

***“TEACHER, WHAT ARE SOCIAL
JUSTICE AND SOCIAL
CHANGE?”***

by

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this action research presentation is to invite discourse on racial equality and social justice with young children. Strategies include using children's literature in conjunction with Georgia's Power Standards for Social Studies. **Methodology:** This action research project took place in a suburban kindergarten with learners of diverse ability levels and ESL students as well. The teacher worked with a medium sized heterogeneous group of kindergarten students. The group size was about 12-18 on a given day. This took place within the second semester of the kindergarten year. The documentation of the strategy was anecdotal and based on the principles of action research. **Results:** The exposure to history and social injustice in the context of literature presented benefits of the children using the vocabulary from the story in their journal entries and an unprecedented conversation about moral dilemmas, friendship race, communication, and change. Another benefit was that the children were forced to apply the scenarios from the text to their own immediate relationships. The final benefit of this unit of study was that the children were motivated more and more each time a story or text was presented to listen and have their own independent discussion of the story, the characters and its events. It allows optimal participation from all members of the group and a constant flow of communication about the central issues at the heart of each text; all tied to race, class, and gender. **Conclusions:** The outcome of analyzing the conversation drawn from this text in the classroom is that it plays upon the natural discussion of young children as a motivator for exploring the past, present and future of change via the perception of the

children. Another outcome is that the teacher found a new medium in which to gain insight on her Caucasian colleagues' perception of young children and social injustice. The relationship of this unit of study to the purpose of the research is manifested in the rich discussion and authentic work samples and conversation of the students. **Recommendations:** It is imperative that teachers offer more avenues that activate the conversation of what social injustice and social change actually are. These and other culturally appropriate strategies with regards to cultural and linguistic diversity make for lifelong learners and independent thinkers.

INTRODUCTION

The examination of this unit is significant because research has informed us that young children acknowledge racial differences as early as two and a half to three years of age. This is the moment in which early childhood educators should take the opportunity to teach children about diversity and appreciation of such matters. Also many states have adopted standards based learning models and this will impact the depth and breadth of teaching for diversity and social justice. Often times, early childhood educators are intimidated when attempting to teach about cultural diversity in conjunction with state standards. This task does not have to be daunting or boring. In some cases the standards can actually make more opportunities to teach about social justice in early childhood classrooms. This examination will advance our capacity to deliver instruction; through standards, in teaching social justice and the history of social change, in reference to African-American people in this country.

Education as political capital

Capital refers to consistent determinants of the choice and execution of acts that have overall consequences. Capital is most often a product of a prior

activity, the after-effects of which impacts the hedonic value of a current activity. This residue embodies stored energy, information and structures that constitute stable contributions to resolved action. Activities that create or enhance these durable elements of actions, which affect both present and future experiences, are said to have vested interest value. How does this definition pertain to education?

The reliable and normally fixed elements of an individual's psychological underpinning along with learning produce personal investment in psychological capital. Psychological capital assigns the development and maintenance of social confuction, the durable elements of which constitute social capital. Social capital is a standard ingredient of social change Individual contentment is largely determined by the effects of psychological, social, economic, and political capital on the ability of an individual to sustain a predominance of positive humanistic experiences. A sector of that arena in which this takes place in early childhood is the learning environment or the school experience. Positive capital serves to improve the subjective benefit of individuals; detrimental capital to decrease it. In this case, the individuals are members of the learning community. Education is the "X factor" in society's armory of tools for positively influencing the quest for happiness by its members through capital development.

The big idea of economic capital includes all the mechanisms needed to generate economic value. Before the development of economic markets, such mechanisms were defined by their addition to human perpetuation. They consisted of physical tools used to increase, augment or replace human abilities in obtaining the sustenance of life. Most importantly, economic capital has been defined to include cognitive estate and human skills developed through education that serve to enhance monetary productivity. Even natural/physical capital encompasses technology created by human intellectual resourcefulness and inspiration. Human capital symbolizes most of the value of economic capital in the developed economies of the world (Becker, 1997).

