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Creating Space for Discussions about Social Justice and Equity in an Elementary Classroom

ANDREW M. A. ALLEN

518 *In this article Andrew Allen discusses how he uses his second-grade students' natural sense of fairness as a foundation for constructing an anti-racist/anti-bias curriculum in his classroom.*

Seven-year-old Andrea [pseudonym] is working at the computer on the first fictional story she has written and illustrated at the publishing center in my classroom. She is busy making final revisions and editing her work to be put together in book form. She appears to be making majors changes to her work, so I decided to check on her and see what she was doing. I discovered that she was changing all the names (and pronouns) in her story. When I asked her why she was doing that, she responded by saying, "There are too many stories written about boys and not enough with girls. I want to write a story about a girl now." (Excerpt from my teacher's journal: November, 1995)

I was surprised and excited with Andrea's political awareness and the level of comfort she had to express her views so openly with me. As a teacher, I have always been fascinated with the particular ways students view the world and how they attempt to make sense of their surroundings and negotiate control of their environment. If we truly want to educate children to be critical, analytical thinkers, then I believe there is a need to encourage, support, and extend students' awareness of social and political issues in the classroom. In my attempts to *teach* social consciousness or to raise political awareness, I have found that many children develop a sense of social and political justice earlier than I had come to expect. Their developing awareness requires an intentional, developmentally appropriate approach to teaching that takes into account their unique perspectives and their cognitive development. Such an approach involves careful observations of where students are in their learning and understanding of these issues and how they bring these issues into the classroom.

Of equal importance is the relationship between students and teacher and the incongruence or dissonance between what the teacher chooses to emphasize (or ignore) in class and students' perspectives, particularly when students' lives are implicated in what's taught. Recognizing that classrooms consist of two parties of unequal power and the *politics* of teaching political awareness in the classroom, these observations of students raise a number of questions for me. Do elementary students come to school already aware of the social inequities in their environment? Do they really notice the forms of bias they encounter and are they even interested in

issues of equity and social justice? Is there a need to raise these issues in an elementary classroom in the first place and are students at this stage developmentally capable of recognizing and dealing with bias in the classroom materials or the curriculum? I'm also interested in how we, as teachers, can identify, respond to, and facilitate the taking up of these issues with children—if and when they do arise in our class.

In this article[1], I will explore these questions by sharing some of what I have learned through my experiences over the years and through dialogue with the students in my second-grade classroom. I describe my observations of some of the spoken and unspoken responses of students' reactions to particular classroom materials, my subsequent reflection on my teaching responses to the students' reactions, and how I am learning to become more aware of students' interest in—and awareness of—equity issues. Finally, I examine some of the challenges I am facing as I try to support this kind of teaching and learning with a diverse group of students in an increasingly conservative climate.

MY SECOND-GRADE CLASSROOM

The students in my second-grade classroom live in a culturally, ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse, working-class urban community in the greater Toronto area. The community in which my school is located is characterized by high immigration and migration, high population density and economic disparities, high unemployment and under-employment and a significant proportion of government subsidised housing. My students are primarily of immigrant and/or working-class backgrounds, whose parents originate from the Caribbean, East Africa, and South and East Asia.

In our class, I offer my students a print-intensive language program organized around themes, using different types of media, and reference and reading materials including children's literature. The children read both individually and read and discuss picture books in small and large groups. I often assign activities centred around the reading materials. I also regularly read to the class and review and critique books with students. Most reading lessons involve questioning and discussions to help set the context of the images and stories for students and make connections to their lives and extend their perceptions and understanding of the material presented.

I believe it is important to promote a classroom atmosphere where the children feel free to take certain risks, think more for themselves, and express their voices and questions more openly in class. I try to connect my students to their learning by encouraging them to feel they have a stake in their own learning and offer them some control over their learning environment. For instance, students are involved in a collaborative, decision-making process regarding discipline, rules, and routines in our classroom. Sometimes students help to plan, reflect on, and evaluate their own learning experiences.

A number of learning activities in my classroom are student initiated, designed to reflect students' particular interests, needs, and backgrounds. I encourage students to research countries from which their families emigrated, favorite things, or personal topics of interest. I select learning materials that I believe contain images, situations, and experiences that represent the various groups of children in my class. I also select reading materials that I hope will introduce students to the images and experiences of groups not represented in our class. In our sharing and discussion time, I encourage open dialogue on topical issues from the media or community events. This collaboration with my students enables me to learn even more about their particular interests, needs, and backgrounds and their capacity for critical independent thought.

