Learning to Be a Good Guy:
Teaching for Social Justice in the Primary Classroom

By Liz Goss

Question

How do students respond to social justice curriculum in my first/second grade classroom?

Subquestions

1) Can first and second graders work with questions of inequality, change, and collective work? What categories do they use to examine social justice issues? How do students use everyday issues to examine social justice?
2) What is the role of the teacher? How is the design of the curricular unit an active part of social justice?

Rationale

Public schools are one of the few truly democratic spaces in the United States. We have privatized almost every aspect of our lives. I feel it is imperative for a democratic society to have free public education for all, but what use is a public education if it is just a factory of standardized curriculum and tests? If it is a soulless bureaucracy that is run by people who have never met my students? My students' young lives are very complicated. These students are still debating the existence of the tooth fairy, but are sure of the reality of gunfire in their neighborhoods.

I envision a better world, one more just, one more joyful, and one more inspiring. I center my work in the heart of my first and second grade classroom, a room of 25 active, questioning, pained, loved, curious, worried, poor African-American students. I center my work here because I believe in the power of education to transform. I believe in the power of critical thinkers to transform our world. We all must be literate and thoughtful if we ever want to create a better world. There is no better place to situate that struggle than in a classroom plagued by overarching social systems of inequality and injustice, but also a classroom full of hope and with students just beginning a life of negotiating education as an emancipatory act. I want to help my students learn to ask the bigger questions and to believe they are capable of finding answers and finding their ways in a world that is designed to do them harm. I struggle to create a classroom full of wonder, love, joy, hope and questions.

So I wonder: what happens when I center my teaching in the ethics of social justice? What happens when teachers take back some of their power to make curricular choices and then use this power *with* their students to investigate how to create a better world for

all of us? Teaching for social justice raises questions of pedagogy, methodology and curriculum content.

Teaching for social justice can come in many shapes and look like many creatures. I borrow the nine components of teaching for social justice that were developed by a Chicago professional and activist organization, Teachers for Social Justice. (www.teachersforjustice.org/pages/PRINCIPLESexplained) They outline the following for curriculum and classroom practice:

1. **Grounded in the lives of our students.** Curriculum should be based on respect for students and rooted in their lives, needs, and experiences and should help students examine how their lives are connected with the broader society.
2. **Critical.** Students should learn to "talk back" to the world. Curriculum and instruction should help students pose critical questions about society, examining popular culture, social structures, government actions, and school life, and should move outside the classroom to connect with real world problems.
3. **Multicultural, anti-racist pro-justice.** A social justice curriculum includes the lives and perspectives of everyone in society, especially people who are marginalized. It should engage students in a critique of the roots of inequality.
4. **Participatory, experiential.** Students should experience concepts first-hand, e.g., through projects, experiments, and role-plays, and should have opportunities for democratic participation by questioning, challenging, making decisions and collectively solving problems.
5. **Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary.** Classrooms should make children feel emotionally and physically safe, significant and cared about, modeling the just and democratic society we envision.
6. **Activist.** Children should come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. Teachers should encourage children to act on their consciences and should give students historical and contemporary examples of people from all cultures who act to make a difference and struggle for justice.
7. **Academically rigorous.** Children should develop the tools to change the world and to maneuver in the one that exists. By speaking directly to the alienation so many students feel, teachers aim to inspire and motivate all students to levels of academic performance far greater than those measured by standardized tests or grades.
8. **Culturally and linguistically sensitive.** As schools become increasingly diverse, teachers must listen to and learn from students and their families, and teachers need to call on culturally diverse colleagues and community resources for insights into the communities they serve.

Using these eight principles may seem difficult to teachers who are presented prepackaged curriculum. Teaching for social justice runs smack into an era of “teacher-proof” curriculum where state standards govern our teaching and standardized tests govern the definition of student success (or more often, student failure). Federal and state mandates strip teachers of the power to assess their students and develop an educational plan that meets their needs, strip students of all individual and collective identity, and punishes schools, teachers, and students that need the most support, the most vision. It is

our children's education, their daily lives that we teachers are living with them. Instead of hiding behind an official curriculum, I made a leap with my students. I found that when I am brave enough to trust my students, and leap with them, we land in an amazing place: a place of deeper thinking and more engaged learning, a place of transformation. These leaps require trust that our students come with background knowledge, important questions and the ability to think through answers collectively.