If formal education contributes to the development of human capital, it does so by presenting the value stored in the human brain. The tenets of human capital consist of stored tailored features of memory and the related dimensions, within which formal and informal learning is paramount as resources. A large portion of the contribution takes place in early childhood classrooms.

Education as social capital

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) emphasizes the role of vicarious, symbolic, and self-regulatory processes in psychological functioning. It regards human behavior as a reciprocal, continuous interaction between one's cognitive,

behavioral, and environmental determinants. This view neither casts the human being into a powerless role that is controlled by environmental forces nor as free agents that have the capacity to become whatever they choose. The environment and the person are reciprocal determinants of each other. People do not simply react to their environment. They select, organize, and transform the stimuli they come into contact with during the course of their everyday interactions. Here enters the importance of social capital and social justice and the cultural identity of young children. Let's review what research has to say about social capital. Social capital is defined as a person's social net worth based on these factors: affiliation with organized social group, capable of changing, interactions within and among families, neighborhoods, and entire communities, trust, reciprocity, and cooperation among members of social network that aims to achieve common goals.

“Social capital consists of social networks, habits of cooperation and bonds of reciprocity that serve to generate benefits for members of a community. These exchanges have lower opportunity costs than comparable market-mediated services partly because they are voluntary (non-contractual) and are likely to involve more intrinsic satisfaction. They embody the emotional bonds of group support and trust.” (Fukiyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000).

Education and equity

Educational achievement is another factor of people's culture because of its connection to career opportunities and earnings. Income earnings boost with

progressively ascending levels of education. The importance of educational achievement as a control on economic well-being cannot be overstressed. Differences in educational accomplishment are predisposed by geographic locality and socioeconomic causes. People with the maximum portion of college degrees live in the Northeast and West part of the U.S.

Educational accomplishment may be a sensitive topic for young learners, especially if they are from another country or if their parents were not born in the U.S. and received education in the US. Reviewing the power of education could improve educators' and researchers' understanding of this aspect of a young learner's culture. Think about the subsequent questions as a way in which to acquire this kind of data.

- What are the family's personal educational standards?
- What are family's instructive ideals for the young adolescent?
- What are the learner's own educational ideals?
- What does the young learner wish to gain from the educational event?
- How does the student prepare to achieve his or her educational goals?
- Are any of these plans and goals in discord with family educational plans and ambitions for the learner?

These and other questions can be answered through the manifestation of communication, ideas and experiences that are results of social and affective exploration taking place in a learning community.

PURPOSE OF THE UNIT STUDY

The members of the learning community in this action research project learned about appropriate strategies for presenting real life examples of social justice, social change, and cultural appreciation in the context of the early childhood classroom. The teacher sought to increase the instructional knowledge and strategies of early childhood educators teaching the tenets of social justice and the history of social change of other teachers in the learning community. It was the goal of the teacher to identify and use multicultural children's literature as a part of teaching the history of social change, social justice and cultural appreciation.

The Importance of Children's Literature

Children's literature is a powerful and important tool for children, adults and society in general. For children, children's literature has literacy and literary effects. It also has social and self-concept development effects. Dr. Rick Olenchak (personal communication, 2006), psychologist states, "children can use critical characterization and plots as backdrops for beginning to identify themselves and their feelings and their ideas as a clear case against a series of cultures; from their own homes to those of racial, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic segments of the larger society.

For adults, children's literature has power; socially and politically.

From its inception, trade books have had positive and negative effects on the perception of child life and environments. Early “Dick and Jane” books seemed harmless but actually damaging. Why? It marginalized children of color and children who have disabilities. The early trade books viewed children of color as deficit white children of ignored their existence.

Children’s literature has come a long way. It now reflects many voices and views of children. It reflects children from many races, ethnicities, and disabilities. Children who have parents of the same gender, children who are biracial, and children who are adopted are now represented in trade books now. Whether controversial or not, children’s literature is now more inclusive than in years past.

