



When we embrace social justice as a pillar of learning in our classrooms, we declare that we're all responsible for improving our world.

Laurel Schmidt

In an era of homogenized, shrink-wrapped, germ-free curriculum, social justice is the renegade. It doesn't just push the envelope—it's several leagues outside the box.

For a start, it has few right answers. Study geography, and you know you're dealing with topography and climate. Even history has some solid content among the questions and interpretations. But social justice is amorphous. It's an unscripted mixture of politics, economics, laws, values, humanitarian crises, and issues that pit common sense against the common good.

For every earnest cause, dozens of

well-educated and well-funded countervailing voices explain why the situation can't or shouldn't change. So you and your students must grapple with this question: Are there some behaviors or conditions that we simply must address, no matter how difficult or unpopular our work will be?

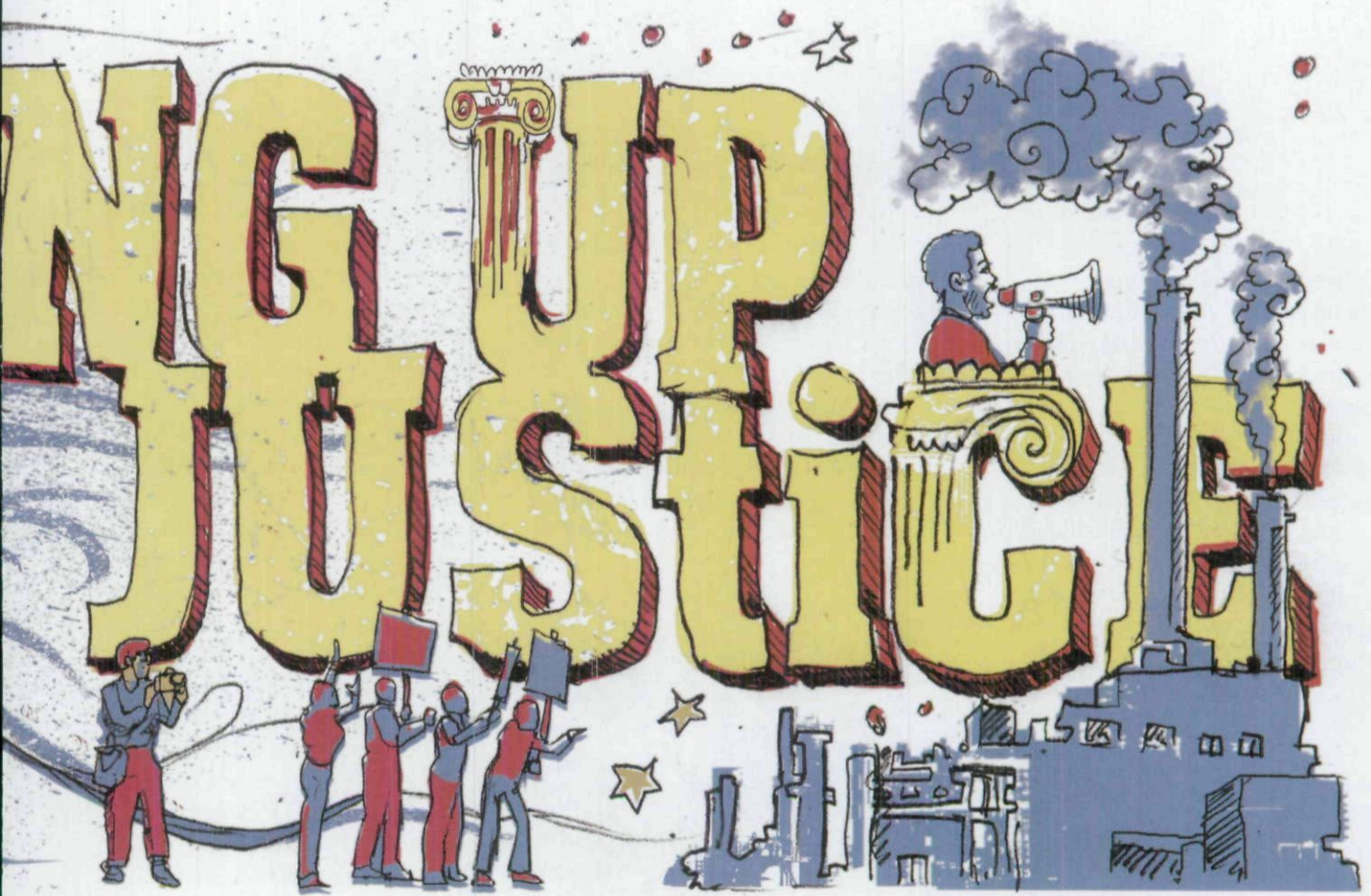
There's so much to do, even in our own neighborhoods. Some projects are simple fixes, but many turn out to be a tiny first link in a long, arduous chain of effort. Think of the thousands of discrete actions required over the decades to achieve civil rights for minorities in the United States. So your students may never have the thrill of seeing a bill signed into law, a shelter

renovated, or even a municipal code modified to create a publicly funded meals program for homeless people. They may solve one part of a problem, only to discover that they've uncovered a greater injustice or need. Social activists face disappointment and frustration every day, but they keep on trying.

