

TEACHING
FOR
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

A Democracy and Education Reader

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**Monthly Welfare Grants by Household Size
for New York City**

	HOUSEHOLD SIZE							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
PA	\$352	\$468	\$577	\$687	\$ 800	\$ 884	\$1010	\$1101
FS	\$112	\$178	\$239	\$290	\$ 332	\$ 400	\$ 422	\$ 483
Total	\$464	\$646	\$816	\$977	\$1132	\$1284	\$1432	\$1584

PA = Public Assistance Grant
FS = Food Stamps

Questions for Discussion or Writing

1. Some politicians say that people on welfare are taking advantage of the system and using taxpayers' money to live "high on the hog." Do you think this is fair and truthful? What would you say to these politicians if you had the chance? How could you use your answers above to support your argument?
2. If people on welfare really aren't getting enough to meet their needs, why do you think some politicians say that they are getting too much? Why do you think the media (television, newspapers) don't seem to question what the politicians say?
3. What do you think are some things people on welfare do to make ends meet?

Suggested Activities

1. Interview a friend or relative who is on welfare and find out how they make ends meet.
2. Do a research project on making ends meet with food stamps in different neighborhoods. Cut out supermarket ads from different stores and see which neighborhoods have more bargains. Visit stores and compare food prices in poor and wealthy neighborhoods. Which neighborhoods have twenty-four-hour stores? How safe and clean are the stores? Which neighborhoods have stores that accept food stamps? How many stores are in the different neighborhoods?

Eight years ago I started teaching at Prologue Alternative High School in uptown Chicago. Prologue is a last-chance school for teenagers who have been classified as "unteachable" in public school. As my students began to talk and write about their own lives, it became apparent that they were in no way unteachable. Although they were dissatisfied and disaffected by school, they had learned plenty, in school and on the streets.

The problem was that their "street smarts" were important only to my students themselves. Teachers and administrators generally regarded students' expertise—i.e., their experiences negotiating violence, racial stereotyping, and the legal system—as distracting handicaps. My students had been exhorted to rise above their unfortunate circumstances and to attend to the skill deficiencies which were impeding their progress in school. Although it is true that many of my students had poor basic skills, the students who could read and write well also felt disconnected from school. They seemed to have dismissed it as irrelevant to the true business of life: survival.

They lived with poverty, danger, teen motherhood, incarceration, and the certainty that life was not going to get easier as they got older. If I was going to help these teenagers, we would have to focus on both academic and life skills. We needed to create a learning environment where students' experiences mattered, where they could speak freely about their concerns and fears, and where they could begin to unlearn some of the passivity each of them connected with being "a good student." This was my mandate: to wake each student to the possibility of genuine personal change. If they believed they could create a better world in the classroom, they might come to believe that they could create a better world outside it.

We worked toward this goal by "cocreating" a student-centered curriculum. In English classes this meant that we studied themes and issues suggested by students. These units of instruction were supported by student input at every stage of planning and implementation. Students determined which key issues should be addressed in the unit. They brought in materials (usually pop songs and videos) which illustrated these key issues.

Students generated questions for discussion and rubrics by which we could evaluate individual progress and the overall effectiveness of the unit.

How did these lessons change students individually? How might our classroom activities engender social change? First, my students learned new, active roles as they participated in this fully collaborative, democratic process of curriculum creation. Further, in each of our thematic units, students learned what it feels like to practice socially responsible behaviors. By gaining awareness of differing social realities, they saw their own circumstances in context and began to redefine some of their personal goals and values. Through a close examination of life choices, they questioned and took responsibility for one another. Always, they taught each other.

GAINING AWARENESS OF DIFFERING SOCIAL REALITIES

When my students chose to study "Education," they were eager to tell stories and complain about their past experiences. They relished the thought of indicting their former teachers and administrators in journal entries and class discussions. I had other, more political objectives: Could I show students how to look at their own educational experiences critically? Could I help them get some perspective on the fact that the most familiar institution in their lives had classified them as "throwaways"? Could I help students see the relationship between economic status, educational opportunity, and power?

