

# Read All About It

## Exploring Social Justice with Our Students: Literature as a Tool for Conversation and Change

by Ann Berger-Knorr,  
Lesley Colabucci,  
and Mary Napoli

In an era of high stakes testing, scripted programs, core standards, and teacher accountability, how do we, as educators, find the time to explore issues of social justice with our students? The answer, we believe, lies in our commitment to a multicultural/social justice education; that is, a belief in a philosophy that pushes our teaching beyond simplistic conceptualizations of tolerance and acceptance toward democratic visions of change and transformation - in ourselves, schooling, and society.

In her article, "Using Their Words, Six Elements of Social Justice Design for the Elementary Classroom," Picower (2012a) provides a framework for implementing six elements of social justice. These include: Self Love and Knowledge, Respect for Others, Issues of Social Injustice, Social Movements and Social Change, Awareness Raising, and Social Action. While it is not necessary to incorporate all six elements in every unit of study, Picower (2012a) argues that all elements "build upon each other sequentially, and all should be addressed throughout the year" (p. 3). Thus, by addressing all six elements in the classroom, "students develop an analysis of oppression and tools to take action" (p. 1).

In this book review column, we share a collection of books that focus on the various elements of social justice for teachers and students to explore together. The selections offered are recently published and are appropriate for a range of ages and audiences across various classroom settings. Moreover, with the implementation of common core standards, the books provide for teachers many opportunities in which to incorporate social studies content, close readings, and argumentation about text. Here, teachers can touch upon and scaffold students to "[r]ead and respond to essential content of text" (PDE, SAS, 1.2.1.E.) and, "[m]ake inferences from text when studying a topic (e.g., science, social studies) and draw conclusions citing evidence from the text to support answers" (PDE, SAS, 1.2.2.D), for example. In an effort to guide our readers, we have organized our recommendations using Picower's (2012a) framework.

Through exploration, we hope these books foster and extend the values of a multicultural/social justice education and serve as an important springboard for thought-provoking conversations about ourselves, others, social injustices, social movements, social awareness, and social action - in our own lives as well as the larger world.

### Self-Love and Knowledge

In element one, Self-Love and Knowledge, "[t]eachers provide students opportunities to learn who they are and where they come from. A sense of dignity in their culture, heritage, ethnicity/race, religion, skin tone, gender, etc. is cultivated in the classroom. Students learn about different aspects of their identity and history associated with it. Negative stereotypes about students' identities are deconstructed" (Picower, 2012b, para. 1). Bunting's (2006) *One Green Apple* best exemplifies self-love and knowledge. Hudes' (2010) *Welcome to My Neighborhood* and Yolen & Stemple's (2010) *Not All Princesses Dress in Pink* also capture this element. Each of these books can be used with students as a catalyst for the examination of one's self in relation to others.

**Bunting, E. (2006). *One green apple*.  
New York, NY: Clarion.**

This poignant picture book introduces readers to Farah, an immigrant girl of Arab descent, who begins attending a new school in the United States. On her second day of school, she accompanies her class on a field trip to the apple orchard where each student picks an apple to be made into apple cider. Farah feels different from the other children even though she wears jeans and a T-shirt. She does not speak English and she wears a duppata, a headscarf. Although she notices differences between her home country and her new school, she also discovers similarities that make her feel less homesick. As the end of the story, she symbolically drops her green apple into the cider press. She helps to push the large handle of the apple press and then takes a drink. Her classmates praise her as she pronounces her first English word, "App-ell" and she knows that this will be the first of many words that she will learn. Ted Lewin's illustrations add depth to the narrative and capture Farah's thoughts and emotions while the last frame showing Farah's happy smile provides a message of hope and pride.

### Respect for Others

In element two, Respect for Others, "[t]eachers provide opportunities for students to share their knowledge about their own cultural background with their classmates. The goal is to create a climate of respect for diversity through students' learning to listen with kindness and empathy to the experiences of their peers. Students deconstruct stereotypes

about their peers' identities" (Picower, 2012b, para. 2). Woodson's (2012) *Each Kindness* is a "must read" for this particular element. Other books include: Hoffman's (2010) *The Great Big Book of Families* and Tonatiuh's (2010) *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*. Books such as these can be used as models for fostering understanding, kindness, and respect toward others who are different from us.

