

RADICAL TEACHER

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Social Movements for Freedom: An Anti-Oppressive Approach to Literacy and Content Area Learning in an Urban Fourth Grade Classroom

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The Curriculum Showcase

I arrived at my nine-year old son's fourth grade classroom around 9:10 am on a Friday morning in June, eager to see what children had done for the long-awaited annual curriculum showcase. Every classroom had been transformed into a vibrant gallery of students' work (Author, 2012), and hundreds of excited adults and children filled the hallways and classrooms. On a bulletin board in this room was a sign that displayed two guiding questions (Figure 1).

How can we analyze the ways activists fought for change?

How can learning about their lives inspire "social justice"?

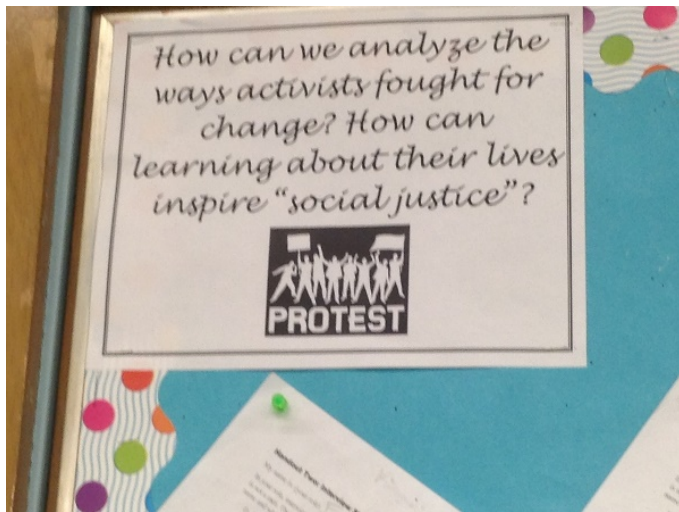


FIGURE 1. THIS SIGN DISPLAYED GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE CURRICULUM UNIT ON THE STUDY OF ACTIVISTS AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Parents and community members were already clustered around children, near trifold presentation boards, propped up on tables. Images, captions, slogans, and brief essays affixed to the boards provided concrete evidence children had studied and reflected on the contributions of activists who fought for freedom and justice. They referred to these images and artifacts as they talked.

As a parent of this school for five years, I was looking forward to this celebratory event to applaud the teacher and children for their hard work, and to witness my son's growth as a learner. But, in my dual-identity as a parent and a teacher, a boundary-crosser (Dyson, 2007), a former elementary school teacher, current teacher educator, and educational researcher, I was thrilled to explore children's learning and knowledge production. Because the showcase addressed racism, sexism, colonialism, classism, and homophobia, I tell this story of my encounters with children to link my personal experiences to a broader context, the power and promise of using literacy in an anti-oppressive pedagogy to raise children's awareness and transform learning in an urban elementary school.

Methods

I began this qualitative inquiry into the curriculum showcase as a part of a larger case study on literacy in project-based learning at this school, to explore teachers' and children's academic experiences, challenges, motivation, and attitudes while engaging in project-based instruction. Project-based learning (Boss & Krauss, 2007; Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, & Soloway, 1994; Solomon, 2003; Spires, Hervey, Morris, & Stelpflug, 2012) invites children to explore challenging curriculum-based problems or social issues through an integrative, interdisciplinary approach. The teacher, several parents, and the principal consented, and parents gave permission to write about their children's work. Data sources include reflections on my experiences and encounters with children (Denzin, 2014; Dyson, 2010; Ellis, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), along with artifacts and handouts children gave as a part of their presentations, pictures of trifold presentation boards, semi-structured interviews with the teacher, principal, and several parents, and field notes generated after the observation, away from the classroom (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, 2003).

Data were organized and coded for initial themes and patterned regularities (Creswell, 2007). More than an in-depth account of what unfolded during the curriculum showcase, I present specific events and circumstances of my interactions with children to illuminate my personal story within the culture of the classroom and school in which this inquiry took place (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Van Maanen, 1995). The goal is to transcend the narrow and modest origins of this classroom-based inquiry and extend it to the big picture concerned with the transformative power of education as a site for hope and struggle (Freire, 1994/2014), "hope for a better life, and struggle over how to understand and enact and achieve that better life" (Ayers, 1998, p. xvii). In this paper, I examined how literacy enabled and promoted sociopolitical consciousness and community engagement, how the teacher purposefully engaged children to consider obstacles to an expression of their full humanity and courage to move against these obstacles (Ayers, 1998; Bomer & Bomer, 2001; Kumashiro, 2000, 2015; Vasquez, 2014).