We began the unit by studying phenomena such as "lowered expectations" and "educational bias." We read fiction and non-fiction, and students wrote about their own struggles and successes in the classroom. We ended the unit by conducting video interviews. One class generated a list of interview questions that included the following:

1. Do you think you learn anything in classes? Do you think the teachers care?
2. What's the average number of students in each of your classes?
3. What is the racial makeup of your school?
4. What conditions are the facilities (gym, library, computers) in?

5. How often do you cut classes?
6. Do you want your children to have the same education you have had?
7. Given your education, where do you think you will be in ten years?

Students interviewed each other about their public school experiences, telling stories of sleeping teachers, chaotic classrooms, school libraries with "no good books left"—generally, of being left on their own, to get what they chose to get from school. Few admitted they had learned anything worthwhile. I wanted them to understand why they had been able to skip so many classes. I wanted them to demand more from their future educational endeavors. They needed and deserved to see that not every school experience mirrored their own.

I assigned excerpts from Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (51–74), which detail and compare the various services and resources available to schools in affluent and poor communities. I supplemented the excerpts from Kozol with copies of a school newspaper, a recent annual report, and a calendar from Niles North High School, in Skokie, Illinois, a prosperous suburban community just north of Chicago.

We brought the video camera to Niles North one afternoon and interviewed a few Niles students for our documentary-in-progress. Prologue students gained exposure to a whole other world there. Although they spent some time gawking at the plush facilities, most of their attention was given to the Niles seniors' interview responses. These students were full of excitement about college and were able to reflect fondly on their twelve years in school.

The resources and opportunities students received at Niles contrasted starkly with those offered to my students by their own public schools and by Prologue. Unlike Prologue students (none of whom wanted their children's education to be like their own), each Niles student expressed the hope that their kids could have "everything I had in school."

When we showed the finished video at an all-school assembly, my students led a thoughtful, humorous discussion which touched on opportunity, inequality, achievement, and individual initiative. This unit engaged students in an analysis of their own experiences, showed them how these experiences compared with

and related to other social realities, and informed their hopes for themselves and their children.

ANALYZING LIFE CHOICES

One year my students said they wanted to study the following topics: cults, gangs, religious fundamentalism, the KKK, and the military. These were separate suggestions, but I recognized common themes—the subjugation of individual will to a "greater" goal, and the power of indoctrination. How could I help students recognize what these ideologies had in common? I wanted my students to think critically about their own choices and about the choices facing the (mostly disenfranchised) adults in our communities. But I could not preach to them. If I did, I immediately set up that familiar, dysfunctional dynamic: I know, they don't. I'm right, they're wrong.

Instead, I would have to begin by using student life as text. We discussed the different kinds of demands made on all of us by parents, friends, and teachers. Students shared stories of what was expected from them as children. This led to an examination of what society expects from us as teenagers, students, boyfriends, girlfriends, Americans. From there, we moved to sacrifice. What should we be willing to give up, if we are asked? Students were arranged in small groups and told to try to reach consensus on issues such as those presented in the box below.

Students struggled to articulate their values and challenged each other on their responses to statements regarding sacrifice. Upon reflection, students began to question some of the affiliations and expectations they had previously accepted. We continued our examination of the uniquely human search for significance, for answers, for something to give our lives meaning. We read poetry (e.e. cummings, "pity this busy monster"), fiction and nonfiction (Yukio Mishima, "Patriotism" and Luis Rodriguez, *La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*) and viewed selected videos (*Born on the Fourth of July*).

Our most provocative reading was an interview with an L.A. gangbanger named Racketeer, which had been reprinted in *Harp-er's* magazine. In this short interview, we learned that Racketeer does not expect or want anything from life but violence; he un-sentimentally predicts his own murder within the next ten years.

