

July 2008

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Recommended Citation

Morrison, D. (2008). Walking the Walk: Linking Teaching and Advocacy. *Occasional Paper Series, 2008* (21). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2008/iss21/2>

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WALKING THE WALK: LINKING TEACHING AND ADVOCACY

danielle morrison

I began teaching at age 21 when I still saw the world through the eyes of a student. I had read books, some about great advocates and others about great teachers, but saw no links between them. To me, an advocate felt passionately about an issue and could not separate that passion from her subject. I learned that teaching was just the opposite, detaching from the subject, presenting it honestly but objectively. That was the only way for the students to form their own opinions. That was only fair.

I believed that the way to go about teaching was to ask question after question and I gave no thought to the person posing the questions. Teachers' feelings were nonexistent. It took six years and many students of my own to realize how wrong I was. It took mistakes and missteps, support from those around me, and an ever-critical eye of my own to see how I might improve my teaching and the places I have yet to go.

There is a strength that comes from trying something again. Teaching is a profession that always asks us to do this: to try again, to do better, to improve upon what we have done before. While this constant need to strive is exhausting, it is also the part of my job that makes me feel luckiest. I have the opportunity each year, each day, to wake up and to do my job better. Curriculum, like a piece of art, needs to be formed and shaped, painted in layers. One year you can get a handle on the main ideas, and then the next, move to finer strokes, more details. Perhaps the year after that, you add a sweep of color. It can be messy and unruly. And sometimes it can even be scary. But we work with what we have and change what we don't like until, as the art teachers say at my school, "it's exactly as we want it."

The funny thing about curriculum development is that I, like most teachers, am always planning with my students in mind: What can inspire them to work on this? What can make them care? What will catch their attention? Or,

simply, what won't bore them to death? I never thought that curriculum would inspire me, because I am, after all, just the guide to the trip, an organizer for the adventure that is learning. But what happens when the teacher is changed by the curriculum she teaches? What happens when she realizes she must have an opinion, and that her job is to share it? What happens when she sees that she must get involved in order to get her students involved? Even though I did not know it when I began, by becoming a teacher, I had signed on to becoming an advocate. As these ideas intertwined, blurring into one, I understood that by working to change the learning experience for my students, I had changed myself.

“We Gotta Start Makin’ Changes”

I teach third grade at a progressive private school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. This school is well-resourced and contains many families of privilege and considerable wealth. Nonetheless, there is a solid pedagogy of equality, and I work hard to establish a community where all students feel valued and have a voice. The children sit together in a meeting area and discuss topics ranging from why Gandhi began the Salt March to why there are pencils strewn about the room. And when they are not talking with each other and forming ideas and opinions, they are working collaboratively at tables, not desks, on anything from multiplication to reading strategies.

Traditionally, the third-grade civil rights curriculum emphasized the role of Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), building upon the first- and second-grade studies of Ruby Bridges and Rosa Parks. I was happy to have MLK as our focus and enjoyed discussing his ideas and work. The first year I taught it, I went into the study with determination. I started off with simple questions for the children: “What do you know about civil rights and MLK?” and “What do you want to know?” Many hands shot up in the air. There were lots of questions, but I noted that most of them did not come from the five children of color in the room. I asked what I believed were thought-provoking but neutral questions, including “How do you think MLK felt during the boycott?” and “Why might African Americans have boycotted the buses?” During these meetings, I noticed that the one African-American girl in the class, normally the “go-to” girl for all the right

answers, turned away from the conversations, even putting her head down to avoid eye contact with the class and with me. As much as I tried to get her to engage, to see the civil rights struggle as a success, and to see how far the movement had come because of the work of MLK, I couldn't. I was failing her and the other children of color. I was failing all of the students, really, and that feeling was palpable in the room. At the end of three weeks, when we finished the study, I asked the class what problems we needed to work on in our world, and they couldn't come up with anything. In fact, one white child said, "Well, segregation is over, so it's okay now." That was my lasting impact for the year.

That summer, in a class called Foundations of Modern Education, I realized that by not saying, "No, things are not okay now" to this child, I was saying "yes," or at the very least, "maybe." My message wasn't clear. This realization came the day after our homework assignment had been to read both John Dewey's *Experience and Education* and George S. Counts's *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* Relying on these readings, our instructor assigned an activity that didn't hit home until a few months later. In a large hallway of strangers, she asked us one simple question: "Is it the teacher's job to bring about a new social order?" If we said yes, we were to stand at the far end of the hallway silently. If we didn't know or thought that it might be, we were instructed to stand in the middle. And if we didn't think it was the teacher's place to promote social change, we were to stand right where we were. I thought for a moment about this question and decided that it was not my job as an educator to bring about social change. Because of my authority as teacher, I believed that my opinions would have too much influence over the children. In fact, I believed it was my job to keep my opinions out of the classroom, even if I felt passionately. My job was to present and organize information, not interpret it.

