

First Graders Research Stuffed Animals and Learn about Their World

Paula Rogovin

My first graders select their social studies research topics. The first day of school, I tell them that we will do research about the community. In September, they wanted to do research about vehicles, restaurants, stores, and buildings. In May, when Isaac suggested stuffed animals as a research topic, I added that to our list. I figured, stuffed animals, why not? They are certainly in our community. When the children voted, stuffed animal research had the most votes.

So do six-year-old children determine the curriculum? Yes, in part they do. At the level of the first grade, the social studies knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students should acquire can be taught and developed through a wide variety of topics, issues, and concerns. At The Manhattan New School, PS 290, I have the freedom to challenge the students—and myself—with learning about a new social studies topic, one that is of interest to the students. All through the year, we spend about four or five hours per week on social studies, focusing on a topic that six-year-old-children already have some awareness of.

Telling What We Already Know

We always start a class research project by talking about what we already know about the topic. That way, we learn who are our “class experts,” and where we should start our work. I often ask, “How do you know that?” This is my way of finding possible resources for our research, or where students learned information—or acquired their misinformation. On the topic of stuffed animals, most of the children had them at home and had lots to say about them.

Asking Questions

Next, we ask questions. Earlier in the year, when students asked questions about a research topic, I wrote them down, typed them on the computer, and returned them to the class as a handout or posting on the bulletin board. By May, students had the skills to write their questions on paper for themselves. I typed the students’ 62 questions about stuffed animals onto

one sheet of paper, then laminated and posted it. Here are just a few of those questions:

1. Do children make stuffed animals?
2. Is there child labor in making stuffed animals?
3. When were stuffed animals first made?
4. Is there a stuffed animal factory?
5. What are the machines called?
6. Do they use conveyor belts?
7. Do they make stuffed animals only in certain places and not everywhere?
8. How long do the workers stay at the factory?
9. Do stuffed animals get exported?
10. How do stuffed animals get stuffed?
11. Where do they get the materials to make stuffed animals?

The children knew from our prior research that their questions would be the basis of our inquiry. It is empowering to see that YOUR questions are important.

Devoting Classroom Time

Often in schools, children ask questions, but there is no time set aside to answer the questions. In my classroom, we hold a research workshop three mornings per week. The fourth morning, we usually schedule an interview related to our research. The subject of our interview could be a parent, a member of the school faculty or staff, or a community member from outside the school. We return regularly to our list of questions to assess which ones we have answered. Those that are still unanswered moved to the fore of our investigation.

Questions Simple and Complex

My students are no brighter than children in any other first grade classroom. However, when children are encouraged to ask questions from the first day of school, and have the opportunity to search for answers, they will ask more questions. Finding

ways to deal with their complex questions will bring forth even more thoughtful questions.

If you complement children for their questions, they will ask more questions. For example, the second day of school, when students asked questions about how elevators work and how bricks and windows were made, I said, “Those questions are too difficult, you’re only in first grade. Those are really college questions. I’m sorry, we can’t answer them.” As I had hoped, some of them “took the bait” and said, “Well, Paula, then we’re in college!” And so, we proceeded to tackle, in a first grade way, some huge questions.

The questions about stuffed animals were informed by our earlier research. Of course, students’ questions also were informed by family discussions and concerns and by world events that were being reported in the news. Thus, students’ questions expanded from basic inquiries about how things are constructed to where things are made, who makes them, what their lives are like, and what is our relationship to these people.

Finding Answers

It is vital to develop a list of ways that the class can find answers to students’ questions. In September, that list was short, but by May, the children thought beyond looking in books to learning from Internet sites and interviewing people who are knowledgeable on a topic. Having good sources of information is a critical aspect of research, as it enables children to continue asking questions and then use multiple methods to find answers. That skill will help children become informed citizens.

How could we get answers to our questions about stuffed animals? Here is a list that students came up with [with some notations by the teacher in brackets]:

1. Ask an expert [briefly]
2. Interview an expert [more at length]
3. Interview a baby [about the uses of a stuffed animal]
4. Ask our families
5. Look on websites
6. Look in books
7. Think really carefully
8. Have a trip to ask different people
9. Go to a stuffed animals factory
10. Look in poems or songs
11. Look at a DVD
12. Make stuffed animals in school or at home
13. Bring stuffed animals [to class] and observe them
14. Go to a toy store

The students included, in their list of “research methods” some activities that are more correctly categorized as demonstrations of what they have learned.