I divided students into groups and asked them to create questions about Racketeer's attitude. Here are a few of these student-written questions:

1. If you're a Crip or a Blood is that the same as being in a war? Is it the same as being in the army?
2. Is Racketeer very loyal or very stupid?
3. Do you think it's "worth it" for Racketeer to belong to the Crips? If you say he doesn't have a choice, what are you really saying?

These questions and their written responses displayed students' developing critical faculties. Because we read this piece at the end of the unit, they were able to evaluate Racketeer's blind devotion to his gang. One young woman wrote:

"Racketeer is wasting his life. He may think he is really down with his set [devoted to his fellow gang members and to the gang itself], but he is wrong to give all that. What is he getting from it? Nothing but dead, which is a shame. He ought to be able to see that being asked to give up your whole life when your young and just starting to live your whole life is ridiculous. The only thing worth sacrificing your life for is something you love. His sacrifice is self-destructive. And there is no love in killing your brothers, 'cause that's what they are."

Students then wrote in their journals about the systems they'd been offered to explain, rectify, or save them from injustices of the world. Some wrote about religion. Some wrote about drugs. Despite the class's collective rejection of Racketeer, some wrote about the gang as family. All students struggled to understand their choices and were compelled to evaluate them in reference to a larger social context. We ended the unit by generating the following list of key questions about joining an organization:

1. What do you hope you will get?
2. What are you being asked to give up?
3. Who is in it with you? Are they being asked to give up the same thing?
4. How will you know if your sacrifice turns self-destructive?

Students had started this unit (we called it False Gods) with casual curiosity about systems of social control. Not only did they learn how to analyze these systems critically, they made sure that everyone in the class was able to recognize the telltale signs of a

restrictive ideology. By ending the unit with this sort of defensive checklist, students affirmed their belief in themselves and their concern for each other.

TEACHING EACH OTHER

Clearly, even disaffected students can be interested in instruction if they determine it is of value to them. As their belief in the relevance of the subject increases, so can their investment in what is taught and how. When my students said they wanted to study AIDS (which they do every year), I knew student leaders would arise within the class. Sometimes students who are the most resistant initially become the most zealous peer educators. One seventeen-year-old boy began by warning me, "No way am I gonna sit and listen to someone who's got it. It ain't my problem. I'll be absent." After a few weeks, this same student wrote, "The youth of the world need to know about this disease!" and braved peer pressure to lead an all-school discussion about AIDS.

We established operational guidelines: respect, honesty, and compassion. After a week or two of teacher-led, mostly informational sessions, my students worked in groups preparing role plays, discussion questions, and original plays to share with their peers in and out of the classroom. Even students who had been reluctant to work in small groups before were eager to collaborate with peers during the AIDS unit. They welcomed the chance to express "the truth" about teens, sex, and drugs. I found students to be most forthright, responsible, and mature when I trusted them—that is, when I kept out of this creative work.

In teams, students planned activities that would highlight the real-life situations that put teens at risk for AIDS. They collected information about sexuality, birth control, HIV testing, substance abuse, counseling, crisis hot lines, and other issues related to AIDS. As students led peer education sessions, they were seen as credible, powerful role models by other Prologue students. Together, all students learned the facts, unlearned their prejudices, and engaged in candid discussions.

Peer educators began with a discussion of myths associated with AIDS. After this brief presentation, they moved on to risk taking in general. Why do people take risks? What kinds of risks do teenagers take? Do boys and girls usually like to take the same

types of risks? What kinds of risks do individual students in the class enjoy? What puts teens at risk for HIV?

Students were then divided into small, single-sex groups of four or five. Based on their own experiences, each group wrote out a short, detailed description of a typical social evening for a typical male or female teenager, from pre-party preparations to post-party behavior. When groups finished writing and reading aloud their descriptions, the class identified certain actions or attributes as dangerous (provocative clothing, drug use, or aggressive behavior) and discussed why these put the teenager at risk.

