

# Using Picture Books as a Vehicle to Teach Young Children about Social Justice

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"FATTY!" "FOUR EYES!" "Chink!"  
"Faggot!" "Girl!" "Retard!"

As teachers and administrators, we have all witnessed children using a derogatory reference to a group of people as a put down. Put downs usually reference non-mainstream groups who are different in ethnicity, gender, religion, ability, sexual orientation, class, or appearance. Hurtful name calling is but one example of how children express prejudiced beliefs and attitudes toward particular groups of people; non-mainstream children are also often excluded by their peers from activities and social events.

Teachers of young children have the challenging task to help eradicate prejudice and discrimination by teaching about social justice. The following story illustrates that the task of teachers is not a simple one.

One day, a woman walking along a river heard cries for help. As she began rescuing people from the river, she wondered why so many were nearly drowning. Looking around, the woman noticed a hill where something seemed to be pushing people off. Realizing this as the source of the problem, she had a dilemma. If she went up the hill to the source of the problem, people in the water would drown; if she stayed to help the drowning people, more would be pushed off the hill. What should she do?<sup>1</sup>

The woman might consider three options: (1) Rescue the people and return them to a dangerous condition. (2) Rescue them and teach them to manage the problem if they ever get pushed off again. (3) Organize with others to solve the problem.<sup>2</sup>

As teachers, we can think about these options as: (option 1) We can all just be nice to everyone but effect no change;

(option 2) We can help everyone assimilate into the mainstream; or (option 3) We can help eradicate prejudice and discrimination and promote respect for difference through advocacy and teaching for social justice. Clearly, the third option has the greatest potential for positive, long-term effects.

The purpose of this article is to share a strategy for teaching young children about social justice. Described here is a project where second graders responded to picture books that focus on social justice issues. Reading and writing were integrated as children listened to stories with social justice themes, briefly discussed them, and then wrote in their response journals. The primary focus of this article is on the children's written responses.

## Teaching About Social Justice

No one is born a bigot; rather, bigoted attitudes are learned. Even very young children notice differences in skin color, dress, and so on; the extent to which they learn to value difference is relative to what is modeled and taught, particularly by their parents, caregivers, and teachers. It is critical that children learn about social justice and respect for human rights when they are young, before prejudiced attitudes and beliefs become deeply ingrained.

National Council for the Social Studies implores teachers to teach for citizenry in a democratic society:

As citizens of a democracy, we support our republic's most important ideals: the common good, i.e., the general welfare of all individuals and groups within the community.

Our moral imperative as educators is

to see all children as precious and recognize that they will inherit a world of baffling complexity. Our responsibility is to respect and support the dignity of the individual, the health of the community, and the common good of all. This responsibility demands that we teach our students to recognize and respect the diversity that exists within the community.<sup>3</sup>

Teaching for social justice in kindergarten and the primary grades begins with an anti-bias environment that includes (1) bias-free materials that have a positive approach to multiple cultures and ways of being, (2) conflict resolution strategies, and (3) cooperative learning activities. In addition, children's literature provides a valuable vehicle for teaching about social justice.<sup>4</sup>

## Development of Empathy

To think about social justice, young children must first acquire a level of moral development that enables them to feel empathy for others. Empathetic responses are dependent on one's ability to take perspective, and they develop as young children are able to understand how another is feeling. The ability to take perspective and thus express empathy evolves on a developmental continuum, gradually maturing between ages four and nine.<sup>5</sup>

Strategies for supporting development of empathy in children include:

- Model empathetic behavior. Point out when you do something for another.
- Build a vocabulary of feeling. Label your emotions and those of others.
- Encourage children to take action. Capitalize on opportunities in children's daily lives to teach empathetic responses.

- Use concrete examples. Capitalize on opportunities to act in empathetic ways. (e.g., Donate to the local food bank as a class project.)
- Provide activities where children work together. Children learn to take perspective as they work together.
- Create partnerships with local agencies. Again, the food bank is an example.
- Learn about the Convention of the Rights of the Child.
- Stay in touch with the child. Pay attention to children's emotional responses and discuss human rights.<sup>6</sup>

### Children's Literature as a Vehicle

Children's books serve as a bridge or a way to vicariously experience social justice situations, and they provide a vehicle to foster empathy.<sup>7</sup> Children's books provide a safe forum for talking and writing about social justice issues because children address

them in the context of the story and its characters rather than a negative personal experience. Reflecting on the list above, children's literature provides a way to develop feeling vocabulary through talking and writing about social justice issues in context. Talking and writing about the stories may encourage children to take action, and books provide concrete examples to help children think about empathetic responses. Table 1 suggests several familiar, high-quality children's books that can be used to teach about social justice.

