Justice is indiscriminately due to all, without regard to numbers, wealth, or rank.¹

With great interest, I read the afterward of the re-released biography *Farewell to Manzanar*, just months after September 11, 2001. The authors comment that these attacks, seen by some as the Pearl Harbor of the twenty-first century, give *Farewell to Manzanar* a new timeliness.

The big difference, sixty years later, was the response of the media and the federal government. In 1942 the flames of racial blaming were fueled and fanned by radio broadcasters and major newspapers. The president of the United States signed the executive order authorizing the forced confinement of an entire ethnic group. . . . In 2001 the widely scattered threats and acts of reprisal against Arab Americans had no encouragement from national or local media nor any support from any level of government. Indeed, the president expressed strong disapproval of such behavior, as did the major networks and large metropolitan papers.²

The authors observe that this is a dramatic change, one clearly in the tenor of what it means to be a democratic nation. However, that early responses to September 11 moved us as a nation to consider all Arabs a threat, just as we did with the Japanese in 1943, means that we still have issues of justice to address. They remind us that we must never forget our history as we forge a future.

In particular, I strongly feel that educators cannot be silent. Educators have the opportunity and, I believe, the responsibility to help build a more just society.

One of the goals of our Constitution, explicitly stated, is to “establish justice.”³ Certainly, every human being deserves justice in all its forms, but just what exactly is justice? Is it equal access to food, clothing, shelter, and education, as well as love and a sense of belonging—which provide the foundation for a self-sufficient or fulfilling life? Is it “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” among which are “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as listed in our Declaration of Independence?⁴ Or is it defined by one of many current issues, as featured on the website, www.justicelearning.org, such as affirmative action, civil liberties in war, the death penalty, gun control, or juvenile justice?⁵ Is the concept of justice easier to understand than the practice of justice? I would argue that justice is indeed easier to define than to deliver, but defining it is no easy task either. Nevertheless, the first is necessary if we are to achieve the second—creating a more just world. Clearly, this is crucial to building our students’ civic competence, a major purpose of social studies programs.⁶ *Expectations of Excellence*, the standards set by NCSS, further elucidates this perspective:

As citizens of a democracy, we support our republic’s most important ideals: the common good, i.e., the general welfare of all individuals and groups within the community.

The common good is supported when all citizens become aware that the meaning and purpose of education in a democratic republic is the intellectual and ethical development of “student-citizens,” young people who will soon assume the role of citizen. Individuals must understand that their self-interest is dependent upon the well-being of others in the community. Attention to the common good means putting first things first. If educators address the ethical and intellectual habits of students, other priorities will be realized.⁷

So, as educators, how do we help our students first conceptualize justice and then live this understanding in community—specifically in schools, the world where our existence with students plays out?

Literature that honors, raises awareness of, and advocates for social justice may be just the means. It’s critical that in our classrooms we nurture a “just” perspective, both in word and deed. As *Expectations of Excellence* states:

Our moral imperative as educators is to see all children as precious and recognize that they will inherit a world of baffling complexity. Our responsibility is to respect and support the dignity of the individual, the health of the community, and the common good of all. This responsibility demands that we teach out students to recognize and respect the diversity that exists within the community.⁸

In our classrooms, students need the opportunity to practice problem solving with various real-life scenarios so that they can see how their actions help facilitate justice. Literature of all kinds—poetry, fiction, and nonfiction—can be the bridge, a kind...
of vicarious living, that demonstrate the consequences of both just and unjust acts.

Poetry may be the easiest kind of literature to include in an already crowded school program as the brevity of poems enables them to be read in their entirety and then discussed. Poetry also tends to make an emotional—rather than cognitive—connection. The poem “Optimistic Man,” by Nazim Hikmet, is one I have frequently used in my university classes to begin this topic, and it’s one my students say their own students find compelling.

**Optimistic Man**

as a child he never plucked the wings off flies
he didn’t tie tin cans to cats’ tails
or lock beetles in matchboxes
or stomp anthills
he grew up
and all those things were done to him
I was at his bedside when he died
he said read me a poem
about the sun and the sea
about nuclear reactors and satellites
about the greatness of humanity

Students of all ages find the specific, yet commonplace actions Hikmet describes as striking, visual images of injustice. This poem causes most students to reflect on and discuss injustices they have perpetrated, such as using a magnifying glass to focus the sun’s rays on an ant or teasing a dog with a treat never intended to be shared. As readers, we find ourselves guilty but are relieved when Hikmet reminds us of our collective potential for kindness. He writes of the splendors of the physical world, of human invention that has great potential for good, and of our own ability to use both natural resources and created ones for the benefit of all.

