
1 The Curricular Stance: Active Learning into Active Citizenship

Teaching for social justice is teaching for the sake of arousing the kinds of vivid, reflective, experiential responses that might move students to come together in serious efforts to understand what social justice actually means and what it might demand.

Maxine Greene, *Teaching for Social Justice* (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn)

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this chapter, we share our explorations of a curriculum for democratic citizenship, what we have come to call a “socially conscious language arts curriculum.” We explain how we restructured an active reading and writing classroom in order to use active literacy to address the complex issues of a democratic society. Betty wanted her seventh-grade students to see the actions of citizens as they supported democracy’s strengths or caused democracy to disintegrate. She wanted them to investigate how the forces of society create justice and injustice. The curriculum-planning model that helped Betty organize activities for socially conscious student inquiry is presented, with descriptions of the predictable phases that occurred during extended units of work. We give an overview of the major units of study during one year. (Readers can see this curriculum framework in action in the stories of two different historical units in Chapters 2 and 5.) This chapter also provides an introduction to the more detailed examinations of inquiry, classroom atmosphere, literacy instruction, literature choices, and student activism that are provided in later chapters.

A Story of Student and Teacher Discoveries

The fifth-period literature class was reading and discussing a *Read* magazine docudrama that featured a family of immigrants on the ocean liner

Titanic. In the middle of the dramatic action, when the third-class passengers realize that no lifeboats have been reserved for them, Carrie suddenly burst out: “Mrs. Slesinger, what I want to know is, would we have been third class?”

A moment of quiet surprise followed Carrie’s penetrating question. Betty was as startled as the students were, and as they turned to her, she stammered, “I’m not sure, but . . . but we certainly wouldn’t have been first class, would we?”

Now the literature discussion turned personal and passionate. The possibility that they might have been caught on the sinking ship without a lifeboat brought a flurry of noisy protests. “No way! Hey, they can’t do that!” Some students were horrified that the steerage passengers were kept below until it was too late, but others defended the impulse to survive that drove the first-class passengers to exercise the privilege of economic power. “Who’s to say who should go first? I would’ve got my family in a boat!”

Carrie’s question had hit a nerve. The kids realized it and Betty realized it. They weren’t sure how to talk about it or what to do with the issue, and neither was she. They wanted to pin the blame for the disaster on some one person—the captain, the company, or the builder of the great ship. The exchange was a burst of strong but naive concern, and Betty’s reactions were tentative at best. But it was a critical point in the intellectual life of the class that year.

Compassionate concern about others’ welfare had been aroused, but what was the next step? Certainly the students’ responses were “vivid” and “experiential,” as Maxine Greene calls for, but could they become more reflective? How could they go beyond spontaneous outrage to a more informed understanding of the social forces that created injustice on the *Titanic*? Could their aroused interest become a serious effort “to understand what social justice actually means”?

Betty knew she needed to extend the students’ engagement with this issue, so she planned a “public hearing” on the topic of “Who was to blame for this accident?” Staging such a hearing could validate the students’ passion yet expose them to multiple viewpoints that might reveal the complexities of the situation. Speakers would have to present evidence for their opinions, reinforcing the idea that in a democracy opinion depends on information as well as compassion.

The hearing was a lively exchange that exposed everyone to the points of view of the responsible parties. Betty was fortunate to have copies of a firsthand account by the captain of the rescue ship *Carpathian* and of other factual analyses. Students did their own research out of class.

Here is a persuasive, surprisingly well-researched statement written by Allen in “officialese” in preparation for his oral presentation:

The Colonial After-Life insurance inspector hereby fines the engineers of the ocean liner the Titanic for a flaw that cost the lives of over 1500 innocent people. We blame the accused with the suffering of the survivors and ask for damages to the families of victims of the disaster. This blame was approved by the Colonial After-Life insurance company.

The metal used in the hull of the Titanic was not as pressure-resistant as possible because it had nothing to keep it from shattering and eventually sinking. If the engineer had used a sulfur/steel alloy in the hull’s watertight compartments the Titanic’s hull-compartments would have bent and stretched under water pressure, but it wouldn’t shatter. Therefore, theoretically, the ship would have been more unsinkable.

As the students listened to statements about the responsibilities of the manufacturers, the inspectors, the captain, the ship owner, the radio operator (who was asleep), and the captain of the *Carpathian*, many of them moved beyond their initial focus on blaming a single person who had done wrong. Their final discussion was more than just a passionate outburst. When Al complained, “I still think that the captain was to blame because he was in charge,” other students were quick to mention the captain’s lack of crucial data about the ship and other contributing factors. As they talked, students were weighing the different kinds of responsibilities involved in the accident and making connections between individual acts and the surrounding circumstances. Their opinions, brought into a public arena, were challenged or supported and thus refined, a small moment of the kind of informed dialogue that we value for a democratic society. And Betty, as a teacher who has to meet external requirements, was relieved that this foray into social justice issues fulfilled the grade-level objectives in the area of public speaking.

A Way to Talk about Social Class

Carrie’s penetrating question about social class had further consequences for the curriculum that year—it provided the students with a metaphor that allowed them to begin to address the confusing and complex issues of economic privilege. Later in the year, when they sensed a social inequity more complex than their ability to verbalize it (for example, in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*), a student might say, “Hey, this sounds like Third Class to me!” and other students would know what he meant.