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I believe that one of the keys to establishing an open classroom environment is my willingness to demonstrate for my students how to take risks and to dare to think and question classroom materials. When I model critical skills for my students, they begin asking their own critical questions.

FACTORS INFLUENCING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL AWARENESS

To return to the journal entry with which I began, it seems that seven-year-old Andrea is already aware of and has learned to identify gender inequities in story books. My first question is this: Did Andrea develop this level of awareness before coming to my class? Before I can take up this question, I need to share a bit more about Andrea and some of her earlier school experiences. Andrea is a confident, outgoing student with strong leadership skills. In kindergarten and first grade, her teachers reported that she had a strong sense of sharing and fairness and she was not afraid of speaking up in class. She moved easily around her kindergarten and first-grade classrooms, working at all the various centres, sometimes challenging boys who told her she could not work at the computers or play with the blocks.

When she entered my second-grade class, Andrea, like other students I have observed over the years, seemed to learn from observing and imitating the teacher. For instance, students often mirror the way I hold or handle books in front of the class or speak about favourite parts of stories and what I like about the books we read. Some students are influenced by my personal preferences for discussion topics or subject

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matter in reading, my styles of writing, or types of reading material. Whenever I read mostly expository texts or poetry in class, for example, more students begin to chose these types of materials as personal reading from the library, sometimes showing them to me for my approval. One student became so excited about my enthusiasm for science and technology that she initiated her own independent study at home and regularly shared her experiments with the class.

I began to pay more attention to the influence I was having on students' behavior in the classroom, especially their seemingly uncritical acceptance of things I liked or valued in classroom materials. I wanted students to move beyond trying to seek my approval and to become more critical independent thinkers. I realized that I could encourage them to think for themselves by modelling and then teaching to the behavior and attitudes they needed to accomplish this. As a way of addressing the students' needs in the primary grades, I adopted a particular approach to using learning materials in my class, particularly picture books. The following section outlines the importance of this type of early intervention in elementary classrooms.

CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY INTERVENTION

I feel it is critical that I take a proactive approach to discussing issues of equity and social justice in my classroom. As Delpit (1988) suggests, it is within the power of educators and curriculum developers to determine the view of the world presented for children. Spencer (1983) argues that because social institutions like schools consciously and unconsciously promote the psychological, social, and intellectual development of children, the lack of direct teaching or discussion of specific social and cultural values results in the unchallenged learning of *traditional* values, beliefs, and understandings of the world.

Yet, children are often aware of physical characteristics associated with race or gender, for example, even before they enter school. By four years of age children can define

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properties of particular groups, differentiate between groups and attribute characteristic stereotypes attached to those groups, and are often aware of how society evaluates particular racial and ethnic groups (Ijaz, 1989; Melenchuk, 1993; Derman-Sparks, 1989). By the time they enter school, chil-

dren have already begun to adopt predominant attitudes and to act upon on their own developing views towards various groups as Andrea demonstrated in the anecdote with which I opened this paper.

At this point, children's attitudes are still in a formative stage, however, and easily influenced by their teachers, their parents, the media, and their peers (Ijaz, 1989; Melenchuk, 1993). No doubt most children begin to realize that, in our society, some groups are valued more than others. The presentation of this status quo in classroom learning materials, if unchallenged, can be expected to be internalized by children (Allen, 1996; James, 1994; Lewis, 1987).

Ijaz (1989) warns that children need a healthy social, cultural, personal, and group identity and a positive attitude towards other groups for them to have high self-esteem and to function productively in our diverse society. Schools must take a proactive role in affirming positive social and cultural identity in all students (Ijaz, 1989; Spencer, 1993). We need innovative curricula that challenge prevailing attitudes and empower students to examine critically the world within which they live. This is consistent with a growing body of research that suggests that children's academic performance in school reflects their marginality or the level to which they are turned off by negative images and messages infused in their environment (Allen, 1996; James, 1994; Delpit, 1988; Harris, 1990). One way of meeting students' needs would be to begin addressing the "turning-off" or silencing of students' social and cultural voices in the classroom.

ADDRESSING THE SILENCE

The framework for the type of approach I have adopted is based primarily on Delpit's theory of addressing silence in the classroom. This is a process by which teachers learn to understand their own power in the classroom, the dynamics of the unequal power relationship between students and teachers, and how this sometimes silences students in their classrooms (Delpit, 1988).