My Teaching Context

Adams Elementary School* exists in the shadows of the United Center, where the Chicago Bulls play for millions of dollars, and the Rockwell Gardens high-rise housing project, where $250,000 in drugs comes through weekly. Adams is a small first through eighth grade elementary school that is home to 170 students. The students are 99% African-American and 95% low-income. The school is a Chicago Public School of choice. A little more than half of our population comes from the neighborhood, but many parents have chosen Adams over their neighborhood school and drive their children to school. Adams is housed in the Pulaski Multiplex, which is home to two other schools: a middle school and a high school. The three schools operate autonomously and are not "feeder" schools.

Adams Elementary School was founded as a small school with a constructivist philosophy. It was one of the first small schools in Chicago. The school places a high value on students constructing their own knowledge through interdisciplinary, thematic units. I have been with Adams for five years, teaching various multi-age classes of kindergarten, first and second grade. With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind act, 167 of CPS's elementary schools were deemed "failing" and placed on probation. Adams was one of those and this was our first year on probation. So far it has meant choosing a board-approved math curriculum, science curriculum and a basal series for reading. While these decisions were mandated by the board, there were no extra funds to purchase these materials. During my five years at Adams, I have served under five principals.

I began my research teaching 25 energetic and curious first and second graders; at the end of the research I had 20 students. All 25 are African-American and 23 qualify for free lunch; one other qualifies for reduced lunch. Half of the parents are employed, most working for minimum wage. Only three of the students live with both their mothers and fathers.

Literature Review

Educators have been wrestling with their role in a democratic society since the invention of democracy. Aristotle and Thomas Jefferson wrote on the connection, although their views of democracy, as well as education, excluded more than it included. (Edelsky,

* The names of schools and students have been changed.

2004, Perry and Fraser, 1993). At the turn of the 20th century John Dewey captured the imagination and hearts of many educators with his writings on the critical role that education plays in forming a democratic society. He wrote in 1916:

> I appeal to teachers in the face of every hysterical wave of emotion, and of every subtle appeal of sinister class interest, to remember that they above all others are consecrated servants of the democracies ideas in which alone this country is truly a distinctive action – ideas of friendly and helpful intercourse between all and the equipment of every individual to derive the community by his own best powers in his own best way
> (Shannon, 2004).

From this call there have been as many definitions for teaching for social justice as there have been definitions of democracy and definitions of the role of public schools. (Kelly and Brandes, 2001; Merrett, 2004; Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998) Many begin with the question of what is needed to produce a democratic, engaged, informed community. The main components are: democratic values, knowledge about democratic ideals, study of societal problems, decision making and collaboration skills, the ability to dialogue, and civic action in the school and or community. (Wade, 2001, Feire, 1968; Apple and Beane, 1995, Ayers, Hunt and Quinn, 1998).

As the theories and practices of teaching for social justice have evolved, so have the control mechanisms for society. The centralization of power by corporations has affected the role individual teachers and communities can play in their decisions regarding curriculum, methodology and pedagogy. (Edelsky, 1999) As Shannon (2004) writes:

> We are told that others know better about our work and how to do it, and our lives and how to live them. For example, in elementary schools, educational publishers tell teachers what materials are needed for instruction. Educational scientists explain how teacher must teach. And now state and federal governments define when and how to assess our teaching and student's learning. (p. 19)

This has impacted the space teachers have both in professional reality (the reality of their professional lives and the hierarchical structures that dictate many classroom practices) and the space teachers have in their mental reality (the space where the terms of debate are sometimes narrowly defined). The courage necessary to teach for social justice is critical. (Shannon, 2004; Perry and Fraser, 1993; Fine and Weis, 2003)

It is against this back drop of increasing centralization of power that teachers who believe they cannot remain neutral on a moving train decide to create curriculum and classrooms that have democracy at their heart as a living, breathing, evolving verb. (Bigelow 1997; Burns 2004; Zinn, 2002)

Collection Tools

I collected data from three sources: student work samples, teacher observation and reflections, and a parent survey.

- **Student work samples**

The students completed a range of writing about various activities in the Black History Unit. They wrote interview questions for a visitor and they journaled about slavery, Reverned Wyatt's visit, race and the unit overall. They discussed and wrote about the movie "A Bug's Life" and they debated and wrote about questions of fairness in students buying ice cream at school. They also wrote about what they would do if they were President.

- **Teacher observation and reflections**

After many of the classroom activities I journaled about the lesson, including dilemmas around appropriateness of topics and of negotiating the curriculum with students.