Yes, it was a shortcut, and yes, it did simplify the complexities that create inequity, but young students need some way to begin to verbalize

their unfocused feelings about their society. We came to see these generalized statements as a place to start. Students need ways to enter into the complex issues of social justice. The connections between unjust acts and the unspoken issues of social class and economics are difficult even for adults to understand. Although children absorb some of the principles of our democracy in their daily experiences, classroom inquiry into these complex forces can be overwhelming. Even though they readily recognize individual instances of injustice in their reading, the problem of how to initiate inquiry into the social forces behind these instances is not easy to solve.

The Challenges of Welcoming Democracy into a Middle School

Isolation. Schools have done very little to help students use their energy to address the problems or the possibilities that exist in society. At the same time that we complain about the idleness and lack of responsibility of our youth, we operate school environments that prevent them from developing habits of concern and social responsibility. Shut in behind school walls, students have little exposure to what goes on outside and little opportunity to participate in the collaborative social action that sustains a democracy. Cumbersome procedures and extra costs virtually prevent teachers from taking students out of the school. And the curriculum itself gives students little exposure to the current issues in society and rarely acknowledges the unjust forces that buffet the lives of many citizens, including those of many students. For some students, an unsettling dichotomy grows between what the school says life is and what they see happening around them and to them. This pretense may be a contributing factor to the negative behaviors adults observe, the alienation and withdrawal and the distractive social whirlwind of adolescence.

If an issue or activity hints of controversy, schools shy away. The dilemma of schools is much like the world's governments. They profess more idealism than actually exists in the policies that direct the operation of their systems. Those few teachers who may be interested in social education find little support or training. Faced with unspoken pressures and even overt directives from administrators, teachers feel constrained to stay with noncontroversial subjects. In the tense and authoritarian atmosphere created by bureaucratic priorities and test results, schools turn their backs on social issues.

It is an unusual school in the United States today that addresses problems of economics and class, or the more difficult problems of race, economics, and class. Despite conflict resolution and peacemaking programs,

rarely are the very real social problems within schools named and discussed in classrooms. As teachers we are concerned when prejudice breaks out in ugly conflicts at school, but we shrink from letting students research the contexts that support this prejudice. We are left to deal again and again with the fallout of conflict—the fights, the vandalism, and the vicious gossip. We try to find ways to stop the fighting and we punish students, but we do not help students understand how intolerance emerges in the social relationships of the school, or how economic and social systems nurture intolerance in our larger society.

Restructuring a Language Arts Curriculum

Inspired by the growing national conversation about democratic values, the two of us, a seventh-grade language arts teacher and a college language arts professor, decided to confront a daunting question: If a democracy needs committed and informed citizens, shouldn't our classrooms be preparing students for these active roles? And if so, what would this classroom look like?

Rethinking Our Beliefs

Confronting these questions led us to challenge Betty's constructivist and humanities-based curriculum—a curriculum we valued and had worked together to create. Her focus on lifelong habits of literacy brought a valuable depth and authenticity to the language arts curriculum. We had been pleased to watch the students actively engaged in drafting, conferring, and publishing their writing, and we had begun making steps toward restructuring the literature program into topics rather than genres.

But now we wanted to ask harder questions. Could we call this active engagement with literacy authentic when it rarely touched the world outside the school? How valuable was inquiry that ignored the realities students lived in? What were we doing to help students be critical thinkers about their society? Were students actually collaborators in decisions that affected their lives in school? Betty recalls:

Like most teachers, I believed that I was already running a democratic classroom. I was overt in my acceptance and praise of diverse cultures. The mantra of justice is engrained in teachers like me. I used multicultural texts. At every turn I tried to model fairness and kindness to each child and hoped for it back. I tried to provide attention and opportunities equally for all. I aimed for objectivity when I mediated altercations. But when I began to think about what a democracy means, especially what it means when each person has a say in decisions affecting their lives, I saw many more possibilities.

When her students seemed to focus only on the surface activities of their lives in their “authentic authorship,” Betty realized how dissatisfied she was. Yes, they wrote for real audiences, but usually only for their peers. Yes, they made choices about topics, as authors in the real world do, but how superficial and limited these topics were. She wanted to expand their inquiry to the wider world and have writing and discussion emerge from that inquiry. “I wanted my students to find their own opportunities to question, investigate, learn, and connect,” she remembers. “I wanted their work to be generative, each part taking them deeper into their inquiry.”

The NCTE Committee on Teaching about Genocide and Intolerance was helpful in expanding our view of the possibilities of engagement with social issues. The committee (Robertson, 1999, p.13) offers this challenge:

The aim of the English studies/language arts classroom is to invite informed dialogue and reflection on language and literature so that students and teachers examine the ways persons and groups build respect for differences or contribute to the forces of hate.

[T]eaching about acceptance and value for others sensitizes students to events of intolerance and genocide. Reading, discussing, and writing about texts that deal with intolerance and genocide help students learn about human deeds of violence throughout history, and illumine parallels existing in human behaviors that make hatred and suffering possible today.

From Habits of Literacy to Habits of Literate Citizenship

We needed to find a perspective on democracy and its values that would help us guide our work. Although we agreed with Carole Edelsky (1994) that we would have to “re-theorize language education” (p. 254), our direction was still uncertain. We were not proposing a study of the governance system of democracy; we wanted to create a socially conscious English language arts program, not a civics program. Betty would approach these issues through the literature, the writing, and the speaking and listening that were her responsibility to teach. We looked for a way to think about democracy as it exists in the lives of people and their stories.