Social activism is also potentially dangerous. A veteran educator explained how one of his students warned him, "You know, Mr. Kohl, you could get arrested for stirring up justice!" You have only to look at the history of the civil rights movement to know how right he was.

So social justice is untidy, exhausting,

ILLUSTRATION BY SHANNON BRADY



discouraging, even dangerous work—which may be the reason why it's not on the top ten list of social studies projects in many schools. Better to have kids build a model of a *rancho* (a group of huts for housing ranch workers) or recreate a *potlatch* (a festival ceremony practiced by the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest) and be done with it.

From Idea to Action

But whether you ignore or embrace the topic, the truth is that most students experience or think about social justice issues. They know instinctively when something's unfair, whether they're puzzled by the way certain kids are excluded from playground games or worried about where homeless people sleep at night. Kids rarely accept injustice as the status quo. Instead, they look to the adults in their lives—parents, teachers, coaches, and relatives—to help them decide what to do.

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In the best-case scenarios, the adults encourage rather than avoid authentic conversations about our collective dilemmas—human rights, environmental protection, economic justice, violence. They embrace the inevitable question, What can we do about it? and teach students to act.

But sometimes the response from adults is less than inspiring. We squirm, change the subject, turn a blind eye. *Drop it* is the unspoken message. Chil-

dren may well respond to the discovery that the topic of social justice is off limits by thinking that

- Injustice is a fact of life; there's no point in trying to change human nature.
- Injustice is unfortunate, but getting involved is too discouraging.
- Perhaps the victims brought it on themselves. They deserve it.

Even if kids never get that far in their thinking, they may be left with a vague uneasiness that if *they* were ever in dire straits, no one would come to their rescue.

Younger students may not be able to define social justice, but they can list the attributes that we value in human relationships: friendship, responsibility, equality, fairness, mutual support, collaboration, and caring. With a little prompting, older students enlarge their sphere of concern, zeroing in on injustice related to socioeconomic status, exploitation, and the abuses of power. They probably won't use those words,

but they'll recognize the issues.

They'll notice for example, that certain ethnicities seem to be over-represented on the homeless rolls in their own town and underrepresented in the local power structure or that hotel workers risk their jobs to demonstrate for a living wage, but the subject is aggressively ignored at city council meetings. And now that classrooms have Internet access, it won't take long for students to discover sweatshops, child labor, hazardous waste, discrimination, and the devastation of the natural environment on a global scale.

Learning about all these injustices would be emotionally daunting for kids if it were just an exercise in cataloguing calamities and human indifference. But social justice education encourages students to *act*. It is based on the notion that we, the people, agree to live by a covenant that defines how we will behave toward one another in a community, whether you define community as a prairie town or the planet. If individuals, town leaders, or federal officials violate the covenant, then we attempt to restore justice through concerted action.

But kids can't do this alone. They need adult mentors to help them translate their ideas into action. With guidance, they can go from passive spectators to activists, focusing their energy on solutions that could save an ecosystem, a species, or a life. They eagerly master new skills, contact key people, and gather crucial resources—because something real and terribly important hangs in the balance.

The Social Action Autobiography

Most of us become social activists through inspiration. We meet or read

about someone who puts everything on the line for a cause, and we're moved—or deeply disturbed—by the realization that we, too, possess the power to make a difference.

Some kids have already had that epiphany, even on a micro-scale, but they may not see themselves as activists yet. That's your starting point. When you decide to include social justice proj-



ects in your curriculum, you need to take the all-important first step of finding out what your students already know and what experience they've had in trying to solve problems in the community.

The social action autobiography helps all students recognize the ways they've acted for the good of others. Giving them the opportunity to share their prior knowledge lets them feel smart from the outset and enables you to gather valuable details about their individual skills and interests. For younger students, the prompt might be something like, *Think of a time when you helped someone*. This

could range from taking care of a neighbor's cat to playing with a child who had no friends. The students can respond by writing, drawing a picture, or making an annotated drawing with images and words. Even kindergartners can do this reflective activity by drawing a picture or series of pictures and then dictating to a scribe, perhaps an older student, parent, instructional aide, or the teacher. If you can't arrange for scribes, ask the students to discuss their pictures in small groups.

Ask older students to think about a problem that involved other people, the community, the environment, or animals, and what they did to help. You can pose a series of questions like the following to help them remember details and analyze their actions:

- How did you find out about the problem?
 - What did you think was a good solution?
 - What did you need to do to make it happen?
 - Did other people help you?
 - What did you learn from the process?
 - How did you feel about yourself?
- As students share their experiences, they're building a template for how to pursue social action and starting a list of potential projects.