The Learning Context

With an enrollment of 804 students, this urban elementary school was the second largest in its district. At the time of the study, 69% of the students were Black, 11% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 10% White. This school had the highest percentage of students who scored at levels 3 or 4 on standardized tests (ELA = 77%; Math = 71%), outperforming schools in the comparison group (ELA = 64%; Math = 65%), and schools citywide (ELA = 40%; Math = 42%). Compared to 661 other elementary schools in the city, 13% of the children at this school had disabilities (compared to 20% citywide), 2% were taught in self-contained classrooms (compared to 6% citywide), 1% were English Language Learners (compared to 18% citywide), and 46% were in economic need (compared to 61% citywide).

My son's teacher, Ashley Lorenzo, a veteran of 10 years, was teaching fourth grade for the first time. She described her class of 32 students, predominantly children of color, as reflecting the racial and economic diversity of the school. In this average fourth grade class, several students were achieving at an accelerated rate, and several were struggling, but all of them were reading on grade level. Two children had IEPs (individualized educational plans) and needed special education services, and none were English Language Learners.

In this unit, Ms. Lorenzo invited students to explore what it means to fight against oppression, for freedom and justice, in the United States and beyond. Throughout the year, children read about civil rights, immigration, the labor movement, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and freedom movements, past and present. They analyzed a range of texts, including novels, informational texts, biographies, song lyrics, and visual images. In response to their reading, and for the showcase, they created pamphlets, newsletters, posters, timelines, essays, dioramas, poems, songs, digital slides, and other artifacts. They made notes to organize and practice what they would say during their presentations.

What follows are selected samples of children's topics and responses to illustrate the transformative power of education, and how one teacher used literacy as a form of social action to raise children's consciousness and inspire change (Vasquez, 2014). Analysis (Creswell, 2014; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003) of my encounters with all 32 children in 10 presentation groups revealed patterns of an active and strategic approach to literacy (Duke, 2014; Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). As children read, wrote, and talked with others, they paraphrased, summarized, and interpreted what they learned. They compared, contrasted, and evaluated people's actions and the outcome of events that challenged oppression.

Synthesizing Social Movements

For two hours on that Friday morning in June, just a few weeks after the standardized tests, parents, family members, friends, teachers, administrators, and community representatives dropped in to hear children talk about their work.

Adults bustled about from station to station, while children hovered near their desks, stepping away from time to time, to visit a friend or two. I glanced over at Reggie (all children's names are pseudonyms), who was standing alone by his station, an interactive whiteboard with a scrolling digital presentation on social movements. I missed the first slide. The second slide projected while Reggie explained that a social movement is "...something that changes a law." The slide stated:

HOW PEOPLE CREATED SOCIAL MOVEMENT

"Do you know how people created a social movement? First, people wants to take over an action of what is happening, and to change it. Secondly, you would have to spread it out on newspapers, on websites, social networks, E-mail your friends, and tell organizations to help spread the word. Also, you can tell the press and

make blogs to influence people. Lastly, go and take action and try to influence the government to change the law. This is how people create a social movements."

Instead of reading from it, Reggie used the slide to frame his talk. He initially told me, "Reaction, revolution, and reform. How do you create a social movement? You can create a social movement by...they create it by...well, it's what I said. The 3 Rs."

Then an image appeared, of a large group of people standing together, holding a sign that said, "Free speech."

Reggie explained, "But it's not easy because they have to like, like gather people up and then, after they gather people up, they have to go and protest. And after they protest, they have to try...well they continue protesting, but they have to try to convince the government."

Referring to the slides, Reggie explained, "It switches by itself." He read, "Famous social movements," then said, "I'm not gonna mention all. I'm gonna mention some. The civil rights movement, the labor movement, immigration movement, the LGBTQ movement, there were many, many movements."

Next, an image of tens of thousands of people facing the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. appeared, and Reggie said, "This is...this is about a movement." Then he paused.

"The March on Washington, it looks like," I added.

"For civil rights?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, and nodded. He paused again.

I asked, "What do you think is the result of all these people getting together to protest something?"

"The result? To change something that is not fair, or that they just don't like. Because if there was no thing as social movements, the world would still be unfair. And, we would be going to different schools. Like people, people would be like, unfair. Everything would be unfair."

The image of people standing at the March on Washington in 1963 gave Reggie pause, as he contemplated a broad answer to my question. Without social movements for freedom and justice, the world would be unfair. Although his slides included notes on movements for civil rights, labor unions, immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and Indian independence from British colonial rule, he did not read them all. Yet, he referenced the struggle to desegregate U.S. schools based on race, though it was not a part of his presentation. Like Reggie, when relevant, children in all other groups highlighted information they learned from a synthesis of other lessons, in addition to the results of their research and writing.

In the 3 - 5 minutes or so I spent with each group, space permitting, it was not possible to completely assess what a child knew about a given topic. However, that was not my expectation. I was drawn into each presentation through a more authentic author-speaker-audience relationship, one that disrupted the teacher-as-sole-authority trope common to most schools (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). Children presented what they learned, sometimes

by reading from their notes, but most times, through an exchange of questions and answers designed to elicit discrete facts merged with key ideas.

Understanding Race, Economics, and Power

I visited Amir's group on the Labor Movement and listened to him read.