**Woodson, J. (2012). *Each kindness*. New York, NY: Nancy Paulsen Books/Penguin Young Readers Group.**

In a first-person voice, Chloe shares information about the new girl in school, Maya, who sits next to her and tries to be friends. However, Chloe and her group of friends decide that they do not want to associate with Maya - who is poor - or play any of the games that she shares with them. The girls' subtle form of bullying and meanness intensifies as Maya tries to reach out for opportunities to be friends. One day, Chloe's teacher demonstrates the ripple effect of kindness using a bowl of water and a pebble. The students watch as their teacher, Ms. Albert, drops a small stone into a bowl of water. As she does, their teacher laments, "Each little thing we do goes out, like a ripple, into the world." As Chloe's classmates share examples of the kind things they have done, Chloe has nothing to share. Soon, the class learns that Maya has moved away and will not return to the school. Chloe reflects on all of the ways that she could have been kind to Maya. In this powerful picture book, Jacqueline Woodson tackles an important lesson about small acts of kindness and E.B. Lewis' masterful illustrations evoke emotion that will certainly guide readers to a deeper understanding of what it means to be kind.

### Issues of Social Injustice

In element three, Issues of Social Injustice, "[t]eachers move from 'celebrating diversity' to an exploration of how diversity has differently impacted various groups of people. Students learn about the history of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, religious intolerance etc. and how these forms of oppression have affected different communities. Teachers make links that show how the historical roots of oppression impact the lived experiences and material conditions of people today" (Picower, 2012b, para. 3). Mason's (2011) *These Hands* provides a powerful story and example of social injustice, specifically racial inequality. Other examples which capture a range of social injustices include: Amado's (2007) *Tricycle* (disparities in wealth and social class), Lyon's (2009) *You and Me and Home Sweet Home* (homelessness and poverty), DiPuchhio's (2008) *Grace for President* (gender inequities), and O'Brien's (2008) *Afghan Dreams: Young voices of Afghanistan* (oppressive conditions of religious intolerance and war). Each of these books can be used as a springboard for discussing and "taking up" important social issues with students across a range of ages.

**Mason, M. (2011). *These hands*. [Illustrated by F. Cooper]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.**

*These Hands* is a beautifully written picture book sharing a grandfather's story to his grandson telling of the wonderful things he has done with his hands. From tying knots, to playing the piano, shuffling cards, and playing baseball, this grandfather has many plans to share these skills with his beloved. However, in the story, the grandfather also shares how he was not allowed to use his hands as a bread dough mixer or bread dough handler in the Detroit Wonder Bread Factory in the 1950s and '60s - because he is African American. "These hands were only allowed to sweep the floors and work the line and load the trucks. Because the bosses said white people would not want to eat bread touched by these hands." As the story continues, readers learn how many hands joined together to fight the discriminatory practices and unwritten rules against African Americans during this time. This moving story - coupled with the author's notes - is a must read for a further understanding of racial injustice and the role civil rights and labor movements played in the fight for fair and equal treatment of workers in the workplace.

### Social Movements and Social Change

In element four Social Movements and Social Change, "[t]eachers share examples of movements of iconic and everyday people standing together to address the issues of social injustice ... Rather than leaving students feeling overwhelmed and defeated, teachers help students understand that working together, ordinary people have united to create change" (Picower, 2012b, para. 4). Evan's (2012) *We March* captures an outstanding portrayal of element four, highlighting the civil rights movement. Other books capturing important social movements which have been instrumental in societal change include: Murphy's (2011) *Marching with Aunt Susan* (women's rights), Lyon's (2011) *Which Side Are You On* (workers' rights and labor unions), Johnson's (2010) *Seeds of Change* (environmentalism), and Zalben's (2006) *Paths to Peace: People Who Changed the World* (peace movement).

**Evans, Shane W. (2012). *We march*. New York: Roaring Brook Press.**

In a modest sixty-one words, this inspiring picture book conveys the power of determination and hope as a family and a community join together to march for freedom and justice. *We March* captures a day in the life of a family as they prepare for what is known as the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. Rising early in the morning, the family meets at a local church with other community members to pray for strength and prepare signs of protest before boarding a bus to Washington. Carried out on the same day as Martin Luther King Jr.'s historic "I have

a dream” speech, the event is an important one as the family marches and sings and dreams of freedom - along with the thousands of others who gathered and marched on this eventful day.

