to take action against injustice.

The consent workshop you hosted for students is hugely popular. What topics do you find the most important to address with young people?

The consent piece is important because all of the issues we see exploding in the media have a starting point. What if we could address the root causes of things such as sexual assault and racism, and teach children foundational skills and concepts so they grow up with a more developed awareness and critical lens?

I believe that anti-racism work has to start at an extremely early age, because research has shown that even toddlers notice racial differences, and act upon these observations. We can't hope to solve problems in our communities that we don't address head-on. Beginning by having conversations about "divisive" topics such as race, gender expression, and religion, builds our students' fluency and comprehension to engage with these topics.

"Many people seem to feel threatened by those who advocate for more acceptance and inclusivity, because they don't want to give up the positions of power that they hold."

What is your proudest achievement so far?

Giving a TED Talk has been on my professional bucket list since college, and I still can't believe I was fortunate enough to be invited to share my work on the TED platform!

Your work is transformative and your influence is increasingly growing, what are the recurring questions you get asked during your sessions?

From teachers, I get a lot of questions about how to navigate challenging conversations with parents and administrators who might object to students learning about topics like race or gender. Some teachers also ask how to respond when students say things that might be considered biased or discriminatory, and they are unsure of how to respond. There seems to be a lot of interest and desire to lead these kinds of lessons, but there are many barriers that are still in the way.

What are the most difficult parts of your job as an educator and activist?

The emotional labor and exhaustion can be really challenging. I find that the more explicitly I talk or teach about racism, whiteness, and white privilege, the more vocal and aggressive the backlash becomes. Everyone's lived experience is different, and it's difficult to educate others if they're unwilling to accept that others' lived experiences are important and valid. Many people seem to feel threatened by those who advocate for more acceptance and inclusivity, because they don't want to give up the positions of power that they hold.

What advice would you give to an educator, school or parent who want to understand how to a better anti bias educator?

If you're not reflecting on your own identity, seeking to educate yourself from other BIPOC educators and activists, or feel (Black, Indigenous, people of color) uncomfortable discussing race and anti-bias topics with your adult peers, you are NOT ready to do the work with kids. Don't think you have to take on everything at once, but choose an entry point where you have experience and expertise, and use it to facilitate conversations. Be humble and understand that this work neverending. It is a spectrum, and we're all at different places. It's not okay to shame people for where they're at, but it IS NECESSARY to question WHY people are at certain places.

About Liz Kleinrock

Liz Kleinrock creates curricular content for K-12 students around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and specializes in designing engaging and accessible units of study for all ages of learners. She began her career in education as an AmeriCorps volunteer teacher in Oakland, California in 2009, and has since served as both a classroom educator and diversity coordinator in Los Angeles, California. Liz also works with schools and districts throughout the United States to develop workshops and trainings for adults that support culturally responsive practices that fit the needs of specific communities. In 2018, Liz received the Teaching Tolerance Award for Excellence in Teaching, and her lessons on teaching consent and personal boundaries to students have gained international media attention. Liz has written articles for Heinemann Publishing and Teaching Tolerance on destigmatizing privilege, trauma informed teaching, and cultivating relationships with students and families. Most recently, Liz is proud to share her 2019 TED Talk from "Education Everywhere" on building foundations of equity with young learners, and is working on her first book.

You can reach her at liz@teachandtransform.org or on Instagram @teachandtransform.

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