### Teaching About Social Justice

Participants in this project were second-graders in one fairly homogenous rural school (two classrooms, 47 children) and one diverse city school (one classroom, 23 children). Second graders were selected because, by the age of seven or eight, their ability to take perspective and feel empathy

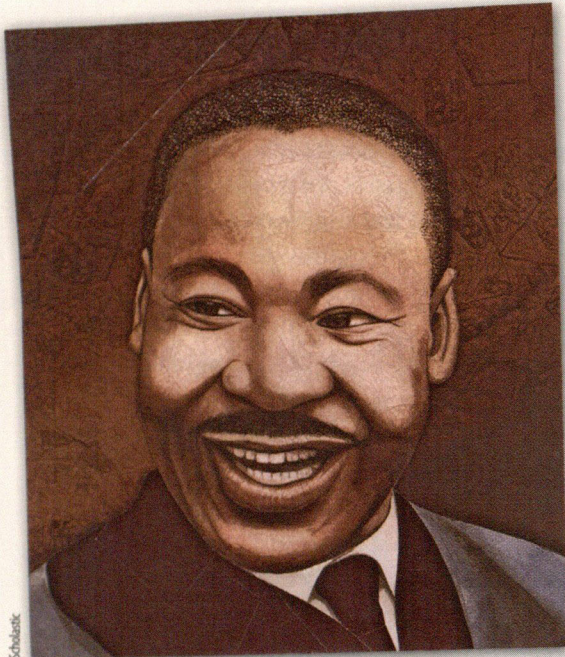
is reasonably developed.

Parents were informed of the purpose and content of this project before it began. They had an opportunity to preview the books before they were read and ask questions about the intent of the project. By informing parents, they were better able to understand the purpose of the activity and reinforce learning at home.

The project spanned several daily read aloud sessions that were part of the normal routine in each classroom (approximately 15 minutes), during which teachers (or practicum students) read books that focused on social justice themes. Following the reading, the children briefly (4-5 minutes) discussed the stories. On some days, the read aloud time was extended to 30 minutes to allow time for children to write in their story response journals. For this project, children did not share their written pieces in small or whole class groups; however,

**Table 1. Examples of Books to Engender Discussion About Social Justice**

Book	Description	Themes
<i>The Universal Declaration of Human Rights</i> by Ruth Rocha and Otavio Roth (New York: United Nations, 2000)	This book describes the ideal social environment where each person, regardless of differences, enjoys the same human rights.	Human Rights
<i>Martin's BIG Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.</i> by Doreen Rappaport (New York: Scholastic, 2001)	This picture book chronicles the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, highlighting his message of driving out hate with love.	Civil Disobedience Love of Human Kind
<i>Amazing Grace</i> by Mary Hoffman (New York: Dial, 1991)	Grace's classmates tell her that she cannot play Peter Pan in the play because she is a girl and she is black. Grace does not let such facts stop her ambitions.	Racism Gender bias Assertiveness
<i>The Other Side</i> by Jacqueline Woodson (New York: Putnam, 2001)	A black girl and a white girl cross the barrier and racial tension created by a fence that separates the black and white sides of town.	Racism
<i>Daddy's Roommate</i> by Michael Willhoite (Los Angeles, CA: Alyson, 1991)	The father of the young boy in this story lives with his gay partner. Their lives are very similar to other families that have experienced an amiable divorce.	Gay Parent
<i>Fly Away Home</i> by Eve Bunting (New York: Clarion, 1993)	A young boy and his father are homeless, living in the airport, and working hard to avoid being noticed. Narrated by the child, the story is sober, but not grim.	Economic Inequity
<i>The Story of Ruby Bridges</i> by Robert Coles (New York: Scholastic, 1995)	This is the true story of Ruby Bridges who was the sole black child to attend an all white elementary school in New Orleans after court-ordered segregation.	Civil Rights
<i>Talking About Disability</i> by Jillian Powell (New York: Raintree, 1999)	With photographs and simple text, this book explains many different disabilities and depicts persons with disabilities as functional, productive human beings.	Differences in Abilities



Back cover of *Martin's BIG Words: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* by Doreen Rappaport, illustrated by Bryan Collier.

an extension of that nature would provide opportunities for further discussion about social justice issues.

