

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

Executive Summary

Liz Goss

Teachers Network Leadership Institute 2004-2005

I. Research Questions:

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?

II. Rationale:

I envision a better world, one more just, one more joyful, 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. We all must be literate and thoughtful 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 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?

III. Data Collection Tools and Analysis

Data Collection Tools	Data Analysis
<p>Student work samples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Journals about slavery • Discussions and writings from “A Bug’s Life” • Debates and writings about fairness of selling ice cream at school • “If I Were President” activity • Class meetings 	<p>When reviewing my students’ written work, five categories of THEIR thinking kept emerging:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fairness • standing up for yourself • empathy • collective action • identifying with the oppressed
<p>Teacher observation and reflections</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher journals about lessons • Reflection on dilemmas in appropriateness and relevance of curricular unit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowing students to help direct the curriculum was important and made a difference • Having students negotiate curriculum in ways that were not overwhelming or too broad made it possible for the learning to be focused and of interest • Daily events in our classroom were framed by issues of social justice.
<p>Parent survey</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey about discussions students were having with parents during Black History unit • I received 14 completed surveys out of 20. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the parents (14 out of 20) reported speaking to their child about at least one of our activities and the overwhelming majority reported they spoke to their children about all of the activities. • Several examples of responses are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “I thought the unit was very enlightening and brought back good and bad feeling about that era.” ○ “Please keep the unit going.”

V. 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 able to listen. They can show you what language they enjoy most, what songs they listen to, the various forms 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 too 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.