- **Parent surveys**

I used a parent survey to assess if the unit on Black History affected the students beyond the classroom. All the parents received a survey asking them to detail in what ways the students discussed the Black History unit at home. They were asked about four of the curricular themes and one more general question around applying lessons of the unit. Of the twenty students, 14 returned surveys.

Data and Analysis

Student work samples

When reviewing my students' written work, five themes, or categories, of their thinking emerged: fairness, standing up for yourself, empathy, collective action and identifying with the oppressed. We worked on a range of activities spanning history and touched on current personal problems. Surprisingly, students kept returning to these five themes. At the beginning of this research project, I was anxious about what I was going to find and how I was going to make sense of my students' thinking. I was surprised, relieved and intrigued by how easily the categories of their thinking emerged. The data taught me about how my students were thinking.

1. If I Were President

During the Presidential Inauguration in January, we discussed the roles of the President and then each student created a page for a class book. Each page began with the sentence tag "If I were President. . ."

Of the 23 pages, 19 showed thinking about empathy, fairness, and identifying with the oppressed.

The 4 who did not show any mention of these qualities had plans like, "If I were President, I would ride a bike and rollerskate in the Oval Office," (DeMarcus) or "If I were President I would boss around my mom, dad, sister and Ms. Goss." (Whitney)

Nineteen wrote about what they would do to make the world a more just place.

They wrote with empathy towards the poor:
"I would give poor people houses" (Camille)

And with empathy towards the homeless:
". . . I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses and I would give them food and a car." (Jordan)

Many wrote about how they would help the world be fairer for kids:
"I would love the world and I would buy anything for kids. . "
(Crystal)
"I would give money to schools and help all the people in the world improve their schools." (Sabrina)
"I would take care of kids." (Alex)
". . . I would say all the schools are to be great and no one can fight." (Dewayne)
". . . I would help people learn to read and write and how to spell." (Shaton)

Three wrote about more controversial change, in which they identified with the oppressed:
". . .I would stop wars from killing people and fighting and throwing bombs at people. They need to care for people. That's what I would do." (Jamal)
"I would let people out of jail, like my uncle." (Allana)
". . .I would set every one free out of jail." (Dewayne)

2. **A Bug's Life**

After completing several activities around Dr. Martin Luther King's Birthday and the President's Inauguration, I planned to step back and frame the Civil Rights Movement as more than one man's work and as connected to the legacies of slavery.

I introduced this topic by showing the children's animated movie "A Bug's Life." The premise is a Marxist take on the power struggles in the insect world. The ants are the main characters and are exploited by the grasshoppers. The ants are forced to pick all the food for the grasshoppers, who rule by fear. The ants begin to realize their lot in life is not set in stone. It begins with one ant, a loose cannon, who steps up to an evil grasshopper leader. This ant goes to a faraway land to recruit other insects to help fight the evil grasshoppers and refers to his work as for "ants and oppressed colonies everywhere." So when the recruiting of other insects doesn't work, he plans to make a big bird to scare the grasshoppers away. This plan fails, but ultimately the ants realize they outnumber the grasshoppers and simply have to work together collectively to

overthrow the grasshoppers' regime. While the movie is light-hearted, it lays out a powerful analogy for oppression, particularly slavery.

I explained to the class that we were going to watch a movie for children but that I wanted them to think about its theme. I explained that it reminded me of slavery. I asked if anyone knew what slavery was. Torri said she knew it was when blacks had to do all the work and the whites were mean. Another student said the whites were mean and "hung Black people in trees." Then Torri added that a teenager from the local Boys and Girls club had told her about slaves being drawn and quartered. (This leapt into some brutal imagery before I had planned for it. So I directed the conversation back to more general information and explained that most of the students were descended from slaves.) As we began the movie I explained we would watch the first 20 minutes and then stop to write about how the grasshoppers treated the ants and what they thought the ants should do.

I asked students to respond to three prompts:

1. I think the ants are treated _____ by the grasshoppers.
2. They have to _____ and _____.
3. I think _____

Of course the last prompt was the most interesting. The first two prompts had responses like:
I think the ants are treated badly. (Tameka, DeMarcus, Camille, Whitney)
Are being abused. (Dewyane)
Are treated rong. (Torri)
Are treated desrespackfull. (Ruby)
They have to give them all the food. (Marcus, Maya, Jamari)
They have to think and then do it. I think they should excape. (Jeremy)
They have to think of a plan. (Jacob)
They have to give the grasshoppers food and be good to them. (Whitney)

With the "I think . . ." prompt, students wrote about collective action, standing up for yourself and empathy with the ants.

