"Act It Out"

Dramatizing Stories to Enhance Student Writing and Diversity Awareness

Karen Cathers & Nancy Schniedewind

Young people have the potential to be creative and skilled storytellers, actors, and writers. They also can become profoundly insightful about the way diversity affects themselves and others, as well as actively challenge bias. "Act It Out" encourages these potentials in students. Augmenting the writing program that many teachers already use, it enables students to write about, act out and learn from experiences of discrimination in their lives.

By collectively acting out and discussing their "bias stories," students improve their writing by generating more detail to use in revising their work. At the same time, they expand their understanding of discrimination and responses to it. This article describes the genesis of "Act It Out," the steps in the process through the voices of teacher Karen Cathers and her third grade students, and approaches to raising awareness about diversity and anti-bias actions, useful for elementary and secondary students alike.

Many excellent approaches exist to enhance student writing (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 2007; Wood, 2006). Similarly, educators have developed meaningful strategies to raise students' awareness about diversity and help youth develop the understandings and skills to respond to bias (Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007; Christensen, 2000; Kivel & Creighton, 1997; Schniedewind & Davidson, 2006; Stein & Cappello, 1999; Vasquez, Myhad, & Creighton, 2003). "Act It Out" integrates components of both to concurrently enhance writing and foster greater consciousness and agency to stand up to discrimination.

Karen Cathers is a retired teacher, formerly at Lenape Elementary School in New Paltz, New York, and Nancy Schniedewind is a professor in the Educational Studies Department at the State University of New York at New Paltz.

Background

Developed in New Paltz, New York, "Act It Out" has its roots in the school district's Diversity Education Program (1990-99) and in Playback Theater, an improvisational theater organization. Located in a semi-rural community and home of a state university, the district's student body is primarily White with about 18% students of color and 15% eligible for financial support for meals.

The authors collaborated as classroom teacher and in-service educator through components of the district's multifaceted Diversity Education Program, including a 30-hour professional development course, study groups, and classroom support (Schniedewind, 2001). While focusing on racism and sexism, this initiative addressed all forms of diversity including discrimination based in class background, sexual orientation, language, religion, age, and ability.

Playback Theater, founded in New Paltz by Jonathan Fox, provides a public process for people to tell a life story and have it played back to them by actors using improvisational techniques. Playback troupes perform in New York, nationally, and internationally. A storyteller observes the dramatization of his/her story, shares how it felt to watch the story and adds information to further explain it. Both the storyteller and audience gain insight on the particular situation as well as universal themes in the stories (Salas, 1998). Karen brought the Playback process into her classroom to enrich her students' writing.

Origins of "Act It Out"

Developing detail in a story is often difficult for young writers. Karen found that when she sat with students to ask questions about their sketchy stories more detail came out. She hoped that by integrating the Playback process with her writing process students might 'see' more clearly how leaving details out makes it harder for others to appreciate their stories. One component of Karen's writing program was Writer's Workshop, a time set aside for creative writing. It involved pre-writing a graphic organizer or outline and writing several drafts. Included was conferencing with peers, teacher, or adult volunteer where constructive questions were asked of the author and suggestions given. By integrating Playback into Writer's Workshop, Karen developed "Act It Out" (See Figure 1).

As an educator who addressed diversity and bias awareness throughout the year, Karen wanted "Act It Out" to contribute to her multicultural goals. She began the year with community building activities to develop a trusting, inclusive classroom where it was safe to talk about difficult topics. Integrated into classroom dialogue were words to talk about human diversity and discussion about how difference is used to maintain inequality.

As the year progressed, students learned to be more comfortable with such words as racism, sexism, homophobia, color, lesbian, gay, and so forth. Every week community meetings were held which provided an opportunity for problem-solving, including ways for young people to deal with bias they experience in their lives (Cathers & Schniedewind, 1994). "Act It Out" became a context in which students further heightened their multicultural awareness.