This approach demands that teachers examine their own positional frames of references with respect to their power, social class, access, and privilege and how these might sometimes contrast or be in conflict with the frames of their students. Teachers must become aware of their cultural and class-bound perceptions of students to appreciate how their students interpret their school experiences, especially when students do not respond to schooling in ways that teachers expect.

For myself, if I fail to understand or to take into account my students' perspectives, location, or frames of references and how their positionality is implicated in how students *read* the curriculum, then the issues that I choose to emphasize or ignore in my classroom may have the unintended affect of reinforcing the socialization of students to social roles

differentiated by social class, race, and gender (Van Galen, 1993; Delpit, 1988). The students become socialized to see the depiction of characters in children's fiction and its social construct as the way things are—an inevitable or unchangeable part of their social reality (Lewis, 1987). As teachers, we need to first be prepared to acknowledge that there is always some form of bias in learning materials. We also need to be prepared to address and discuss controversial issues posed by classroom learning materials, even if the implications to the students' lives are not obvious or if the students appear to be unaware. The following section describes some of the principles of anti-racist/anti-biased education and examples of the classroom strategies I have developed with the students in my classroom.

ANTI-RACIST/ANTI-BIAS CLASSROOM LEARNING STRATEGIES

An anti-racist/anti-biased approach to teaching and learning involves the critical interrogation of the accepted traditions in the school system and a need to address the problems associated with schools as a site for the reproduction of societal inequalities. One assumption of anti-racist/anti-biased education is that the overlooked, taken-for-granted components of school curricula often have an oppressive effect on our students. The "hidden messages" in the curriculum, including the representation of people's lives in children's literature, can shape children's perceptions of the world and their roles in society and socialize children to maintain the "status quo." An anti-racist/anti-biased approach to teaching and learning must, however, be grounded in the perceptions and experiences of students, what they bring into the classroom, how they respond to schooling, and the ways their background and identities are implicated in the schooling and learning processes (Allen, 1996; Dei, 1995; James, 1994; Lewis, 1987).

My approach to anti-racist/anti-biased education includes the following steps: helping students identify and name bias in classroom learning materials; allowing time for discussions and taking-up social issues in the classroom; and, encouraging students to respond to inequities and validating the voices and perspectives of each student.

Identifying and Defining Bias in Classroom Materials

I introduce anti-racist/anti-biased education to my students by asking them to recall any experiences where they felt they had received both fair and unfair treatment. We talk about, compare, and contrast our individual preferences, tastes, and dislikes. We examine how our perspectives are shaped by our backgrounds, our environment, and our experiences. Students are often surprised to discover the patterns of pref-

erence of specific groups of students, or differences in preferences between and within groups. This year, for example, the girls and boys in my class generally disagreed on their choice of favorite television programs.

I typically ask students to discuss and come up with working definitions of the terms *bias* (as an individual or collective way of perceiving) and *equity* (as a form of justice and fairness). This year's class seemed to understand the concept of fairness and readily gave examples of things they considered unfair. We then talked about control and having the power to decide, for instance, what you can watch on television if you are in someone else's home. We examined the way stories or an individual's perspective tend to differ based on that person's location. We illustrated this through a conflict situation on the playground between two class members where both students were asked to report their side of the story to the class. They realized that, although the stories told by both these classmates were based on the same event, each person's account was very subjective.

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We then used some of the children's literature in the classroom to explore and apply their definitions of *bias* and *equity.* Shannon (1992) points out that classroom learning materials, and particularly children's literature, can be excellent tools for teaching children how to examine literature critically. First, I proceeded to guide or talk my students through some of the picture books in the classroom. We looked only at the illustrations. I asked them to point out unfamiliar pictures or scenes that did not make sense to them or illustrations they didn't like or found hard to understand. Together we were able to detect what we thought were particular race, class, and gender biases, as well as negative stereotypes and unauthentic characterizations in these picture books.

Once we were able to identify particular race, class, and gender biases, I started to model the types of critical questions I asked myself when I read to them. The kinds of questions I modelled included, for example: "Why do you think this character is dressed like that?" "Who is missing or always in the background in the pictures in this book and why?" "Is this the best or only way to show this character?" "Do you think the characters live in any other environment or live any other way?" "Does it really matter if the character is beautiful?" I verbalized these questions to help students begin verbalizing their own critical questions. I encouraged students to ask and try to answer other open-ended questions that could promote higher-level thinking skills.

