

**Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension. Sara K. Ahmed. Heinemann, 2018, 176 pages, ISBN 9780325099705**

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## Book Review

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*Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension.* Sara K. Ahmed. Heinemann, 2018, 176 pps., ISBN 9780325099705

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We have to stop blaming kids: for not reading, for not being collaborative, for not being kind to one another. Kids mirror the language and behaviors adult's exhibit. So, it is up to the adults in their lives to model compassion for them. We have to take it head on. Consider it a responsibility. (Ahmed, p. xxii)

Sara K. Ahmed has put together a book for all educators full of practical teaching skills and language on social comprehension within the classroom. She opens up her classroom and shares her own experiences and teaching strategies to help readers understand how to teach students to be empathetic, open minded, and critical thinkers. She gives educators and students the language and tools needed to create safer spaces for cultivating and supporting difficult conversations about race, gender, politics, and current day hot topics in and out of the classroom.

Ahmed's book gives educators practical tools and language about how they can create an environment of care in their classrooms that support challenging conversations about topics like, race, gender, and politics within K-12 classrooms. Ahmed believes that people can develop skills in social comprehension that can support them to navigate challenging conversations. Social comprehension is how we as a society make meaning of race, gender, politics, religions and sexuality and where the intersections are for us as educators and students. Most educators are not taught how to approach challenging topics in the classroom. Ahmed offers easy to follow step-by-step lesson plans, she guides us through what stepping into the challenging conversations looks like within her own classroom, giving educators the tools and language to do the same within their own classrooms. In today's society of massive social change coming out of the Covid 19 pandemic, it is critical that we allow students the space to talk through what is happening around them within their own world. Climate change, Black Lives Matter, Every Child Matters and social justice issues are topics that are now at the for front of what is being talked about in the news and on social media. Now more than ever we are in a moment in time that the importance to support the next generation in how to have constructive conversations with each other, even if they disagree is critical to be teaching in classrooms today. This can be taught with the right tools and language.

Ahmed's book gives us these tools in social comprehension. Ahmed shares with us as educators and learners in how we can create the space for fostering social comprehension in her book *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension*.

Ahmed lays out her chapters is an easy-to-follow step by step guide in how to engage in conversations about race, gender and politics, by providing tools, language, and strategies to support multiple perspectives in the classroom. She begins the chapters with some background knowledge through stories, to help educators with an understanding of the importance of why she has selected the lesson within her classroom. She then gives a lesson plan that is a step-by-step guide in how to open up the conversation with students, she shares with us how she shares with her own classes and supports students with their learning. Ahmed also gives us examples from her classes and others who have also done these lessons in their class so we can see some different ways to approach the lesson plans ourselves. Ahmed also gives us points to look out for within the lessons, to see how students are doing and what a struggling student may look like and how to support them. What I like the most is the two features at the end of each chapter, the first feature is Ahmed talks about the tensions that could arise and how to work through them. The second feature is the piece she calls, making thinking visible; she shows us as educators how we can see where our students are at with their learning as well as where we are at with our own learning. The tools are for us to have check in points with students in what they are learning about and how they are growing from the work together.

Here is a breakdown of the chapters:

Chapter 1: Exploring our identities. Creating the web of ourselves and how our identity is complicated and interconnected. This helps students to see themselves and others as whole humans and where we can connect to each other. This supports students in feeling visible in the classroom community and making them feel like they are part of the learning community.

Chapter 2: Listening with Love. Teaching students to be active listeners in conversations in order to really hear each other's opinions and voices. Giving language to students in how to have constructive conversations.

Chapter 3: Being Candid. This chapter focuses on honest and sometimes hard truths, assumptions and perspectives. Ahmed helps us address bias in ourselves and shows us how to engage in accountable talk with each other. Giving us the opportunity to listen, learn and being empathetic with each other.

Chapter 4: Becoming Better Informed. Giving students a voice within the classroom and help make time for knowledge construction within the classroom. Inviting in what is happening in the larger world and being able to unpack and talk about it within the classroom. Open ended questions and exchanging of dialog about outside world. Ahmed gives us the tools to address these questions and conversations within the class.

Chapter 5: Finding Humanity in ourselves and others. Teaching students about humanity of each other to build on empathy. This helps support students in seeing each other as whole humans and that we can talk and work with each other in a respectful manor. Learning to listen to each other, rather than listening to respond.

Chapter 6: Facing Crisis together. Teaching us how to work together when talking about crisis. Giving us tools, language and ways that we can work together to create a community of support.

