



Children Taking Action for Social Change

Kathy G. Short

University of Arizona

(shortk@u.arizona.edu)

Abstract: Literature provides an opportunity for children to immerse themselves in conceptual ways of thinking and living in the world. Engagements with global literature can help children develop understandings about power and human rights, delve into critical inquiries about themselves and the world, and take action for social change. Involving children in authentic and meaningful action requires the consideration of complex issues and criteria.

Key words: literature, action, inquiry, dialogue, social justice.

Taking action to create change in the world is essential to building bridges across global cultures. Freire (1970) argues that action must grow out of critique and hope in order to lead to social change. Discussions around literature often involve critiques of discrimination and oppression in our world as students question “what is” and challenge the status quo. These discussions include talk about “what if” and the possibilities for change to create a better world. Less frequent is talk that leads to meaningful action. Many of the action projects in schools are adult-imposed, not child-initiated, and focused on charity rather than social change.

The tension of how to support children in taking action has been a major focus in a four-year school-wide research project on building intercultural understanding through engagements around global literature (Short, 2009). During an inquiry into human rights, students documented unfair events and reflected on their rights in the school before engaging in literature experiences to explore global human rights issues. They particularly found the accounts of children taking action compelling because they viewed action as the responsibility of adults. They then moved back into their school context to investigate and take action on issues they considered significant. An inquiry into power led them to explore the interconnections of power with hunger. They started with an exploration of “tight times” to connect with the economic crisis in their community and then examined the root causes of hunger locally and globally through fiction and nonfiction, films, guest speakers,



and a global banquet. Only after examining root causes did children identify ways to address hunger through working with community and global organizations that focus on sustainability so those receiving a gift take their own action.

Authentic Approaches to Taking Action

We struggled with ways of taking action that were not adult-imposed projects and that went beyond charity or volunteering so that children could identify and act on the issues underlying global problems. Our findings from this action research and a review of scholarly literature on service learning and critical pedagogy led to the development of criteria to consider in developing action projects that are authentic and meaningful for children.

Develops through Inquiry and Experience. The action needs to be grounded in the lives and experiences of children and in their knowledge about the context for that action, so that the action is not an isolated project, but grows out of inquiry and understanding. Kaye (2004) argues that service must be combined with learning so that the content that children are exploring through inquiry informs service and the service drives further learning and inquiry. Action goes beyond volunteering to collect trash in a stream, for example, to also include analyzing that trash, figuring out the sources, and working with the community to reduce pollution. Students need time for reflection, inquiry, and the learning of values, strategies, and content. In our research, we started each inquiry with children's life experiences and continuously attended to their interests, tensions, and understandings.

Meets Genuine Needs. The action must meet an actual need that is recognized by children. Children need time to research and to understand the issue from multiple perspectives by investigating whether a need actually exists and the nature of that need. For example, the second graders thought that trash on the playground came from the local landfill. Their research revealed that children were the source of the trash and that the problem was the location of the trash barrel on the playground.



Determining a need is not enough – children also must see the need as significant. Visits by a “Lost Boy” from the Sudan and a local food bank volunteer created a sense of urgency for children to take action on the root causes of hunger. An understanding of need can also be developed through literature, as occurred with the fourth grade students who developed a strong connection with children in refugee camps through books such as *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Williams, 2007).

Builds Collaborative Relationships. Reaching out to work *with* others by developing partnerships and sharing responsibility with community members, parents, organizations, and students is critical to authentic action. These collaborative relationships involve learning about each other and gaining mutual respect, understanding and appreciation. Since the human rights inquiry occurred at the end of the fifth graders’ final year in the school, they wondered why they should take action for kids’ rights when they would not benefit. When they realized that they had a unique perspective because of their knowledge of the school, they took responsibility to help fourth graders consider ways to work with adults in developing playground rules. The fourth graders made a shift when they interviewed the playground monitor and realized she was not their enemy but someone to think with about rules. In both cases, the students realized that they could take more effective action by collaborating with others.