Setting the Context

As a teacher educator who focuses on multicultural/social justice education, Nancy encourages teachers to use a sequenced approach for teaching about diversity. It supports their efforts to build trusting classroom communities where young people learn to empathize with others, explore why and how inequality based on difference exists, examine discrimination in the institutions in their lives to see how

it has affected them, and create changes to foster greater equality. This diversity education framework is reflected in *Open Minds to Equality: Learning Activities to Affirm Diversity and Promote Equity,* a book Karen both contributed to and used in her teaching (Schniedewind & Davidson, 2006). Experiences with the ideas in this book prepared students for "Act It Out."

By observing "Act It Out" in Karen's class, Nancy pinpointed a set of approaches Karen used to raise student awareness about diversity (See Figure 2). Other educators, whether already applying these strategies or thinking about them for the first time, can use them to be more conscious and intentional in their own social justice teaching. These approaches are not only meaningful in 'Act It Out!' but also valuable in ongoing dialogues about diversity in classrooms and schools.

Following are vignettes from Karen's class that exemplify students' increased multicultural awareness gleaned through the "Act It Out" process. The first, *Eudora's Story*, illustrates the stages in the entire process. The subsequent, shorter vignettes are selected segments of the process containing telling accounts of student learning about diversity.

The "Act It Out" Writing Process: Illustrated in Eudora's Story

"Act It Out" is based on the belief that students face many situations in their lives that involve bias and discrimination, and that by having a safe place to share them, understand their dynamics, and get support from others, they will be better able to respond to them in the future. Through the example of Eudora's Story, told in Karen's class and described below, the steps in the "Act It Out" writing process are laid out. Italicized are approaches Karen used to raise student awareness of discrimination and responses to it while implementing the process. The discussions highlight students' insight as well as the power of meaningful dialogue in education for social justice.

Eudora was a recent immigrant to the United States and a student in Karen's third grade class. Before beginning the "Act It Out" process, Karen *set a climate of inclusion, communication, and trust* creating a safe space where students learned skills to engage with each other in positive ways and share their stories comfortably.

Since it was hard for the students to understand Eudora because of her accent, Karen taught them a strategy for including her. If they didn't understand Eudora they said, "Eudora, please say that again. I want to hear what you have to say." In this way students became responsible to make sure that all classmates' voices were heard; in addition, Eudora learned to speak without fear.

Step 1 : Writing

Students were asked to write a story about an experience when they had been discriminated against. Because issues of bias had been introduced already, this content was familiar. To help students focus their stories on discrimination, Karen held a short discussion about the difference between bullying and discrimination. She explained that bullying involves people with more power using their power unfairly and is often based in hurt and anger. She noted that childrens'examples of siblings being mean are examples of bullying.

"Discrimination is somewhat different in that it is bias toward a group of people and is often encouraged by society. People have been harassed and even killed because of racism, sexism and homophobia." She added that people are working for changes to make our society more fair for all.

Here Karen *defined and used language about discrimination*, a teaching approach that provides young people conceptual tools to reflect on theirs' and others' experiences with bias and put them into words. In stepping back and talking about them, they are in a better position to respond in the future.

Step 2: Teacher Introduces "Act It Out"

Karen described the "Act it Out" process to her students. She encouraged them to give details when they tell their stories and to listen carefully to others' stories so they will act them out accurately.

Step 3: Telling

Initial Telling

Eudora volunteered to tell her story about an after-school incident. "I was in homework club and I got out of line to get a drink. When I tried to get my place back in line a boy told me that I couldn't have it back. I said that I could because I had just gone to get a drink. Then another

Figure 1
Steps in The "Act It Out" Writing Process

1. WRITING
   Students write a discrimination and/or ally story.
2. INTRODUCING
   Teacher introduces the steps in the "Act It Out" process.
3. TELLING
   a. Telling
      A student volunteers to tell her/his story to the class.
   b Clarifying
      Students ask clarifying questions of the storyteller to get a fuller understanding.
   c. Reflective Questioning
      Teacher asks reflective questions to raise student awareness of diversity issues.
4. ACTING
   a. Choosing
      Storyteller chooses students to act out each role in the story.
   b. Acting
      Students "Act It Out" for the class, storyteller and teacher.
5. PROCESSING
   a. Giving Feedback
      The storyteller gives feedback on the dramatization and provides further detail as needed.
   b. Processing
      Teachers processes the dramatization—asks questions to help student reflect on the experience—related to both writing and diversity issues.
   c. Acting Again, if time permits
      Usually the storyteller directs students to reenact the story with more detail, based on the feedback. The teacher again processes that dramatization.
6. REWRITING
   The student further develops her/his story with detail based on the action and the discussion.