Data are shared here from six, 30 minute sessions in three different second grade classrooms. Each session, a new book was read, briefly discussed, and children wrote responses in their journals. Books included were: *Fly Away Home* by E. Bunting, *Amazing Grace* by M. Hoffman, and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by R. Coles.

Teachers (or practicum students) first read the book and then posed a question to the children to engage them in a brief discussion. The single discussion question was intended to help the children take the perspective of the story characters. Discussion questions included:

- ▶ (*Amazing Grace*) How do you think Grace felt when the children told her she could not be Peter Pan?
- ▶ (*Fly Away Home*) How do you think the boy and his father felt about living in the airport?
- ▶ (*The Story of Ruby Bridges*) How do you think Ruby Bridges felt when the white people yelled at her and left the school?

During the perspective taking discussion, children universally indicated that they would feel bad if they found themselves in the circumstances experienced by the characters. For example, during a discussion following the reading of *Amazing Grace*, children expressed feelings

of sadness (“I would feel sad.”) and hurt (“That would hurt my feelings.”)

### Children's Written Responses

After hearing the story and engaging in a brief discussion, the children were given a general rather than a specific writing prompt: “Write about what you are thinking about after hearing this story.” They were then given about 15-20 minutes to write in their response journals. Children who struggled to begin writing were given more specific

prompts such as:

- ▶ How did the story make you feel?
- ▶ Do you think it is fair that some people do not have a home?

We assessed children's learning by analyzing themes that emerged in their writing. Two broad themes emerged, empathy and advocacy. Within the theme of empathy, children talked about sadness, fear, friendship, and right and wrong. In addition, responses varied based on the particular story.

### *Fly Away Home*

This book by Eve Bunting is the story of a homeless father and his young son who live in the airport. They must stay on the move so their constant presence in the airport will not be spotted. On the weekends, the father works as a janitor and the young boy stays with the Medina family, also homeless and living in the airport.

For the second-graders, this story engendered empathetic responses. Many of the children were saddened and decried that it is not fair that some people are homeless. Following are unedited examples of children's expressions of sadness. (Children's spelling has been corrected.)

*Fly Away Home* makes me feel sad because they don't have a home and we do and because their mom died.

I think it would be hard to live in an airport. You would be lonely and sad, no bed either, that is no place for a home at all. I feel bad for all the kids that are

homeless and poor. Rich people are mean, poor people are nice.

It makes me feel bad. It isn't fair that that boy does not have a home. It almost made me cry.

The following responses reveal children's expressions of fright over the plight of the father and son. They indicated that it would be scary to live in an airport and to not have a home.

If I lived in an airport I would be scared and sad because I don't have a home.

It would be scary to have to live in an airport because you could get lost. And there would be a lot of strangers. It's not fair. You would not have toys to play with or any games to play.

It would be scary to live on the street or in an airport. It would be hard to find food and water and shelter. It would be amazing if every one had a house and some books. And if everyone could go to school.

I think it would be scary. And it would be hard because you would not have a bed or a room and it would be hard to sleep and buy food for your self.

### *Amazing Grace*

Written by Mary Hoffman and Carolin Binch, this is the story of a young girl Grace, who loved to act out stories. When Grace really wanted to play the title role in her class production of *Peter Pan*, one classmate told her she could not because she was a girl and another told her she could not because she was black. Encouraged by her Nana, Grace practiced and tried out for the part. In the end, Grace was an amazing *Peter Pan*.

Children responded to this story with feelings of empathy and advocacy. Many children indicated they would be Grace's friend.

Following are some unedited examples of children's empathetic responses.

If I was in Grace's class I would be nicer to her and say You can be *Peter Pan*

because it doesn't matter if you're a girl or a boy or if you have a different color of skin. I think Grace should be treated the way we want to be treated.

If I were in Grace's class I would vote her for Peter Pan.

The following responses suggest that many children were not only empathetic, but were moved by this story to take action and advocate on Grace's behalf. Advocacy was manifest in statements about talking to Grace's classmates.

I would tell them that she can do whatever she wants.

I would of told them that Grace can be anything she wants. Then after school I would walk home with her and ask if I can come over to her class and be her friend.

I would of told them she can do any thing she wants. Then I'd invite her to a sleepover. I'd walk her home and I would talk to her friends and I would make her feel better.