Collective action:
"They have to try to escape and take all the food I think." (Tameka)
"I think they should make a plan." (Whitney)

Stand up for yourself:
"I think they should fight back." (Marcus)
"I think they are going to win the fight." (Jeremy, Jacob)
"I think they should stand up for ther self." (Torri)

Empathy:
"They wanted to be treated right and I think the grasshoppers is mean." (Diamond)

“I think they (the grasshoppers) should give back there food.” (DeMarcus)
“They don’t have to do wate thay don’t wont to do.” (Ruby)
“I think the grassphoppers sould say sorry.” (Maya)
“I think the grasshoppers have to do the work.” (Whitney)

In the middle of the movie I asked the students to write whether they would want to be an ant or a grasshopper. (This is before the ants won.)

Of the 16 students, 15 wanted to be ants and only 1 wanted to be a grasshopper. The lone grasshopper-want-to-be said: “I would rather be a grasshopper because I love bosting (I love bossing). Bost (bossing) is fun.” Whitney (It is interesting to note this is the same girl who said if she was President she would boss around her mom and her teacher.)

Of the 15 students who wrote about wanting to be ant, they again wrote about identifying with the oppressed, standing up for yourself, empathy and collective action.

Standing up for yourself:
“I would rather be an ant because they is brave. They stand up for therself. Thay will scair the grasshopper. They is not scaide of the grasshopper no more. “ (Torri)
“I would rather be ant because they stand up to grasshoppers.” (Camille)
“I would rather be an ant because they stod up for theyself.” (Jordan)
“I would rather be an ant becaue the ant make food. He stand up for all of them. The grasshopper did nothing.” (Jamari)

Fairness:

“I would rather be an ant because the grasshoppers are mean casue the grasshoppers they are making the ants of all the work.” (DeMarcus)
“I would rather be an because I don’t want to be mean.” (Dewayne)
“I would rather be an ant because when I grow up I wot to be goo giy.” (I want to be a good guy.) (Corey)

Collective action:
“I would rather be an ant because we will work toghet and mak a plan to defet the grasshopp.” (Jamal)

At the end of the movie, I asked how the ants defeated the grasshoppers and the students wrote exclusively about collective action and standing up for yourself.

Eight of the students wrote about how the ants won by standing up for themselves:
“They stood up for each (other).” (Jordan)
“They was brave.” (Jamari)
“Flick std up to Hpper and Flick def the gishs o the is ha gtim. (Flick stood up to Hopper and Flick defeated the grasshoppers and all the people was happy.) (Camille)
“They was brave enough to stand up to them.” (Ruby)

Eight of the students wrote about the ants won by collective action:
"Flick stood up to the grasshopper and the ants took the grasshoppers down." (Maya)
"The ants was braf enf to deft the grasshoppers togehr." (The ants was brave enough to defeat the grasshoppers together.) (Tyshawn)

3. The Dilemma of Ice Cream

In January the cafeteria sold ice cream to students at lunch for $0.50. Seven students who had money bought ice cream while the others did not. This was the first time this year the cafeteria had sold ice cream. At that afternoon's class meeting, I said I was trying to figure out what to do about the buying of ice cream. I asked if we should allow students to continue to buy it since not everyone could afford it or we could decide we should not buy ice cream. I told them we needed to discuss the issue. I asked who had bought ice cream. Seven hands went up. I asked how that made the ones who had not bought it feel. Kourtney said it made her feel "bad." I asked if buying ice cream caused any problems. Maya said some the students were teasing the ones who didn't have ice cream. The students debated for about 15 minutes. When students argued on the side of buying ice cream, they would often be inclusive of others: "I can buy everyone ice cream" (Jacob) or "We should have ice cream because I like it. I would share." (Tameka) Most were sensitive of other's feelings.

I asked the students to write about what we should do. Seven said "Yes, we should buy ice cream" and 11 said "No, we should not."

Of the 7 who said yes, four wrote about concerns of being fair while still getting to buy ice cream:
"I think we should buy ice cream at lunch because some people want to just eat ice cream. I could buy them ice cream." (Jacob)

The students who said "No" showed empathy, a sense of fairness and even collective action.