Ahmed is an experienced and knowledgeable educator, that shares and opens up her classroom experiences for educators to learn from. Her book is set up as an easy-to-follow step by step guide. Each chapter she starts with a reflection of her own experience, then gives us a lesson, strategies, activities, resources and the language to talk through this work. This work will help the reader/educators look through a different lens in education. It focuses on the student experience and student viewpoint of the world. It also gives educators tools and language to help support the students learning as well as to be critical about their own knowledge and experience. A strong piece of the book is that it helps the educator teach students about how to have a critical conversation and be open to other people's perspectives without being judgmental. Supporting students to see multiple perspectives and engaging them in conversations.

I appreciated the way Ahmed engaged with her students and answered students' questions within the work. For example: In our class, will be talking a lot about our identities, so it's important that we know how to respect what each of us is willing to talk about. So, if you have a personal question, you might phrase it this way: Are you comfortable answering a question about your parents, Miss Ahmed? And, if I say I am, you can follow up with the question. So, what questions do you have? (p.p. 10 & 11). By modeling these conversations, she demonstrates how we can use language to engage in respectful conversations with each other. Ahmed also gives readers strategies to answer hard questions and gives educators permission to not know all the answers all the time. She suggests to write down questions from students that you don't know the answer to and come back to them once you have taken the time to find the answers. Ahmed gives educators the tools to open up classroom discussions in a respectful way for students to be heard and for educators to support the difficult conversations that will benefit all learners.

Her guidance is specific and clear, so much so that I found that it was easy to implement what Ahmed was sharing with me as a fellow educator. I felt like she was sitting around the staffroom table talking to me and supporting me in my teaching practice. What I appreciated the most was the language she used when talking through the difficult questions from students. An example of how to take ownership in difficult conversations: Ask students "*Have you ever had a moment in a conversation where you were growing increasingly angrier, sadder, or more frustrated by the second, almost to the point of explosion?... Then ask them what it feels like inside as that is happening, just before the point of explosion, and ask volunteers to share a strategy they have used to either calm down or exit the situation.*" (p 39)." Ahmed gives clear guidelines in how to create open ended questions that allows for student voiced conversations about challenging topics. This supports and honours students, their heritage and their culture within the classroom. She gives examples and age ranges for the work as well. Ahmed shares with the readers examples of students work of all different age groups, and how others have adapted her work for their own classrooms. Students today have the ability to use the internet to gather so much information, allowing them time to talk through that information within the classroom will support their learning and respectful conversation skills. Ahmed gives educators and students the tools to talk through this respectfully and empathetically through her examples, stories, and lesson plans. These skills are critically needed today when addressing topics such as racism, white supremacy, fake news, and settler colonialism.

Ahmed's book draws on ideas that other scholars have also taken up of late. Specifically, Felicia Rose Chavez's *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (2021) comes to mind. Similar to Ahmed's book, Chavez takes the reader on a journey through her personal stories and teaching experiences to support educators in creating a safe and

inclusive classroom with decolonized teaching practices. The similarities in the books revolve around how they teach and focus on the students. Chavez, gives us practical and clear ways to dismantle the western colonial lens of education in the classroom and gives educators tools to how to do the work in decolonizing teacher practice. Gholdy Muhammad's book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy* (2021), is another book that takes a deep dive into honouring and supporting students within the classroom through a lens of decolonized teacher practice and equity framework. Muhammad shows educators how to frame their work through a culturally and historically responsive approach. She uses her experience as a classroom educator to support other educators in learning how to teach to students' strengths with a focus on honouring their culture and background. With using Muhammad's work educators will be able to support students in the classroom, making them feel seen, heard, and visible. Like Ahmed's book, these books are accessible, from classroom educators with a strong track record of making change. What they help to do is make concrete the conceptual scholarly arguments they all draw on.

This book is an accessible resource for any educator wanting to do work in social justice in their k-12 classroom. I also believe that it could be used as a resource in the post-secondary classrooms for teacher education programs. Supporting new educators before they go out into the field, giving them a strong foundation with strategies and language for their classrooms. New educators would benefit from this step-by-step guide, but I would encourage new educators to practice this work with other educators before bringing it into the classroom. This way you have the opportunity to work through some of the challenges that could arise, in a safe community of support. I would recommend this book for all educators to engage with. It tackles the big issues in society and makes it easy for any grade level teacher to do these lessons in their own classroom. From grounding us in who we are, to creating webs of connections in our classroom communities, and setting our students up with the language and tools to talk through differences and difficult conversations. I would encourage all educators who have not done this work before to gather a group of educators to practice and work through the book together. This will help support their learning and understanding of how to engage with the work of social comprehension.

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