The labor movement in the United States grew out of the need to protect the rights and interests of workers. Those in the organized labor unions fought for better working wages, reasonable hours and safe working conditions. The labor movement led efforts to prevent child labor, give health benefits, and provide aid to who were injured or fired.

Labor unions existed in one form or another in the United States.

Also, the immigrants coming into the country affected the wages to decrease. Poor pay and work conditions led to the creation of the 'AFL' the American Federation of Labor in 1866. The Congress became sympathetic to the labor force, as time passed, which led to the creation of the Department of Labor.

All these events led to the "Fair Labor Standard Act" which mandated a minimum wage and pay for overtime work and basic child labor laws. The labor movement grew and changed along with the major historic events during the twentieth century."

After he read, I asked, "So, what's the big idea that you want us to remember about the labor movement and immigration?"

Amir replied, "That, that, that people didn't get good pay and, and had unreasonable hours. Did you know, a woman in a factory, she got zero dollars? A slave. In a week, she got no money. Later on, a woman also, she got two dollars per hour. Now working hours decreased to eight hours a day, she could earn up to fifteen dollars per hour."

Another student in Amir's group, Mike, said, "I was doing a timeline, and I was also doing connections. An average Pullman porter would have to work twice as many hours than an average American."

"Can you tell us what a Pullman porter is?" I asked.

Mike continued, "Well, they worked on trains from, like for uhmm, like you wanna go somewhere or travel by train, they would clean the trains, uhmm, if there was anything minor, they would like help someone with their luggage. Yeah."

"So, were they mostly Black men, or no?" I asked.

"They were mostly Black men. Like, they were used like slaves," Mike said.

Amir added, "They relied on tips. And, they didn't get money. And, they could live in the railroad or in the train.

They could stay and sleep, but they didn't get money." He speculated that in today's economy, they might earn about two dollars an hour.

I asked, "Is there anything else you want me to remember about the labor movement and civil rights?"

"The civil rights...the labor movement isn't the second social movement...it's the first in history."

In this unscripted learning event, children navigated and narrated their exchanges, giving facts from their research, while making connections between historic and contemporary issues. They took turns sharing that labor union movements struggled to address fair wages, hours, and safer working conditions for all workers. Ideally, the unions advocated for racial and gender equality, which came out in their talk, but leadership was segregated and assumed to be the privilege of White men, which did not come out in their talk. Union leaders' historic resistance to diversity and equity and unwillingness to change systems based on White privilege is a complex part of the reality of social movements, which children will learn as they explore the effects of structural and institutional racism.

Evaluating Tensions and Taking Perspective

Francesca introduced her diorama, which depicted the March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King "...gave the great I Have a Dream speech," she said. I noted images of mostly Black men holding signs, like "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" and "No U.S. Dough to Help Jim Crow Grow." Newspaper headlines, such as, "Let us not wallow in the valley..." and from the *Washington Post*, "250,000 Jam Mall in Mammoth Rally: Solemn, Orderly Pleas for Equality" lined the panels of the box to recreate the scene. Finally, near a picture of the pool, were the words, "Free at last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Francesca began, "Uhhh...basically, the civil rights movement revolved around segregation, and how they were like, 'You have to go over there because you look different.' It was just completely wrong. And, so, like, think about the way Dr. King worked to stopped that saying. But Black Panthers was more revolved around resisting police brutality, and uhmm the police actually crippled the civil rights that aided and protected them. Uhh - but you might think that Black Panthers were violent, but actually, it's more of, if you punch me, I'm gonna punch you back. Self-defense, not violence."

"Okay. So, they didn't start the trouble, but if they had trouble, they would fight," I said.

"Yeah. Like, so Martin Luther King and Black Panthers had different approaches to the same argument."

"Right. Uhhh. Which approach do you agree with after learning about both of them?"

"Uhhh. I think Black Panthers at this point...because I defend myself, if I was getting hurt right. If I got boys, or something, I'd defend myself. Uhhh...they're working to do

the same...help the same causes, but self-defense. So, I might think Black Panthers."

"So, so, they used violence when necessary, and he advocated non-violence."

"But he thought that it's better to wait to get your freedom, so I just honestly think that..." Francesa said, then paused.

"Okay. You disagree with that strategy."

"I don't mean that I don't like him. He was a giant part of the civil rights, but...I think there..." she said, and pointed to her poster, to another group member's biography of Rosa Parks, and someone else's essay on the connections between the civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Black Panther Party. She gestured and signaled other strategies that involved direct action and protests.

Francesca's strong opinion in favor of more radical approaches to fighting injustice was surprising. I didn't expect to hear this young girl who appeared to be White wrestle with the differences between nonviolent protests of the civil rights movement and the self-defense stance of the Black Panther Party. Ms. Lorenzo exposed children to a wide variety of activists and movements, and children were free to explore and interpret these ideas, often from their intersectional identities as children, raced, classed, and gendered (Crenshaw, 1991).