I have yet to use this poem and not have a student comment on the fact that Hikmet asks for a poem about the greatness of humanity, that he values words and ideas and doesn’t have room in his life for petty things. I’ve come to expect this insight and the hush that overcomes the room as students ponder that a man who has known injustices, unspecified as they might be, can still be an “optimistic man” and also find the ability to be reassuring to others. As educators, we must teach justice and act justly and we must advocate for the same within our schools.

**Justice is truth in action.**

Discussions on topics relating to justice are not always easy, especially when the topic concerns the absence of justice. Two of my students were particularly indignant after I had assigned Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War.* The novel is about high school student Jerry, who attends a Catholic boys school, and dares to “disturb the universe” by refusing to sell boxes of chocolate for the school fundraising project. The acting headmaster, Brother Leon, asks the leader of a secret group, The Vigils, to handle the matter in what turns out to be a very violent manner. My students questioned how the book could be a good example of justice when Jerry, who is basically the “good guy” of the novel, is brutally beaten up at the end. I pointed out that this is an example of “non-justice,” or injustice. I explained to my students that we can grow by recognizing the evil in Brother Leon’s plan, by analyzing how the school community—both teachers and students—‘bought’ into his plan, and by considering how that community allowed a group called “The Vigils” to even exist. “As readers and writers and thinkers, we can grow even if the characters in the novel do not,” I explained.

It is easier for students to see “justice is truth in action” in *To Kill a Mockingbird.* Students can read and discuss the actions of characters that highlight the best and worst of humanity. The integrity of lawyer Atticus Finch who, in early 1930s Alabama, defends a wrongly accused black man of raping a white girl, is apparent in contrast to the depravity of Bob Ewell, the deceitful accuser.
**We can best get justice by doing justice.**

The books listed in the section that follows highlight issues of justice. I chose them because they are relatively newly published and because they address a variety of topics and cultures. I also chose them because of the responses of my students. I teach both undergraduates in education and teachers working on additional licensure or degrees. But I also included these books because the warmth and compassion in the illustrations communicated a story of injustice, as in *When Marian Sang*. I chose *The Misfits*, for example, because I was impressed at the humanity exhibited by four seventh graders who called themselves the “gang of five” because they figured “there’s one more kid out there who’s going to need a gang to be part of.” I included other books because I don’t want my students to say, “I never knew that,” as I did when I first read some fifteen years ago in *Farewell to Manzanar* about the Japanese internment camps during World War II.

In the next section are more than a dozen books that address the topic of justice. They are categorized by genre and/or format: picture book biographies, nonfiction, contemporary picture books, historical novels, contemporary novels, and books of poetry. After the bibliographic listing, a brief description of each text is provided, after which an idea for exploring some aspect of justice is suggested.

While the book descriptions were written with a teacher-reader in mind, the writing activities were written with a student-reader in mind so that teachers could easily assign them to students. Though each writing idea was tailored to the specific book mentioned, the ideas are flexible and could work with many other books.

While teachers can use a single book at any point in the curriculum, combining several books can easily create “mini-units” focusing on justice in particular times or cultures. A unit on World War II, for example, could include: *The Yellow Star; Passage to Freedom; Remembering Manzanar; Farewell to Manzanar; We Were There, Too! Young People in U.S. History; and Number the Stars*. Such a unit would include two picture book biographies, three informational books, and an historical novel.

A unit that highlights African American culture might include *When Marian Sang, Mr. Lincoln’s Way, and Speed of Light*. This unit would contain a picture book biography, a contemporary picture book, and an historical novel. A unit that highlights Latino issues might include *Esperanza Rising* and *Felita*. In a middle grades class, more accomplished readers could tackle *Esperanza Rising* while less accomplished readers could read *Felita*. Or, younger middle grade students could read *Felita* while the teacher read *Esperanza Rising* aloud. *Young People in U.S. History* could also be included in either of these last two mini-units; its anthology-like nature lends itself well to many topics. A thematic unit called “Taking Action” might include *The Yellow Star, Passage to Freedom, Mr. Lincoln’s Way, Number the Stars, Speed of Light, Gracie’s Girl*, and *The Misfits*. In each of these books, the protagonist does something to combat injustice. While middle grade and high school teachers could use the full range of suggested texts, primary teachers might want to focus on the picture book biographies and contemporary picture books.

No matter what grade, teachers across the country are required to teach to “standards,” district, state, or national ones, sometimes all three. At whatever level, curriculum guides focus on students’ ability to comprehend when they read, to analyze what they read, and then to respond to literature in appropriate ways. Reading and writing standards can easily be addressed through these texts.

While any combination of these books would be appropriate for a thematic unit on justice, their strength will come in using them—and others like them—throughout the curriculum, imbedded in other topics so that the issue of justice is an ongoing conversation and evolves into action-plans and actions, a just classroom which will, in turn, nurture a more just world.

