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Civil Rights and Social Justice: A Path to Engagement and Transformation

Type: Horace Feature

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Source: *Horace* Fall 2008, Vol. 24 No. 3



“Wow! You kids know so much. I never knew anything about the civil rights movement when I was your age. In fact, I didn’t learn much about it in college either, until now.”

A 20-year-old education major at Hamline University in St. Paul wrote these words on an evaluation of a presentation made by children. The children, students at Southside Family Charter School in Minneapolis are at the oldest 15; most are ages 11 to 14.

These kids are the same mix of races and incomes as the rest of urban Minneapolis. Enough of them are poor that the school qualifies for various programs designed to address poverty. Many of them had difficulties at other schools and were enrolled by frustrated parents, hoping for a fresh start.

When you listen to Family School kids articulate the lessons they’ve learned from the school’s civil rights curriculum, it’s clear that demographic descriptors often lead to low expectations. These kids are articulate, knowledgeable, and deeply engaged in their study of the civil rights movement. They bring the same competence and ability to their study of Native American history, treaty rights, and current challenges. Ditto their knowledge about environmental racism and their activism on behalf of a better urban and global environment. And by the way, they are eager to talk with you about the political implications of redistricting, their community garden and the importance of composting, and legal challenges facing youth.

I have been part of the Family School family for more than half of my 60 years on the planet. I was a parent when my daughter started school there in 1974, the school’s Executive Director for 20 years, and for the last seven years, I have served as a consultant helping out however I can. The school educated my two kids, laid the foundations for their moral and political convictions, and provided me a community to test my ideas about the world, engage in the ongoing, difficult work of consensus decision making, work through enormous conflicts, and celebrate huge achievements. Next year, my granddaughter will enter kindergarten at the school, beginning a third generation of our family’s deep devotion to this remarkable little school with its well-earned big reputation.

The original leadership for the school’s social justice curriculum came from Lead Teacher Susie Oppenheim who, for 35 years, has poured her creativity, her radical politics, and deep love of children into the curriculum, working with generations of students and teachers to build a school that embodies her vision. One of Susie’s enduring contributions to equity education is the Civil Rights Curriculum and Study Tour. Under her guidance, students in grades six through eight study the civil rights movement and, every three years, students, teachers, and volunteers take a 12-day bus tour through the southern United States where they meet people who risked their lives challenging Jim Crow laws when they were as young as our students. Kids share what they learn in a Civil Rights History presentation made to diverse audiences, including college students like the young woman from Hamline, quoted above.

“The inspiration for the civil rights trip and other study tours we do came when I realized that the best possible teachers for us—and I mean adults as well as students—are the people who are actively engaged in changing the world,” explains Susie. She and the other teachers and administrators of Southside Family Charter School have built the school’s reputation on the foundation of a commitment to social justice. As the term enjoys broader currency, it threatens to become another smiley face on the educational buzzword chart. But at Family School, social justice means more than youth engagement and a basic commitment to equity issues. It means that children themselves learn by doing social justice work, and do so well in their academics because they have learned that education is about them, about the roots of racism and its local

legacy, about the reasons nearly half the houses in their neighborhoods are foreclosed, about the systemic reasons their mothers are poor and about why asthma rates are so high in big cities.

They also know what needs to be done to change the picture; action is central to the curriculum. It is the dynamic interplay between learning and doing that makes the Family School pedagogy so compelling. Kids learn environmental science in the classroom from texts, experiments, and guest speakers. Some of the speakers are from a local environmental group, Environmental Justice Advocates of Minnesota (EJAM), a multiracial organization founded by Congressman Keith Ellison before his historic election as the first Muslim to hold national office in the United States.

The kids were so taken with EJAM and its dynamic speakers that they developed an environmental rap for their presentation at the EJAM conference. It starts out:

We will work hard. (We will work hard.)
 To turn the tide. (To turn the tide.)
 We'll love our Earth. (We'll love our Earth.)
 Stand by her side. (Stand by her side.)