Figure 2
Approaches to Raise Student Awareness about Diversity in Discussions during "Act It Out"

1. Set a Climate of Inclusion, Communication and Trust
   Before and during "Act It Out" take time to teach students skills for positive communication: listening and paraphrasing, including others, giving feedback.
2. Define and Use Language about Discrimination
   Use words that explain discrimination—like racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.—and teach students their meaning.
3. Validate the Common Feelings Students Have When They Experience Bias
   Encourage students to share their feelings about situations of discrimination so they realize the commonality of experience, making it easier to admit and deal with those feelings.
4. Clarify Students' Experiences in Discriminatory Situations by Naming the Dynamics
   Summarize in clear words students' experiences in discriminatory situations, so by naming the dynamics they can step out of the feelings, analyze the situation and see alternatives.
5. Ask Students to Empathize with Someone Else
   Asking students to get into shoes of someone who is experiencing bias both builds their capacity to empathize and helps clarify their own feelings when involved in a situation of bias.
6. Challenge Students' Stereotypes Through Reflective Questioning
   Ask students to think about comments that embody stereotypes, compare the stereotype to reality and give them a chance to reframe their statements.
7. Teach Students about the Dynamics of Discrimination
   Take time to name and explain personal and institutional patterns that maintain discrimination.
8. Educate Students about Common Dynamics of Discrimination Across Different Social Groups
   While discrimination affects people based on various aspects of their social identity or social group membership—e.g., race, gender, age, class, sexual orientation, religion, language, ability etc.—there are common dynamics to all forms of discrimination that students can learn.
9. Share Your Own Experiences with Discrimination and Being an Ally
   Tell students about how you faced bias or acted as an ally, enabling students to learn from your efforts, successful or not.
10. Provide Students Approaches for Standing Up to Bias and Discrimination
    Reflect on and develop with students a variety of approaches for standing up to bias including very practical tools for responding either as a targeted person or as an ally.
11. Validate Students' Positive Understanding of Diversity and Action to Address Bias
    Positively acknowledge students' meaningful understandings of issues related to diversity and discrimination and their actions to challenge bias.

boy called me 'black face' in a mean way. I didn't like it. I gave up my place in line. The next day it happened again. He called me 'black face' again. I told Ms. Cathers and she talked to the boy."

Karen told the class that she had asked the boy if he understood what racism is. When he said, 'no,' she explained that, "It's using color to hurt people. I wanted him to think about what he was doing." By sharing this short, student-friendly definition of racism with her class, as well as the boy, Karen *defined and used language about discrimination,* language students remembered later to deal with racial bias.

Clarifying and Reflective Questioning

Once Eudora finished, Karen encouraged students to ask clarifying questions of the storyteller, while she also asked reflective questions to raise awareness of diversity issues:

> Karen: "What clarifying details do we need from Eudora?"
>
> Student: Can you show the expression on your face when he said it again."
>
> Eudora showed the face.
>
> Student: "Did you say anything to him? Why didn't you react?"
> Eudora: "I wanted to give him a chance."
>
> Karen: "You never talked to him? No one said 'ouch'? Did you ever use an 'I-Message'—'I feel bad when you call me 'black face'?"
>
> Eudora said she had, but he had just said, "So what."

In this discussion, Karen *provided students approaches for standing up to bias and discrimination.* Previously, Karen had taught her students to say "ouch" when someone emotionally hurts a person. The "ouch" signals that the statement needs attention. It's a vehicle for someone who is the target of bias to speak up without having to go into great detail. It provides an ally—one who intervenes when someone else is being discriminated against—a means for taking a stand. A dialogue with the targeter follows, with the goal of educating the person. Even when a full discussion isn't possible, those saying "ouch" have maintained their integrity and pointed to a problem with what was said.