It is also now more reflective of social justice and social change. Social justice and social change in children’s literature has many roots. The one that stands out to me personally is the fortitude of Willie, the subject of many Ezra Jack Keats stories. The character, Willie, is an African American boy in the inner city. This act of writing about an African American urban boy is a form of social justice in that a group of people normally pathologized in books and other print media, was portrayed as an everyday person –minus the pathology. The books about Willie and other characters of color in the inner city written by an author of Jewish descent. This small bit of information on a prolific author and his characters is a form of social justice and social change

in the world of literature.

Exposure to History

Literature is also a tool to exposes children to history. It is a tool or medium for voices and stories, and points of view that are usually precluded from textbooks and basal series. Facts that challenge notions of heroification and vilification are well documented in "Lies My Teacher Told Me" by James Lowen and "Before the Mayflower" by Lerone Bennet. This leads us to a discourse about diversity.

This action research project resulted from a unit of study with an Early Intervention Program Kindergarten class in a suburban school district. The demographics of this class reflected a diversity that is substantial. This class included children who were African American, Caucasian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Gambian, and Nigerian.

Along with the complexity of literature, diversity and history, throw into the mix state standards. Standards are essential concepts that learners must possess an intricate understanding of. Standards serve the purpose of compacting numerous single set objectives and are so written that they are a requirement for all students to attain to the point of mastery. As educators, we seek to improve instruction and follow state mandates as well. We sometimes feel that we are sacrificing what is creative and enjoyable learning for students by "covering" the standards. This juxtaposition does not have to exist.

We can make standards and creativity synonymous through the vehicle that is literature followed by conversation.

Discourse About Race

Valuing diversity acknowledges differences between people and concedes that these distinctions are a respected asset. Multicultural education is a principal factor of attaching importance to diversity. It compliments diversity while instructing all youth to develop into successful and contributing affiliates of a democratic organization. It respects individualism while upholding respect for other people. It emphasizes the offerings of the various groups (e.g. ethnic, gender, income, sexual orientation, etc.) that make up the populations of the globe. It highlights the significance of people exchanging their stories and gaining knowledge from the stories of others. It acknowledges that different children have different learning styles. This tactic seeks to amplify diversity consciousness, sense of worth, and abilities so that adolescents are equipped to take constructive action with their constituents. By shaping positive peer pressure, young adolescents begin to alter unconstructive attitudes, acuity, and behaviors about the issue of diversity. Appreciating diversity can be considered at three levels:

- Intellectual: knowledge and understanding of the concepts and issues related to diversity

- Psychosocial: appreciation and respect of the similarities and differences among people
- Outcome-based: building positive relationships with "different people"
- Choice or decision making is an intricate, global progression; skills develop as with practice.

Regrettably, prejudice is learned and by the middle grades. Often middle school students break away trailing customary racial and or cultural lines. Discrimination in this devious form is perilous because if people are not conscious of it and if actions are not taken to right it, it can lead to bigotry. Like infants are not born with prejudices, no one person is ushered into the world involuntarily grasping the preeminent way in which to commune with others. They have to learn to converse, read and connect in other ways by surveying people, who teach through their illustrations and coaching. Integrating the respect of diversity as a vital idea in schooling programs is of great consequence.

Incorporating State Standards

In March 2004, the State Board of Education accepted a recommendation from the Georgia Department of Education (GDOE) to do away with the K-3 English/Language Arts standards "Reading and Writing Grade by Grade" from the present course of study within the proposed Georgia Performance Standards. A number of teachers in Georgia were in

agreement with the quality of the standards, but were uncertain that they couldn't be changed or augmented in the coming school years as the needs of Georgia's students change and more effective teaching strategies come into play.

These are some of the kindergarten literacy and social studies standards.

- **ELAKR4: Fluency**
The learner will be able to demonstrate the ability to read orally with speed, accuracy, and expression.
- **ELAKR5: Vocabulary**
The learner will be able to acquire and use grade-level words to communicate effectively.
- **ELAKR6: Comprehension**
The learner will be able to gain meaning from orally presented text.
- **ELAKW1: Principles of Writing**
The learner will be able to begin to understand the principles of writing.
- **ELAKLSV1: Communication**
The learner will be able to use oral and visual skills to communicate.