Challenging Heteronormativity

This final example epitomized the value of the diversity in this school and the larger community. Children challenged oppression by naming LGBTQ+ rights as human rights.

Oliver, Emily, and Sandra created a poster with a prominent rainbow flag and sign that said, "Born This Way." As I approached the group, they chimed in together. "So, we...so first of all, the letters LGBTQ stand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer."

Oliver continued, "Which basically are homosexual. The struggle in the LGBTQ community is they have been abused while they love each other, by law. It's very depressing."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Also, the issue that they face today are many LGBTQ people still face violence, especially those of non-American descent. Even though American gays were granted the right to marry last year, they are in danger of losing that right with the new politicians of the office. Also, the rights that they fought for were to love who they want to love, whoever they love, to be whatever gender they feel inside, and to be free. Also, some notable figures are, Emily, I'll let you do Emma Goldman, 'cause you wrote about it, so..." he added.

"Okay. Emma Goldman was not, was a heterosexual or not gay," Emily began, "...and she, but she didn't like how the government treated the LGBT community. So instead of going along with them because she is heterosexual, she actually stood up in court and had a whole long speech. If

you read my paragraph that I worked oh so hard on, there's actually only a fraction of her speech," Emily explained.

Oliver added, "A quote that she said was, 'The demand for equal rights in every vocation of life is just and fair. But after all, the most vital right is the right to love and be loved.' Also, this one is from Oscar Wilde. He was imprisoned and punished with hard labor because he wanted to stand up for men and the other gay people, the other homosexuals. And a quote that he said, was, 'You don't love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or their fancy car, but because they sing a song only you can hear.' Also, the last quote is from Harvey Milk, uhmm, who was the first openly gay politician elected to office in California. He created laws against discrimination for someone's sexual orientation. He got murdered shortly after taking office. A quote that he stated is, 'All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve to have a safe supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.'"

"Absolutely," I said.

Emily pointed to the poster and added, "And, there's a fraction of it..." referring to Emma Goldman's speech.

I asked them, "What did you learn from all this research?"

Oliver replied, "I learned...this is something I already believed, but it just makes me think of even more, that LGBTQ people should not have to fight for the right to love who they want. Everyone has the right to be who they are. Love is not a privilege. It's a right."

Fighting for equality and fair participation in government for all citizens, gay and non-gay, was the mission. Emma Goldman fought for the rights of women and LGBT people to be fully liberated in their exercise of freedom, to be treated as fully developed and self-determined human beings, equal to all others. She was a feminist, a revolutionary, a writer, an organizer.

Sandra, also a member of this group, wore a black jacket and pants to portray "Rachel Maddow," a news anchor on the cable news station, MSNBC, and read the biography she had written about Maddow, highlighting her success as one of the highest rated news anchors on cable television, and a proud and married lesbian.

Mark, the final member, shared an advocacy song he had written. He pointed to himself, and said, "This shirt inspired me a lot." Written in magic marker were the words, "Love is Love." He explained, "Because, teens are committing suicide, because people are bullying them for becoming who they really are, I have to support the LGBT community. I feel like they have self-determination. And, I wrote this song."

"Can you sing it?" I asked.

Reading from his yellow lined paper, Mark's lyrics flowed easily.

It Ain't Easy

We got to win this fight

For LGBT rights

It isn't right

You got to try

To win this fight

Having rights

It's a given thing

Like being in a school...

Yeah, it's a right

Why do you discriminate them?

They are people like us.

If we be mean to them

They will commit suicide.

"They will commit suicide. That represents the teens," he interjected.

It ain't easy

To be them

It ain't easy

To try to fit in

It ain't easy

Not to be bullied

Why? Why? Why?

They are people like us.

Why, why, why?

It's not fair to us to be bullied.

For this group, and the rest of the class, the right to love, the right to self-determination, the right to live in peace, LGBTQ+ rights, were human rights.

Social and Academic Empowerment Through Literacy

As children prepared to engage in interactive conference-style exchanges with family and community members about social movements for freedom, they met Anchor Standards for College and Career Readiness in reading, writing, speaking, and listening (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Individually, they compared and contrasted what they found, analyzed and synthesized information from multiple sources, documented and displayed relevant and accurate findings, and responded to the ideas of others. Collaboratively, they presented and built on each other's ideas, while expressing their own, clearly and persuasively, each demonstrating a strong command of academic English. Children organized their findings and gathered supporting evidence to reason in a way that was appropriate for the audience. Some used digital media to find and present images on their posters or in a digital slide show, but everyone created collaborative

trifold boards to display ideas and augment their presentations. Each child contributed a written text to reflect the outcome of a literacy-focused inquiry-based cycle, reading and writing to ask questions, conduct research, gather and analyze evidence, and present findings on social movements for freedom.

