

# If I Were President

## Teaching Social Justice in the Primary Classroom

Elizabeth Goss

*Liz Goss, a primary grade teacher in inner city Chicago, demonstrates how 6- and 7-year-olds can eagerly engage with difficult issues of social justice like slavery and collective action. In one set of lessons, she drew on popular culture by using the Disney movie *A Bug's Life* (1998) to help the children think about the oppression of one group by another.*

*Goss's teacher research illustrates an effective technique for analyzing a large body of data to represent children's thinking. Five emergent themes drawn from the data were woven together to tell a story rich in examples of what really happens in urban primary grade classrooms. Little did this teacher know in January 2005, when she asked her African American students to think about what they would do if they were president, that four years later they would witness the inauguration of an African American as president of the United States.*

*Like President Obama, Liz Goss's students reveal a deep level of hope and a desire for change. Liz offers insight into how to co-construct with students a curriculum that promotes social justice and yet is grounded in their everyday lives.*

—Barbara Henderson

If I were President I would give poor people houses.

If I were President I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses and I would give them food and a car.

If I were President I would stop wars from killing people and fighting and throwing bombs at people. They need to care for people. That's what I would do.

The 6- and 7-year-olds in my classroom created posters with drawings of themselves as president of the United States. Their statements completed the thought, "If I were President, I would . . ." I was teaching on Chicago's West Side in a small public school that stands in the shadows of one of the city's largest housing projects. My multiage first and second grade class was made up of 25 active, questioning, loved, curious, and sometimes worried and pained African American children.

The world of my first- and second-graders was a complicated one. They came to school rich in experiences of the world, garnered from both home and school. As young children, they still debated the existence of the tooth fairy but

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Photos courtesy of the author.

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**What happens when teachers work collaboratively with their students to investigate how to create a better world for all?**

were painfully aware of the reality of gunfire in their neighborhood. I struggled to create with them a classroom full of wonder, love, joy, hope, and questions. I wanted my students to ask important questions, and I believed they were capable of finding answers and finding their way in the world. I envisioned a better world for them, one that is more just, more joyful, more inspiring. This was the setting for my action research project.



### Undertaking action research

Looking for a new challenge after four years of teaching, I had applied for and received a MetLife Fellowship at the Teachers Network Leadership Institute (TNLI) through the Chicago Foundation for Education. TNLI is a nonprofit educational organization established to improve student achievement by bringing teachers' expertise and experiences to education policy making. The institute awards fellowships to full-time public school teachers to conduct action research in their classrooms and then connect their findings to local, state, and national policy discussions. MetLife Fellows meet every three weeks to discuss their action research with each other under the aegis of a university mentor who provides technical assistance to the group. The fellows document their work by writing papers and making presentations.

I had often asked myself, How do the students in my first- and second-grade classroom respond to ethical dilemmas? I wanted to give my students opportunities to explore large questions of justice. I wanted to set up learning experiences that pushed them to think critically about their world. I decided to see what would happen when I centered my teaching in the ethics of social justice. I also wanted to see whether my students could participate successfully in helping to determine the direction of the class curriculum. In essence, I wondered, What happens when teachers work collaboratively with their students to investigate how to create a better world for all?

I believe in the power of education and critical thinking to transform the world. Therefore, there was no better place for me to situate this transformation than in my first- and second-grade classroom—a place affected by an overarching social system of inequality and injustice and yet also full of hope.

### What is teaching for social justice?

At the turn of the twentieth century, John Dewey captured the imaginations and hearts of many educators with his writings on the critical role that education plays in forming a democratic society. Dewey wrote in 1916,

I appeal to teachers . . . to remember that they above all others are consecrated servants of the democratic ideas in which alone this country is truly a distinctive action—ideas of friendly and helpful intercourse between all and the equipment of every individual to serve the community by his own best powers in his own best way. (Dewey 1976, 210)

If I were President I would make things good. I would love the world and I would buy anything for kids and I would help people get homes.



As the theories and practices of teaching for social justice have evolved, the roles individual teachers and communities can play in the decisions regarding curriculum, methodology, and pedagogy have been limited (Edelsky 1999). Teachers have to contend with high-stakes

tests that constrain curriculum. They find their hands tied in their own classrooms due to the district's, even the state's, adoption of the latest textbook or newest instructional system. Curriculum decisions are made by bureaucrats far removed from classrooms, many with limited or no actual teaching experience. Despite this backdrop of increasing centralization of power, good teachers attempt to create curriculum and classrooms with democracy at their heart as a living, breathing, evolving metaphor (Bigelow 1997; Zinn 2002).