1. Do a play about stuffed animals
2. Do role-plays

3. Tell people about our research
4. Make our own factory

When children are making suggestions, however, I write down everything they say. The class performs some these activities during and toward the end of the investigation.

Practicing How to Do Research

Here are a few examples of skills and activities from research projects performed earlier in the year. In September, when we wanted to learn how bricks are made, we

- Learned to use the table of contents and indexes of books to help find answers
- Looked on websites
- Made small bricks and other objects from clay I dug up from my backyard and from store-bought clay
- Interviewed Ibrahim, a student’s father, who told us about the brick factory at the base of a hill in his native Turkey
- Interviewed a paraprofessional, Petrana Koutcheva, who used to make bricks for families in her small town in Bulgaria.
- Interviewed Pia, a student’s mother, an art historian who told us about art made in ancient India from clay from the Indus and Ganges Rivers, then told us about brick making in India where whole families work full time to make bricks.

In December, when we did our inquiry about chocolate, we

- Interviewed Principal Sharon Hill, who as a child made chocolate with her Grandma Dada in Jamaica on Sunday mornings
- Interviewed Ernsta Jerome, an assistant teacher from Haiti, who sometimes made chocolate on weekends with her family.
- Interviewed a former class parent who answered our questions about chocolate, nutrition, and health
- Used books and websites to get background information
- Chopped cacao beans
- Ate chocolate with different percentages of cacao
- Made a model cacao tree
- Read information on wrappers of chocolate

Planning Activities

At the beginning of an investigation, after looking over the list of questions, I think about which questions to work on right away. We want to accumulate a set of useful resources at the outset. I also think about how to approach some of the more difficult or complex questions in a week or two.

One of the best ways to get resources is to tell the students’

families and friends about our project. My colleagues in the school often have great leads. Every week, I prepare a “Family Homework Sheet” to inform families about what we are doing in each curriculum area and about our research. It invites family members to participate in many ways: to extend our research into their homes, to help us look for sources of information, and to help us find people to interview or trips to take related to our research. It also includes some homework, which consists of brief activities for parents and students to do together that will reinforce classroom learning.

Interdisciplinary Learning

Our planning is interdisciplinary. In conversations with teachers, we think of ways to bring reading and literature, writing, math, science, art, music, and drama into our investigations and summative activities. We think of ways to make the learning hands-on, active, and even fun. We think of multiple ways to involve family members and people in the school community. We find ways to make topics or resources accessible to young children. We find ways to make the topic multi-cultural—through the people we interview, trips we take, books we use, and photos or websites we view.

With this kind of inquiry, the teacher can’t write or follow a precise script. Because we are basing our inquiry on the children’s questions and the available resources, our planning must be flexible.

Thinking about Social Action

All along, as we plan, as we do the research, we think about possibilities for social action. Young children are passionate about justice and injustice. It is essential that we help them find constructive ways to be proactive to combat injustice at school and in the world. For example, when Viviana’s mother, Pia, told us about the children who make bricks in India, my students were angry and decided to write a play about child labor in brick making in India so we could teach other children in our school.



When we learned that most chocolate in the United States was made from cacao produced in the Ivory Coast where children often work long hours under difficult and dangerous

conditions, my students were unhappy. They said that wasn’t fair. We thought about what all children should be able to do—go to school, play, and live with their families. They insisted on finding ways to end child labor.

After we learned about Fair Trade chocolate, which is produced by adults under much better working conditions, a parent helped us make a newspaper about Fair Trade chocolate. Children wrote letters asking Hershey Company to use Fair Trade chocolate, and we received some replies. Families helped us with a Fair Trade sale. Nearly 600 children came to our sale and participated in discussions about Fair Trade chocolate. We contributed the money we raised to the National Labor Committee. When young children see that they can do something to make this a better world, being an involved citizen can become a way of life.

Where Are Our Stuffed Animals Made?

In May, when we began with the questions about where our stuffed animals were made, we had a daily “parade” of stuffed animals that students brought from home. Most stuffed animals have a label that displays the name of the country where they were made. As each child found that information on the label, I put a sticker on our huge map of the world.

Day after day, child after child, we read the labels, and nearly every sticker was placed on China! After two weeks, there was no more room within the borders of China for stickers, so we placed stars on top of stickers. Most elementary school math programs deal with surveys. Placing stickers on a map made our survey experience more relevant to us than a typical first grade survey of favorite colors or TV shows. When a math survey is connected to an inquiry activity, it gets students thinking critically and asking more questions. It was a mystery to the children why so many stuffed animals were made in China. We formed some hypotheses, and then thought of ways that we might find some answers. But first, we had some lab work to do.