Ya'll already know what's up
 The government's corrupt
 Our system really sucks
 For big bucks they're killin' our people
 P.O.Ps, P. C. B.s—somehow it's all legal.

The voice of children is indeed a gift to the whole world. While the environmental rap may not make platinum, its righteous rhythm has crossed state and generational lines. Students rapped for Kwame Leo Lillard (who led sit-ins in Nashville as a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee known as SNCC in 1960) on their recent trip to Nashville. He was so taken that he set up a meeting with Professor Robert Wingfield at Fisk University. Wingfield researches environmental toxins and their disparate impacts on people of different races in Tennessee. He too loved the rap, which he will share with activists young and old in the south.

"In so many social change situations, the intergenerational model was crucial," remarks Susie. "When adult activists see young people actively engaged in nonviolent social change, it makes them think differently about their own movement and its possibilities."

Classroom learning, intergenerational dialogue, and action combined enliven even the most challenging educational pursuits—science education, for example—as third, fourth, and fifth graders learn basic biology and botany lessons through texts, experiments, and field trips. Their field trips take them to the Two Ponies Farm (in Plymouth, Minnesota) owned by an organic farmer who is leading local efforts to push through food safety and organic-friendly legislation. Students learn about sustainable and non-sustainable agriculture in the classroom. They learn the principles of organic farming and what practices deplete soil and cause erosion.

When they visit the organic farm, they see these principles in action and, because organic farmers are eager to spread the good news, they patiently offer students opportunities to actually work the farm while they are there.

Family School offers students further opportunities to build on this learning by taking responsibility for the community garden down the street. Students plan, plant, weed, and harvest the garden. They cook at school, using garden produce, and share their meals with other students and parents. They take home recipes to pleased and surprised parents.

I remember the day we hired Brynne Macosko (now Paguyo), a creative and idealistic young woman just graduated from college. Fifteen years later, Brynne has integrated her scientific curiosity, her environmental passions, and her art into a vibrant pedagogy that kids love and parents value. A practicing artist, she integrates art with basic skills to engage children and deepen knowledge. Eliza Goodwin, the school's current Executive Director, and parent of fourth grader Tyler, remarks, "Brynne can blend really rigorous academics with a kindness and joy that gives kids—even those who struggle with schoolwork—a confident sense of

themselves and internal motivation to succeed.”

Taking their environmental science lessons to scale, Brynne collaborated with another teacher to help students develop a presentation about environmental justice and what kids and adults can do to achieve it. Inspired by the effectiveness of the Civil Rights History Presentation, the Environmental Justice Presentation is also touring other schools, colleges, and community and faith groups.

This active learning draws a full intergenerational circle around the life of the school and the development of each child. As kids learn from adults, or older youth, they in turn become teachers. As the young woman from Hamline noted, they often know things much older students don't know because of their exposure to the Family School big world.

When Victoria, age 12, brought home study packets about the Civil Rights movement, her mother, Debra Pruitt, started studying along with her. Debra is the older sister of two young men who graduated from the school in recent years. She said that her brother Johnnie, now 25, quizzed his young niece about her Civil Rights trip. Still engaged after 10 years since he took the study tour and curious about how the curriculum and the tour have evolved, Johnnie exclaimed, “Wow, we didn't learn that when I was there.” According to Debra, “He's still interested in history and we all learn right along with her.”

Shannon Jones enrolled her son Hassan in Family School after an unhappy start in an area public school. “He did well academically but I was always getting calls and complaints about his behavior. The class was big and chaotic, and the school took no responsibility for how that affected him. By the end of the year, he was coming home and saying he was dumb.” Hassan has blossomed at Family School, says his mother. “He is enthralled by the lessons about the Civil Rights movement. He's so excited that he went on-line to learn more. And he loves the environmental lessons, and is always talking about ways we could clean up the city.” Hassan and his family are able to put those lessons into action; Family School students take home lessons about composting and recycling and actually provide their families with tools to make environmental consciousness a part of family life.