In a school where administrators and teachers believed in the capacity of each individual child, and the transformative power of education, it is easy to see how and why a prolonged study of topics like social movements for freedom are the norm. Children were educated so they can become members of "strong, stable, self-governing communities" (Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Bomer & Bomer, 2001), able to tackle the most pressing issues of our time, engage in informed exchanges with family and community members, and examine issues of equity and fairness.

Instruction was designed so that children work at their highest capacities, individually and collaboratively, using literacy strategies for comprehension, analysis, and concept building. With information gathered from print, visual, and media sources, and through writing and reflection, children paraphrased, summarized, and synthesized what they learned. Some copied from texts without citing the sources, like Amir did while quoting from two websites (e.g., history.com, investopedia.com) to define and describe the labor union movement. Others were more skillful as they wrote in response to their reading. In this classroom, children were honored at all stages of reading and writing development. Ms. Lorenzo encouraged ongoing self-reflection and peer feedback, supplemented with teacher feedback, and direct instruction. Children worked iteratively through reading and writing processes, rewriting and revising their work. As expected, their writing improved, was focused and substantive, but not perfect.

At times, children read the same novels and informational texts, and at other times, they read individually, in pairs, or in small groups. Led by the questions Ms. Lorenzo posed at the beginning of the unit, how activists fought for change, and how learning about their lives can inspire continued efforts toward social justice, children looked for specific examples to illustrate themes (Vasquez, 2014). As a class, they read, *Bud, Not Buddy* by Christopher Paul Curtis (2002) and *Tiger Rising* by Kate DiCamillo (2001) as whole class novels. They read *One Crazy Summer* by Rita Williams-Garcia (2010), *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry (1989), and *Crash* by Jerry Spinelli (1996) for book clubs. They tied the themes in literature to their study of history and a range of topics: the fight for freedom from colonial rule against the British in the United States and India; the struggle against apartheid in South Africa; the fight against Nazi invasion in Europe; the struggle for racial equality and the right to vote during the civil rights movement in the United States; modern day civil war in Syria; ongoing struggles for gender equality in the U.S. and around the world; and civil rights for those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In this class, and in this school, teaching and learning toward social justice (Ayers, Hunt & Quinn, 1998; Kumashiro, 2015) meant expanding what children read beyond the experiences and perspectives of those who are privileged in the U.S. and around the world, to reflect all of humanity (Hudson, 2017). Children read a

wider range of texts and learned to ask different kinds of questions about which interpretations matter in school and society and for whose benefit. The goal was to help them examine and challenge the, often, invisible narratives that privilege and favor some groups and identities while marginalizing and disadvantaging others.

Children were afforded the freedom to choose their projects and mode of response, based on their interests and strengths, so they were naturally motivated for this work. They worked together at all stages of the project-based lessons (Blumenfeld, Soloway, Marx, Krajcik, Guzdial, & Palincsar, 1991; Duke, Halvorsen, & Strachan, 2016) that led to the curriculum showcase. Teachers guided them through a pedagogy of possibility (Simon, 1987), to research, read, write, and talk about what they learned with an authentic audience, using literacy to promote academic achievement and sociopolitical consciousness.

As a part of the Curriculum Showcase, all students were asked to write a reflection on their learning experiences. My son wrote (spelling corrected),

I believe that our Curriculum Showcase is important and relevant to today's issue because it shows what is happening in other parts of the world, like in Syria, so we can know what is going on. I learned that the U.S. government is involved with Syria by fighting only Isis and Russia who supports the Syrian government is fighting both ISIS and the opposition groups against the Syrian government. The Syrian Civil War started in 2011 when the government launched soldiers on peaceful protesters because they supported the Arab Spring when 15 boys were tortured and one killed at age 13. Also in 2011, 450,000 Syrians had been killed. In 2014, ISIS made life hard for Muslims.

The Curriculum Showcase is important and relevant to society's history, like with the Holocaust. In the Holocaust, the Nazis took over Berlin and other countries and made Jews wear the Star of David. The Nazis also arrested Jews and sent them to concentration camps. This relates to today's society because there is segregation. Some rights are not for gay people, some rights not for women, fewer unions and people get fired easily, and some immigrants cannot come to America.

Learning from history and present-day issues helps students know what happened in history and how that helps shape our country now. We need to know history because some events are bad and we can't let them happen again, but it is. For all these reasons, we learn lessons from history to prevent bad things from happening.

In this unit on social movements for freedom, children used literacy to look closely at human struggles and the fight for freedom. By making connections between the past and present, children learned that the struggle for justice is complex and ongoing. People must continue to work together and make enormous and persistent efforts to bring about social change. As Ms. Lorenzo explained, the fight for human dignity and freedom continues and is all the more important because of today's divisive political climate which breeds inhumanity and harshness against the most

vulnerable among us, the working class, the poor, the elderly, the disabled, children, veterans, women, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants. We need a curriculum, she said, that inspires advocacy and empathy for others.