Karen also mentioned giving an "I-Message," which she had also taught her students. An "I-Message" tells another person how a behavior of theirs makes you feel without judging or generalizing (See Figure 3).

'I-Messages' provide a reliable framework for students to articulate their feelings. Targetters hear how their statement makes others feel, possibly sparking discussion and greater understanding. In any case, I-messages enable students to stand up to bias.

Discussion went on with Lisa noting that people make judgements so quickly that they don't get to know you. Karen described that as prejudice—a prejudgment, again *defining and using language about discrimination.* One student described the boy who called Eudora "black face" a "bad boy." Karen explained that to call someone a "bad boy" isn't really accurate because we learn bad behaviors from our society.

Another student asked Eudora how the name-caller had said it. She described him leaning in her face and saying, "black face," and showed how she walked away, downtrodden.

The student asked, "Were you about to cry?"

Eudora nodded her head. Karen imitated her non-verbal behavior, explaining that this is how people normally hide their tears.

Step 4 : Acting

Choosing

Eudora chose students to play herself, the boy, his friend, and Ms. Cathers, and then gave them directions.

Acting

The students "Act It Out" for the class, storyteller, and teacher.

Step 5: Processing

Giving Feedback

Eudora watched the dramatization and made some corrections and additions.

Processing

Teachers can process experiential learning by asking thoughtful questions that help students make sense of their experience—in this case the acting—so as to learn from it. Before posing her own questions, Karen sought student comments. One of the actors was afraid to use the word "Black" to describe Eudora, thinking it was bad to call someone "Black." Karen clarified the difference between using the word "Black" to describe someone and to hurt someone.

She went on to note that if someone shouted "lesbian" from the bus in a mean way that's one thing. But if a person tells you 'I'm a lesbian' that's different. It's not using difference to hurt. In this example she built on student reflection to *educate students about common dynamics of discrimination*.

Acting Again—
Optional, If Time Permits

When Eudora told her story again Karen reminded them, "The more you tell your stories, the more details you'll remember!" When Eudora picked Mark to play Ms. Cathers for the re-enactment Karen noted, "See a boy can act as a girl!," using another of her approaches—*validating students' positive understanding of diversity and action to address bias.* By pointing out that Eudora chose a boy to play a girl and that students accepted that without complaint, Karen reaffirmed their willingness to challenge sexist stereotypes.

6. Rewriting

While Eudora had gleaned specific new ideas for her story, all students had seen the detail possible to include in writing and went to work enriching their stories.

Other Student Story Vignettes: Additional Teacher Strategies

Eudora's story illustrates the steps in the "Act It Out" process as well as approaches Karen used to raise student consciousness about diversity and alternative responses to it. The following vignettes from dramatizations of other students' discrimination/ally stories further highlight these approaches.

Lily's Story

To begin this class, Karen checked in with her students with a "modified go-round," asking children to hold up fingers from 1-10 that indicated how they felt that day. She and students comfortably shared their numbers and rationales, *setting a climate of inclusion, communication, and trust.*

In response to Karen's request for stories in which people were allies to each other, Lily described a situation when her 17-year-old uncle was being made fun of by three neighborhood teenagers because he's gay. Her grandmother saw it out the window, and when Lily's older sister couldn't stop the teasing, her grandmother went out and asked how they would like it if someone treated them that way. They stopped. Lily added that her uncle is teased a lot for being gay.

During the Clarifying and Reflective Questioning, and before students acted out the story, Karen prepared them through discussion. She asked students to *empathize with someone else.* "How might Lily have felt in the situation?" Someone suggested "embarrassed"; Lily said "no." Another suggested "angry," and Lily acknowledged, "sort of."

In addition to preparing children to playback the story, encouraging students to empathize with people facing bias helps students increase their own sensitivity and encourages their becoming allies for others in the future. It helps the teller, in this case Lily, to clarify her feelings when faced with a discriminatory situation. With the greater self knowledge and self control such clarity provides, young people are more apt to make thoughtful future responses.