We found that we had to look at the way people lived together to find a guiding definition of democracy. Democracy can be viewed as a social system in which all participants can—have the opportunity to—influence the decisions that affect their lives. Greene elaborates:

Justice . . . is incarnated in human action in spaces where people live together. Most of us would agree that there should be an equitable, a fair distribution of goods and services . . . , and, surely, people

ought not to be used for others' benefit, certainly not without being consulted. Indeed, one of the requirements in a just society ought to be that everyone affected by a decision ought to have a part in making the decision. (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998, pp. xxviii–xxix)

At the core of a vision of democracy are the values of justice, equity, and citizen responsibility. In a true democracy, the core values of justice and equity are embodied in daily life. “Who gets what” would be determined through a political process involving participation among equals (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998) rather than by a system such as we have now in which all might *be able to participate*, but a few benefit from privileges that are denied to others.

Edelsky (1999) makes it clear that in order for students to envision these core values of democracy they must give attention to those forces that threaten democracy and “undermine the nature of the existing political system in the United States” (p. 9). The systems of domination that create the unequal social conditions we have now can be invisible if not consciously examined. Edelsky (1996) highlights Ira Shor’s important insight: “If we do not teach in opposition to the existing inequality of races, classes, and sexes, then we are teaching to support it. If we don’t teach critically against domination in society, then we allow dominant forces a free hand in school and out” (p. 3). As we began to think about the task of addressing issues with students, Edelsky’s (1994) three dimensions of engagement defined some of the kinds of activities that would be important:

1. Critique: a critical discussion of taken-for-granted issues and institutionalized decisions
2. Hope: learning from others who have successfully challenged undemocratic and unjust systems
3. Action: doing something to further a just society

The core value of citizen responsibility had significant implications for the content of the curriculum but even more implications for how the classroom would be run. We had a strong sense that democracy is built and maintained by its local citizens, so we wanted the students to have more opportunities to work together to make decisions in their own classroom. We began to see how the two faces of democratic education—“studying democracy” and “doing democracy”—would influence and strengthen each other. We also wanted students to know adults who question, who work to benefit others, and who strengthen democratic values. We would need to highlight these people in literature, in the news, and as citizens in the local community.

The Citizenship Potential of Twelve-Year-Olds

One might suppose that middle schoolers would prove poor subjects for engagement in selfless social concerns. Seventh graders tend to be at the same time obsessed with themselves and uneasy with themselves. They are often erratic and emotionally volatile in their changing social relationships. They are prone to hiding their own individuality from their peers, and they can be quick to ridicule others. Their developmental insecurities can sometimes intensify an intolerant stance toward people that they have absorbed uncritically from the culture around them. Our students were all of these things, yet, given the chance, they proved to be interested in the study of issues and values of a democratic society. They liked that it was “real,” they told us.

Our students were suburban, and few of them had experienced the massive frustrations and crises common to inner-city families. Their economic backgrounds ranged from working class to professional, for the most part, though many families had lived through tragedies and disruptions (and these touching stories entered Betty’s classroom through family inquiry projects). Our student population engaged with the realities of injustice primarily through life stories of others. These stories created in students empathy for other people and also allowed them to reflect on their own experiences of hurt, ranging from social isolation to child abuse. In other communities, where families live injustice daily, the students’ own lives would be a more central focus of their work (see Bernabei, 1996; Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, & Peterson, 1994; Edelsky, 1999). All groups of students have to shape their own particular journeys of inquiry through their own questions and concerns. There is no scope and sequence chart for this work.

Looking out at the world, the students tended to seesaw between knowing the score and believing in rosy stereotypes. They recognized some of the unfairness that exists “out there,” but the glittering world of television had made its impression on their life views. Poised at a time of growing awareness yet without having taken on responsibilities in society, they clung to the security of believing that opportunities exist for anyone. They expressed deeply empathetic feelings about individual life tragedies, but they wanted to think that everyone has a chance to succeed. Positive energy is one of middle schoolers’ pleasurable traits, but when a positive outlook on life is carried uncritically into adulthood, it produces citizens who, for instance, view homeless people as nuisances and who are heedless of the ways in which their own material benefits may have negative consequences for others. We aimed for a more critical and informed energy.

Taking a Proactive Stance

As teachers we do not have to accept passively whatever mix of appreciation or intolerance students bring to our classrooms. Although it is not easy, the daily routines of instruction and the content of the curriculum can be restructured to move students toward greater understanding and empathy for others. Maxine Greene (1995) states this vision of ethical growth as a kind of critical social imagination:

I am reaching toward an idea of imagination that brings an ethical concern to the fore, a concern that . . . has to do with the community that ought to be in the making, . . . visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools. (p. 5)

The students were far from realizing such a far-reaching vision, but we could see that certain texts caught their imagination through the high drama of real life struggles, and some students did reach toward a vision of a different life. Betty shared her own compassion for others and worked to make the classroom a safe place for explorations of social difference and conflict (Meier, 1995). She encouraged students to speak up from and for their emerging convictions and made some progress (though not as much as she would have liked) to break through the school walls to the community outside.