The Challenge of Challenging Oppression

An anti-oppressive approach (Kumashiro, 2015) to an integrated English Language Arts and history unit on social movements is not a common occurrence in American public schools. Through a narrow curriculum, American schools historically reinforce perspectives and experiences of those who are privileged in U.S. and European societies (Zinn, 1999). Many do not wish to recognize ways in which schools contribute to oppression through racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, for example, and do not agree we need to change the way certain groups or identities are favored and privileged while others are disadvantaged or marginalized.

Those who do must challenge the ways schools and teachers resist change or make change difficult. Common ways of teaching that do not challenge oppression may actually help to perpetuate oppression and the status quo in schools and society. How can teachers prepare for teaching in crisis, and uncertainty, for healing and activism (Kumashiro, 2015)? They must look critically at ways to work against oppression and toward social justice. And, since no educational practice is always anti-oppressive, teachers need to explore the anti-oppressive changes made possible by alternative discourses on teaching (Kumashiro, 2000; Vasquez, 2014).

Both the content and pedagogical processes of the curriculum showcase on social movements were anti-oppressive. Children studied the decisions and actions of activists who fought for social change, in an organic curriculum that emerged from children's interests and teachers' informed perspectives. Children's independent research, writing, collaborative discussion, and assembly of final products transcended traditional forms of education, copying the teacher's notes and answering questions from the textbook. Instead, they negotiated how much they read and wrote, and how and what they shared with an audience. They worked heterogeneously in groups based on interest. They learned to think along with others, developing an intersubjective concept related to specific aspects of social movements (Bomer & Bomer, 2001). The conference-style presentation format afforded children an opportunity to use literacy to broker their own knowledge, as they fielded questions and shared information prepared in advance.

Though the organic curriculum teachers developed was complex, and young children were at times limited in their capacity to understand all the actors and their roles in working for or against justice, the curriculum and pedagogical practices involved in the showcase created a widening and empathetic space for all, without diminishing the demands for motivated learning and deep engagement (Filippatou & Kaldi, 2010).

Importance of Family and Community Involvement

Parents helped to get resources, like trifold boards, books from the library, and online resources, including images children used for signs on their visual displays, and articles they read and annotated in class. In the younger grades, parents helped to create models and exhibits. In the upper grades, children created their own displays, using materials parents supplied. If families could not afford to purchase materials, teachers used resources from the art room, with the principal's support.

Parents of children in Ms. Lorenzo's class, and other parents whose children had been in the school since kindergarten, highlighted the impact of the showcase on family discussions at home. For example, when Mesha's son, Brandon, was in third grade, he researched foods commonly eaten in South Africa. They went to a South African restaurant, and tried bison and porridge made from ground up grain. They gathered texts on the subject from the library and online. For his project, Brandon made a South African braai, a type of barbeque grill used to cook a variety of meats at gatherings for friends and family. His father and grandfather helped him assemble the braai from a large plastic water bottle and other materials they bought from a hardware store. They cut the water bottle in half and painted it, then added wire mesh for the inside, and a wooden stand for the legs. Mesha helped Brandon form and paint "meat" out of clay. For fourth grade, Brandon researched the #MeToo movement, a network of grassroots advocacy groups who speak out against sexual harassment and sexual violence against women. Mesha wanted Brandon to understand the importance of respecting women, so she and her husband talked with him about what he read and saw in the media, to help Brandon become critically aware of behaviors that might harass or harm women, and to stand against inappropriate behavior. For the showcase, he wrote a poem about it, using one of Maya Angelou's poems as a model.

Sara talked about Jeffrey's fifth grade showcase on the Constitution and equal rights. He researched the Separate Car Act of 1890, that allowed railroad companies in Louisiana to accommodate Black and White customers, but in separate rail cars. Jeffrey researched Homer Plessy, who was hired by a radical group of men called the Citizens' Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Law, to purchase a ticket and attempt to travel in a rail car designated for White passengers only. Plessy was a free man of Creole heritage, born of a Black mother and White father; his complexion was very light, and he essentially appeared to be White. Since the law did not define what it meant to be "Black" or "Colored" or "White," he challenged the very premise that a person could be defined by race based on the color of his skin. Further, the men argued, the law imposed a mark of servitude on Black people, specifically, because they could not move about freely in society, on public transportation, or in public spaces, which, they argued, violated the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing citizenship to African Americans and equal protection under the law. Sara said the children were disappointed and upset when they learned Plessy lost the

case and the "separate but equal" law was upheld. For the showcase, Jeffrey dramatically reenacted the moment Plessy got arrested, and what he might have said to the arresting officers. At home, he performed his monologue to share what he learned and contribute to an ongoing family discussion of racial discrimination in the United States.

Parents like Mesha, and Sara, who volunteered at the school and accompanied children on school trips, reported that each year, the community is "blown away" by the showcase and raves about how much children have learned. In the classroom, they asked children questions about what they were learning, prompting children to summarize, synthesize, and reflect on their projects. During the showcase, while visiting a number of classrooms with family and friends, Sara and Mesha reported asking, "What did you learn?" "What do you want me to remember?" "Did you enjoy researching your topic?" Most often, children were enthusiastic and motivated to study their topic, with one exception. Sara said some children told her the showcase on racial segregation was hard for them because they didn't like learning about the history of legalized racial discrimination in this country. She told them, the subject might not be good, but the project gave them space to talk about racism as a painful part of America's past and how it impacts our lives today.

