DON'T TREAD ON ME: Exploring Oppression

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PURPOSE
This activity helps students think critically about what oppression is and who gets oppressed, and invites them to consider ways they can promote justice and equality.

GRADERS
6 and up

TIME
60-90 minutes

MATERIALS
- oppression quotes & definitions;
- white board and markers;
- sets of oppression scenarios/photos (1 set per group)

SUBJECT AREAS
Language Arts and Social Studies/History

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Common Core for grades 6-8: http://bit.ly/18Yv0Up

Common Core for grades 9-12: http://bit.ly/1cdPRox
PROCEDURE

1. Show students the quote: “No one is free when others are oppressed.”
   ~ Anonymous

   Ask them what they think the quote means -- what is it trying to say?

2. Ask students “What exactly does oppression mean?” After you hear their answers, share a dictionary definition, such as:

   Oppression:
   1. unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.
   2. something that oppresses, esp. in being an unjust or excessive exercise of power.
   3. a sense of being weighted down in body or mind

   (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 11th ed.)

3. Ask students what that definition means to them.

4. Ask students if any of them have ever experienced someone using an “unjust or cruel exercise of their power or authority” over them before. How did that make them feel?

5. Ask students to share some examples of oppression. (Write down all
responses.) Ask: “Do we all agree on what constitutes oppression and who gets oppressed? Why not?”

6. Share with students that you’re all going to look at some different scenarios and/or photos and decide which ones demonstrate oppression and which don’t – and why. Pass out to groups of about four students each a set of brief written scenarios with accompanying photos depicting various types of (potential) oppression. Have students in each group discuss the scenarios/photos and decide which ones they believe demonstrate oppression and which don’t. Encourage students to come to consensus in their group, if possible. Have each group divide the scenarios/photos into two columns:

These demonstrate oppression.
These do not demonstrate oppression.

Sample categories of potential oppression from which you might create your scenarios/photos:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racism</th>
<th>Child labor</th>
<th>Factory farming</th>
<th>Sweatshops</th>
<th>Saying things like “That's so gay”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food deserts</td>
<td>Polluting refinery in your neighborhood</td>
<td>Gossip</td>
<td>Housing discrimination</td>
<td>Gentrification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic abuse</td>
<td>Animals in entertainment (zoos, circuses)</td>
<td>Gender inequity</td>
<td>Chained animals</td>
<td>Affirmative action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban sprawl</td>
<td>Service animals</td>
<td>Women in hijabs</td>
<td>Mandatory standardized testing in schools</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. After each group has finished (or time has elapsed), have students quickly visit the working areas of the other groups to see which examples they chose for each column.

8. As a full group, invite students to discuss their views of which scenarios/photos demonstrate oppression, which don’t, and why. Have their views changed after listening to what others chose?

9. Ask students to consider the question: “How does my own life contribute
to oppression?” Ask them to each write down 3-5 examples of how they’re contributing in some way to the oppression of others, and then have volunteers share.

10. Lead a brief discussion on the topic: “Where do our tendencies to oppress others come from?”

11. Ask students to brainstorm a list of actions that everyone can take to promote justice and equality for all. Encourage them to choose one item from the list to enact in their own lives. Invite them to share & to report back on their progress at a later date.

EXTENSION

Choose a class project to help promote justice & equality in your school or community.