Karen then *shared her own experiences with discrimination / being an ally.* In mentioning how it takes courage to speak up to tell these stories, she talked about a time, as a student herself, when she didn't stand up for a girl in her class. Karen explained that to this day she regrets her inaction and the loss of the girl's friendship. Being vulnerable as a teacher by sharing our own experiences, including those we're not proud of, encourages students to be similarly honest. Students learn that they don't have to defend themselves by hiding experiences when they may have hurt others. With such openness, students and teachers alike can grow and change.

This bore itself out as the children went on to mention Lauren, a child with a disability who was often teased. One student reported a negative comment that an adult made about Lauren that everyone assembled had laughed at, including himself. Karen noted how public humiliation is hurtful. She asked if anyone stood up for Lauren. They mentioned a different situation where an adult did. Karen explained that it's an adult's job to do that. She added, "Maybe some of you will stand up for Lauren."

Karen also *taught students about the dynamics of discrimination*. She explained that we often don't speak out for fear of being teased ourselves. The students responded with their own experiences. Ray acknowledged that he would be afraid of getting laughed at if he spoke up for Lauren. One child mentioned that Lauren was picked on because she's mean. Karen asked, "What came first?" Another student responded " She's mean because she was picked on and people excluded her—it even happened in kindergarten." Karen reiterated that when people are picked on they can become mean.

Lily sat in the director's chair and other children's hands waved eagerly to volunteer to play the roles. After students had acted out Lily's story, Karen moved on to the Processing Step, asking students

Figure 3
I-Messages

"I-Message" Format:

.....(Name), when you .....(Behavior), I feel.....(Feeling)
Because..... (Consequence)

In this case Eudora might have said:

"John, when you call me 'black face' I feel hurt, because those words don't show respect for me."

Or an ally could have said:

"John, when you call Eudora 'black face' I feel upset, because using Eudora's race to hurt her is unfair."

to reflect on their experience. In the resulting dialogue, Karen implemented several other approaches that she used consistently to raise student consciousness about diversity.

Continuing to encourage students to use language to articulate their experiences with discrimination, Karen asked what the grandmother's role was. The students responded "an ally," a word that they had learned before and recognized in this story. Karen also consistently *challenged students' stereotypes through reflective questioning*.

In response to a question she asked about how children had role-played the teasing, students mentioned a taunt about the uncle wearing panties. Karen asked if they know any gay men and if it's true that they wear panties. Lily responded that her uncle doesn't run around in panties, but rather wears boys' clothes.

Going on to *provide an approach for standing up to bias and discrimination*, Karen pointed out what discriminators lose out on. Toward the end of the processing Lily stated that a person can't change being gay. When asked by Karen if she was embarrassed by her uncle, Lily responded "no." Karen highlighted how Lily's family encouraged the feeling that, 'I like who I am. I don't care what you think.' She noted how Lily's uncle got a lot of support from his family. "He's accepted for who he is. It's the bullies' loss that they didn't get to know him." This example showed children that you can stand up to bias by rejecting stereotypes and affirming all peoples' worth.

Lisa's Story

Lisa shared a story about an experience playing soccer. When she bumped into someone else another player called her "old lady." Her friend came over and stood up for her saying, "You shouldn't call her that." During Clarifying and Reflective Questioning Karen asked, "What's this story about." The students replied "ageism" and "sexism." The ease with which they answered indicated that Karen's ongoing efforts to *define and use language about discrimination* enabled students to aptly recognize these forms of discrimination.

From the questions that students asked Lisa, it became clear that the name-caller didn't do anything to help his team. Taking the initiative to *teach students about the dynamics of discrimination*, Karen described a common pattern—people who don't feel comfortable about themselves are more apt to criticize others. She went on to mention that criticism can be a form of violence.

Discussion continued about why people put down others. Katie suggested that the name-caller might feel stress from his family so he wants to give it to others. Derek mentioned that when someone was picking on him, she was having family problems and that he was the scapegoat. Karen added that by pointing out other people's faults they don't target you for criticism.

Derek added that fear of athletic girls might be a motive in Lisa's situation. "If Tara's around, boys can be afraid of her. Technically girls are supposed to be calm. Tara's aggressive and wild in every sport." Karen asked, "If she were a boy, would you call her 'wild'?" Derek readily replied, "I mean she's very energetic in sports." Here again Karen *challenged students' stereotypes through reflective questioning.* Students then went on to act out Lisa's story.