A Wake-Up Call

But some kids don't seem to have a clue about activism. Their idea of social justice is being first in the cafeteria line at any cost. It's not hopeless—they're probably just not paying attention. But rather than waiting around for them to "discover" social justice issues, you can jump-start the process by introducing them to some extraordinary kids—just like them—who are experts at this game.

Get Phillip Hoose's book, *It's Our World, Too: Stories of Young People Who Are Making a Difference* (Joy Street, 1993). It celebrates 14 heroic kids who saw problems in their world and solved them. Your students will be dazzled from the very first page. They'll meet Justin Lebo, who reconstructed nearly 200 bikes from used bicycle parts and gave them to kids who were homeless, had AIDS, or were orphans. They'll love James Ale, whose friend was struck by a car while they were playing ball in a busy street. James wondered why he and

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his buddies had to play in the street, when the kids in the rich part of town had parks. He transformed his anger into a campaign and eventually convinced city officials to build a park in his neighborhood.

Ask your students, Why do you think these kids were successful? What did they know or learn how to do? Have the students list the personal traits and skills that helped these young activists succeed. Post the list prominently and refer to it often as you close in on your own projects.

I've used Hoose's book dozens of times, with adults and children, and the reaction is always the same—awe and discontent. Students recognize that these kids are doing something real and important. That's the awe factor. But they're filled with questions: Could I do that? Would I? Are there problems like that in my community? How could I find them? Do I have the courage to act? A new standard of behavior replaces the status quo, and kids wonder whether

they can measure up. That's what causes the discontent, and it's a perfect platform for action.

But What Does It Look Like?

The best social action projects are like an earthquake. One minute you're comfortably ensconced in your classroom, earnestly working through your curriculum, and the next minute, the ground shifts. Even before the room stops rocking, you sense that you're in new territory, face-to-face with a genuine adventure. The best projects

come organically from the work and conversations you have with your students every day.

Sometimes students will burst through the door on red alert and demand that their peers sit up and take notice. Here are a few examples:

- Barbara Lewis's 5th grade students waged a campaign to have a hazardous waste site near their school closed and cleaned up. Through their efforts, the toxic barrels were removed. The students won the 1989 President's Environmental Youth Award.

- Students organized a boycott of chocolate candy manufacturers at Halloween to register their support for fair trade chocolate.

- A group of 8-year-olds in Los Angeles were discouraged by the profusion of broken furniture and large appliances dumped on the sidewalks around their school. They worked their way zealously through the sanitation bureaucracy until they made contact with the large haulers responsible for removals.

The debris vanished, and in a moment of jubilant inspiration, the students collected any interesting junk left behind and created a 10-foot commemorative sculpture for the school entrance.

- Canadian students helped students in Africa and Afghanistan by raising money to remove land mines from schoolyards.

- A group of 2nd and 5th graders campaigned for fellow students to boycott any ice cream trucks that sold toy guns along with their sweets. These students had decided that their community didn't need another weapon—either real or a look-alike.

- Many students have joined Amnesty International Kids (www.amnestyusa.org) and respond with letters and e-mails to monthly Urgent Action postings.

What About Standards?

When you include social justice projects in your social studies program by teaching what activists do, think, and know, your students will develop and demonstrate skills that are fundamental to a rigorous standards-based approach to social studies. In fact, teachers who are bold enough to embrace an activist approach to teaching find themselves scrambling to *add* to the standard curriculum impromptu lessons in trickle-down economics, writing a press release, making an effective speech in under three minutes, using graphic design principles for making posters, and learning the fundamentals of negotiation. Many teachers report that their students exceed expectations on dozens of standards. Moreover, students experience the thrill of road testing their courage, persistence, ingenuity, intelligence, and diplomacy—not to mention the pride of contributing to the welfare of others.

Here are just a few of the cognitive

challenges that students will face when they're immersed in the work of creating a more just society. Students will

- Examine what it means to be a citizen.
- Identify ways people can participate in their government.
- Discuss the importance of political leadership and public service.
- Locate, access, organize, and apply information about an issue of public concern.
- Use spoken, written, and visual forms of communication effectively with a variety of audiences to promote their social justice efforts.
- Use knowledge of government, law, and politics to make decisions about and take action on local, national, and international issues to further the public good.

Kids rarely accept injustice as the status quo. Instead, they look to the adults in their lives to help them decide what to do.

- Examine and develop others' ethical and moral reasoning.

Responsibility—Ours and Theirs

As educators, we hold the next generation of voters, politicians, and corporate leaders in our hands. Teaching students about interdependence and responsibility through social action is a lesson that can stick.

Active, inquisitive citizenship can begin when kids are very young. They should act out early and often, until championing worthy causes becomes a habit they can't break. You won't regret

a minute you spend guiding your students to discover their roles as stewards of the environment and champions of human rights. **EL**

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