Big Idea: An Imbalance in Power Can Lead to Injustice:

What is Power?

Most simply, power is the ability to get things done. More broadly, power is also about influencing or changing the behaviour of others to help get things done.

So, while we all have power, other people and groups also have power over us. They may use their power to get us to think and behave in ways they believe are best. For example, schools have the power to make rules about attendance and completing assignments. Friends may have the power to influence what we say and do. Have you ever thought about how they get that power?

Types of Power:

There are basically two ways you can try to chance what people think and do: force them or persuade them.

Hard Power is used to force people to do things out of fear or threat of punishment. Governments use hard power (laws) to put criminals in jail and protect citizens. Bullies use hard power to threaten, abuse, and intimidate others.

Soft power changes behaviour through persuasion and influence. People act because they believe they need to or should, not because they feel threatened. Charities use soft power to convince people to support their cause and donate funds. Some individuals and groups use soft power to argue that it’s all right to hate and persecute other groups in society.

Sources of Power:

Where does the power to influence what people thing and do come from? There are many different sources of power:

* Authority: Power from authority is based on a formal position of role that comes with specific powers and abilities. Prime Ministers, elected officials, school principals, and police officers have authority-based power
* Reward: The capacity to reward people is a source of power. Rewards can be material (money and privilege), or emotional (affections, acknowledgement, and praise). Businesses and corporations have reward power
* Force: Power from force is based on the capacity to threaten, harm, and punish. Force can be physical (armies), economic (financial loss), or emotional (abuse)
* Knowledge: Having specialized knowledge and skills can be a source of power. Experts such as scientists and professionals gain power and influence because they can do things others can’t
* Respect: People who are highly trusted, respected, and admired also have the power to influence others. Elders, friends and family, and people of great accomplishment can have the power of respect

The Use and Abuse of Power:

Power itself is neither good nor bad – it is how people use or abuse power that matters. Power can be used for good and for evil, and history is full of examples of both. Citizens and democratic societies need to be aware of who has power, how it si used, and how it can be used for positive change.

Active citizenship involves knowing who has power, identifying abuses of power, and getting/using power for positive change

Analysis Questions:

1. How might power lead to injustice?
2. Is there anything we can do to ensure people don’t abuse power? Suggest one example for each of the *Sources of Power* categories.
3. Who has power in your life? Suggest one example for each of the *Sources of Power* categories.