Teaching for social justice comes in many shapes and sizes. This research project is grounded in a framework developed by teachers committed to the idea that public education is central to the creation of a humane, multiracial democracy. The framework was presented in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* in 1994 (Au, Bigelow, & Karp 2007) and adapted by a group of Chicago area educators, Teachers for Social Justice. It comprises eight principles, as follows.

**A social justice curriculum and classroom practice should**

- **Be grounded in the lives of our students**
- **Equip students to pose critical questions about their world**
- **Be multicultural, anti-racist, pro-justice**
- **Be participatory, experiential**
- **Be hopeful, joyful, kind, visionary**
- **Encourage children to act on their ideas**
- **Be academically rigorous**
- **Be culturally and linguistically sensitive**

(Au, Bigelow, & Karp 2007)

**A social justice curriculum should equip students to pose critical questions about their world and encourage children to act on their ideas.**

If I were President I would make a park.



**Curriculum decisions are made** by bureaucrats far removed from classrooms . . . It is against this backdrop of increasing centralization of power that teachers decide to create curriculum and classrooms with democracy at their heart.



## A Bug's Life

I introduced the topic of slavery by showing the children the animated movie *A Bug's Life*. The movie's premise is a Marxist take on the power struggles in the insect world. The main characters, the ants, are exploited by the grasshoppers, who rule by fear. The ants are forced to gather all the food for the grasshoppers. As the ants become aware of the unfairness of their lot, one ant stands up to the evil grasshopper leader. Ultimately, the ants realize that they outnumber the grasshoppers and simply have to work together to overthrow the grasshopper regime.

I explained to the class that we were going to watch an entertaining children's movie, but that I wanted them to think about its theme. I said that it reminded me of slavery. I led a brief discussion, eliciting their prior knowledge about slavery, and then we prepared to watch the movie. I explained that we would watch the first 20 minutes and then stop so that they could write about how the grasshoppers treated the ants and what they thought the ants should do.

I asked students to give their views by responding to three prompts:

I think the ants are treated \_\_\_\_\_ by the grasshoppers.

They have to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

I think \_\_\_\_\_.

### Unit on the Civil Rights Movement Parents' Survey

Dear Parents:

Our class is just completing a unit on the Civil Rights Movement. Please take a moment to fill out this survey so I can evaluate the effectiveness of our studies. Circle yes or no in response to each question, and write additional comments you may have in the space under the question. I value your opinion and would very much like to hear from you.

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| 1. My child talked with me about Reverend Wyatt's visit.   | Yes / No |
| 2. My child talked about the Underground Railroad and slavery.   | Yes / No |
| 3. My child talked about the Black History Assembly.   | Yes / No |
| 4. My child talked about the Civil Rights Movement (including Rosa Parks, Dr. King, Malcolm X, and boycotts).                | Yes / No |
| 5. I see my child applying lessons learned from the unit to her/his everyday life (issues of fairness, justice, race, etc.). | Yes / No |

Do you have any comments about the unit on the Civil Rights Movement?

Do you think learning about African American history is important for the children?

Please return your response in your child's homework folder.

Thank you for your time.

Elizabeth Goss

## Data collection and analysis

### Data collection

I collected data for my action research project from five sources over a period of five months:

**Student work samples**—written work from my students, including copies of their journal entries, writings from class projects, and written responses in classroom meetings.

**Teacher journal**—my observations of pertinent class lessons and discussions as well as reflections about the curriculum. I wrote in the journal at least twice a week, spending 15 minutes at lunch or at the end of the day recording my thoughts. After a few weeks, I realized I was questioning my own role as a teacher as much as recording the students' responses to activities.

**Parent survey**—parents' reports on the ideas the students were bringing home from their experiences at school. The survey included five yes/no questions with space after each for comments: (1) My child talked with me about Reverend Wyatt's visit; (2) My child talked about the Underground Railroad and slavery; (3) My child talked about the Black

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If I were President I would say all the schools are to be great and no one can fight you and I would set everyone free out of jail.



If I were President I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses and I would give them food and a car.