According to the Georgia State Department of Education, the “Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies were designed to develop informed Georgia citizens who understand the history of the United States and our place in an ever increasing interconnected world. It is essential that students understand their past and how that past influences the present day and the future”. To accomplish the creation of a community of informed citizens, it is critical that social studies teachers:

1. Bridge essential understanding about the past to contemporary events.

2. Assist students in understanding the nature of historical inquiry and the role of primary and secondary sources.
3. Encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives on events.
4. Engage students in speculation about the known and unknown motives and actions of historic figures.
5. Integrate the strands of Social Studies.

The ever evolving body of children's literature that has culturally relevant social studies themes should be incorporated into the Social Studies curriculum. In addition, the reading of social studies related books should be an integral part of the elementary reading program. Through the use of a varied assessment program, students should be provided with periodic opportunities to engage in inquiry-oriented projects related to social studies. A differentiated assessment program with numerous types of both formative and summative assessments provides the teacher, the student, and the parent with an understanding of the student's progress and mastery of the Georgia Performance Standards for Social Studies. The standards are listed below.

- SSKG1 The student will describe *American culture* by explaining diverse community and family celebrations and customs.
- SSKCG1 The student will demonstrate an understanding of *good citizenship*. Explain how rules are made and why. Explain why rules should be followed.

- SSKCG2 The student will retell stories that illustrate *positive character traits* and will explain how the people in the stories show the qualities of honesty, patriotism, loyalty, courtesy, respect, truth, pride, self-control, moderation, and accomplishment.
- SS1H1 The student will read about and describe the life of historical figures in American history. Identify the contributions made by these figures: Benjamin Franklin (inventor/ author/ statesman), Thomas Jefferson (Declaration of Independence), Meriwether Lewis and William Clark with Sacagawea (exploration), Harriet Tubman (Underground Railroad), Theodore Roosevelt (National Parks and the environment), George Washington Carver (science). Describe how *everyday* life of these historical figures is similar to and different from everyday life in the present (food, clothing, homes, transportation, communication, recreation).
- SS1H2 The student will read or listen to American folktales and explain how they characterize our national heritage. The study will include John Henry, Johnny Appleseed, Davy Crockett, Paul Bunyan, and Annie Oakley.
- SS1CG1 The student will describe how the historical figures in SS1H1a display positive character traits of fairness, respect for others, respect for the environment, conservation, courage, equality, tolerance, perseverance, and commitment.

The standards listed above were the standards reflected in the lesson plans.

SAMPLES OF LESSONS

The unit was designed based on the essential questions format. Essential questions are questions that require you to make a decision or plan a course of action. Essential questions reside at the top of *Bloom's Taxonomy* (Bloom, 1954). They require students to evaluate (make a thoughtful choice between options, with the choice based upon clearly stated criteria), to synthesize (invent a new or different version) or to analyze (develop a thorough and complex understanding through skillful questioning). Essential questions ignite our curiosity and sense of inquiry. They extract from some deep longing to understand something which is important to us.

Essential questions usually extend themselves well to interdisciplinary investigations that require students apply the skills and perspectives of social science and language arts while grapple with content from social studies or science. It would be best if students could learn to situate within their learning experience, their own essential questions, but in most cases they must have several experiences with questions generated by the teacher before they can begin to assist in the creating process and generate their own. It was critical that I looked at “what did I want the children to walk away knowing”. What goals would turn into tools for

helping children to look at the world critically? What emotional or social experiences could we plan in conjunction with literature to under gird the principles of brain-based learning? Here is a sample of a lesson plan used during this unit.