Teaching for Democracy

In this class, literacy was taught from an anti-oppressive approach to prepare children for critical and capable citizenship in a participatory democracy, through a pedagogy of hope (Freire, 1994/2014), a "pedagogy of possibility," one that is "not yet, but could be if we engage in the simultaneous struggle to change both our circumstances and ourselves" (Simon, 1987, p. 382). A close examination of the curriculum showcase revealed how a unit on social movements for freedom embodied this pedagogy of possibility. Children's project-based learning highlighted the transformative power of education as a site for hope and struggle (Freire, 1994/2014), as they used themes in literature and social studies to understand, for example, the connections between race, economics, and power, and tensions in social movements when challenging racism and heteronormativity. The curriculum promoted critical reading and writing, sociopolitical consciousness, and family and community engagement. Family members supplied resources and materials, served as discussion partners at home and audience members during the showcase at school, to extend learning opportunities beyond school using resources in the community. In this school, literacy was a fundamental right, equal to civil and political rights. Teachers promoted a literacy that leads people to positions of power and authority, in which they are conscious of their own power, and work for their own interests. This curriculum dared to teach literacy as a matter of justice for all (Finn, 2009; Freire, 1994/2014).

The problem is, "[i]n American schools, children of more affluent backgrounds get an empowering education and powerful literacy; children of poor and working class (and to a surprising degree the middle class) get domesticating and functional literacy" (Finn, 2009, p. ix). However, children in

this school, 46% of whom were in economic need, and a majority of whom were Black and Latin Americans, used literacy to carry out integrative, multimodal research projects, in an education fit for informed, actively engaged citizens who read, write, and think critically, question inequities, and engage meaningfully in ideas about fairness, justice, and struggles for a better world.

Three decades ago, Kozol (1991) documented social and economic inequalities in America's public schools, and revealed the pernicious pattern of racial and economic discrimination against poor and marginalized children. He found that schools were predominantly segregated by race, and schools in more affluent neighborhoods spent nearly twice as much as schools in urban areas on per-pupil funding.

For example, in 1987, New York City public schools in urban areas like Harlem and the Bronx, serving predominantly Black and Latino children from lower income families, spent approximately \$5,500 per student, while schools in suburban Yonkers, Manhasset, Jericho, and Great Neck, serving predominately White students, spent approximately \$11,000 per student (Kozol, 1991). Wealthier districts had more money to fund public schools because they paid higher property taxes on home and land. Those schools could pay for smaller classes and higher teacher salaries. Administrators and students in these districts, praised for having the best schools, suggested students came from "good" neighborhoods and families, and benefited from having well-resourced libraries, smaller classes, enriched math, science, and technology classes, advanced placement and gifted programs, with teaching that promoted higher-order thinking. School officials reportedly said there was "no point" in putting money into schools in poorer districts, serving predominantly Black and Latino students, because teachers did not stay long and children would not accomplish much, compounding the effects of low expectations and systemic racial and economic bias.

Teachers and administrators in struggling communities, according to Kozol, acknowledged the difficult circumstances in which their students lived and went to school, reporting overcrowded classes, without enough chairs, desks, and books, and curriculum that did not meet children's academic needs. Low teacher salaries, high teacher turnover, and limited student support services abounded. Children in those struggling schools noticed the difference and questioned the unequal conditions between their schools and schools in wealthier communities. They still had high aspirations, with dreams to become lawyers, doctors, business leaders, and architects. Yet, few were prepared enough to take SATs, or graduate in four years. At the time of the study, a lower quality of education for children from poor and working-class communities was an accepted fact (Kozol, 1991).

That was thirty years ago. One would hope we have made enormous progress since then. But at the time of writing this article, 30,000 public school teachers in Los Angeles went on strike to demand higher salaries, smaller classes, and more support staff in a school system serving 500,000 students, predominantly lower income Latino Americans. Inequitable school funding remains a persistent

problem for the poorest children in our nation, and their teachers.

Lack of equitable school funding plagues our school system, but modifications in funding in New York (and other states) show that change is possible. In 2017, statewide, New York public schools spent an average of \$23,265 per student, among the highest in the nation (National Education Association, 2018). New York City schools use a funding formula and agreements with specific service providers to create two-thirds of their budgets to meet children's educational needs. They consider children's grades, grade levels, academic needs and performance, special education needs, English Language proficiency, and graduation portfolio requirements in specialized schools. The goal in applying this funding formula is to meet the needs of children who require the most support and apply the funding criteria evenly across schools.