I felt quite satisfied with my answer until I realized that I stood almost alone, one of two people left at the near end of the hallway. When everyone had found his or her place, our instructor asked us to look around and notice where we all stood. Many had worked their way down to the far end of the hallway or somewhere between that "yes" and "maybe" zone. I could see that there were a lot of educators out there who felt it was the teacher's job to get involved. I wanted to

know why.

During the remaining weeks in class, I listened as my “involved” classmates told their stories about being the only one whom their students came to when they wanted to talk. I listened as they referred to their administrations setting standards but not addressing issues of who was forced to meet those standards, or even considering whether it was possible to meet those expectations. I heard how they deflected racism, sexism, and homophobia in their classrooms because if they didn’t, who would? I learned how they organized students to march in rallies and led groups to discuss change. I heard them as advocates. I saw them create change. I came to believe that I, too, could find a way to set up my classroom for this kind of dialogue. I thought back to the words of the late Tupac Shakur and knew “We gotta start makin’ changes.”

Becoming an Activist

The next fall, the middle school coordinator asked me about my goals for the year and what support I needed to meet them. Feeling more confident, I asked if we could, as a team, work to change both the content and the timeline of the civil rights curriculum. He agreed, and along with the other third-grade team, we set out to research other ways to talk about social justice.

One of the biggest problems I saw with the existing curriculum was how black and white it was, quite literally. We only discussed the struggle between the African-American and white population, which excluded the struggles of so many other groups. This, in turn, limited the ways in which children could connect to and understand the idea of “civil rights.” The year before, the children had learned that in the United States the white population had rights and that, with a great deal of struggle and even violence, African Americans had gotten some of these basic rights, too. Now we wanted to globalize and generalize the idea of nonviolent struggle by opening up the conversations to other leaders and cultures.

We chose to begin our discussions with Mohandas Gandhi, even though we recognized that it is difficult for eight- and nine-year-old children to think back to the early 1900s, especially in countries as far away as South Africa and India. But many of the civil rights leaders in the United States derived their ideas from

Gandhi, and we decided that we couldn't have these conversations without discussing this powerful man. We then moved onto other movements in the United States, beginning with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his work for African Americans in the 1960s, and then studying Cesar Chavez and the migrant farm workers movement in California during the late 1960s and early 1970s and Harvey Milk and the gay rights movement in San Francisco during the 1970s. To complete the curriculum and make it global as well as current, we discussed the present-day struggles of a recent Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi, who continues to work in Iran for women's and children's rights.

A team of five—two head teachers, an assistant, an intern, and a student teacher—researched these activists and, together with the support of our administration, we crafted a new civil rights curriculum for the third grade. The theme was no longer just skin color. Now we were thinking about nonviolent protest against a range of injustices. The leaders we studied reflected the diverse families of the school: white, African-American, Latino, gay, Hindu, Muslim, and others. And with the war in Iraq blasting images of violence and hatred towards Muslims in 2003, it felt good to include an Iranian woman working for change in our study.

This curriculum was important not only because it made the discussions richer and more inclusive, but also because it led to a social action project. My idea was to get the class out of the building and into the larger community. The administration supported these changes and worked to prepare the entire school community for the new approach.

They pushed back the timing of the culminating assembly and renamed it the Civil Rights Assembly, an important symbolic shift for the school.

Teaching a new curriculum became a significant undertaking during its first year, and there were pitfalls along the way. Some parents disagreed with our having opened up the curriculum to include more than MLK and complained that we were honoring the struggles of African Americans less by including others in this study. The administration stood behind us in defending the new curriculum but made sure to include the "I Have a Dream" speech in the assembly to emphasize the importance of MLK to our civil rights study.

Also, because there was a family who disagreed with the inclusion of Harvey

Milk as a civil rights leader in the curriculum, my coordinator and I met with them ahead of time. We discussed the readings about Harvey Milk and rehearsed how their child could voice his feelings in a respectful way. The family agreed to practice this at home. They were, however, the exception: most of the other families welcomed the changes to the curriculum and helped me make the transition.

