

Children's Agency for Taking Action



Children need agency in order to believe that they can take action and exert power in a particular situation. Their agency is often ignored in school projects directed by adults that result in charity rather than authentic action. In one primary school, teachers and children explored global issues and alternatives for taking action locally and globally through inquiries into human rights and hunger. Literature played a key role in supporting these inquiries by offering demonstrations of authentic action.

The experience of trauma is increasingly represented in global children's literature through portrayals of the suffering and pain experienced by children from war, genocide, all types of violence, racism, enslavement, abuse, and natural disasters. In these stories, children are typically portrayed as innocent, sometimes as "victims" who require adult protection and guidance, and other times as "saviors" who survive trauma and offer an example of triumph over pain through love, trust, hope, and perseverance (Smith). Many of these texts focus on the ways in which children recover from physical and psychic pain.

The traumas experienced by children often occur within social domains that are shaped by adults who create the situations leading to those traumas. Higonnet raises the issue of the effect of national politics and societal experiences on a young person's sense of agency. A child's sense of agency is critical, not only in the healing process, but also in whether children feel some control within the situation

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and a sense of being able to take action to better the lives of themselves and others. Agency reflects children's belief in their capacity to take action or exert power within a particular context (Nieto). The focus on agency reflects a shift in views of childhood from adults making assumptions about the *needs* of children and what is best for them to an emphasis on the *rights* of children to have their perspectives taken seriously and to participate in decision-making. This view of childhood challenges Western values that often construct children as passive recipients of adults' actions rather than as agents (Smith).

My interest in children's sense of agency and their willingness to take action when faced with social injustice became a tension during an inquiry with children on human rights. The children were surprised that they would be expected to take action—they saw action as the responsibility of adults. Their skepticism led me to examine the types of action projects that typically occur in schools. I realized that most projects take the form of charity or volunteering rather than authentic action. The teachers at the school were concerned about the children's views of themselves as lacking agency because we believed that willingness to take action is essential to intercultural understanding (Case). Also, children's sense of agency connects to their ability to cope with trauma,

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both in their own lives and in their reading of global literature that raises issues of trauma. The children's tension about their responsibility to take action led to shifting the focus of our inquiry from human rights to action and an exploration of the ways children can take action for social change. This article focuses on this inquiry and on the issues surrounding the ways in which teachers can engage children with literature to encourage their sense of agency and action.

Taking Authentic Action in School Contexts

The most common form of action in many schools is charity, where children raise money in response to hunger, violence, or natural disasters. These fundraisers are often initiated by adults as isolated projects, and children spend their time figuring out how to raise money rather than examining the issues. This “give the unfortunate a handout” approach may invoke children's compassion, but it does so from a stance of pity rather than an informed understanding, sense of connection with children in these situations, or a belief in their own ability to make a difference. In the United States, the annual canned food drives that occur at Thanksgiving require children to bring cans from their parents' pantries for the community food bank to be given to the “poor” without a sense of commitment or understanding of the families receiving the food. Another common form of action is volunteering where children pick up trash on the playground, clean a vacant lot or polluted stream, or visit the elderly in a nursing home.

Although charity and volunteering are valid ways to respond to

needs, they do not involve taking action for social change or the development of new possibilities. These actions are not embedded in children's inquiries and experiences and so the action does not grow out of understanding and goes no further than raising money or picking up trash. Collecting trash in a stream is volunteering; action becomes possible when children analyze that trash, figure out sources, and work with the community to reduce pollution (Cowhey). Children need time to understand the need and research the context of that need so that the action addresses the root causes of local and global problems, rather than only dealing with surface issues. Literature can play a critical role in children developing understandings of the root causes of hunger, pollution, or violence. These understandings, in turn, lead to a different set of actions and to developing compassion for those who are in need. Taking action for social change is more than filling a gap in services or donating money; it involves encouraging students to question prevailing practices and to work at making the world a better place (Freire).

Many charity projects involve one-directional giving where children remain distanced from those experiencing hardship. Authentic action grows out of a mutual exchange where everyone gains from the experience (Wade). Literature can provide a way for a mutual exchange even when children do not have direct interactions with the recipients of their actions, because children gain a sense of connection through the characters in the books. Children also need to have responsibility throughout the process, including witnessing the outcomes of their action when possible. When their actions always involve sending off money or collecting cans that others deliver, they are not aware of the impact of their work and are not able to engage in a continuous process of action, reflection, and problem-solving in order to effectively take action within a particular context (Kaye).