Rethinking Reader Response and Literature Choices

Literature was the starting place for student exploration of society. A broad definition of the term “literature” (and in fact “texts” may be a better term) includes not only high-quality fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction, but also magazines, newspapers, speeches, documents, interviews, and other texts that bring to students the lives of other people and the conditions that affect these lives.

We knew that the current level of exposure of students to social issues in our school was not enough. Betty overheard students reacting to current and historical events with trite sound bites, applying sitcom views of life to the struggles of citizens. Published research on social studies instruction confirmed Betty’s experience. Studies find that students tend to make limited representations and broad, vague inferences as they attempt to make sense of history. Supplying improved texts or providing background information before reading standard texts is not sufficient to make history come alive for students. After reviewing this research, McKeown and Beck (1994) call for “more powerful enhancements of learning” (pp. 20–24) that provide compelling narratives of history and extended opportunities to inquire, reflect, and construct understandings.

It was not our intent to “teach” democratic values through teacher presentations. Our intention was—and has continued to be—to expose students to as fine an array of diverse, authentic, and humane voices as we could find and to support student responses to those voices. Betty’s role was to collect more socially conscious literature and to push the students to probe more deeply into an issue, not to teach them the ideas we were committed to. We believed we could depend on the texts and the voices of our democracy to do that job.

Laura Apol (1998, p.33) provides insight about our profession’s over-emphasis on the processes of literature response, noting that we have been so intent on creating meaningful connections between students’ lives and the literature they read that we have unwittingly fallen into the trap of thinking that the reader’s response is the *end* of the reading process rather than the *means* to cultural understandings. Too much attention has been paid to how readers act on texts to the exclusion of how texts act on readers.

Applebee (1993) similarly cautions against too much emphasis on the students’ response but points out that the response can be a starting point for cultural conversations. Students can then examine the social contexts of the texts and how the author is socially situated. Readers can look *at* the text and also *beyond* the text, constructing interpretations as a means of entering into larger cultural conversations. Conversations about the cultural implications of students’ reading can create a place for their emerging thoughts, a place safe from teacher correction and peer criticism.

Betty’s greatest asset was the wealth of new young adult literature that brings to the classroom a richness of voices not previously available to students. Voices of the disenfranchised—from the fields, the ghettos, and the welfare hotels—spoke to the students through firsthand accounts and well-structured fiction.

The Competencies of Democratic Citizenship

What are the competencies that enable citizens to work together, to protest wrongs, to rethink and rebuild their democracy when needed? As Maxine Greene points out, “More is required than indignant or empathetic responses to what may be discovered in the world around, once people’s eyes are opened.” (p. xxx). We were pleased to discover that many of the competencies laid out in our new state language arts standards were also competencies of citizenship—investigation, critical judgment, collaboration and negotiation, and a public voice. Our new, socially conscious curriculum could be built on the core seventh-grade requirements. It could make use of, but extend beyond, the standard literature anthology and personal writing topics into texts and topics that were more issues oriented.

David Bloome (1993) agrees that there is a close connection between democracy and literacy. But teaching students how to read and write does not necessarily help them learn how to use reading and writing for democracy. Bloome asks teachers to consider the question, “What are the genres of writing needed for participation in a democracy?” Given this consideration, nonfiction and persuasive genres would be more prominent, and the oral communication of investigation, negotiation, and persuasion would not only be more prominent but also more authentically linked to social purposes. As we continued to think about this issue, we added to our vision other essentials of democratic citizenship such as respect for diverse points of view, initiative, experience with a democratic environment, and the confidence to put into practice new ideas.

Classroom Life

William Ayers helped us look carefully at the life of the classroom. Studying democracy, he believes, inevitably integrates itself with doing democracy. He points out that to learn about social justice, students must live in an environment that is abundant with opportunities to practice social justice (Ayers, Hunt, & Quinn, 1998, p. xxv). Although students in Betty’s classroom often had choices in writing topics, choices in personal literature responses, and choices about whether to work by themselves or in a group, we knew that their classroom life was far from embodying responsible citizenship and shared decision making. And certainly it was very far from the vision of a just society in which those affected by a decision have a part in making that decision. Schools are quite unjust societies when viewed through such a lens, but established conventions cannot be changed overnight. The slow steps Betty took toward changing the classroom into a more democratic community are described in Chapter 3.

Researching the Emerging Curriculum

We knew it was important to study what happened as Betty opened up the curriculum for students’ questions about society, and we knew we would have to find ways to fit the research into our already full schedules. Neither of us had released time to do research. Beverly came to visit Betty’s classes from time to time, and we talked through curriculum plans and student work on a regular basis, usually each week. Sometimes during the several years of this work, we systematically examined classroom data, and at other times Betty saved evidence of student inquiry for later review—photocopies of journal entries and other written work, audiotapes of discussions, notes on interviews. We kept our separate journals. Periodically,

we went through these data to see what we thought was happening. One year we tracked how student questions changed during a unit of study and how they led to new learning or projects (Busching & Slesinger, 1995).

We formulated questions to guide our study. At the beginning, these were our questions:

How would the integration of factual and fictional texts change how the students read literature?

What questions would they raise, and in what contexts?

Would the curriculum activate biased attitudes, or would students move to a larger human sense of the world? (We especially worried that the World War II unit would create prejudice toward Germans.)

How would parents react to their children discussing controversial issues in the classroom?

When Betty began making changes in the curriculum, she was still teaching five classes of either reading or language arts each day. Some, but not all, of the students were in both reading and language arts. She was able to accomplish more, especially to expand student decision making, when she taught fewer students in a block schedule the next year. Student work from several different years is included in this book.