The students connected to the various civil rights leaders in fuller and more relevant ways. I saw more hands go up, more conversations move into the blurry gray area of “I don’t know if everything is okay,” and more children of color raising their hands to get into the conversations. It wasn’t perfect, and I was still balancing when and where to use my voice and opinion. I challenged my teaching more than I ever had, reviewing my questions, asking myself why I was posing them, and forcing myself to push the envelope. I began to make things personal. When a child in the room started laughing and showing off his muscles upon learning that, in Iran, women had to ask permission from a man before leaving the home, I labeled his behavior for him: “That’s sexist.” And I had something to equate it to now: “It’s like racism.” When the meeting was over, I reflected back on this moment. I knew the student felt bad about his gestures, but he still didn’t understand why sexism was bad or why it existed in Iran in this way. He certainly didn’t make the link that it still exists, but more subtly, all over the world. I would have to find a way to make it personally meaningful to him. While I had started to find my voice, I hadn’t found how to insert it easily into our conversations. Still, I felt proud of the change I had helped effect in the school community. Proud, that is, until I dropped the ball again.

The intended social action project got swept into the “maybe later” or “after the break” category. It never happened. I moved my focus to reading and spelling, writing and math. At the end of my second year, I knew I had started something important, but also knew I hadn’t found the way to make it real.

The third year brought a group of already incredibly active and inspired students, and I thought immediately that this would be the year to harness that energy. I knew the curriculum, and the class was already excited. But as the study drew to a close, I saw that I had no idea what to do about the social action project. The students, advocates that they were, decided to organize a canned food drive. I helped them get boxes, decorate them, and publicize and promote drop-off times and

places. I set aside time during the day to do this, though not enough.

In an attempt to gain some closure on this project, I found a drop-off point for the food at a church down the street from school. One rainy spring morning, the children and I gathered the cans in small plastic bags and walked, carrying heavy loads, to the church. Bags broke, cans rolled down the street, and I feared that this once exciting and engaging project had now become a chore for the children. It had become a chore for me, and I asked myself if my feeling had passed on to them. For the first time I questioned what effect my affect had on them. Where was my passion? Where was my action? All of a sudden, it became clear that harnessing and maintaining the energy I had at the beginning of the study for this kind of work was my job as a teacher. I could lead all the great discussions in the world, I could talk the talk, but my professor was right—I had to become an activist to inspire activism.

“You Must Be the Change”

The best part about curriculum is that it is shaped by the class you are teaching in any give year, so even a curriculum that you have taught for ten years can suddenly become fresh when a new group of students walks through the door. The civil rights unit always inspires family participation because there are so many connection points for people. Parents want to contribute and talk about their experiences or what they do now to help. Many of the parents in my room had also lived through these struggles and wanted to share that history. As they did, the movements became personal not just for me or for the families, but for all the students.

In my third year, I took a chance and had a father come in and speak about his work for UNITE HERE, a group that organizes unions. He used the work that Cesar Chavez had done to inspire the class. He made the talk relevant, discussing current issues with unions and contemporary boycotts. The children learned that there is still work to be done and still work going on. I learned how important it is to have families come in and speak, how much the students enjoy honoring a current struggle, and how much pride they have in seeing their family member as a part of the room.

As these families came and went in the classroom, I noticed how much the students and I were learning together about the world around us, and more importantly, about what we could do to help change what we saw as unjust. I began to get comfortable with the idea of “not closing” the curriculum. By nature and personality, one of my favorite things is to “wrap up” a unit. But one of the things I realized after listening to the many families coming and going was that this work never ends. I accepted that idea.

In February of my fourth year, I asked my students the same question I always asked when we neared the end of this study. Taking my cues from Gandhi who said, “You must be the change you wish to see in this world,” I asked the children, “What do you still think we need to work on in our world and what can we do now?” Each year, the list got longer, from food collections for the homeless to letter campaigns to voice our concerns about the war in Iraq. And as we discussed these ideas, I became more energized and passionate. I would tell them “whatever you think of, we will do,” and I meant it, even if I wasn’t sure how we’d do it yet. Now I had individuals I could ask, families I could reach out to, and research I knew I was capable of doing. My confidence grew as their activist spirits gained strength.

This class loved to write, and as our social action project that year we wrote letters to senators about various issues from gay marriage to the war in Iraq to the homeless in New York. As we received responses, we stopped and read them together. We decided whether or not we wanted to do something to follow up. We never shut the door on this project.