One group of girls wrote the following scenario. They underlined the risks, and then we analyzed them as a class:

"Mercedes got ready by putting on her *leather miniskirt and sheer blouse and red high heels*. She did her hair and makeup and her friend, Denise came to pick her up in her boyfriend mother car. She *didn't have a drivers lisen* [license] but the party was close by and her *boyfriend would take care of both of them*. She handed Mercedes a *half a joint* and they drove to the party at the party the lights were low and this one boy that Mercedes had been liking came up to her with a 40. He looked at her in her hot outfit and they *drinking* out of the same bottle together and *dancing real slow*."

The class concluded that her clothes, the joint, and the alcohol put Mercedes in danger of having unprotected sex and thus being at risk for HIV infection.

In other sessions, students acted out plays they wrote themselves, and then the actors led discussions, asking questions like, "What would you have done in my situation?" Another effective instructional technique is for the teacher to prepare a script, have the class act it out, and then ask the class to discuss what worked, what didn't work, and how they would change the scene to reflect more accurately the reality they knew.

In these activities, Prologue students came to see themselves as powerful, valid sources of knowledge and experience. They worked together to create an exciting learning environment which was grounded in their own realities. They learned to recognize and evaluate the barriers which separate all of us according to class and race, lifestyle and geography.

Here in Chicago, in 1995, no teacher has to tell a teenager that we need drastic social change. The most useful thing we can

do is help each student believe in change itself. As a classroom teacher, I cannot really know if or how these lessons and my students will change the world. What I do know is that my students at Prologue took part in creating a new classroom dynamic. They came to know what it's like to be in control of their own educations, and what it feels like to enrich others' learning. They wrestled with the responsibility inherent in this democratic experience. They changed themselves.

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OPINIONNAIRE:
WHAT WILL YOU SACRIFICE?

Complete this partial list of things that we are supposed to be willing to sacrifice in various roles and situations:

1. "Citizens should be willing to give up MONEY, _____, and _____ for their country."
2. "A friend should be willing to give up _____, _____, and _____ for his or her friend."
3. "A woman should be willing to give up _____, _____, and _____ for her _____"
4. "A man should be willing to give up _____, _____, and _____ for his _____"

—Afterword
Some Reflections on
Teaching for Social Justice

Herbert Kohl

The idea that you have to advocate teaching for social justice is a sad statement about the state of moral sensibility in our schools and society. I remember one of my elementary school students who was involved in a civil rights demonstration saying, "You know, Mr. Kohl, you can get arrested for stirring up justice." You can also be fired as a teacher for stirring up ideas and provoking conversations that challenge privilege and try to make issues of democracy and equity work in the everyday life of the classroom. The problem is that many people do not believe that justice is a value worth fighting for. Sadly, this applies as much to children as it does to adults. One cannot simply assume that because an action or sentiment is just, fair, or compassionate that it will be popular or embraced. At this moment in our history, there are many sanctions for the idea that self-interest overrides communal sanity and compassion. The enemy of teaching for social justice is "The Real World," which is characterized as hard, competitive, and unrelenting in its pursuit of personal gain and perpetuation of bias and institutional and economic inequities.

So what are social justice teachers—that is one who cares about nurturing all children and is enraged at the prospects of any of her or his students dying young, being hungry, or living meaningless and despairing lives—to do in the classroom so that they go against the grain and work in the service of their students?

I have several suggestions, some pedagogical and some personal. First of all, don't teach against your conscience or align yourself with texts, people, and rules that hurt children. Resist in as creative a way as you can, through humor, developing and using alternatives, and organizing for social and educational change with others who feel as you do. Don't become isolated or alone in your efforts. Reach out to other teachers, to community leaders, church people, parents. Try to survive, but don't make your survival in a particular job the overriding determinant of what you will or won't do. Find a school where you can do your