We discussed their observations and responses to the books in our class and explored patterns of omission and exaggeration of particular characters in specific roles. As a class we discussed reasons that literature might portray particular groups of people in limited roles or particular forms of representation. We also discussed strategies to deal with the material and I gave my students time to try to discuss and come up with their own strategies for change. Some

students, for example, decided to write letters to authors, illustrators or publishers of children's books as a means of sharing their feelings and concerns about particular types of bias they had discovered. Some other students, on their own initiative, decided to search the school library to find books with more positive roles which they brought back to share with their classmates.

Providing Space to Discuss and Take Up Issues in Class

As a follow-up to the types of discussions we were having, I tried an activity where I placed a random selection of picture books into piles on the carpet area. Then we sorted the books on the basis of patterns they found. Then we changed our rules for sorting and looked at other patterns in the literature. We examined the type of images, story context, backgrounds, situations, characters' clothing, and points of reference and illustrations to detect race, class, and gender biases and stereotyping.

It was in this context that my Black students, for example, became interested in the over-representation of Black characters in scenes of poverty in the books they were read-

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ing. They wanted to share their stories about their families and backgrounds as a more positive representation of Blacks. Many of my students, particularly the girls, were also eager to redefine, deconstruct, and re-evaluate the concept and the importance of beauty in fairy tales. They observed, for example, how blue eye color was used in picture books to depict the qualities of *beauty* and *goodness* even in multicultural picture books featuring racially similar characters. Several students pointed out how most of the girls portrayed in the books in our classroom library had kittens for pets while boys usually had dogs. The students also noticed that male characters were involved in action and adventure situations while female characters were more docile and imaginative.

Whenever we had these discussions, I asked the students to report and comment on their findings (see below). We then tried to take into account the perspectives and interpretations of the author and illustrator in explaining the patterns we discovered. As a class, we began to learn to name and locate social class, poverty, and racial, gender, and other institutional forms of oppression. My students drew on this growing awareness as they became involved in selecting, re-

viewing, and critiquing the books and other materials in our classroom.

Encouraging Students to Respond

After these discussions, I immediately encouraged the students to record their thoughts in their reading-response journals and I offered them sample phrases they might use to help them express their ideas (Schwartz & Bone, 1995). For example:

This story reminds me of _____.

It is hard to believe _____.

I wonder if _____.

I wonder why _____.

This makes me feel _____.

I notice that _____.

This is different from _____.

At this stage in the development of our anti-racist/anti-bias curriculum, I began reading to my class alternative versions of familiar fairy tales like *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs/ by A. Wolf* (Scieszka, 1989), *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Trivizas, 1993), and *Jack and the Beanstalk and the Beanstalk Incident* (Palusen, 1990). In these versions the villains get to tell their stories.

I also asked my students to respond to books which they found contained biased or stereotypic illustrations with their own drawings and pictures. With my assistance, they re-wrote the plot, setting, characterizations, and roles for characters in some of the stories they were reading. The students were most comfortable, however, talking about or acting out alternative roles for characters. They saw this exercise as a way for the secondary characters to "make excuses" for their behavior or roles in the stories. In most cases, students made it clear that they preferred their own, alternative versions of the picture books they were reading as well as the commercial non-traditional picture story books we read in class.

My students and I also played around with superimposing or substituting different character names, roles, or descriptors and compared and contrasted these to see if they changed the story line or created any contradictions. Together we evaluated how genre, era, plot, setting and images of characters could be changed to best represent various groups in the literature. For example, we discussed how placing Black characters in more contemporary, urban settings might better reflect the lived experience of many Black people. In general, my students developed a deeper level of understanding of story construction and social context which prompted even more discussion and more student input.

Another exercise that I found to be very valuable was to challenge students to extend their knowledge and skills to begin evaluating the various media they encountered in their

lives. I encouraged them to perform the same kind of analysis for bias using the reading response journal format for television, newspapers, comics, magazines, computer programs, video games, and the Internet. One particularly interesting response came from a male student who used this opportunity as a way to get his parents' permission to watch his favorite television program for homework. After a week of watching the popular television program "The Power Rangers," he presented five reports to me exclaiming, "It's all the same plot!" Although he decided he would keep watching this program from time to time, he felt he had come to a different level of awareness and was seeing it through "different eyes now."

Validating the Voices of the Classroom Community

Andrea particularly seemed to flourish in an environment where the less obvious or taken-for-granted issues of bias and equity could be addressed in the open. In time, she was just as comfortable taking up these issues in whole class discussions as she had been in small groups. All of my students became more aware and sensitive to the other voices within the class as they all began to feel more comfortable bringing controversial issues from the media into the classroom. In our discussions, I found that it was important for me not to give the answers to students' questions. I learned that I needed to allow students the time to think independently and collectively about the issues being discussed and to hear the opinions of others in the class. It was also important for me to give students the space to disagree with each other and, equally important, for them to even disagree with me.