That year, my colleague who had embraced and adapted this new curriculum for her classroom arranged for Dr. Shirin Ebadi to visit with both third-grade classes. Dr. Ebadi had heard from a parent in my colleague’s room that she was a part of our study, and she agreed to speak about the problems and successes in Iran at that moment. She talked about her childhood and how she got involved in helping others. She humanized the experiences that the students had read about all year. They were so inspired that they wrote letters for her to take back to Iran. Dr. Ebadi visited in May. For the first time, I felt that we had kept the momentum going on this work for more than just a couple of weeks.

Walking the Walk

As the rush of Dr. Ebadi's talk and the students' projects subsided near June of my fourth year, a parent overheard my conversation with another teacher in the room about finding a place where I could volunteer. I was looking for a place that wasn't necessarily directly linked to children, but I was hoping to work on behalf of women. She recommended an organization in New York called Sanctuary for Families and made the initial contact for me. Sanctuary's main focus is to provide legal, financial, and other aid to those affected by domestic violence. At the start of my fifth year, I decided that I had waited long enough. Writing letters was a great new addition to our work, but I still felt the need to get involved in what I was asking the kids to do. I was ready to walk the walk.

At Sanctuary I began by doing what I was good at—teaching kids—although I also stuffed envelopes and addressed mailings. Primarily, I work with different students; some of them are survivors of domestic violence and others are family members of those affected. Mostly I just listen to the people I work with, talk with them, and provide a moment when they don't have to think about anything else but what we're doing. I laugh with them and I realize how much they make me believe in the power of survival. Without a doubt, this place has changed me more than I have changed it.

My involvement with Sanctuary and learning to act for change made me realize that there is always more to do. Setting foot inside this building every week gave me the confidence I needed to find other opportunities where I know I can help. With the help of my school, I have attended conferences that have highlighted the social action work educators and others are doing and I have made connections with individuals already walking the walk. It is a funny thing about activism: once you start, you just can't stop. It's contagious and, if you look, you will find so many others around you who are also working for change in many different venues. I have also found people to bring back to the classroom. But most of all, I have found the energy I needed so long ago, the passion for social justice work that I didn't know I had inside of me. And it is the passion that my class notices. I model a commitment to real work in a world filled with injustice, and my students learn that I am not asking the impossible of them.

Fighting the Never-Ending Fight

In the past I've always been a "closer." I love to tie up loose ends and file away bits of curriculum. One of the hardest parts of this work has been getting used to the ongoing nature of the struggle for social justice and to keeping it in front of me at all times. Admittedly, it has been exhausting. But every once in a while a child will bring in a newspaper article about a basketball player coming out as a gay person, or picture of the statue of Gandhi in Union Square; every once in a while, the children will make a connection between their world and what they have learned. They will notice that their food has been picked by migrant farm workers or see a union organizing a boycott. Maybe, after studying these leaders and having these discussions, they will have an opinion about crossing a picket line. Or maybe they will look deeper and find their own causes. My students have started to do this. They've started to make their voices heard. There are no more heads that hang low in the room when we talk about civil rights. Rather, there are involved conversations about the things that they really care about in the world.

I have learned that it is my job as a teacher to inspire students to want to build a better world, that it is okay to use my voice and express my opinions, okay to share my experiences and to model ways for them to participate. Sometimes this work takes longer than I think it will. Sometimes it takes away from other parts of the curriculum. Sometimes people complain that there are topics we just don't get to or things that we do instead of what we originally planned. I have explained to families and administrators before, and I will continue to do so in the future, that these changes occur because my priority is social justice. This is the work that we need to do, as educators. This is the job that we have been hired to do. Anyone can teach someone to add numbers together or to recall a fact from history. It takes a different kind of hard work, dedication, and time to teach children to care about advocacy.

For me, there is a sense of accomplishment and excitement each January, even before the civil rights study begins. The accomplishment comes from knowing that these students will learn more each day than they did the day before, and the excitement comes from wondering what they will choose to do with that information. The focus has shifted from a study of the past to a study of our future

together, and that, to me, is the most important thing I can teach them. Just as the curriculum did for me, I am calling them to action. I am asking them to think about something they believe in and something they want to work for. I am finding ways to support what they want to do and to have them get directly involved. We leave the school building in search of the answers to our questions. And if there are no answers yet, I will have the students strive to find them. I am asking them to become advocates, to become teachers. I am challenging them to build a new social order, a better one, in a more just and equitable world.