**The first reward of justice is the consciousness that we are acting justly.**

**Picture Book Biographies**


This beautifully illustrated, over-sized picture book provides a thoughtfully detailed look at Marian Anderson’s life and at the discrimination she faced before the civil rights movement. The author’s and illustrator’s notes at the end of the book enhance its utility throughout high school grades.

**Writing Activity:** The dreams of Marian Anderson, who would eventually become a world-renowned operatic star, were continually thwarted when she was younger simply because of her skin color. Was this fair? What was it about Marian that enabled her to live out her dreams? Write a formal letter to her commending her for her accomplishments.


This brief text highlights the stories that surrounded King Christian X of Denmark during World War II. While the author’s note at the end informs the reader that there is no documentation that King Christian actually wore a Star of David or that he suggested all Danish citizens do so in an effort to protect Danish Jews, the author asks the reader, “What if King Christian had responded to Hitler’s horrific plan this way?” This provides a wonderful springboard for class discussion.

**Writing Activity:** During World War II, King Christian acted in just ways. What actions did he take that would result in that conclusion? Create a proclamation honoring this man. As with all proclamations, state explicitly what he did, that is, provide evidence of why he should be given this award. For further information about the Danish people’s resistance to Hitler, readers might want to consult *Darkness Over Denmark: The Danish Resistance and the Rescue of the Jews* by Ellen Levine (New York: Holiday House, 2000).
PASSAGE TO FREEDOM. Ken Mochizuki. Illustrated by Dom Lee (New York: Live Oak Media, 2001)

In another World War II story, Chiune Sugihara, Japanese consul in Lithuania, put himself and his family at risk by writing out visas for more than 2,500 Jews so that they could escape Hitler.

Writing Activity: Write a biographical sketch, highlighting the characteristics that make Sugihara truly noteworthy. For further information about Sugihara, readers might want to explore A Special Fate by Allison Gold (New York: Scholastic, 2000).

Nonfiction

REMEMBERING MANZANAR: LIFE IN A JAPANESE RELOCATION CAMP. Michael Cooper (New York: Clarion, 2002).

This informational book provides a comprehensive description of life in one of the internment camps during the last half of World War II. The photographs add depth and reality to this United States government act, which seems in direct opposition to the Constitution. Indeed, two-thirds of those sent to camps were United States citizens, whose parents were born in Japan.

Writing Activity: After reading this text, use the letters in Manzanar and create an acrostic poem, highlighting key features of life in a Japanese relocation camp. An acrostic poem is created by writing the letters in a word, in this case, “Manzanar,” vertically, writing one letter on each line. Then, a word or phrase is written which describes the topic, making sure to use the focal letter for each line. For example, the first line might be “Many years,” “Too much sorrow” or “Overwhelm,” as the examples reveal, the focal letter can be at the beginning, the middle, or even the end of the line.

FAREWELL TO MANZANAR. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002).

In this re-issued biography, published just after September 11, 2001, Wakatsuki Houston recounts her family’s life at Manzanar. This book provides a powerful vehicle for students to understand how this family’s civil liberties were compromised.

Writing Activity: Create a “fast fact” sheet, highlighting the conditions that Wakatsuki Houston, her family, and others of Japanese ancestry faced at the camp. Using this list, write an editorial, using these examples, to support reparations for all those who lived in the camps that go further than the 1988 settlement provided.


This oversized book, filled with illustrations and photographs, features sixty-seven portraits of young people who played a role in the making of this nation. The approach is an exciting one for middle and high school students who typically learn history written from an adult perspective. These portraits include viewpoints of young students.

Writing Activity: Peruse the book, selecting one of the persons portrayed. Which issues of justice did that person confront in his or her history-making role? Create a radio-script interview of this person, being sure to draw attention to the issues of justice.

Contemporary Picture Books


In terms of text, this book is the simplest in this annotated bibliography. Crayons explain to a young girl who buys them that they do not like one another; but when the girl uses all of the crayons to draw a picture, they come to appreciate that their differences are what give the illustration depth and richness.

Writing Activity: Using another allegory, with a different setting, recreate this story, maintaining the message.


Mr. Lincoln is the principal of an elementary school where everyone—except Eugene—thinks Mr. Lincoln is the absolute best. For no one else is Mr. Lincoln’s dark skin an issue. Mr. Lincoln’s understanding and unraveling of Eugene’s perspective is heartwarming.

Writing Activity: Who in your life, or in your reading life, exemplifies the spirit of Mr. Lincoln? Write a personal narrative explaining the impact of this person and his or her belief system on your life. Call it “Mr./Mrs./Ms. _____’s Way.”

Historical Novels


This Newbery award-winning novel is in part a Holocaust story because it involves Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, but it is set in Denmark and is largely a story about friendship and courage. While the content is suitable for students as young as fourth grade, eighth graders (as well as high school readers) will also find it a compelling read.

Writing Activity: Write a journal as if you were the character Annemarie, chronicling your experiences throughout this novel. Comment on whether specific actions are just or not.


