

Empowering Our Students to Make a More Just World

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“I’m a good listener, an upstander, a doer, and a thinker!” Pierce proudly proclaimed. “All of those qualities could make me a defender of justice, just like Susan B. Anthony was for many people.” Pierce turned to his partner and asked her to share her own character traits. Danielle thought for a moment and then spoke. “Dolores Huerta was smart, brave, and able to talk in front of people. I am like her in those ways, so I can also make a difference in the world.” Around the room we could hear snippets of similar conversations. After an inspirational morning spent learning about a diverse group of Americans, each of whom had fought against injustice, our fifth graders were imagining themselves as the next generation of people who would take a stand to fulfill the dream of a country, which might truly provide “justice for all.”



As teachers of elementary students, we live by these words: “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.”¹ With this idea in our hearts, we dream that the children whom we see in front of us each day might eventually become the heroes of their generation. More important, we strive to help our students see the possibilities that exist within themselves, so that they can begin to envision their own future. To this end, we choose to celebrate the legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by sharing the stories of

lesser-known figures who embodied King’s dream of equality. Our ultimate goal is to inspire our students to believe that each of them has the potential to become a leader who can, in King’s words, “rise above the narrow confines of his [or her] individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”²

Defenders of Justice

Each year, in mid-January, we bring our two fifth grade classes together for a morning filled with activities centered on the theme “defenders of justice.”³ We began this work in 2008, as a celebration of President Barack Obama’s inauguration, with a shorter version of the lesson that we describe here. Soon after that historic election, our district developed a diversity curriculum, recognizing that teaching students to appreciate diversity is a fundamental aspect of a vibrant, democratic citizenry. One of the core understandings of that curriculum is empowering students to address injustice. In the years that followed, we looked for a way to extend the value and efficacy of successful lessons from that curriculum, and King’s birthday seemed to present the perfect opportunity.

This year, our students knew that something wonderful and significant was about to happen, merely because we chose to bring two classes together for an entire morning! We started, as we do each day, with a recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, after which we posed the question: “What does ‘justice for all’ mean?” Immediately, hands shot up around the room, with students eager to share their ideas.

Mikayla spoke first, explaining, “It means that everyone is treated equally, no matter who they are.” Tamer added, “In the United States, it doesn’t matter what color your skin is or what your religion is. You can’t be discriminated against because of the Constitution.” Tamer’s proclamation was the perfect lead-in to our next query: “Turn to a neighbor and talk about a time in our country’s history when there was not justice for all.” We could feel the energy in the room as the students proudly shared their ideas with each other: “During slavery;” “Before women could vote;” “Gays still can’t get married in most states.” As we circled the room, we heard thoughts like these spoken aloud, revealing how students were recalling examples from previous lessons on history and human rights.

Learning with Music

Next, to fulfill our never-ending quest to provide a multiple intelligence-based curriculum, we listened to the song “What Can One Little Person Do?”⁴ as the students followed the lyrics on a handout. We invited them to sing along the second time around, and, although some were reticent at first, soon, everyone joined in, at least for the chorus. The song is a salute to four famous Americans: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, each of whom is said to have had, “justice on her (his) side.” By the end of the song, all of our voices rang together, “One can help another one and together we can get the job done!” At one point during the songfest, a student quietly got up to shut the classroom door, so our neighbors would not be disturbed, and we knew that the day was off to a banner start!

Reading a Book

Next, we told students that they would have an opportunity to work with a partner to read a picture book biography about an individual who helped provide “justice for all.” We chose this genre for several reasons: picture books are not long; biographies were not being used elsewhere in the fifth grade ELA curriculum, and they helped us meet the demands of the new Common Core Standards. This activity fulfills several of the anchor standards for reading because it requires students to read informational texts closely, cite specific evidence when speaking, and summarize key details and ideas. In addition, students analyze how two or more texts address similar themes



to build their knowledge.⁵

There’s a plethora of quality biographical picture books available, on all reading levels, which cover an extremely diverse group of famous individuals (See Picture Books list). One of our goals was to ensure that students understand that those who fought for equal rights over our country’s history include women and men of varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and creeds. We wanted the children to be able to see parts of themselves reflected in the people who they studied.

We differentiated the task for students by matching the biographies to student pairs on the basis of students’ reading level and ability to synthesize the information. Each pair included one student from each of our classrooms. Of course, we also took into consideration behavioral issues when placing students together. We modeled how “reading in pairs” can be done: sitting silently “elbow to elbow,” or taking turns reading pages aloud quietly to one another. Then we invited students to choose the method of reading in pairs that they preferred.

Sharing 3-Dimensional Work

We distributed a cube sheet (**HANDOUT 1** on the inside back cover of this journal) to each pair, explaining that their job was to complete each of the six spaces on the sheet (describe the person; the issue; what he or she did; who helped; who stood in the way; and who supported justice), using information gleaned from their book. We checked that students understood all of the words on the handout, with respect to vocabulary words such as “obstacle” and “overcome.” As the students read, we circled the room, reminding students to use all of their reading strategies (stop and think, summarize sections for each other, and monitor for understanding) to make sense of their biographies.

As they worked to complete the cubes, we encouraged them to go back to the texts to find specific proof for statements they were placing on the cube. Additionally, we suggested that they use text features that are particularly suited to biography, such as timelines and captioned photographs.

This activity was an opportunity for students to practice the close reading skills that we had been developing during the year to meet the Common Core expectations. We found that, by going back to the text with a specific purpose in mind, students were

Children’s Picture Books Referred to in this Article

Blue, Rose and Corinne Naden. *Ron’s Big Mission*. New York, NY: Dutton Children’s Books, 2009.