History Assembly; (4) My child talked about the Civil Rights Movement (including Rosa Parks, Dr. King, Malcolm X, and boycotts); and (5) I see my child applying lessons learned from the unit in her everyday life (issues of fairness, justice, race, and so on). I allowed space at the bottom for parents' comments. I asked families whether they felt that learning about African American history was important for the children.

**Audiotapes**—audio recordings of class meetings during social justice activities.

**Informal conversations**—my notes on conversations about social justice topics between students and teacher during the study.

### Analysis

At the end of five months, I read and analyzed the data. I looked for patterns in the students' responses to questions of inequality and for evidence that the students were using their experiences from outside of school to justify or explain their views on social justice. I also examined the data to determine what happened when the students participated in making decisions about the direction of the curriculum.

I had collected a large amount of data but wasn't sure what it told me. However, on closer examination, as I read through the data, certain trends began to appear. For example, I noticed that the students were using many of the same categories of thought, such as notions of fairness and collective action, across the activities. In all, I found five main categories. I color coded the data based on the five categories.

### Findings

#### 1. Students used main themes or categories when discussing issues of social justice.

At the beginning of the research process, I was anxious about what I would find and how I was going to make sense of my students' thinking. What if I couldn't identify distinct threads of thought in the data? What if the students weren't interested in questions of justice? I was surprised, relieved, and intrigued by how clearly the categories of their thinking emerged. I found five recurring themes in their writing and conversations. The five themes present across activities were empathy, identifying with the oppressed, collective action, standing up for oneself, and fairness. Their definitions follow.

**Empathy.** Students expressed empathy often. In the If I Were President activity, they showed empathy toward poor people ("I would give poor people houses. I would give them food and a car;" "If I were President I would take care of lots of people. People would have 3 day weekends;" and "If I were President I would take care of kids") and toward people involved in violent situations ("I would stop wars from killing people and fighting and throwing bombs").

**Identifying with the oppressed.** The children generally felt empathy for people who were hurt or sick or poor and for animals, but they had a more specific identification with people who were oppressed by others or whose freedom had been taken away. They used both fictional and real-life ideas when identifying with the oppressed. They saw the ants in *A Bug's Life* as oppressed

because the grasshoppers made the ants do all the work, took away the ants' freedom, and did not treat the ants with respect ("I think the ants are treated disrespectful"). In the children's own experiences, people in jail are oppressed ("If I were President I would set every one free out of jail . . ."). Many of the children had had direct experiences with people whose freedom had been taken away. I believe this was part of their strong identification with the ants.



**Collective action.** The students referenced how the ants worked together to gain their freedom from the grasshoppers. They understood how people (or ants) work together to make a plan and carry it out. They wrote, "I would rather be an ant because we will work together and make a plan to defeat [defeat] the grasshopper" and "They have to try to escape and take all the food I think." They believed it was important to be brave and not just accept unfair treatment. When asked how the ants won, one student wrote, "The ants were brave enough to defeat the grasshoppers together" [The ants were brave enough to defeat the grasshoppers together].

**Standing up for oneself.** Many of the students had been taught that they have to stand up for themselves and their family members. For example, if a younger brother is being bullied on the playground, the older sibling would be expected to stand up for him. In the *Bug's Life* discussion I often heard, "I think they should fight back" and "I think they should stand up for themselves." When the children were asked if they would rather be an ant or a grasshopper, one responded using the language of standing up for oneself: "I would rather be an ant because they are brave. They stand up for themselves. They will scare the grasshopper. They are not scared [scared] of the grasshopper anymore."

**Fairness.** Primary age children often say, "That's not fair." They can be very focused on equity and they look at equity in concrete terms. The children in my classroom judged the fairness of a situation by comparing themselves to their peers. For example, they would think, "If I have to do some work, then you should have to work also." If the cafeteria ran out of a favorite food, the children's response was not just "I can't have it," but "It is unfair because you got some and I didn't." The students expressed this view when discussing how to solve the problem between the grasshoppers and the ants: "I think the grasshoppers should give back their food." That is, the ants did all the work and the grasshopper didn't work at all, and yet the grasshoppers got the food. Similarly, the children thought the homeless should have houses because rich people have houses: "If I were President I would tell the builders who build houses for rich people to build the homeless houses . . ."