Empathy:
"I think we should not buy ice cream because they may cary (cry). (Jamari).
"I think we should not buy ice cream at lunch because the kids dat buy ice cream daizt (doesn't) be nas (nice) to the ath (other) kids." (Jordan)
"I think we should not buy ice cream because people might cry and people will fill (feel) bad and becaseu people might ties (tease) other peopole and then tay might cry." (Dewayne)
Fairness
"I think we should not buy at lunch because it is not fir." (fair) (Camille)

Collective action:
One student was so moved by the lessons of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, she proposed we have our own boycott:

"I think we should boycott them because it is not fair for other kids that don't have money. We should boycott tham for a year." (Torri)

It is interesting to note that her resolve was tested the next day when her brother bought her an ice cream at lunch and instead of boycotting, she hid in the corner to eat it quickly.

Teacher Observations and Reflections

"These kids constantly surprise me. Just when I think I know how a student will respond, a different, usually more interesting and nuanced, thought would come out." (Teacher journal, January 24, 2005)

One issue I wrote about extensively in my journal was how to adjust the curriculum to fit the interests of my students:
"Now I am a little stuck. I gave the kids the option of continuing the unit on slavery and they chose it! " (Teacher journal, February 24, 2005)

After the introduction of the concept of slavery in A Bug's Life, I had planned to discuss slavery in the United States briefly, to give a historical context to an in-depth unit about the Civil Rights movement. I conducted a few read-alouds about slavery and we worked on a mapping project. Then I planned to launch a comprehensive Civil Rights Unit. The only problem: my students were so interested in slavery, they wanted to keep studying it. I explained my dilemma: I already had activities, a guest speaker, and an idea for our Black History Assembly that were a part of a Civil Rights unit. The students were not swayed; they really wanted to know more about slavery. I had thought about splitting the class into two study groups, each working on their topic of choice, so we took a class vote: 18 for studying slavery, 2 for going ahead with the Civil Rights Movement. Since slavery won the overwhelming majority, I felt I must go with it because it provided students with an empowered voice in the classroom. I always tell them it is *their* learning community, and they really spoke up for what they wanted. The unit turned out well. We developed a performance about the Underground Railroad based on a hip-hop song. The students choreographed a dance and they loved performing it during the school's Black History Assembly. I think they felt like they owned that performance since they chose the topic and did a lot of the work in creating the piece. It is interesting to note that the assembly was the most popular topic of discussion at home according to the parent survey.

The teacher journal showed the amount of times I was surprised by the need to deal with issues of social justice within the daily life of the classroom. While we had a large, overarching social studies unit on social justice, it was the everyday problems and concerns that made the most poignant practice of these ideas. This unplanned curriculum provided a rich context in which to explore the problems my students face.

> Ice cream! Of all things to engendered a heated debate and intense emotions about fairness, poverty, and collectivity! Thinking about it, I should not be very surprised by that – it has a much more

> tangible and direct connection to their lives and it challenges their sense of fairness not just in an abstract way, but in a real way that will determine whether or not they get to eat ice cream."
> (Teacher journal, January 26, 2005)

> Since students have been able to discuss a problem they are having outside of school during class meetings, they have been more aware of each other's struggles and their own problem solving abilities. During the class meeting today, Ruby brought up a problem she was having. She said she was tired from having to go to the Boys and Girls club after school, then walk and pick up her brother from a different school, wait around for him and then walk back to the club. When the students started offering advice to her, I saw such a caring community developing. They were genuinely trying to find a solution to her individual problem. Although it was difficult to find a solution (no, her mom couldn't pick up her brother; no, she couldn't pick him up at 5 when she left the club), they still tried and Ruby felt supported. It was really nice to see the class act in such a caring way.
> (Teacher journal, February 24, 2005)

I included a category that I kept running into with the discussions and the student work: identifying with the oppressed. The students continually made observations about the unfairness of the unequal distribution of resources. They complained about how some people do not have homes, they worried about schools that were not "good enough", some even wanted to set everyone free from jail. I believe this powerful identification would not be true if my students were not living the contradictions of being poor and Black in an urban environment. While a sense of fairness and empathy is often a part of a first and second graders' psychology, I do not think as many would say "Open the jail doors" if they did not identify with the humanity of the people on the inside. The two students who brought up the idea both had visited jail or prison: one visited her uncle, the other visited his mom's boyfriend.

I was really struck by some of the comments my students made.