If I was in Grace's class I would stand up for Grace and say to my class mate that if he was a Girl then what would he feel like and if he would like it if someone said to him You cant be Peter Pan cause he's black.

I would of said to the person that told Grace she couldn't do it, that Grace can try out for what ever she wanted and didn't have to be told wait to try out.

A few children responded by putting themselves in Grace's situation. While they did not directly express empathy, they did indicate they felt Grace was being unfairly treated.

I would say just because I'm a girl doesn't mean that I cant be Peter Pan because Its not really the real thing of Peter Pan. And just because I'm black I still could be Peter Pan.

I would follow my dreams and I would do what I wanted to do.

If I were Grace I would move away from those two and wouldn't be friends with them.

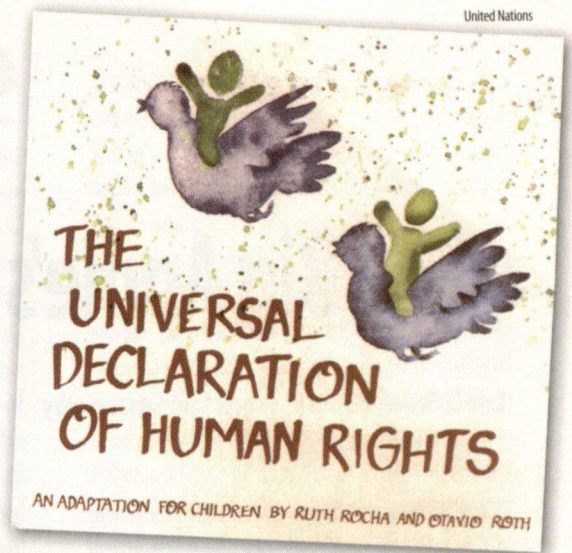
Children were better able to put themselves into the character of Grace than the homeless boy which may have assisted them to become advocates. This is probably because the context of a classroom and participation in a school play were within their realm of experiences, while living in an airport was not. The children participating in this project had never experienced homelessness any more directly than perhaps observing homeless people in their communities. Even then, they may not have been aware of what they were observing. Furthermore, they may have easily identified with Grace if they had personally experienced hurtful remarks from classmates.

### **The Story of Ruby Bridges**

Written by Robert Coles, this is the true story of six-year-old Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an all white school. Each day as Ruby goes to school, she encounters hateful protesters, but she demonstrates strength and courage. As white children leave the school, Ruby is eventually the only child left in Mrs. Henry's class.

The children expressed concern about right and wrong and responded empathetically to Ruby's plight. Furthermore, almost to a person, the second-graders placed themselves in the character of Ruby Bridges as they wrote responses to this story. Perhaps because Ruby is about their age and the context of school is familiar, they were able to speak from Ruby's perspective. In this case, advocacy responses such as those engendered by *Amazing Grace* would be difficult because Ruby's classmates left the school, and there was no one to hear the advocacy.

Placing themselves in Ruby's situation, the second-graders wrote that they would defend themselves against the hatred. Furthermore, many indicated they would encourage friendship.



If I was Rudy I would do the same thing but a little differently. I would say I want to make friends. Do you understand? Don't kill me. I want to make friends. Please, oh please.

I wood say Ha that's not nice. I wood go and tell my dad. I wood run away. I wood walk into class. I would yell Help. I would stand up for myself. 🐼

### **Notes**

1. Louise Derman-Sparks and Carol Brunson Phillips, *Teaching/Learning Anti-Racism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
2. Ibid.
3. National Council for the Social Studies. *Expectations for Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), 5-6.
4. Gary Fertig, "Using Biographies to Explore Social Justice in U.S. History," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 1 (September/October, 2003): 9-12; Nancy P. Gallavan and Jennifer L. Fabbri, "Stimulating Moral Reasoning in Children Through Situational Learning and Children's Literature," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 3 (January/February 2004): 17-23; Alexa Sandmann, "Literature that Promotes Justice for All," *Social Education* 68, no. 4 (May/June 2004): 254-259.
5. Anne Colby and Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Measurement of Moral Judgment: Vol. 1, Theoretical Foundations and Research Validation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 15-35.
6. Rebecca J. Glover and Barbara K. O'Donnel, "Understanding Human Rights: The Development of Perspective-taking and Empathy," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 15, no. 3 (January/February 2003): 15-18.
7. Alexa Sandmann, "Literature that Promotes Justice for All," *Social Education* 68, no. 4 (May/June 2004): 254-259.

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