What Are Our Stuffed Animals Made From?

We did “surgery” on the teacher’s teddy bear. We saw the polyester stuffing, but, to our surprise, we found a small bag of tiny plastic pellets inside, which gave the teddy a “beanie” feeling. On the label, we read, “polyester stuffing and plastic pellets.” After making these discoveries, I sewed the bear back up.

We did a survey about stuffing materials as describe on labels. On a chart, we made tally marks for those animals that contained polyester, polyester and pellets, or other materials. All of our animals had polyester inside. A few also had pellets. We discussed and posted that survey.

How Do People Make Stuffed Animals?

Lynnanne Kelly’s daughter had been in my first grade class six years earlier. Lynnanne conducted a stuffed animal lunch club with other adults. She agreed to work with parent volunteers to help students make their own small mice. Lynnanne cut the felt, threaded the needles, and prepared sets of eyes at home. As we interviewed Lynnanne, we kept hearing homophones—words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. The children had grown fond of homophones, as they can



A Gambian child worker carries dust out of a pit (2010).

be really funny. So we made a list: I and eye (of the needle or the animal); sew and so; all and awl (a tool for putting in the eyes); nose and knows; and so on. There were shouts of joy when children got to the point where they put the stuffing in! They had created their own stuffed animal! In the process, we had answered several research questions about how things are made and manufactured.

The next week, those homophones were in the Family Homework packet, along with poems that had lots of homophones. At home, children recited the poems, and circled the homophones, then (with parental help) wrote sentences using

some of the “stuffed animal homophones.”

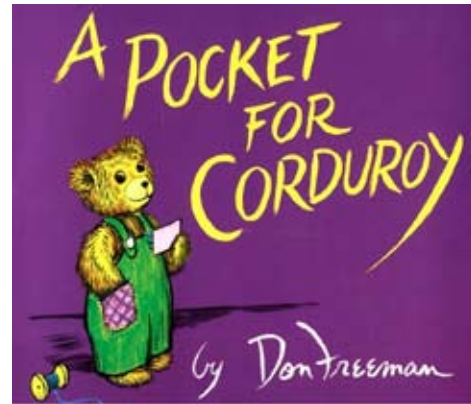
To conclude this section of the project, I read aloud two of Don Freeman’s books, *Corduroy* and *A Pocket for Corduroy*.¹ Then I invited the students to take turns telling stories about their own stuffed animals.

Why is China the Source of Stuffed Animals?

This is a huge question, one that might be tackled by a high school or college class. At home, I worked hard to figure out a way for first graders to understand this issue. I found no age-appropriate books about this. While searching for information on the Internet, I found an interview by journalist Amy Goodman on the radio program Democracy NOW! with Charles Kernaghan from the National Labor Committee. Charles spoke about a factory in China where Barbie Doctor Pet Shop stuffed animals were made. Perfect! My previous classes and I had worked with Charles Kernaghan, who has dedicated his life to working to end sweatshops and child labor.

At the Barbie factory, people worked 16 or more hours a day, six or seven days a week. Workers who looked at or complained to the boss were fined or fired. Most of the workers were teenage girls and young women who lived in dormitories far away from their families.

My students thought about their school day and imagined that they would have to work until at least eleven o’clock at night, sometimes with no weekend to relax. We read relevant parts of the radio interview and did role-plays, stopping often to discuss the action and dialog and then take notes in research journals.



After we learned that workers at that factory made fifty-three cents per hour, I told the children about a toy factory that I recalled from my childhood in Buffalo, New York. Workers had earned several dollars per hour before that company moved to China. We looked at real money and figured out one big reason why some companies had moved: factory workers in China are usually paid less than similar workers in the United States.

A Telephone Interview

These role-plays and discussions raised even more questions and concerns. The children wanted to speak directly to Charles Kernaghan, who works in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Since he was not available at the time, we interviewed his co-worker, Barbara Briggs over the phone. Students discussed and wrote down questions ahead of time. We had the cell phone on speaker so all could hear Barbara answer our many questions. It was June, and children could now take running notes in the steno pads, what we call our “Interview Journals,” as they listened to the interview over the speakers.