> When Corey was asked if he would rather be an ant or a grasshopper, he said, "I would rather be an ant because when I grow up I wot to be goo giy. (I want to be a good guy.)" That summed up my reasons for teaching: so my students can grow up to be the good guys (and good women), the fair, honest, brave ones who stand up to injustices.
> Teacher journal, January 29, 2004

> I love Jamal's quote from his If I Were a President: "If I were President I would stop wars from killing people and

fighting and throwing bombs at people. They need to care for people. That's what I would do." I told him I would vote for him. It is interesting that he chose to write about a more peaceful world. He has a lot of difficulty managing his anger and is very prone to outbursts and fights. This lesson seemed to let the kids express what they want in their world, both the larger world and in their own personal struggles.
Teacher journal, January 15, 2005

Jordan's "If I were President" really struck me. He lives in really rough block that is just beginning to be gentrified. He wrote, "If I were President, I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses and I would give them food and a car." What a great thought. I think the real President could learn a lot of lessons from my kids.
Teacher journal, January 15, 2005

Parent Surveys

My third data collection tool was a survey I sent home to the families of my students. I asked parents to let me know if the students brought up the curricular topics of our Black History Unit at home and if they saw their children apply lessons from the unit in their everyday life. Out of 20 students, 14 returned the surveys. This is a good rate of return for my class. I typically receive homework from 10 or 12 students a week. In addition to the survey, I had parents attend two of our Black History events. Two of the students' mothers attended the interview of Reverend Wyatt and seven students had family members attend the Black History Assembly. The overwhelming response to each question was "Yes, my child did talk about this at home." On average, 90% of the respondents marked "Yes," some explaining their answers.

Question 1: My child talked about Reverend Wyatt's visit.
Yes: 13
No: 0
The parents stated the students talked about her role with Dr. King, her participation in a march where she was hit with a brick and how no one should get in the way of your work.
"She talked about Revered Wyatt when she sayed don't let anyone get in the way of your work."
"He talked about the Reverend Wyatt being hit with a brick during the bus boycott in the south."
"Solomon was very excited about her telling the story about marching with Dr. King."
"We discussed how she meet with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr."
"We discussed the reason she was in a wheelchair."
"Diamond talked to me about Rev. Wyatt being with Dr. King when he gave his speech."

Questions 2: My child talked about the Underground Railroad and slavery.
Yes: 10
No: 2
Parents reported their children discussed Harriet Tubman and the slaves escaping.
"We talked about Harriet Tubman."
"We discussed how slaved escaped to freedom and a batter way of life for slaves."
"Diamond talked about how the slaves escaped Underground."
"She did the play of the Underground Railroad for me.

Questions 3: My child talked about the Black History Assembly.
Yes: 13
No: 0
The parents reported the students' excitement about performing a play and dance about the Underground Railroad.
"Diamond talked about and demonstrated the dance the class performed. She was excited."
"I was proud of him and his dance skills."
"We discussed how excited she was in participating in reading of poems."
"He performed a song called musta gone off on the underground railroad."
"She told me she was going to have a play slavery at school."

Question 4: My child talked about the Civil Rights Movement (including Rosa Parks, Dr. King, Malcolm X)
Yes: 10
No: 2
"We discussed how important it was and how the Civil Rights Movement gave all people a chance to improve their life."
"Solomon talked about how Dr. King fought for all races (colors) to come together."
"How they changed the world."
"He talked about how Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving up her seat on the bus. And how Malcolm X was killed."

Question 5: I see my child applying lessons learned from the unit to her/his everyday life (issues of fairness, justice, race, etc).
Yes: 10
No: 2
"My child is anxious to learn more about the issues that affected that era."
"Being kind to the less fourtnate than us."
"Diamond is always fair. She plays with anyone, white, black, etc. She shows no favortism."

Any comments you have about the unit:

One parent said, "I thought the unit was very enlighting and brought back good and bad feeling about that era."

Another parent said, “Please keep the unit going.”
One grandmother stated, “Jordan asks a lot of questions some I can’t answer but I tell him to put it on the library list.”

Interpretation

I believe the five themes (fairness, standing up for yourself, empathy, collective action and identifying with the oppressed) show the ways my students make sense of their world. They used these five concepts to figure out how to be a good President, whether they wanted to be an ant or grasshopper, and whether it is acceptable for some of the class to buy something others cannot afford.