Frequently, two or more themes are apparent in a single comment. For example, when the children identified with the oppressed, it was often because the oppressed subjects were treated unfairly and the children empathized regarding their situation ("If I were President I would help schools. I would let people out of jail, like my uncle" and "If I were President I would take care of the country and buy everybody games"). The responses told me a lot about the depth of their

**I found five recurring themes in the children's writing and conversations:**

- Empathy
- Identifying with the oppressed
- Collective action
- Standing up for oneself
- Fairness

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understanding of social justice issues. I learned more about teaching social justice to young children from my students' responses than from any textbook on teaching.

### Findings linked to the main activities in the study

I began an analysis of the data by looking at students' work for the activity If I Were President and then at the activities connected to the movie *A Bug's Life*.

**If I Were President class book and posters.** I had asked the students what they would do if they were president of the United States. As is clear from the quotations at this article's opening, the students looked at their own communities' needs and decided how they could improve their world. The activity—to represent a Black president—was especially meaningful because the children placed themselves in the seat of power, visually and intellectually. It enabled them to see someone who looked like themselves in a world that has a hard time imagining anyone who is not White, male, and wealthy running for president. Nineteen of the 23 children wrote statements that showed their ideas about empathy, identifying with the oppressed, and fairness.

Not all of the children responded by thinking of others. Of the remaining four, their plans for using presidential power represented the typical priorities of 6- and 7-year-olds, such as, "If I were President, I would ride a bike and rollerskate in the Oval Office." and "If I were President I would boss around my mom, dad, sister and Ms. Goss."

***A Bug's Life.*** In this movie the situation of the ants and the grasshoppers ignited the students' passion, and the children became deeply engaged in discussing and writing about its unfairness, how one ant stood up to a grasshopper, and how the ants as a group banded together to change their circumstances. Because of the children's strong interest and enthusiastic participation in the activities related to *A Bug's Life*, the movie became the cornerstone of our social justice curriculum.

In the activities that followed the children's viewing of *A Bug's Life*, it became clear that the children identified with the oppressed ants. When asked how the ants were treated by the grasshoppers and what the ants should do, in response to the prompts, "I think the ants are treated \_\_\_\_\_ by the grasshoppers" and "They have to \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_," the children wrote,

If I were President I would stop wars from killing people and fighting and throwing bombs at people. They need to care for people. That's what I would do.





I think the ants are treated badly.  
I think the ants are treated desrespackful.  
They have to give them all the food.  
They have to think and then do it. I think they should excape.  
They have to think of a plan.



In response to the prompt “I think \_\_\_\_\_,” students wrote about collective action and standing up for oneself, and they expressed their empathy for the ants. One example of advocating collective action was Tameka’s response: “They have to try to escape and take all the food I think.” Two other children wrote about standing up for oneself:

I think they should fight back.  
I think they should stand up for ther self.

Five children showed empathy toward the ants:

They wanted to be treated right and I think the grasshoppers is mean.  
I think they [the grasshoppers] should give back there food.  
They don’t have to do wate they don’t wont to do.

I think the grasshoppers sould say sorry.  
I think the grasshoppers have to do the work.

In the middle of viewing *A Bug’s Life*, I stopped the movie and asked the students to write about whether they would like to be an ant or a grasshopper. (This pause is before the ants win the war.) Of the 16 responses, 15 students wanted to be ants and only one wanted to be a grasshopper. The lone grasshopper wannabe wrote, “I would rather be a grasshopper because I love bosting [bossing]. Bost [bossing] is fun.” (It is interesting to note that this same child said if she were president, she would boss around her mom and her teacher.)

Of the 15 students who wanted to be ants, they again wrote about identifying with the oppressed, standing up for themselves, fairness, empathy, and collective action. Here are some representative responses:

I would rather be an ant because they is brave. They stand up for therself. They will scair the grasshopper. They is not scaide of the grasshopper no more.

I would rather be an ant becaue the ant make food. He stand up for all of them. The grasshopper did nothing.

I would rather be an ant because when I grow up I wot to be goo giy [I want to be a good guy].

I would rather be an ant because we will work toghet and mak a plan to defet the grasshopp.

**The situation of the ants and the grasshoppers ignited the students’ passion, and the children became deeply engaged in discussing and writing about its unfairness.**

At the end of the movie, I asked the students to explain how the ants defeated the grasshoppers. The students wrote exclusively about collective action and standing up for oneself. Eight students used the concept of collective action to explain how the ants won:

They stood up for each [other].