Lesson Plan Format

Title of Lesson: The Enchanted Hair Tale		
<p>Established Goals: SSKCG2 The student will retell stories that illustrate <i>positive character traits</i> and will explain how the people in the stories show the qualities of honesty, patriotism, loyalty, courtesy, respect, truth, pride, self-control, moderation, and accomplishment.</p>	<p>Understandings: People are different in appearance, but should be treated fairly in spite of that. Differences make us unique.</p>	
<p>Essential Questions: Why do we need differences?</p>	<p>Technology Resources <i>URLs:</i> <u>Software:</u> KidPix and Kidspiration. <u>Hardware:</u> laptop carts</p>	<p><u>Materials:</u> Book Paper plates Crayons Yarn pictures</p>
<p>Students will know:</p>	<p>Differences and diversity are to be valued. Differences are acceptable. Differences do not less or better.</p>	

Students will be able to:	Come up with solutions for conflict resolution in discrimination situations.
Performance tasks:	Create, discuss and record ideas that resolve conflict in our school and community.
Learning Activities:	Students will create a paper plate picture of Dr. Fair with ENCHANTED HAIR! We will use a Venn diagram or graph to record different types of “enchanted” hair.

JOURNAL RESPONSES

In looking at journal responses, I was able to examine many facets of the young learners. I was able to see the children’s self-concepts, questions

about others, and how their belief systems operate during instruction and interaction.

In looking at their self concepts through journal reflections the responses were reflective of the hopes the children had for themselves. The children's responses to three reflection questions in their journal were as follows:

Question 1: There have been many people who have fought for the rights of others. If you could fight, what or who would you fight for?

The responses were as follows:

I would fight for people who live under bridges over the freeway.

I would fight for everything.

I would fight so everybody could learn.

I would fight for people to get together.

I would help fight for people who could not talk.

I would fight so kids could have food.

I would fight for each child to be special to at least one person.

I would fight for safety.

Question 2: Grace (of the story Amazing Grace) had to show her classmates, despite what they said felt that she could be anything she wanted to be. What are you going to be?

I am going to be a basketball player.

I am going to be a ballerina.

I am going to be a police woman.

I am going to be a teacher.

I want to be a policeman.

I want to be an astronaut.

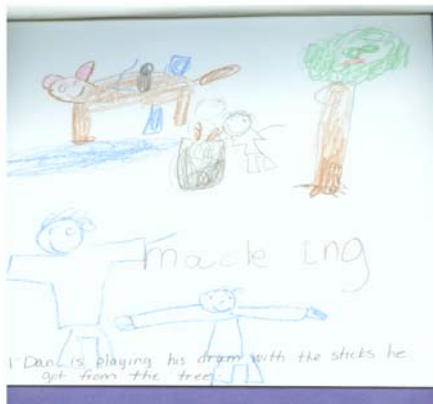
I am going to be a doll designer.

Question 3: The music in the Sweet Music in Harlem reflects many

kinds of music in Black culture that many people still enjoy and listen to today. If you could, would you be a part of the Sweet Music in Harlem and if so how?

I would sing my heart out.
I would dance with Dr. Fair.
I would dance the jitterbug.
I would sing "My Baby".
I would play a clarinet.
I would play the drums.
In my picture I am playing the guitar, really loud.

Question 4: How did Li'l Dan the Drummer Boy save Company E?
He played his drum different ways to trick the confederate soldiers.
Li'l Dan climbed the tree and played the drum to save them.
He beat his drum like the sounds in war.
Li'l Dan played his drum with the sticks he made from tree branches.
Li'l Dan saved the Union soldiers with his drumsticks.



Questions about others also came up within the content of rich

discussion in the context of rich discussions in the classroom. This was an explicit outcome of the instructional design of the unit. Student's belief systems were enacted through conversation and interaction. With these particular lessons, this examination was explicit once again but implied as well.

TEACHER REFLECTIONS

As a teacher, I was privy to unobstructed and uncensored expression of who the children were, what they saw in others, and who they wanted to be in the context of this unit. This was a striking and unnerving experience. I had two Caucasian colleagues that I taught with in this classroom. As well as observing the children, I got to observe their reactions and responses to the children in the context of the unit. I was offered the opportunity to teach the "Black history" unit. They were not aware of the magnitude of the communication and the courageous conversation that could be engaged in by the children and them as well. I will provide several examples of this in the following three vignettes.