As we reflected on the students' work during the first year, we made many of the major discoveries that still guide our work. Perhaps the most important discovery was that students need opportunities to return again and again to a topic in order to go beyond their initial, generalized emotional reactions to a level of (somewhat) informed analysis. Integrating factual texts with fiction is a powerful stimulus for the kind of active inquiry that leads students to rethink a topic more analytically. The curriculum model used in planning experiences to encourage students to engage with and rethink social issues is described in the following section.

Units of Study: A Model of Immersion in Socially Conscious Inquiry

Our approach to planning a unit for student engagement with social issues was not to create a predetermined sequence of teacher-created thinking activities. Rather than stimulating students' thinking, this teacher package approach too often interferes with students' ability to think for themselves. Nevertheless, some kind of planned curriculum structure is necessary in order to manage a middle school program that integrates language arts objectives with student initiative in a full day of classes.

Instead, we used a model of topic immersion through inquiry—a plan for sustained student engagement in a variety of reading, writing, listening, viewing, and talking activities that immersed them in the topic from a variety of perspectives over a long stretch of time (Short & Burke, 1991). We started with broad topics rather than teacher-created themes. A topic such as World War II offers multiple themes that raise questions about individual courage, despair, and suffering, and about patriotism, social control, and international relations. In this model, a *topic* is not a *theme*. When compelling literature is forced into theme units, the predetermined theme may close off the potential wealth of diverse connections as students engage their life experiences and beliefs with the text. Thus, the value of literature may be diminished when a theme is predetermined (Christenbury, 1994).

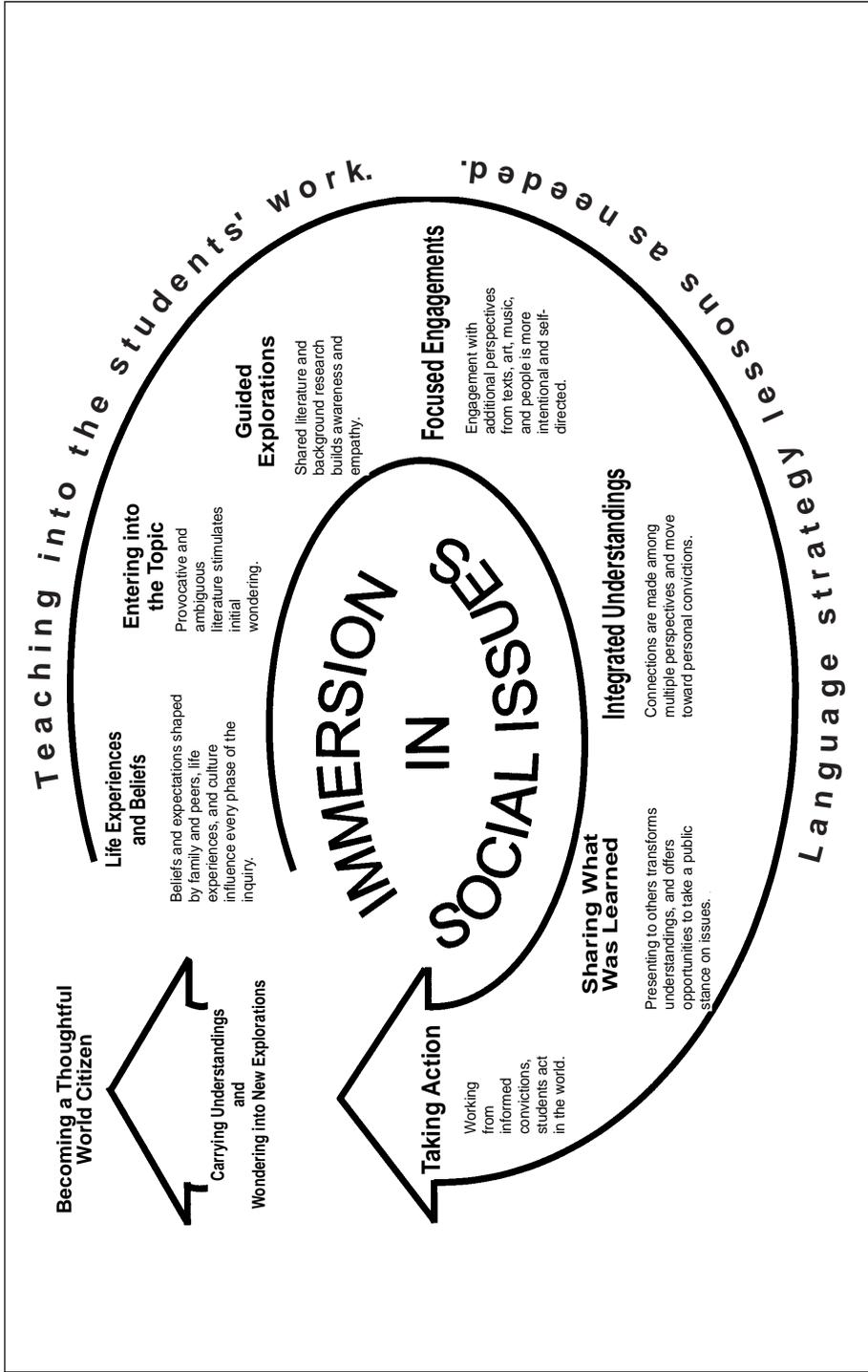
The two extended units of inquiry described in detail in Chapters 2 and 5 were both organized around topics from historical periods of social upheaval. These long units (and others during the year), along with many opportunities to return again and again to important issues, provided opportunities for the slow accumulation of awareness and understanding during the entire year. We have come to believe that unless we provide students with repeated opportunities to dig at complex issues, we will not discover students' potential to understand how society works. No one lesson, or even one unit, is sufficient.