Winner of the 2002 Pura Belpre Award, Esperanza Rising is a reverse Cinderella story. Esperanza was once the daughter of a wealthy ranch owner in Mexico. When her father dies, she and her mother are left with nothing simply because they are female, and so they immigrate to California with their former servants. Loosely based on Ryan’s grandmother’s life, this story is finely crafted and most memorable.
**Writing Activity:** Write a persuasive essay stating what the issues of justice are in this novel and the evidence you have that these issues are indeed central to the concept of justice.

**SPEED OF LIGHT.** Sybil Rosen (New York: Aladdin, 2002). In 1956, when Audrey's father champions the black security guard from his factory as the next town sheriff, Audrey learns that neither Jews nor blacks have much status in her small West Virginia town.

**Writing Activity:** Audrey makes an important speech in front of the local synagogue. If she had been allowed to attend the town meeting concerning the new sheriff, what might she have said? Write the speech you believe she would have delivered.

**Contemporary Novels**

**Felita. Nicholas Mohr. Illustrated by Ray Cruz (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1996).** This short chapter book set in New York City is well-suited for fourth graders who are ready for a book with more sophisticated content. Students should be prepared for some of the language, as characters do some name-calling, but overall it is a story of family and friendship.

**Writing Activity:** Friendships, by definition, should be just or fair relationships. What happens in this novel that challenges this concept? Write two friendly letters, one by Felita that explains how she is feeling and why such a reply as requested by Felita is possible or not possible.

**GRACIE'S GIRL. Ellen Wittlinger (New York: Aladdin, 2002).** Sixth grader Bess, just about to start middle school, is determined to be one of the “cool” kids, whatever it takes. Yet, her parents’ requirement that she help serve a meal at the homeless shelter changes her life. The mysteries of life—why some people end up without a job, why some end up homeless, why some end up without adequate food—become important questions for Bess, especially when she realizes that she can serve justice by her own actions. This book is perfect for schools with a service learning component in their curriculum or for those contemplating such an addition.

**Writing Activity:** Bess changes a great deal during the course of this story. Write Bess's résumé for both the beginning of the book and the end; be sure to name what job Bess might be applying for at the beginning of the text—and her qualifications, as well as what job she might be better suited for at the end of the text—and her new qualifications.

**The Misfits.** James Howe (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001). Four seventh graders take on the school—and win, an amazing story of justice. “Kids who get called the worst names oftentimes find each other. That's how it was with us. Skeeze Tookis and Addie Carle and Joe Bunch and me. We call ourselves the Gang of Five, but there are only four of us. We do it to keep people on their toes. Make 'em wonder. Or maybe we do it because we figure that there's one more kid out there who's going to need a gang to be part of. A misfit, like us.” (p. 13)

**Writing Activity:** Each of the misfits has a problem. As if you were an advice columnist, write an advice column that includes a question you think each “misfit” would ask and then answer it in a manner that supports justice.

**Poetry**

**The Flag of Childhood: Poems from the Middle East. Selected by Naomi Shihab Nye (New York: Aladdin, 2002).** An abridged version of The Space Between our Footsteps, Flag of Childhood still provides sixty poems from Palestine, Israel, Egypt, and Iraq. This important and timely treasure demonstrates the universality of feelings toward family, friends, and the world.

**Writing Activity:** In the introduction, Nye states, “We must remember that the one flag we all share is the beautiful flag of childhood that flies with hope in every country.” After reading this anthology, “agree and agree” or “agree and disagree,” using lines of various poems to support both stances; to do so, use the format of Joyful Noise by Paul Fleischman (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). In other words, write a “poem for two voices,” either agreeing with one another or not.

**Voices from the Alamo. Sherry Garland. Illustrated by Ronald Himler (Scholastic, 2000).** This book reveals the story of the land before the Alamo was built over several hundred years, a most fascinating way to present the history of a place. The variety of viewpoints makes the place far more engaging than one would expect.

**Writing Activity:** From each of the poems, choose the line you believe summarizes that perspective best and create a timeline chronicling the “life” of the Alamo. Put a star next to the voice for whom justice was least served and write a postscript under the timeline, explaining why.

**A Suitcase of Seaweed and Other Poems. Janet S. Wong (McElderry Books, 1996).** This anthology of poetry is divided into three parts to honor the Korean influence of Wong’s father, the Chinese influence of her mother, and her American-born self. In a country created by immigrants and still viewed by most of the world as a land of golden opportunity, this presentation of perspectives will be highly intriguing to most readers.

**Writing Activity:** After reading through this collection, choose the poem that speaks to you most clearly about the prejudice that Wong felt growing up. Write a poem of your own, sharing your own experience with prejudice.

**Notes**


7. Ibid., 6.

8. Ibid., 6.


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