One of the best questions a child asked was, “How do you know so much about this?” Barbara told the students that finding out what goes on inside a factory is sometimes hard to do. The owners may not let people from outside groups go into the factory to see what is happening. But, she said, many of the workers are so upset about the working conditions that they make movies with their cellphones, as described by David Barboza in the *New York Times*.² One of the children brought that article to school.

Writing about the Radio interview

After an interview, children write and draw a picture for a homemade book. A few weeks later, we use the book for word study during a reading workshop. Students predict which words they might find in a typical homemade book. For example, one student predicted that we would see the word “phone,” because we called on a phone. I wrote “phone” on the Smartboard, and students wrote that word in their reading journals. Then, we

thought of other words that include the word “phone,” such as microphone, telephone, cellphone, xylophone, and more. We tried to figure out what the root word “phone” meant when it was part of a larger word. After lots of guesses, students instructed me to look in the dictionary to find both the meaning and the origin of phone. At the end of the day, students took their books home to read to their families.

Social Action

In our first grade class, some form of social action nearly always evolves from our social studies research. Trying to find ways to help alleviate a problem empowers children and gives them hope. Of course, you can’t deal with every issue that comes up during class. Social action can be doing something small or something big. Actions might include:

- Talking to family and friends about the issue
- Learning a song about the topic, writing a song, or making up new verses to a song
- Learning a poem or writing a poem
- Writing letters individually or as a class to a company, lawmaker, or public official
- Making a mural or other art work
- Posting informational signs at school
- Going to a meeting or hearing
- Writing a play and performing it for families or other classes
- Making a DVD
- Having a fund-raising event with an educational component
- Putting an article about the topic in a school-wide newspaper or website
- Going with children and their families to a demonstration
- Participating in a boycott or a Fair Trade activity

The injustices that might be involved in production of our beloved stuffed animals posed a dilemma. With some products, such as chocolate, you can buy Fair Trade products. But with so many of our toys made in China (and so few Fair Trade toys available), boycotts or Fair Trade options weren’t an option. We had to think of some other possibilities. We chose to teach other people about this issue.

Writing and Producing a Play

Besides creating awareness, role plays are great for developing self esteem, helping with enunciation, developing reading and writing skills, and building community.

As we sat in a circle, children suggested ideas and words for a play about stuffed animals. I jotted everything down, then took my journal home and shaped their ideas into a play. For over two and a half weeks, we practiced and revised and sent revised scripts home for the children to practice. As the school

year drew to a close, students performed the play to over 125 family members and friends at our Family Celebration.

In our play, the stuffed animals in a toy store came alive and told the shoppers about their friends, the workers who made them. They told about the terrible working conditions in the factory. They told shoppers that some of the brave workers made movies with their cell phones. In the final scene, a “cell-phone movie,” students pretend to work on an assembly line, manufacturing stuffed animals. At the conclusion, students told the audience that child labor was unfair, urged the audience to find ways to help, and sang, “Give us Hope” by Jim Papoulis.³ Some of the audience members cried, and there was a standing ovation! We knew that our concerns for the people who made our beloved stuffed animals would reach far beyond that auditorium.

Conclusion

The great poet William Butler Yeats is credited with having said, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but lighting a fire.” This concept is at the heart of inquiry teaching. Education is more than teaching the information for a test, or even teaching the required topics in the curriculum. Rather, it is about working with the required curriculum, the standards, or topics of focus in a particular school, having children ask questions related to that curriculum, and guiding them to find myriad ways to search for answers. As students grow as researchers, it is very important for them to verify their findings. As students work with their teachers and classmates to find answers and to think about and share what they have learned, they develop the critical thinking skills necessary for dealing with issues in the world around them.

Within all of the learning, there will always be issues of concern—issues of justice or injustice, issues about quality of life for ourselves and others. When we help children identify those issues, we can also help them to become social activists by working with others to solve the problems. That way, instead of being left with sadness, we generate empowerment and hope. 🌍

Notes

1. Don Freeman, *Corduroy* (New York: Viking, 1948); *A Pocket for Corduroy* (New York: Viking, 1978)
2. David Barboz, “China’s Labor Pains,” *New York Times Upfront* (September 6, 2010).
3. Jim Papoulis, “Give Us Hope,” *Sounds of a Better World* (CD, 2002).

PAULA ROGOVIN has taught elementary school in New York City public schools for 38 years and is currently teaching at The Manhattan New School, PS 290. She is the author of *Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning*; *The Research Workshop: Bring the World into Your Classroom*; and *Why Can’t You Behave? A Teacher’s Guide to Creative Classroom Management*, all published by Heinemann.