Frequently, the action projects in schools are conceived and directed by adults with little room for student voice or choice. Adults introduce the project to children, engage them in fund-raising, and then send the money off to the organization. The problem, of course, is that children do not develop a sense of their own agency for taking action, and the power and control stays in the hands of adults instead of shared collaboratively. Adults work *for* children rather than *with* children (Hart). Over time, children come to accept this hierarchy, unless presented with alternative ways in which to view their agency. Literature can provide one means of offering alternatives for how they view their responsibility and for developing their agency.

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An Inquiry on Rights and Taking Action

The context for this inquiry was a small public school of 200 students, ages 5-12, within a large urban district in the American Southwest with a culturally diverse population. We collaboratively engaged in a 4-year

action research project as educators to develop a curriculum focused on global inquiry through literature and the arts, using a curriculum framework to enact our theoretical beliefs and organize instruction. This framework highlights multiple ways of engaging with global literature to support children's critical explorations of their own cultural identities, ways of living within specific global cultures, the range of cultural perspectives within any unit of study, and inquiries into complex global issues (Short).

As part of our professional learning, we developed a school-wide inquiry into human rights to explore critical inquiries that might lead to social action. Our initial plan was to focus on issues of rights within the school, expand to examining human rights across the world, and culminate with children engaging in their own investigations of specific human rights issues from which they would take action.

Developing Conceptual Understandings about Rights

The human rights inquiry focused on a conceptual understanding of rights as the needs we have as human beings in order to live in a society. We knew that children would struggle with the difference between needs and wants as well as the balance of individual voice with group responsibility. We realized that this concept plays out in students' lives through their complaints about what is "unfair," especially at lunch or recess, and so decided to begin with concepts of fairness. We read aloud *A Fine Fine School* (Creech 2001), about a principal who loves his school so much that he wants to have school every day of the year, to begin our conversations about unfair decisions in school. We also put out many picture books about school for browsing, such as *The Recess Queen* (O'Neill 2002) and *Say Something* (Moss 2008), that focus on bullying and teasing on playgrounds, lunchrooms, and buses. These books naturally led to children sharing their own stories about unfair things that had happened to them at school.

Each student created a map of the school, such as Maria's map above, and labeled places

where unfair events had occurred and shared those stories with a partner. Many stories involved adults who made them wait in lines, stopped their play at recess, made up arbitrary rules, or forced them to sit silently in the lunchroom. Other stories focused on peers, such as not being chosen for a team at recess, losing a friend, getting hit or pushed, or being teased or taunted.

Once the maps were shared, we talked about what determines whether we consider something fair, and the notion of unfairness as the sense that your rights are violated in some way. Students worked in small groups to create lists of their rights within the school based on the entries on their unfair maps, such as the right to be treated with respect and the right to have more places to play. These discussions were intense and engaged, providing them with a conceptual understanding of rights as well as strong connections to their own experiences.

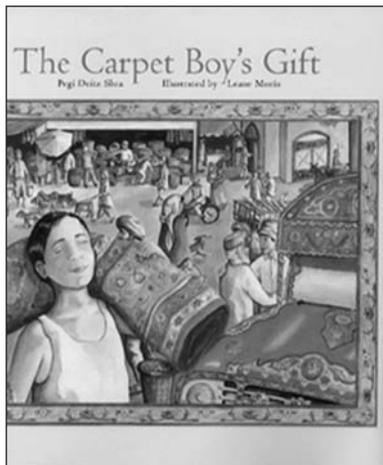
The younger children, especially the first and second graders, were convinced that they did not have responsibility for taking action because they believed action was something that adults do for them. They considered their rights as doing what adults tell them. They did not see themselves as having agency to make choices that lead to actions and consequences. We read picture books, such as *Fred Stays with Me* (Coffelt 2007), *Daddy is a Monster Sometimes* (Step toe 1983), and *Evan's Corner* (Hill 1993), about children who negotiate with their parents, to help children realize that they are not powerless. In our discussion of *Daddy is a Monster Sometimes*, about two children who manipulate adults to get an extra ice cream cone, the children shared the strategies and sad faces they used on their parents as six-year-olds as a persuasive technique.

The fourth and fifth grade students were particularly engaged with the issues of rights and felt empowered to assert their rights in the school. Unfortunately, at this point, their focus was on individual rights and using their agency for their own benefit without considering others. One fourth grader asserted his right to do his math assignment whenever he felt like it, without regard for the problems that this would cause for

his classmates or teachers, and the fifth graders wanted to determine the playground rules to give themselves the most desired places for playing.