Nydia's Story

Nydia told a story involving sexism and "bodyism" when she was an ally to her friend during an outing at a local pool. Boys had surrounded her friend and were making fun of her saying, "You're fat!" Nydia approached them and asked, "Why are you doing that?" "Because we want to," they replied. "Stop," demanded Nydia. "Who's going to make me," responded one of the boys. Nydia rejoined, "I have a fork and I'm not afraid to use it." The boys said, "Those girls are stupid," and walked away. The class clapped.

During Clarifying students asked a series of questions like, "Was your friend acting sad?" Nydia showed them how she looked. Karen then said, "You were threatening them." Nydia replied, "I wanted to threaten them because they were threatening the girl very badly. They thought I meant it, but I didn't really mean it." Karen asked, "Why did they stop bothering her?" "They thought I'd use the fork on them," Nydia replied.

Before classmates acted out the story, Nydia gave directions to the person playing herself. "Act like you're serious and you really mean it. They're teasing your best friend. It's important to stand up for your best friend." The children acted out the story.

During the Processing Step, Karen opened up a dialogue that *provided students approaches for standing up to bias and discrimination.* Karen asked, "What do you think about what people did in the incident? What do you think about the fork?" Kate and Derek focused on the threat. "The fork thing is stupid. I think it's wrong to threaten to stab someone." "Poke," Nydia replied. "You still shouldn't poke someone with a fork," rejoined Derek.

Karen asked, "What should you do in a situation like that?" Leroy said, "I'd have gone to take the friend outside the pool area and talk to someone about it." "Why do that?" asked Karen.

"The boys might just do it again to someone else," replied Leroy. "So the fork threat might postpone the behavior, but not stop it." Karen paraphrased.

"I wouldn't do it because there were four boys," added Ellen. "What if Nydia really did do it. I know she wouldn't, but she could get in trouble," Kate commented. Karen summarized, "They're calling names, but she's threatening physical violence." Here Karen *clarified this situation by naming the dynamics.* She highlighted a difference in the children's responses which provided another cognitive framework for their thinking.

Derek said that he'd push them in the pool. Karen asked, "Two girls against four boys?" Then Karen asked the class what would have been helpful to Nydia. Nydia replied, "To walk away—but they would just follow us."

Michael suggested, "Why not walk over to your mother?" Karen asked, "Are there people at the pool who could help?" The children called out, "Parents and lifeguards." Through this Processing Step students reflected on a variety of approaches for standing up to discrimination and potentially became more thoughtful about the consequences of the options.

Paulo's Story

Paulo told a story about his brothers calling him gay when there was something wrong at home. He shared that when that happens he gets mad, runs upstairs, and slams the door. During Clarifying and Reflective Questioning the children and Karen contributed to a dialogue that *provided approaches for standing up to bias.*

Lisa asked Paulo, "Why do they call you gay"? Paulo answered, "To get me mad." Lily asked, "Do your brothers know what gay means?" Paulo replied that they do. "Then why? You're not. Say, 'I'm not gay.'"

Karen took the discussion further by asking, "What if Paulo was gay? Why is it

an insult to be called gay? Why wouldn't you want people to know you are gay?"

Amber replied, "Some people think gay is weird because they don't know gay people. They use it as an insult because other people do. In such situations say, 'They're gay, and what's your point'?"

Derek added, "I got called gay on the bus. Four out of ten people who say 'gay' mean 'stupid.'" Paulo replied that one of his brothers means "stupid" when he uses it.

Karen asked the class if they had enough information to know what Paulo felt and did. "Tell us exactly what you did when you went in the bedroom." "I turned on the radio, punched the wall and laid on my bed," reported Paulo. "That's exactly what I do!" commented Rick.

Pointing out that there's a difference in showing and telling, Karen asked Paulo to show the class how he closed the door and acted in his room. After Paulo acted that out for the class, Karen noted, "These things you do when you write your story are the details."