Coles, Robert. *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. New York, NY: Scholastic, 1995.

Golenbock, Peter. *Teammates*. New York: Harcourt, 1990.

Krakow, Kari. *The Harvey Milk Story*. Ridley Park, PA: Two Lives Publishing, 2001.

Lasky, Kathryn. *A Voice of Her Own: The Story of Phillis Wheatley, Slave Poet*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2003.

Miller, William. *Richard Wright and the Library Card*. New York: Lee and Low Books, 1997.

Munoz Ryan, Pam. *When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson*. New York: Scholastic, 2002.

Rappaport, Doreen. *Martin’s Big Words*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.

Wise, Bill. *Louis Sockalexis: Native American Baseball Pioneer*. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2007.

Wise, Bill. *Silent Star: The Story of Deaf Major Leaguer William Hoy*. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2012.

Note: Contact us for a list of 50 recommended picture book biographies we’ve used over the years for this activity. Many of these have appeared on lists of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People. Visit www.socialstudies.org/notable. E-mail sharidorf@gmail.com.”

—Shari and Ruth

able to deepen their understanding of their defenders of justice, including their motivations, obstacles, and accomplishments. As some of the pairs finished constructing their cubes, they assisted others with the task of cutting and taping their cubes together. When all the pairs were ready, we brought them back to the carpet to model the next phase of the lesson.

Comparing What We've Found

Earlier that week, we had read aloud two picture books to our classes: *Martin's Big Words* and *Teammates*. Then, using a Venn diagram on chart paper, we guided students through a comparison of defenders of justice (for example, Martin Luther King, Jr. compared with Jackie Robinson) from each book, respectively. (Past classes have selected Pee Wee Reese and Branch Rickey, instead of Robinson, as examples from *Teammates*.)

Now, students were ready to do the same type of comparison with their defenders. We assigned each pair of students to team up with another pair. Then the group of four students used the information on the two cubes to teach each other about their respective famous figures and find similarities and differences between the defenders, just as we had done with Robinson and King. Students need frequent opportunities to create their own understandings through peer discussions and reflection, rather than having all information fed to them in a teacher-directed lesson.

Finally, when groups shared their results with the entire class, there were many interesting revelations. For example, one set of students had read about Ron McNair and Ruby Bridges and were excited to learn that both of these defenders had stood up against injustice as children. Jordan, one of the four in that group exclaimed, "This shows that we don't have to wait until we are older to make a change in the world. We can do something right now!" Another group discovered that both Phyllis Wheatley and Richard Wright used writing as a vehicle to make a difference. Matthew announced, "No wonder you had us spend time this year working on editorials and persuasive essays. Someday we might need to write those kinds of pieces to convince other people to fight an injustice."

Common Threads

The students also noticed many poignant contrasts and connections between the defenders. "Harvey Milk was a politician, but so many people hated him just because he was gay," Paniyota lamented. "We compared him to Marian Anderson, who was told she couldn't sing in Constitutional Hall just because of her skin color. I wonder how many other defenders of justice are just people who stood up because other people couldn't accept their differences." Another group shared that both of their defenders, Louis Sockalexis and William Hoy, were baseball players who faced discrimination. "Sockalexis was not accepted because he was a Native American, and Hoy's obstacle was that he was deaf. I guess justice for all hasn't really been true for lots of different reasons," Sanjana realized.

We jigsawed the pairs of students into foursomes a few times

more, so that each student not only learned about her or his own defender, but also about several other defenders. Additionally, we allowed time for a whole-class discussion each time the partners switched groups.

By the end of the exercise, students had been exposed to many models of Americans who had stood for justice during our nation's relatively short history. It was time to end the morning on a high note, literally, with another round of "What Can One Little Person Do?" (Another way for students to synthesize and demonstrate their newfound knowledge would be to allow them to create additional verses for the song.) This time, our students' voices could be heard even beyond the closed door of the room, as they exuberantly sang the verse about King, "We must fight for liberty / Until all of us are free." There seemed to be a new fervor among them, perhaps because they felt empowered by all of the knowledge they had gained over the course of the morning.

Reflecting on the Experience

As a culmination to the entire lesson, we asked students to reflect on what they had learned and apply their new ideas to their own lives. After learning that there were many instances during our nation's history when Americans faced injustice, our fifth graders understood that we still need Defenders of Justice in the world today. As David put it, "We need people to look up to, who can protect our rights, so they aren't taken away." Rebecca concluded, "Some people still have their prejudices and don't give them up," to which Larry added, "People are still discriminated against today, but not as obviously." And all of our students were quite sure that they possessed many qualities that could enable them to emulate King and fulfill his and other defenders of justice's dreams. As teachers, we believe that there is no more important goal that we can have for our students. 🌍

Notes

1. Variations of this quote have been attributed to Martin Luther King, Jr., but we have been unable to find the exact source.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Address Delivered at the First Annual Institute on Nonviolence and Social Change, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project (December 3, 1956), mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu.
3. This lesson was inspired by "Defenders of Justice," (Teaching Tolerance), www.tolerance.org/lesson/defenders-justice. The cube-folding diagram is reprinted with permission of Teaching Tolerance, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.
4. Sally Rogers, "What Can One Little Person Do?" (Audio recording, Thrushwood Press, 1991).
5. The College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards require students to master skills and understanding, several of which are addressed in this lesson: CCR1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. CCR2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. CCR3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text. CCR9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take. 2012 Common Core State Standards Initiative www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/CCR9/R.

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