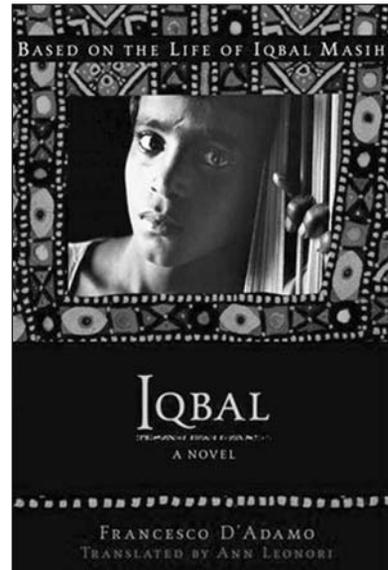
Expanding from Local to Global Perspectives

To expand children's understandings and perspectives beyond the school and their individual rights, we immersed them in read-alouds and text sets to expand their knowledge of human rights to global contexts. We put out text sets containing fiction and nonfiction picture books and newspaper articles around issues such as child labor, discrimination, freedom, violence, basic needs, education, and the environment. Students had time to read from these books as well as to talk with each other and web the issues that were emerging.



We also read aloud and discussed picture books such as *Rebel* (Baille 1994), the story of a child's resistance to a military dictator in Burma, and *The Carpet Boy's Gift* (Shea 2003), about a Pakistani boy who is forced to work in the carpet mills to pay off his family's debts. Student interest in *Iqbal*, the real-life boy who led a movement against this child labor, led to reading aloud the novel, *Iqbal* (D'Adamo 2001). The students were shocked that children were punished for making mistakes at the looms and they condemned the parents for selling their children into slavery. They thought the parents were selfish, only concerned

for themselves, not their children. Gradually, they came to understand the tremendous poverty that led to such a difficult decision by parents. They were moved by Iqbal's willingness to risk his own life to help others. The stories of children who take action for others, often at great



personal expense, shifted the students' perspectives away from a focus on individual benefit to group responsibility and to recognizing that taking action can involve risk and danger.

We regularly gathered for reflection after read-alouds or book browsing for students to share their observations and chart issues about human rights. Students also worked in small groups to web their understandings and tensions. Our initial plan was to see what area of human rights emerged as a strong interest, such as child



labor or education, and move into investigations around that area, looking both locally and globally. Instead, the most compelling issue for students was their surprise and tension that *kids* can take action. They did not believe that they could make a difference, and so their discussions focused on the strategies that Iqbal and other children were using as agents for social change in their settings.

Taking Local Action to Develop Agency

At that point our focus shifted to strategies for taking action and we realized that taking action in their own school context was most compelling to them. They cared about the ways human rights were playing out in global contexts, but they needed to first experience taking action in their own context to gain a sense of agency and possibility that their actions could make a difference. Also, they did not have enough in-depth knowledge about particular global issues to take action in thoughtful ways at that point in time. They were still at an exploration stage with these issues, but ready to investigate how to take action in their school.

To highlight strategies for taking action, we engaged in improvisational dramas around books in which children engaged with social issues that were familiar to our students, in particular homeless people and undocumented immigrants from Mexico. In these dramas, they took on the roles of characters from *Friends from the Other Side* (Anzaldúa 1993), about a girl who protects an undocumented boy from bullies and the Border Patrol, and *The Lady in the Box* (McGovern 1997), about two children who help a homeless woman in their neighborhood. They interviewed each other in pairs as a reporter asking a book character questions about the action that child took within the story. Taking on the roles of children and adult authorities led to multiple perspectives on these issues and explorations of the tensions between individual rights and group responsibilities. Children felt empathy for Joaquin and were angry about the discrimination and fear he

faced as an immigrant from Mexico as they explored the complex issues of immigration, documentation, and the Border Patrol. We also read books, such as *Subway Sparrow* (Torres 1993), about people who work together across languages to rescue a bird, and *Sami and the Time of Troubles* (Heide & Gilliland 1992), about a Lebanese boy who longs for peace but is forced to live in the basement during bombings. These books provided examples of collaboration that challenged children's assumptions that individuals act alone.

Students returned to their unfair school maps and webbed the problems they still saw as significant within their school context. Their original webs of problems were somewhat self-serving, without consideration of how their desires would affect other students. We hoped that when students returned to their maps after the global exploration of human rights and action, they might have a different understanding of the balance between individual needs and responsibility to the group.