One of the beauties of intergenerational learning is that it honors the achievements and wisdom of people who don't make it into history books. By engaging directly with community activists, civil rights workers, and other freedom fighters, the kids learn that “real people” make history and just how this happens. Victoria's mom Debra observed, “I learned about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King in school, but I never heard anything about the other people like Kwame Leo Lillard. There were a lot of people who made that movement happen but we didn't study them in school.”

When Hollis Watkins, now in his 60s, tells our children about how he came to be Vice President of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee at age 17, they remember and they pay close attention to any mention of SNCC. Mr. Watkins is the founder and leader of the Southern Echo, a multi-issue African American leadership and environmental group. He hosts the Family School contingent when they take their Civil Rights study tour every three years. Visits with Hollis may include a tour of Tougaloo College (a historically Black college and sanctuary for many Civil Rights activists), a stop at the Mississippi state legislature and meetings with black representatives, or a visit to slain Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers' home, where Hollis sings a song he wrote about Evers.

In turn, with a sponsorship from Hamline University, Hollis visits Minneapolis every winter, sharing civil rights history and informed observations about race and equity issues today with college students and with our students and their families. “I tell people I have family in Minneapolis, from the little Kindergartners to the eighth graders and teachers and parents,” Hollis says. “I am so committed to my family that I break one of my personal rules, which is not being in the Frigid Zone during the winter.”

Like many activists and adult members of the extended Family School family, Hollis reflects on the two-way road of learning as he deepens his relationship with the school. “The situation (the struggle for justice and the understanding of injustice) is ever-evolving. Can my experiences from the past be used today, or do I have to change and broaden my understanding? My experience is my generation. New generations vary and their experiences are also specific to location. The past is important but does it apply? When you work with children and you have a close and trusted relationship, they will reveal to you what they need and what their circumstances are. This is one of the gifts of the school.”

Susie considers the school community “a microcosm of what the movement [for racial and social justice] should be, a multi-ethnic, multi-racial group of intergenerational activists who understand the relationship between learning and activism. We feed each other along the way.”

Intergenerational learning is so embedded in the Family School philosophy and approach that I sometimes forget about it until a student reminds me. Over the last few years, as I’ve written about the school’s vibrant arts program—which engages a diverse population of local artists as mentors, and features an original musical play (written by Susie)—I was struck by two unsolicited remarks from young people who talked to me about the play as an intergenerational learning experience.

Yolanda Hare graduated from Family School in the early 1980s and came back after college for a year’s stint through AmeriCorps. I was asking her about her memories of the play. Recalling her career as one of the “good guys,” she observed, “I got to work with kids I wasn’t in class with. And we all got to feel proud of our hard work. Now I work at the school and it’s wonderful to watch the next generation learn and have fun in the Family School play.”

You wouldn’t expect kids who are in the play now to make the same observation but when I interviewed Fiona, age 13, backstage, she said, “I like it that different ages can work together and create the play.” Another young actor, Amity, observed, “Older kids have an impact on younger kids and help them out.”

The intergenerational focus is critical to the high expectations and strong academic outcomes that characterize the school. “You don’t have to wait ‘til children are half grown before you talk to them about justice,” Hollis reminds us. “Even itty bitty ones can learn.”

I asked Hollis what he thought other schools and youth organizations could learn from Southside Family Charter School. He took a characteristic long moment to think before he spoke. “The biggest obstacle that people in schools have is the fear factor. Southside Family Charter School takes risks. They have faith in themselves and the children. Educators need to get outside their little boxes. If they would take risks, they would see endless possibilities.”

Romona Safree, a practicing artist, and 18-year Family School veteran, encourages kids to explore the world and master skills through art. She describes her painting class as a “little kid version of color theory. They learn about pigment, shades, and color.” She uses visual art to teach math and help children learn to read. “There’s a direct link between creative thinking and critical thinking.” And one of our youngest teachers, Melissa Favero, characterizes the school’s philosophy and her own innovations in science and math teaching with the compellingly simple slogan, “Dream It! Do It!”