Results in Mutual Exchanges. Many action projects in schools take the form of charity – “let’s help the poor and unfortunate.” Students raise money to send away to those experiencing hardship. The giving goes in one direction and students remain distanced from those whom they are helping. Authentic action occurs when there is a mutual exchange of ideas, information, and skills among *all* participants. Each person sees the others as having something to share and everyone gains from the experience. By focusing on human rights within the school context before examining global issues, students directly interacted with those involved with the action and recognized how much they were learning from the experience.



Literature can be a tool for envisioning a mutual exchange even when children do not have direct interaction with recipients. The fourth graders raised money for refugee children in Darfur because they felt that they had learned so much from books, such as *Brothers in Hope* (Williams, 2005), about courage and perseverance in the face of tremendous hardship and wanted to give something back in return. Their action came out of respect, rather than pity.

Includes Action and Reflection. Authentic action is based in children having responsibility throughout the process, including witnessing the outcome of their action when possible. A continuous cycle of action and reflection spirals throughout the process – identifying a problem, researching to understand it, planning, anticipating consequences of the action, taking action, observing what happens, reflecting on what occurs, accepting responsibility for consequences, and then acting again. Dewey (1938) argues that when learners do not have the time to reflect on action, they lose much of the learning potential from an experience. A balance of action and reflection allows children to be aware of the impact of their work on their thinking and life as well as on others, which is essential to mutual exchanges.

Students may move across more than one type of action within a project. In the power and hunger inquiry, students engaged in *research for action* to determine the needs and the types of organizations that take action on hunger. The fifth grade students engaged in *direct action* to raise money for a classmate whose family was facing hunger and eviction after the sudden death of the father and the mother's loss of her job. The first graders engaged in *indirect action* as they raised money for seeds to support a community garden project at the local food bank. Third graders took *indirect action* by raising money for global projects that involved sustainability, an idea that became significant through books such as *Beatrice's Goat* (McBrier, 2001). The first graders engaged in *advocacy for action* by creating posters about the ways that gardens could allow a family to support themselves. As students acted and reflected, they developed a range of perspectives and problem-solving strategies to carry into new situations.



Invites Student Voice and Choice. Too often, the action projects that occur in schools are conceived and directed by adults, with little room for student voice or choice. Rosenblatt (1938) argues that in classrooms based on democratic social relationships, students and teachers live together as equals, not in hierarchies of power where a few decide for all. Students have the right to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives and in the “behind the scenes” thinking that leads to determining those choices. The valuing of individual voices is balanced within recognition of group responsibility.

We found that the younger children felt they did not have responsibility because they did not believe they could take action – action was something adults do for them. We read picture books such as *Fred Stays with Me* (Coffelt, 2007) to help them realize that they negotiate with their parents and are not powerless. The fourth and fifth graders responded to our focus on human rights with a sense of empowerment; however, their first response was to use this power for their own benefit without considering others. The fourth graders wanted to determine the playground rules without input from other classrooms, and a fifth grader believed he should be able to do his math work whenever he wanted without considering the teacher and other students. Several participation models raise issues about children’s involvement in decision making, based on the realization that the focus of power and control usually remains with adults who work *for* children rather than *with* children. The most well-known is Roger Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Participation that emphasizes the effect of different types of adult/child interactions on the distribution of power and control. Harry Shier (2001) examined the processes that occur within interactions and the kinds of attitudes, actions, and practices that schools can develop for a participatory approach to action.