Brown Egg

"Children line up; be careful with those eggs now." I got them to choose eggs, some chose brown ones and some chose white ones. All day long life was dictated by the color of the eggs. Choosing the type of juice you want, and not getting to choose your exploration center were the opportunities (or lack thereof) determined by the eggs.

Melissa: What do you mean I can't have grape juice? I don't want orange juice.

Kenrick: Melissa, you have a brown egg, that is the rule.

Melissa: Why can't I change the rule?

Kenrick: Because the white eggs are the boss today.

Enchanted Hair

“So Erica’s hair is enchanted ‘cause it’s red?” The story “Enchanted Hair” allowed the children to recreate what makes them different from the others. This activity following the story was especially significant for a little boy in the class named Nazyr who was African American and wore long braids. This was actually more of an issue with the Caucasian teachers than the children in the class. The teachers would say “why doesn’t his other just cut it?” They were actually leery at touching his hair to adjust it when he woke up from his nap. This behavior led me to design this lesson in order to open the conversation up for the teachers in the room a well.

Nazyr: I know how the boy in the story feels. It makes me mad when people make fun of my hair in this class. They don’t make fun of my hair at the Boys and Girls Club. It’s just at this class.

Erica: I like your hair Nazyr, it’s different like mine. I like my red and curly hair. My daddy says it’s like my Grandma’s. My brothers have blonde hair. I am the only one with red hair. You should act like me Nazyr.

Nazyr: I know why that boy in the story was always fighting. The people in the story were not his friends for real, except for Miss Pearl.

Back of the Bus

“Come on you all; each person takes a chair and add it to the line”. Mackenzie asks, “Where are the headlights? My Mom’s van has headlights and a steering wheel”. As the chairs line up in the two columns, I wonder what Rosa Parks would be thinking right now? With all the chairs all lined up, the children proceeded to pay their money, one quarter per person, to get on the bus. This activity took place before the reading of the Rosa Park story. This served as the background building activity to ignite their affective filters. They have their money out and they are ready to board the bus.

Teacher: All of the people wearing red pay your money first and then stand at the end of the line.

Francisco: Why teacher?

Teacher: You will see in a moment.

All of the people in red paid their money and went to the end of the line. Everyone else paid and took their seats. The people in red stood at the back of the bus and only four of seven were allowed to get on board. They four could not choose their seats and two of them had to stand up, though there were empty seats.

Kayla: Why can’t we pick our own seats like everybody else?

Leo: Because the rule is no one in re gets to pick.

Kayla: So, that’s not fair!

Leo: I don’t like it either, Kayla.

David: At least you got a seat. We paid and could not even get on the bus!

Melissa: I am telling!

Leo: Who are you going to tell?

Melissa: The teacher.

Leo: But the teacher made the rule.

Melissa: I'll find somebody. The teacher has a boss, right?

These vignettes are snapshots of the grand conversations facilitated by the richness of the children's literature as an anchor in this conceptual unit.

Conclusion: In this action research project, I was able to engage in many a conversation at different entry points; observer, facilitator, silent partner and then some. Within the confines of developmental, cognitive and moral stages of the children, I was able to examine the infrastructure available in each child; ripe for the guiding and nurturing to create a collective of individuals who respect each other and take up their own task in the struggle of social justice and social change. I was also able to see what it looks like when the conversation has not been nurtured and guided with other educators in the microcosm of the kindergarten classroom. I witnessed a struggle within myself as well. I struggled with the fact that once I left that classroom, I knew that the work I started would not continue in a meaningful way but in a way that was additive and "touristy" at best. All of those incredible cultures unexplored and conversations not to be had. They would have no grown up that was astute enough to realize legitimized racism in our midst and last but

not least, no one to advocate. My actual evidence; seeds of social justice planted, were the journals. These journals provided hope that in the minds of my African American, Caucasian, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Gambian, and Nigerian kindergarteners wanting more for the big idea of fairness, compassion and change would actually create a manifest in their daily lives and in their instruction. The journals and work products for me the unit did answer some parts of the essential questions for me.

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