The five themes were not ones I had set out to find. I began my research focused on what the teacher does, what a social justice curriculum should look like. During the research process I found I had shifted my thinking to what the students brought to the discussions. I listened to their ways of making sense of issues of social justice.

While the five themes my students used are connected to the 8 concepts of curriculum design for social justice mentioned earlier, I think the students’ themes provide a more specific way my class made sense of our work. For example, the first concept of curriculum design was:

> **Grounded in the lives of our students.** Curriculum should be based on respect for students and rooted in their lives, needs, and experiences and should help students examine how their lives are connected with the broader society.

This tells what the teacher should do, but does not give the feedback for the ways the students make sense of it. Grounding the curriculum in the lives of the students, I saw myriad ways they encountered issues of social justice in their everyday lives as seven, eight and nine year olds. We opened up our conversations. I added an important component to our weekly class meetings. Before the unit we had the following agenda for the class meeting: 1 or 2 students would share something that was going well in class and then 1 or 2 would share a problem they were having in class. We would close with a song, poem or game. Once we got into the unit I changed the format to add a new agenda item. After the students discussed a problem or challenge in class, one student would get to share a problem they were having outside of class. This opened up the range of problem solving to problems such as bullying at the local boys and girls club, the recent rape in the school playground, and a student feeling like her mom was not listening to her. This unplanned curriculum led to many new insights for me as their teacher. I heard the students articulate problems in their lives and the class worked together to help the student come up with various solutions. I would not have taken up buying ice cream as a classroom community issue unless I had been listening to them.

The second tenet for curricular design states:

> **Critical.** Students should learn to "talk back" to the world. Curriculum and instruction should help students pose critical questions about society, examining popular culture, social structures, government actions, and school life, and should move outside the classroom to connect with real world problems.

My students were able to “talk back” to the world. They imagined themselves as President and reimagined the job description. They focused on better schools, less violence and more freedom for everyone. They showed their sense of empathy and fairness when they imagined themselves with power. As Jordan stated, “. . . I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses and I would give them food and a car.” He took a critical dilemma – homelessness – and figured out the simple solution of giving everyone the basic necessities for living: shelter and food.

The third curricular design tenet is:

> **Multicultural, anti-racist pro-justice.** A social justice curriculum includes the lives and perspectives of everyone in society, especially people who are marginalized. It should engage students in a critique of the roots of inequality.

My students struggled with each other and with themselves about what justice looks like. When the ice cream debate happened, there were many ideas of right and wrong presented. Some students believed as Tameka, “We should have ice cream because I like it. I would share.” Others, like Dewayne, thought it was “unfair” for some to eat ice cream and were worried “. . .because people might cry and people will fill (feel) bad and becaseu people might ties (tease) other peopole and then tay might cry.” We knew as a class we were looking for an answer that could balance individual wants with the larger collective good. This balance is often tenuous, as was shown by the student who argued passionately for boycotting the cafeteria and then the next day snuck out to eat ice cream. This is a life-long struggle for deciding what is right and what is wrong and it should have a place in our curriculum and in our classrooms.

The slavery unit showed an example of the fourth tenet:

> **Participatory, experiential.** Students should experience concepts first-hand, e.g., through projects, experiments, and role-plays, and should have opportunities for democratic participation by questioning, challenging, making decisions and collectively solving problems.

When the students were fascinated by the topic of slavery, I allowed them the choice of staying with that topic instead of going ahead to the unit on the Civil Rights Movement. They knew their learning was in their own hands, that they could make curricular decisions. They were able to negotiate the curriculum within bounds that made sense for them as young students and within bounds for me as a teacher.

The fifth tenet I try to incorporate all the time, with varying degrees of success:

> **Hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary.** Classrooms should make children feel emotionally and physically safe, significant and cared about, modeling the just and democratic society we envision.

Their writing about how the ants should solve their problems and the world they would create if they were President was full of hope, joy, kindness and vision. I believe primary-aged students have an innate sense of justice and fairness. I also believe our world works hard to discourage some of those feelings of empathy and fairness. I see students come into class having been beaten up by their brothers or their mothers. I see them act in very individualistic ways because that is how they have been taught to survive. In order to encourage growth of social consciousness, I believe teachers have to directly teach or reinforce some of the emotional skills, like empathy and fairness. These are some of "democracies ideas" that Dewey challenged teachers to embrace.

The sixth tenet relies on the teacher to be sure students have a vision of themselves as powerful and to understand past struggles where truth-tellers have made change.