Betty worked hard to prepare each unit but did not create a day-by-day plan. Using a rich collection of texts, other resources, and activities allowed for teacher flexibility as the unit unfolded. Betty could respond to student needs as they appeared. The grade-level language arts objectives were reviewed for appropriate tie-ins. The “launch,” the initial activity, was carefully planned in advance to capture students' imagination. Although the unit was ongoing, Betty's daily and weekly planning became an interplay between prepared ideas and fluid responses to emerging student needs, interests, and suggestions. Betty built on her understanding of where students were, thinking through what the next step should be. In this way, a unit was neither preplanned nor unplanned.

Phases of Learning in a Unit of Socially Conscious Inquiry

The unit model offered in Figure 1.1 is based on multiple opportunities for the development of student understanding as students cycle back into a topic again and again through different perspectives, different materials, and different sign systems. We have been strongly influenced by the work of Short, Harste, and Burke (1996). Students benefit from certain types

Figure 1.1. A model of immersion in social issues through inquiry in units of study. Adapted from the inquiry model in Short, Harste, and Burke (1996).



of activities as they enter into a topic and from other kinds of assignments and activities as they stay with the topic over a long stretch of time. To some extent, this is a sequential model of teacher planning, as it reflects predictable patterns of learning, but it is also recursive in that students cycle back to earlier modes of thinking as they move forward toward deeper understandings. The dimensions of the model are described in the following list.

Life experiences and beliefs. All phases of the students' inquiry are shaped by their individual perspectives. They enter the inquiry with certain beliefs, expectations, and attitudes that have been shaped by their life experiences, by their family and peer interactions, and certainly by their experiences as a member of a culture. But this inquiry is not just a matter of prior knowledge; it is a matter of interaction between the texts and the background brought to it. Not only do students' experiences with people influence their interpretations of characters in literature, but also their encounters with characters in literature influence their interpretations of real people and how any encounter with people is played out (Apol, 1998). At each phase of inquiry, there is the potential for reinforcement of these beliefs and also potential for change, renegotiation, and transformation.

Entering the topic and guided explorations. Curiosity is aroused by new experiences that challenge or stretch current views of the world. A compelling but puzzling short text or video raises questions and pulls students into the study of the topic, which is usually a historical era or contemporary issue. Once students care about the lives of the people involved and raise their own questions, they are launched into exploring the topic. The students' questions lead to a teacher-guided informational search. The enthusiasm and curiosity of the most assertive students feed the less involved as students begin to gather pieces of background information. Each student's small piece of research is shared with the rest of the class in an authentically purposeful manner.

Teacher-selected whole class readings or the beginning chapters of a core novel bring more stories of the period into the classroom, as fact and fiction work together to weave an empathetic understanding of the people whose lives are part of history. In this phase, a foundation of shared experiences is laid for later, more broadly conceptual and individual thinking. Students build from the "known" in their inquiry, but now what is known is greatly expanded through student inquiry. When heartfelt questions about society are raised,

students will continue to find answers in many places. In this phase, the teacher is active in providing instruction in active reading, genre study, and inquiry processes.

Focused engagements. Now, as a community of inquirers with a shared base of understanding and literary experiences, the students expand their views of the world and perhaps venture into new cultural territories. Students begin to create their own journeys of inquiry through self-selected novels in literature study groups. Teachers plan an array of book choices, making sure that the voices of marginalized peoples are heard through firsthand accounts and interviews.

Poetry, short stories, videos, and music provide opportunities to view the topic through multiple literacies. What can be learned by looking at pictures of the bombed remains of Dresden? How does World War II look through the eyes of Picasso? How do the photographs of bombed European cities or English airfields look different after students have seen through Picasso's eyes? Students stretch their interpretations as they respond to poetry, art, and music.

Visiting experts bring different systems of knowledge and investigation, such as history, anthropology, or family counseling, to bear on the subject. Social studies classes might support the students' inquiry with lessons on geographical and historical background, current events, or civics. Literature response journals and writer's notebooks, class discussions, and quickwrites create spaces for dialogue (Jennings, O'Keefe, & Shamlin, 1999). Informal sharing introduces more perspectives into the classroom and allows students to test their assumptions and opinions in the arena of their peers. New questions arise that probe more deeply into issues. Contrasts and anomalies among the different sources of information stimulate new levels of insight.

Integrated understandings. Students make connections between the separate pieces and layers of information, images, stories, and feelings they have gathered. Creating poetry, visuals, charts, and scenarios; holding debates; prioritizing sessions; and other activities that require the integration of perspectives assist this process. Students analyze, challenge, and integrate their understandings. Many students are working from strong convictions and raise critical questions about the past and the future.

Sharing what was learned. Students have the opportunity to share their understandings and convictions with public audiences, in and

out of the school. The process of creating finished reports, plays, stories, essays, bound books, and speeches adds further layers of understanding and integrated thinking. Students create strong bonds with each other as they share the results of their extensive work. Making their compassionate feelings about society public is a more emotional process than merely giving a factual report. Choices in the mode of communication give ownership and authority to the students.