Then Karen asked the children to get a partner and tell each other what they do when they've been hurt and get angry. After a couple of minutes of partner-sharing, they discussed their responses with the class. Karen asked, "What does your partner do to deal with anger?" "Robert hits his aunt's plastic figures and doesn't pick them up." "Lily says, 'Yes, mom, whatever you say, mom.'" "Ryan pushes the door." "Derek kicks the head off toys." "Madison hits Barbie on the wall."

Karen provided a space for *validating the common feelings students have when they experience bias*. Students realized that many of them feel angry when they've been hurt and let it out in various ways. By hearing that they're not alone in their feelings they'll be more apt to share and then deal with them positively.

Karen then went on to discuss the importance of studying one scene and developing it for details. Children proceeded to act out Paulo's story.

Stories from Previous Years

Sometimes Karen extended the process by reading student discrimination and ally stories from previous years to introduce new concepts. For example, Karen read several stories that highlighted the way discrimination can limit people. In one case a student was made fun of because of an earing. The student took it out because she didn't like being teased. Then Karen read another story in which a student refused to be limited. When a girl wanted to play soccer and the boys didn't want her to, she persevered, played and then other girls started playing too. This *provided students an example of standing up to discrimination.*

In another story a person being called gay wanted to cry but didn't. Eudora commented, "It's ok to cry. He should let himself cry." Amber explained that she knows what it feels like when she doesn't want to cry. "Once I had to hide in the bathroom." Another student mentioned that it's especially hard for boys. Karen commented, "That's how you're limited."

"Boys aren't supposed to cry," Derek contributed. " Boys are supposed to be like a man. In cartoons boys can't cry, they have to be men. Girls are limited when they have to wear skirts."

Amber added, "When I saw my dad cry, I knew men could cry." Another student gave an example of a tough male who cried a lot. Danielle added, "I never thought boys could cry. My dad cried when his favorite cat died." Karen then summarized, "We all have examples of men crying," closing this discussion in which *students challenged a common stereotype.*

Karen went on to expand their thinking by asking, " What are other ways boys and girls are limited?" After children shared examples, Karen discussed the idea of conformity and its message—don't be different. Amber talked about being friends with a boy and getting teased. "People would say, 'Look at Amber's boyfriend!'" Nevertheless, Amber didn't give up the friendship. Other students added comments about not letting bias limit them.

Karen commented, "You kids are more determined than kids years ago. You are determined to keep your friends, despite sexism and racism," *validating students' positive understanding of diversity and action to address bias.*

Conclusion

"Act It Out" is a powerful process for both improving student writing and raising awareness about diversity. Through the "Act It Out" process Karen continued to challenge students to expand their stories and writing, which produced more sophisticated work. "The more you tell your stories, the more details you'll remember. Then there are lots more details for your writing!"

She encouraged students as she hopefully encourages us. "Everything in life is a story—think about what the stories are that YOU have to tell!"

References

Au, W., Bigelow, B., & Karp, S. (2007). *Rethinking our classrooms: Teaching for equity and social justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

Cathers, K., & Schniedewind, N. (1994). A cooperative classroom: The context for cooperative learning. *Cooperative Learning Magazine, 14*(2), 14-19.

Calkins, L. (1994). *The art of teaching writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word.* Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

Fletcher, R. (2007). *How to write your life story.* New York: Collins Publishing.

Kivel, P., & Creighton, A. (1997). *Making the peace: A violence prevention curriculum.* Alameda, CA: Hunter House.

Salas, J. (1998). *Improvising real life: Personal story in Playback Theatre.* New York: Center for Playback Theatre. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Playback_Theater

Schniedewind, N. (2001). Embracing the rainbow: An integrated approach to diversity education. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *3*(1), 23-27.

Schniedewind, N., & Davidson, E. (2006). *Open minds to equality: A sourcebook of learning activities to affirm diversity and promote equity,* 3rd ed. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.

Stein, N., & Cappello, D.(1999). *Gender violence: Gender justice*. Wellesley, MA: Center for Research on Women.

Vasquez, H., Myhad, N., & Creighton, A. (2003). *Making allies, making friends: A curriculum for making the peace in the middle school.* San Francisco: Hunter House.

Wood, K. (2006). *Study driven: A framework for planning units of study in the writing workshop.* Porthsmouth, NH: Heinemann.