> **Activist.** Children should come to see themselves as truth-tellers and change-makers. Teachers should encourage children to act on their consciences and should give students historical and contemporary examples of people from all cultures who act to make a difference and struggle for justice.

The unit on slavery was designed to show the students how ancestors of theirs made difficult decisions in order to survive and how they worked together collectively to change unjust social and political systems. This knowledge can form the basis of constructing their own identity as change-makers. This tenet also means teachers have to retain an activist stance. As Shannon (2004) warned teachers: "We are told that others know better about our work and how to do it, and our lives and how to live them." As teachers, we have to show that we are the experts over our lives and the teaching of our particular students. We cannot cede the debate over curriculum to people who have never met our students.

The seventh concept states curriculum should be:

> **Academically rigorous.** Children should develop the tools to change the world and to maneuver in the one that exists. By speaking directly to the alienation so many students feel, teachers aim to inspire and motivate all students to levels of academic performance far greater than those measured by standardized tests or grades.

Academically rigorous can mean many things. For me, I see rigor when students are looking at problems, completing research on a topic and coming up with their own solutions. Rigor is being able to think critically and creatively solve problems. It is more than learning to read and write; it is learning that there are big, important reasons to learn, think, write, and read. It is understanding that literacy is multidimensional and is tied to the decisions we make in our daily lives that become the basis for who we are.

The last tenet is:

> **Culturally and linguistically sensitive.** As schools become increasingly diverse, teachers must listen to and learn from students and their families, and teachers need to call on culturally diverse colleagues and community resources for insights into the communities they serve.

Being culturally and linguistically sensitive means being open as a teacher and researcher. When I began the project, I was sure all of the interesting data would come once we began investigating a social movement. But in reality, one of the most interesting moments came over the question of buying ice cream. This is what concerned my students and by listening to them, we were able to have a discussion of fairness and empathy with each other. The curriculum was much broader than my teacher-planned unit. The curriculum literally became "life," and not just anyone's life, but the complicated, joyous, difficult lives of my 25 students.

While conducting this research, I listened to my students and to their parents. I was a learner and a teacher. When I was "sensitive" to the culture of my students I learned new aspects of their thinking. For example, I was particularly surprised by the category of "standing up for yourself." I know this is an important category in my students' lives. Most, if not all, have been taught to defend themselves, to hit back if they are hit and to never back down from a fight. Their lives require that they are able to "stand up for themselves." It makes sense that this is a category they would use when identifying with the ants in "A Bug's Life." While it makes sense in retrospect and while it has been a common comment in my classroom for five years, I would not have predicted it would have been one of their ways of making sense of social problems. This was a lack of thoughtfulness on my part, which was corrected as soon as I read their work.

Throughout the research, my students guided me as much as the eight concepts for teaching for social justice. I learned alongside them, while still retaining the important role of teacher. The project reinforced my belief that classroom community can be built around sharing, discussing and working to resolve issues of social justice. It showed what democracy as a verb could look like in my classroom. It reinforced my belief in my students' and my own agency in making critical decisions everyday to be "one of the good guys," to use education to transform our ways of thinking and our ways of living in this complicated world.

Policy Implications

1. Trust teachers to trust their students. This curriculum could not have been planned by someone at Houghton-Mifflin who had never met my students. This curriculum did not always meet a state standard I could write on my lesson plan (unless I use the catch-all standards for oral communication). They were not always going to be written in my lesson plan book. I did not plan to have a discussion about buying ice cream at 10:40 on February _____. It happened because it was important to my students at that moment. With all the mandates and time schedules and minute-counting, teachers lose some of their ability to teach – really teach: investigate an important issue, debate, research, find new answers and try them out.
2. Teach teachers how to listen to their students. Encourage them to understand the specifics of their children's lives. The students are constantly showing what they know if teachers are just able to listen. They can show you what language they enjoy most, what songs they listen to, the various form of literacy that exist in their homes, what moves their hearts.
3. Build curriculum from students' interests and needs. This is their education; they should learn how to negotiate the act of learning. This was successful in part because the choices were limited: do you want to continue studying slavery or do you want to move on the Civil Rights Unit. The choices were not so open that the learning topics overwhelmed the teacher or were tangential to the course of study.
4. Allow time for community building. If teachers are focused on their math and reading basals, they will miss wonderful opportunities to learn from and with their students and create a community of learners.

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