Taking action in the world. Students' concern about issues may stimulate the desire to act on their concern. When students have strong convictions about injustice, opportunities to take some kind of action may prevent them from becoming cynical or apathetic. Students can write or speak to those in authority, or find ways to contribute their own efforts. With adult support, students can experience the satisfaction of making productive contributions to society. Service learning projects, student-initiated projects that arise spontaneously from their concerns, and letters to the editor are all valuable ways for students to take action. Students may interact with local adults in a variety of ways so they can better understand and appreciate how groups of citizens work together for social good.

Carrying understandings and wondering into new units of study. Each inquiry unit during the year adds its own layer of questions, concerns, and understandings and leads students into the next encounter, which they approach with more appreciative eyes. Exposure to issues surrounding the Great Depression in the United States helps students see the implications of economic deprivation in Germany before World War II. Teachers can relax when students do not "get it" when they know that the issues of justice and injustice will be revisited throughout the year.

Becoming a thoughtful world citizen. Of course, we have not had a chance to watch the students as adult citizens, but we have learned that some of them were vocal in a protest against a banned rock group in high school, and others are still engaged in social issues work. The thoughtful comments they made at the end of seventh grade about themselves and about the world they would like to see gave us hope for their future. Clay, after hearing a Holocaust survivor at the state museum, wrote, "[This] story made me realize that I don't have it hard, because a lot of problems have been coming up in our family and I felt like I had it hard." Addy wrote that it "hurts to think that there were cruel enough people to torture another human

being the way that they did. Seeing that the United States didn't respond either makes me feel ashamed." Bert wrote about becoming the kind of citizen who might work to avoid devastating social crises: "We can learn from our mistakes or we can learn from history. We learned about the practice of senseless prejudice and changes that have slowly come. We learned about hard times that people pulled through. We learned from the lessons of history."

Parents and the Socially Conscious Curriculum

We were anxious about initiating a curriculum that invited students to take a critical stance toward their society given the conservative atmosphere of our southern city. Conservative opposition to concepts labeled "inquiry" and "whole language" was widespread. Conservative takeovers of school districts and a push for a phonics-based state curriculum were prominent forces at that time. School administrators warned teachers about controversial books and activities that appeared to oppose local religious values.

But the political opposition that we feared did not materialize. No parent complained about the controversial topics or critical perspectives, although some complained about the "too much work" that an inquiry curriculum requires of students. We found that some parents shared our sense of regret that public school avoids social realities, and Betty received very welcome reassurance from these parents, who thanked her for what she was doing.

Why, in the thick of conservative pressures, was this curriculum unchallenged? We can guess at several reasons. At the beginning of the year, the students explored their own family origins in an autobiographical study and wrote about the people and activities of their family at home and at church. These projects were presented in an evening celebration, and parents saw their own family values—expressed in religion, acts of courage and togetherness, humorous and happy times—being valued by the school. Betty also invited parents that she knew would have concerns to preview controversial books, and she honored their reactions by making many choices available to students. She communicated frequently through informal newsletters and was available for conferences.

Furthermore, critical perspectives entered the classroom through students' responses to literature, their research, and their interpretations of the media. Betty did not "teach" her critical stance. She emphasized to students the importance of respecting one another's beliefs and then encouraged them to share with each other freely. The more conservative students heard critical, or controversial, stances through the voices of other students

rather than through the single voice of the teacher.

Competencies of citizenship, such as the responsibility to have an informed voice and to care for and collaborate with others, were valued by us and parents alike. This emphasis was another possible reason why parents tolerated this curriculum. As they saw their children growing more responsible, perhaps they overlooked aspects of the curriculum that made them uneasy.

When we started, we didn't realize that within students' families are enormous resources for strengthening democratic values. Relatives who lived through World War II, for example, had reflective thoughts about the costs of war and the damage to people of military conflict. Leah wrote about her grandmother as part of her portfolio at the end of the year: "The most important thing I think she ever said was, 'I think the government should govern not rule, that money should not be power, and that all people should have a chance.' . . . I think that should be in one of those famous quote books." So do we.

Inquiry into Issues throughout the Year

The students' cumulative exposure to social issues during successive inquiry units throughout the year gave them time to grow into the essential roles of active citizens—being able to question, assess, and critique; being able to gather knowledge competently; being able to make informed judgments; being able to speak out in a voice of commitment; being able to work for change (Busching & Slesinger, 1999). Students brought an increasingly stronger information base and a more focused sense of direction to the later units. They also, appropriately, took more and more control of their learning tasks. The major inquiry units during one year were:

Memoir and autobiography genre study: *Many Cultures, Many Voices*
(combined with *Growing into Me* autobiography project)

Media Watch
(combined with connections to nonprofit organizations)

Novel study of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor)
(combined with *Depression: Then and Now* unit)

Novel study of *When the Stars Begin to Fall* (Collier)
(combined with environmental issues and activities)

Multigenre study of World War II

Of course, inquiry into social issues was not the only focus of the curriculum. Middle school is a busy, complicated place with diverse demands and requirements. Literature offers a scope too broad to be limited

to social issues units. The students also read a multitude of stories and plays, did a poetry genre study and a unit on mysteries, told scary legends and tales at Halloween, practiced for standardized tests, and worked on standard vocabulary exercises.