A child or adult engaged in creative activity cannot help but respond critically to a social environment that so often denies the importance of the creative spirit. Part of the school’s creative genius is to honor this connection, and insist that critical thinking be as “hands on” as any art or science project. Critical thinking leads the school community beyond the classroom and into the streets as student artists and dreamers become activists who in turn teach their peers, their parents and anyone who will listen that the world can indeed be a better place.

Sometimes this better place, and the school’s role in creating it, is found when some of our students make critical identity declarations. Because the school is forthright in its opposition to homophobia and its embrace of GLBT rights and issues, the school climate has made it possible for many students to come out early, with the support of their Family School family as they make their identities known. In turn, leaders of GLBT groups support the school because of its willingness to take risks and do the right thing on this issue.

Many of our alumni are studying and building careers with the explicit goal of making the world a better place. Yolanda Hare, the young woman who talked so clearly about students helping students, returned to the school as an AmeriCorps volunteer to give back and to learn more. Today she’s enrolled in the MFA program at Hamline University with the intention of writing juvenile novels, the kinds of stories she wished for when she was first exploring literature. Other students find careers in economic development, nursing, community radio, and Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Even those pursuing more conventional careers filter their choices through the lens they discovered at Family School. Many Family School alumni have returned to the school to volunteer, serve on the board of directors and, as the years go by, send their

own children to the school.

I met Beth Hart when she was five years old, starting kindergarten along with my daughter in 1974. Since then, Beth has enrolled her children at the school, served on our board, and become a neighborhood activist. Now she's a grandmother. This intergenerational connection with the school is remarkable evidence of the way that the school becomes a primary, orienting source of community and stability in so many lives.

At a time when teachers are pressured more and more to compartmentalize knowledge and produce "outcomes" as measured by standardized tests, Southside Family Charter School flies in the exact opposite direction, encourages integrated curriculum, spontaneous creativity, and teacher-generated curricula based on each one's interests and aspirations. Rounding the corner towards its fourth decade, Southside Family Charter School is all about endless possibilities.

Southside Family Charter School at a glance:

94 students

73 percent eligible for free/reduced lunch

46 percent white

44 percent African American

7 percent Hispanic/Latino

2 percent Native American

1 percent Asian

Founded in 1972

POPs are persistent organic pollutants, organic compounds that are resistant to environmental degradation through photolytic processes. PCBs (Polychlorinated biphenyls) are one class of POPs and have been banned due to their toxicity, but are still present in the environment at dangerous levels.

Listen to Southside Community School's students talk about their environmental justice insights, and hear their rap! Download it here:

www.southsidefamilyschool.org/pages/uploaded_files/01%20Environmental%20justice%20rap.mp3

Versions of the Civil Rights History Presentation and the Environmental slide show will be available on our website at some time in 2009. But media cannot capture the interactions between students and audiences. If your school, organization, or conference would like to invite our students to present, please contact us. Distance is an obstacle that we relish overcoming. We'll work with you to make it happen.

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Social Justice Education Resources

Rethinking Schools

www.rethinkingschools.org

Education for Liberation Network

www.edliberation.org

Teachers 4 Social Justice

www.t4sj.org

Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 30th Anniversary

Edition, 2000)

Steven Wolk, *A Democratic Classroom* (Heinemann, 1998)

Each Family School teacher has dozens of books and articles for particular units that she or he would be willing to share. The important point to understand about social justice education is that it is based in the community. Community leaders, activists, and artists are your best resources.

Flo Golod is a consultant who works with nonprofit organizations, including schools, in the Twin Cities. She provides assistance in fundraising, board development, and planning. Before starting her consulting business, she was the Executive Director of Southside Family School for 20 years.

This resource last updated: December 09, 2008

Database Information:

<p>Source: <i>Horace</i> Fall 2008, Vol. 24 No. 3 Publication Year: 2008 Publisher: CES National School Level: All Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent Issue: 24.3</p>
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