Flick [an ant] stood up to the grasshopper and the ants took the grasshoppers down.

The ants was braf enf to deft the grasshoppers togeht. [The ants was brave enough to defeat the grasshoppers together]

## 2. Children can take an active part in determining the curriculum.

If I were President I would buy people houses and if I were President I will make a school and I will be the principal and the teacher for first grade and I will give people clothes to wear.



I thought a large part of my research project would focus on the Civil Rights Movement, and I had planned it accordingly. But the students really wanted to know more about slavery. So I thought I would split the class into two study groups, each working on its topic of choice, slavery or the Civil Rights Movement. We took a class vote, and slavery won by an overwhelming majority: 18 votes for studying slavery, 2 for going ahead with the civil rights unit.

Although changing the curriculum plan required work on my part, I was pleased that the students wanted to learn more about slavery and that they were participating enthusiastically. I had taught a unit on the Underground Railroad a few years earlier, so I had some resources at hand. I kept the civil rights speaker I had invited, who brought to life the Civil Rights Movement, but we changed the plan for our contribution to the Black history assembly. We developed a performance about the Underground Railroad based on a hip-hop song, and the students choreographed a dance. They loved performing it during the school assembly. The children felt they owned their performance because they had chosen the topic and worked hard to create the performance piece. It is interesting to note that the assembly was the children's most popular topic of discussion at home, according to the parent survey.

While I had often thought about basing the curriculum on students' interests, I'd had a hard time imagining what that would look like in my classroom of first- and second- graders. When the students became deeply interested in the topic of slavery, I followed their choice, staying with that topic instead of going ahead with the unit on the Civil Rights Movement. They knew their learning was in their own hands, and they responded competently in helping make decisions about the curriculum. They were able to negotiate within

boundaries that made sense for them as young students and within acceptable boundaries for me as a teacher. Following the interest of the children in planning the curriculum gave them an empowered voice in the classroom. I had always told the children it was *their* learning community, and now they were speaking out about what they wanted to learn. They were engaging in critical thinking and taking a stand about their own learning.

**When the students became deeply interested in the topic of slavery, I followed their choice . . . instead of going ahead with the unit on the Civil Rights Movement.**

## Families respond positively

I asked the students' families to respond to a parent survey, which I sent home with the homework in the children's book bags. I asked the parents five questions to gauge student interest in the Black history unit (see p. 5) At the time of the assembly, I had 20 students, and 14 of the students returned their parent surveys—a good rate of return (I typically receive homework from 10 or 12 students a week). I asked the parents to tell me if their child talked about the Black history curricular topics at home. The overwhelming response to each question was, "Yes, my child talked about this at home." On average 90 percent of the respondents marked yes for each question. Some responses were,

I thought the unit was very enlightening.

Please keep the unit going.

Jordan asked a lot of questions; some I can't answer, but I told him to put it on the library list.

Seven members from the children's families attended the Black history assembly, and two came to hear the talk by the civil rights activist.

### 3. Children can apply their classroom learning about social justice in everyday life.

The following experience shows how opportunities to discuss social justice can arise spontaneously in the course of the day in ways we cannot always predict. On a typically cold January day, our school cafeteria decided to offer ice cream to students at lunch for 50 cents. It was the first time that year that the cafeteria had sold ice cream. Of my students that day, seven had enough money to buy ice cream, and they did so, while the others did not. So there were seven children happily eating ice cream and 15 other upset children, some of whom were crying. I called a class meeting and asked the students what we should do in the future: should some students in the class continue to buy ice cream, even if everyone could not afford it? Or should no one buy ice cream? In the ensuing discussion, the students relied on the understandings of fairness they had developed in the classroom.

I asked who had bought ice cream; seven hands went up. I asked the entire class how that made the children who had not bought ice cream feel. Camille said it made her feel bad. I asked if buying ice cream had caused any problems. Maya said some of the students who had ice cream had teased those who didn't. The students debated for about 15 minutes. When students argued on the side of buying ice cream, they were often inclusive of others: "I can buy everyone ice cream," said Jacob, and "We should have ice cream because I like it. I would share," said Tameka. Most of the children were sensitive about others' feelings.

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**Opportunities to discuss social justice can arise spontaneously in the course of the day in ways we cannot always predict.**

If I were President I would give money to school and help all the people in the world improve their schools.