### Awareness Raising

In element five, Awareness Raising, “[t]eachers provide opportunities for students to teach others about the issues they have learned about. This allows students who feel passionately about particular issues to become advocates by raising awareness of other students, teachers, family, and community members. It is important to recognize that while raising awareness is a necessary and important pre-cursor for action, it by itself does not translate into change” (Picower, 2012b, para. 5). Pin’s (2005) *When I Grow Up, I Will Win the Nobel Peace Prize* offers a noteworthy example of awareness and inspiration for younger readers. Two additional books which raise awareness about peace, specifically, include: Hine’s (2011) *Peaceful Pieces* and Kerley’s (2007) *A Little Peace*.

**Pin, I. (2005). When I grow up, I will win the Nobel Peace Prize. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.**

From loving one’s neighbor, creating peace, saving animals from cruelty, sharing with the poor, protecting the environment, providing aid to the needy, and fighting intolerance, this book reinforces that there is “much to do” and best “to get started right away.” Told from the perspective of one small boy, this inspirational picture book highlights the hopes and dreams of achieving many great things, one of which is becoming a Nobel peace prize winner. Readers will enjoy the cartoon-like illustrations portraying this boy in his own physical surroundings. While the story is told with innocence and the illustrations are often humorous, this book is not to be taken lightly. It contains a powerful message about human agency and raises awareness about the many causes still worth fighting for.

### Social Action

In element six, Social Action, “[t]eachers provide opportunities to take action on issues that affect students and their communities. Students identify issues they feel passionate about and learn the skills of creating change firsthand” (Picower, 2012b, para. 6). Shoveller’s (2006) *Ryan and Jimmy and the Well in Africa that Brought Them Together* best captures this particular element. Other books which exemplify social action include: Deedy’s (2012) *14 Cows for America*, Rockcliff’s (2012) *My Heart Will Not Sit Down*, and Kamkwamba & Mealer’s (2012) *The Boy who Harnessed the Wind*. Each of these books provides an endearing example of individuals who are inspired to take action in the name of compassion and human decency. The books can be used as a catalyst for encouraging students to take action in their own lives.

**Shoveller, H. (2006). Ryan and Jimmy and the well in Africa that brought them together. Tonawanda, NY: Kids Can Press.**

When Ryan Hreljac of Kemptville, Ontario was in first grade, he learned that it would only cost \$70.00 to purchase a well for an entire village in Africa. Wanting to make a difference, he immediately sprang into action. Through donations and the earning of money from completing chores, Ryan was successful. However, his dream of helping the villagers purchase a well far surpassed raising enough money to buy just one well. He started to speak locally, nationally, and internationally about Africa’s poverty stricken villages and the paucity of safe drinking water. Ryan soon developed a close friendship with Jimmy, who was orphaned by Ugandan rebels. When Ryan returned to Canada, his friend Jimmy was captured by Ugandan rebels who planned to kill him. With the help of many people, Jimmy was brought to safety and now lives with Ryan and his family. Today, they both work toward improving the living conditions and drinking water in Africa. Consequently, there are over 200 wells that have been built as a result of Ryan’s Well Foundation ([www.ryanwell.ca](http://www.ryanwell.ca)). This inspirational story will reinforce that with determination, cooperation, courage, and compassion, anything is possible.

Taken together, the aforementioned books provide examples of each of the elements of a social justice education. Teachers, in their classrooms, can introduce students to units of study by element (e.g., a week long study of self-love and knowledge; a week long study of respect for others, etc.), for example. Or, they can introduce students to units of study by themes (e.g., race and culture, civil rights movement, homelessness, environmentalism, war and peace, gender and feminism, etc.) across each of the six elements. Either way, teachers will be exploring social justice with their students and using literature as a tool for conversation and change.

### About the Authors

Ann Berger-Knorr is an Assistant Professor of Literacy Education at Penn State Harrisburg. She is the Coordinator of the Master’s in Education in Literacy Education Program. She can be reached at: [alb13@psu.edu](mailto:alb13@psu.edu).

Lesley Colabucci is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Millersville University. She is currently serving on the Notable Children’s Books in the Language Arts committee. She can be reached at [Lesley.colabucci@millersville.edu](mailto:Lesley.colabucci@millersville.edu).

Mary Napoli is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Penn State Harrisburg. She currently serves on the NCTE Poetry Committee which chooses the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. She can be reached at: [mxn130@psu.edu](mailto:mxn130@psu.edu).

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