Betty was excited when she found students extending insights from their social inquiry to other work. One year at Christmas time, students in the advanced class reading an excerpt of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* in their literature book noticed the social context as much as the personal messages of the story. Andrew wrote in his opinion essay, "During the time of Charles Dickens people were not doing very good in terms of being wealthy and often had poor living space. It was almost like the depression time of London. Most kids were working [in] factories to get their families and themselves by." Keith came back from eighth grade one day in the spring to borrow Betty's materials on child labor for a persuasive speech he had been assigned. He still was concerned that children today were made to work against their will, and he heard from friends that Betty had "some new stuff."

Ending Thoughts

As we sat in Beverly's living room one evening thinking about this chapter, news came on the radio of a new outbreak of hostility in Israel. As we listened, Betty remembered Heather's interview of her great uncle Harold. Heather learned that the European war was in all the newspapers, on the radio, and in adult conversations when Germany was invading European countries. When Harold was in high school and the United States entered the conflict, the war came home to Americans. Frightened and confused, the boys knew they would have to face this terrible unknown. Harold and his best friend talked together privately about their fears. He remembered that his friend said, "If I go, I'll never come back." But even though students faced immediate involvement and possible death in the war, there was no discussion of it in his school. Heather closed her interview with the statement that wars are not necessary but that they will continue until we do something about it. She asked of us that we *do* talk about war in schools and that we find new ways to get along with people of other nations.

Just as the kids were changing because of their inquiry, we were changing because of our inquiry. That evening, because of Heather and the other students, we listened to the radio not just to learn about a far-away event. It seemed close to home, and we wondered how we could bring the issues into the classroom.

Students do not know the cost to their ancestors of the freedoms the students now enjoy unless we teach them. They will not care enough to preserve the rights and freedoms they have today unless they engage with the society in which they reside. Although the law says there can be no discrimination, it insidiously permeates our lives every day. Many young people naively believe these civil rights issues have been settled. As adults we do not need to perpetuate half-truths about the issues of equity in our country. Adults who don't choose to acknowledge the underlying animosity and unfairness that are part of their daily lives prevent students from developing a concerned and caring stance. The many families who are faced with personal and economic hardships might find unexpected resources by inviting their children to understand those concerns. We wish that more adults could have an experience like ours, a chance to see the worth and potential in young people. It might change their image of teens and encourage communities to offer teens significant roles in our society.

Additional Readings for Teachers

Social Issues and Education

- Allen, J. (Ed.). (1999). *Class actions: Teaching for social justice in elementary and middle school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Comber, B., & Simpson, A. (Eds.). (2001). *Negotiating critical literacies in classrooms*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Nieto, S. (1999). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Noya, G. C., Geismar, K., & Nicoleau, G. (Eds.). (1995). *Shifting histories: Transforming education for social change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review.
- Routman, R. (1996). *Literacy at the crossroads*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Teaching Social Inquiry

- Bigelow, B., Christensen, L., Karp, S., Miner, B., & Peterson, P. (Eds.). (1994). *Rethinking our classrooms: Teaching for equity and justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- Christensen, L. (2000). *Reading, writing, and rising up: Teaching about social justice and the power of the written word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
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- Danks, C., & Rabinsky, L. B. (Eds.). (1999). *Teaching for a tolerant world: Grades 9–12*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Edinger, M., & Fins, S. (1998). *Far away and long ago: Young historians in the classroom*. York, ME: Stenhouse.
- Gamberg, R., Kwak, W., Hutchings, M., & Altheim, J. (1988). *Learning and loving it: Theme studies in the classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Harvey, S. (1998). *Nonfiction matters: Reading, writing, and research in grades 3–8*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- Makler, A., & Hubbard, R. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Teaching for justice in the social studies classroom: Millions of intricate moves*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Short, K., & Burke, C. (1991). *Creating curriculum: Teachers and students as community of learners*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Totten, S., & Pedersen, J. (1997). *Social issues and service at the middle level*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Centers and Web Sites

Center for Teaching for Social Justice

This center at the University of California, Santa Barbara School of Education is dedicated to providing resources for the teaching of social justice in K–12 educational settings.

<http://www.education.ucsb.edu/socialjustice>

Rethinking Schools

A cooperative of teachers dedicated to discussing issues and providing resources for equity and justice in schools. Publishes the journal *Rethinking Schools* and other useful materials.

<http://www.rethinkingschools.org>

Social Issues Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1978–2001.

Writing from the critical perspective of constitutional rights, teachers have posted units for students on a wide variety of topics.

<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/>

Southern Poverty Law Center

Publishes *Teaching Tolerance*, a free magazine for teachers, and produces videos and teaching materials on historical and current incidents and issues of racial violence and hatred. The Web site is planned as an online community for resources and sharing of ideas.

<http://www.teachingtolerance.org>

Materials for Teachers

Checklist for Social Inquiry Unit Planning

Does your unit plan:

- address themes and issues related to enduring human values?
 - provide a framework to meet requirements in existing, required curricula?
 - provide opportunities for students to become active learners?
 - create opportunities to work with peers and share learning?
 - promote questioning?
 - require student research and information gathering?
 - offer connections between school and life, including local issues, so that students may become active in the school and community?
 - create a rich and deep context for learning through diverse and trustworthy resources?
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