We have come a long way from neglected buildings with crumbling ceilings and walls, but some districts continue to struggle with enormously overcrowded classrooms, low teacher salaries, limited support staff, lack of resources, and segregation by race and socioeconomic class. Kozol reminded us that children from poor, working-class (and some middle-class) communities should no longer be denied the means to compete with children who attend schools in wealthier neighborhoods. And, as this brief inquiry shows, school leaders and teachers can act with courage and vision so children can receive a challenging, academically rigorous curriculum, in the face of ongoing efforts for more equitably funded programs.

All children, regardless of race or class, deserve a curriculum steeped in powerful literacy (Finn, 2009; Pinar et al., 1995), working collaboratively with teachers and other children to negotiate the curriculum beyond the classroom, using resources from the library, online, and in the community, to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize knowledge gained from reading, listening, and talking with others about important ideas, such as social movements for freedom from around the world.

Reimagined, teaching and learning can be student-centered, project-based, and collaborative, using strategic reading and writing while integrating literature and subject area learning. Curricular approaches, such as these, can be empowering for all children, from working-class or middle-class backgrounds, where families have long struggled for civil, social, and political rights (such as the right for workers to unionize, earn living wages, have access to quality health care, and attend quality schools). Teachers, parents, and the principal in this school, aware of the inequities in society, engaged with curriculum topics, like social movements for freedom, to expose injustices in the U.S. and countries around the world, so children could learn that people secured and protected their rights by organizing, resisting, and challenging oppression. Through connections to current struggles to protect citizens' rights and make a democracy work, children learned what it means to be a part of a larger community, to value justice, question inequities they see in the world, and connect what is learned at school to their own lives.

While the teacher in this study was professionally competent and loving (Freire, 1998), she expressed no awareness of a social class analysis of her teaching, yet she was explicit about what it meant to educate children about the importance of their own voice, and the voices of others, consciously interacting in the world in service of freedom. She aimed to teach children to fight against authoritarianism in favor of democracy and encouraged them to engage in critical reflection on events in the world. For this teacher, pedagogy is, indeed, political.

In the school's effort to educate children as responsible and critical citizens, teachers created learning experiences steeped in dialogue, open to the free exchange of ideas. Children learned to respect each other, leaning toward tolerance and deference, against racism, misogyny, classism, and heteronormativity (Kumashiro, 2015; Pinar et al., 1995). While some would want us to believe that education as a part of the superstructure of society cannot change for working- and middle-class children until material conditions change, as educators, school leaders, and community members, we can share information, organize, and mobilize each other toward democratic ideals. We can deliberately and pedagogically challenge authoritarian tendencies and cultural traditions that maintain these injustices. As Freire said,

Citizenship implies freedom – to work, to eat, to dress, to wear shoes, to sleep in a house, to support oneself and one's family, to love, to be angry, to cry, to protest, to support, to move, to participate in this or that religion, this or that party, to educate oneself and one's family, to swim regardless in what ocean of one's country. Citizenship is not obtained by chance: It is a construction that, never finished, demands we fight for it. It demands commitment, political clarity, coherence, decision. For this reason a democratic education cannot be realized apart from an education of and for citizenship. (Freire, 1998, p. 90)

A curriculum unit on social movements, in an urban fourth grade public elementary classroom, grounded in an anti-oppressive, justice-oriented pedagogy, puts powerful literacy in the hands of children for whom this type of instruction was historically, systematically, and institutionally denied. In this practice, we bear in mind, the right to an empowering education is on par with civil and political rights (Finn, 2009).

Conclusion

Education in this school was a site for hope and struggle, enabling and promoting sociopolitical consciousness and community engagement (Spears-Bunton & Powell, 2009). Throughout the curriculum showcase, parents and the teacher played a pivotal role as supportive learning partners and authentic audiences, bearing witness to, and encouraging, deep thinking and strategic reading and writing. The school enacted a pedagogy of promise steeped in critical literacy in which children read, wrote, and talked about social action and the struggles for freedom in local and broader contexts (Gay, 2010; Lee, 2007). Children wrestled with the challenges of the ongoing and complex nature of working for civil and human rights, and confronted

difficult contemporary movements, protesting police brutality against unarmed Black civilians, and organizing and fighting for women's rights, gay rights, and justice for victims of sexual harassment and assault. They examined issues of equity and fairness, as a normal course of study, in elementary school. Education and literacy in this public school offered working- and middle-class children a chance expand beyond the limits of an education that prepares them for employment, only. Through an empowering education, children learned to "evaluate, analyze and synthesize while reading and listening and to persuade and negotiate through writing and speaking" using literacy to "understand and control what's going on around [them]" (Finn, 2009, p. 257). But changes to a school curriculum cannot eliminate poverty. An empowering education disrupts entrenched historic and contemporary social stratification based on race and class, because it encourages educated citizens in a democracy to organize, secure, and protect their own rights, while negotiating "powerful institutions of social class and free-market economy – which are based on inequality – to find a just equilibrium with full citizenship – which is based on equality" (ibid, p. 263).

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