Involves Civic/Global Responsibility for Social Justice. Civic engagement is often viewed as being a good citizen by voting, volunteering and engaging in political activities that do not involve challenging the status quo. Taking civic or global responsibility from a social justice perspective (Freire, 1970) puts the focus on issues of



power and on challenging domination and oppression by looking at the social conditions within local and global communities through:

- Critique - asking what is; not just accepting problems as the way things are, but asking *why* those problems exist, what are the underlying issues, and who benefits.
- Hope – imagining what if and considering alternative ways of living in order to develop a vision of equity and justice.
- Action – taking action to work for social justice and change. This action grows out of critique and hope, questions and vision

Civic responsibility involves going below the surface of a problem to get at root causes, social contexts, beliefs, and consequences. Children learn to problematize and develop critical consciousness to work for social change. They do not just serve lunch in a soup kitchen; they also analyze the reasons for poverty in the community. They may visit seniors in a nursing home, but they also explore why the elderly are isolated in our society. The canned food drives in many U.S. schools reinforce stereotypes of the poor, oversimplify problems and solutions, and fail to teach an understanding of the causes of poverty (Cowhey, 2006). Instead of a “give the helpless a handout” approach, civic engagement involves challenging stereotypes of those who live in poverty, developing an understanding of the complex causes of poverty, introducing activists who work at these causes, and removing the stigma of poverty. Our study of hunger focused on exploring the multiple causes of hunger, both in the U.S. and the world, through fiction and nonfiction. Only near the end of the inquiry did students move into considering the types of action they might want to take, given those causes.

Civic engagement is not just focusing on local or global needs but encouraging students to question prevailing practices and to develop ideas for making the world a better place. Their focus is social change, not just filling a gap in services or donating money, but questioning the conditions in society that create a need and seeking to alter those conditions. Instead of charity, the focus is promoting change and transformative practices, not just empowerment (Wade, 2000). In the human rights inquiry, children raised issues



about prevailing practices in which adults make rules for the playground and lunchroom without providing space for their voices. Initially, they wanted to make the rules, but gradually realized the need to work with adults and other children in the school to develop rules that work for everyone. In the hunger inquiry, students became aware that enough food exists in the world to feed everyone and critically examined the factors that lead to unequal distribution of that food.

Final Reflection

Children are constructing themselves as human beings by developing the ways in which they think about and take action within their lives and world. Our challenge is to build on children's lived experiences to move toward multiple perspectives and action. Our research indicates the complexity of the difficult issues that must be addressed within schools to move beyond *talk* about global issues into authentic and meaningful action for social change.

A key factor in making this shift is *time* – time to research root causes of global and local problems, to explore multiple perspectives on those problems, and to critique, hope, act and reflect on that action. Taking action runs counter to the individualistic and materialistic nature of many societies and to adult views of children as needing protection. Many children do *not* have opportunities to engage meaningfully in making decisions that affect their lives. Adults determine their choices and protect children instead of engaging them in experiences where they gain new perspectives and strategies for problem-posing and problem-solving. Children need perspective, not protection. Through engagements with global literature, children can develop complex understandings about power and human rights, engage in critical inquiries about themselves and the world, and take action to create a better world.

Bibliography

COFFELT, Nancy (2007), *Fred stays with me*, ill. T. Tusa, Boston: Little, Brown.



- COWHEY, Mary (2006), *Black ants and Buddhists*, Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- DEWEY, John (1938), *Education and experience*, New York: Collier.
- FREIRE, Paulo (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- HART, Roger (1992), *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship*, Florence: UNICEF.
- KAYE, Catherine (2003), *The complete guide to service learning*, Minneapolis: Free Spirit.
- MCBRIER, P. (2001), *Beatrice's goat*, ill. L. Lohstoeter, New York: Simon & Schuster.
- ROSENBLATT, Louise (1938), *Literature as exploration*, Chicago: Modern Language.
- SHIER, Harry (2001), "Pathways to participation", in *Children and Society*, 15, pp. 107-117.
- SHORT, Kathy (2009), "Critically reading the word and the world", in *Bookbird*, 47 (2), pp. 1-10.
- WADE, Rahima (2000), "Beyond charity: Service learning for social justice", in *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 12:4, pp. 6-9.
- WILLIAMS, Karen (2007), *Four feet, two sandals*, ill. D. Chayka, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman.
- WILLIAMS, Mary (2005), *Brothers in hope*, ill. G. Christie, New York: Lee & Low.