Andrea learned to discuss the inequities she was discovering in the literature she was reading in the same casual way she discussed sharing crayons with classmates or going to various centres in the class. Andrea's learning reached another level when she was able to take up issues of bias spontaneously without any kind of prompting from me.

Other students began working cooperatively to explore issues of bias and equity. In this context, I learned that I—the classroom teacher—was an important part of this developing community of learners. Being part of the learning community my students and I were constructing also offered me more opportunities to learn from and about my students.

The classroom became a richer learning environment, when I, as the teacher, took advantage of these opportunities to learn from my students. Students began to point out other forms of inequity in the books and other learning materials in the class, particularly as those biases related to their individual lives and experiences. Some of their observations about the books they read were very insightful and covered a range of social perspectives.

I began to reflect on my students' responses and acknowledge their points of view in our classroom discussions and, as a result, I felt a deeper sense of connection between

my relationship with my class and their relationships with each other. I was learning to view the learning from their per-

> **It was also important for me to give students the space to disagree with each other and equally important for them to even disagree with me**

spective and they were learning to understand and respect other perspectives within the class. We were able to build on what we had discovered together and, more importantly, I gave them the time they needed to plan and respond to their perceptions of bias and inequity and to share their ideas and feelings with others. My students seemed to feel that they could take risks and question aspects of their learning materials. They began to learn to transpose the issue of power and representation from one group to another, learning to identify and understand oppression across various groups.

CONCLUSION: ADDRESSING SOME OF THE CHALLENGES AND DIFFICULTIES

Andrea entered my class with an incipient sense of social justice and equity. Arguably, a developing sense of fairness was the foundation for her early political and social awareness. As her teacher, my response—or non-response—to her (or any other students') reactions to bias and inequity in learning materials may have profoundly effected her understandings of the world. I am certain that teachers can help to enable and encourage or disable and discourage critical thinking or awareness skills at a very young age.

If teachers assume that the students are unaware of bias in learning materials and there is no discussion around the issue of bias, then students will probably learn to ignore or deny the existence of bias in the materials and to accept passively the social meanings implicit in these materials (that is, the status quo is the way it is and the way it should be). Children also learn not to question the authority behind these materials: an established social order that supports poverty, sexism, racism, and other forms of institutional bias. The danger is that students will internalize these values to such an extent that they become a lens through which they understand their world (Taxel, 1993; Sims, 1983; Lewis, 1987). Therefore, the lack of discussion about the social meanings contained in classroom learning materials may serve to perpetuate the status quo by training students to be passive, unquestioning, conforming citizens (Allen, 1996; Langston, 1988).

However, this type of political work for classroom teachers involves a complex system of conflicting teaching approaches,

institutional and structural constraints, narrow perspectives in curricular materials and increasingly complex student needs. The greatest challenge is trying to negotiate and manage the time to take up these discussions within the context of an already overburdened curriculum.

The kinds of educational reforms, changes, and cutbacks to the system today limit this type of critical progressive work in the classroom. There is a general movement in Ontario, for example, to *return* to the basics that mirrors what is happening across the United States. My school district is adopting more of a business model approach in education, a technification of schooling in which education is referred to as "big business" and students as "clients" with increased emphasis on quality control and accountability. In this environment, commercially produced learning materials are being used to control *what* teachers should teach and *how* they should teach.

This shift to the factory model of education makes it increasingly difficult for teachers to share control over curriculum with students themselves. When the curriculum becomes so controlled and prescribed, teachers lose control over what is being taught and how it is to be taught in the classroom. This makes the work of teaching especially difficult for progressive teachers trying to make room for critical work in the curriculum. I believe that teachers and students are co-interpreters, translators, and creators of curriculum, but the emphasis on commercial learning materials is creating a curriculum devoid of passion and spontaneity. There is less time for student reflection and discussion in the classroom or for teachers to allow space for more critically relevant instructional activities in the classroom or for students' voices to be validated. In the name of curriculum reform, we are creating classroom programs that are further removed from the lives and needs of our students. The neo-conservatives' emphasis on training students for work makes it difficult for progressive educators to educate students for democracy. We cannot let this happen. We owe it to Andrea and her classmates to work toward a more just and equitable society. ●

Notes

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