This shift was evident in that the issues the students raised earlier that would benefit a few at the expense of others were no longer raised. Each small group chose the top 1 or 2 problems from their list to share with the class and each class engaged in a discussion to determine the problem they wanted to take on. They talked about their experiences with that problem and brainstormed a list of people who had perspectives on the issue. They invited several for an interview with the class and individually conducted other interviews. Based on these interviews, they came to consensus on a strategy for taking action.

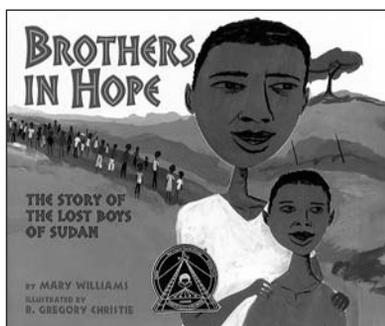
Each classroom decided to focus on one problem instead of breaking into small groups on different problems, because they recognized the difficulty of taking action with adults in school contexts and felt they needed the power of coming with their requests as a group. One group was concerned about the quality and options for school lunches, particularly the lack of fresh vegetables and fruit. After interviews with school personnel, they found out that their lunches were made in a central district location and then trucked to schools. They realized that the problem was district-based and worked on a petition that they asked parents, children, and teachers to sign for delivery to the district head of food services and the superintendent. Another class was concerned about their lack of voice in decisions about the many rules that governed their play on the playground. Upon interviewing their parents, they realized that there was a tremendous difference of opinion and reasons for and against children having a voice in school rules. Their interviews with playground monitors gave them insights into why adults made rules, who was making the rules, the haphazard nature of how rules were created in response to a situation, and differences between older and younger students' views of the rules.

Children needed time to research and to understand their issues from multiple perspectives by investigating the nature of particular problems. The second graders thought that trash on the playground came from the local landfill and planned to write a letter of protest to the owners. Their research revealed that children were the source of the trash and that the problem was the location of the trash barrel at the far end of the playground. Their action turned to a focus on moving the trash barrel and raising awareness among other children in the school.

Although these actions were local, some groups also engaged in global action. The fourth graders felt a strong emotional connection with children in refugee camps through books such as *Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Williams 2007), about two Afghani girls who become friends in a camp in Pakistan, *The Roses in My Carpets* (Khan 2004), about an Afghani boy living with loss and terror-filled memories, and *Brothers in Hope* (Williams 2005) about the forced journey of the "lost boys" of the Sudan. The children particularly focused on the significance

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of relationships within these extremely difficult situations and the courage and caring that the characters showed for each other. Literature became a tool for envisioning a mutual exchange with other children in refugee situations, even though they did not have direct interaction with recipients. The students decided to raise money for refugee children in Darfur because they felt



that they had learned so much from the characters in books about courage and perseverance in the face of tremendous hardship. They wanted to give something back in return, and their action came out of respect, rather than pity.

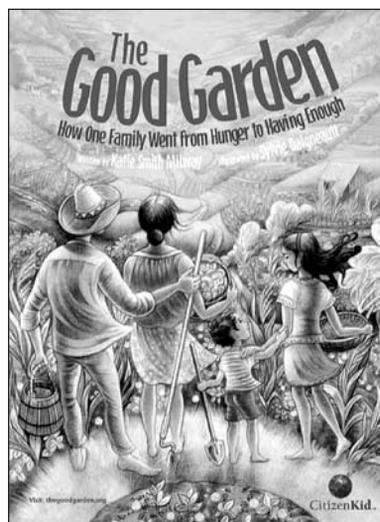
Moving from Local to Global Action

Although the human rights inquiry led to local action, we later engaged in an inquiry on the interconnections of power with hunger that involved global action. Students initially explored “tight times” to connect with the economic crisis in their community, using the picture book, *Tight Times* (Hazen, 1983), as a touchstone text. This story of a family that struggles after the father loses his job was a situation that many children knew their families or neighbors were experiencing. They realized that many families face “tight times,” even though for some that means not going to Disneyland while others face hunger and the loss of their homes. This sense of connection moved them beyond feelings of pity or blame toward those experiencing hunger.

We examined the root causes of hunger locally and globally through fiction and nonfiction, films, guest speakers, and a drama simulation of a global banquet. The banquet involved dividing all of the students into three groups and giving

them food according to the world population, with 12% receiving more than they could eat in the form of pizzas, 60% receiving just enough to eat in the form of rice and beans, and 28% receiving not enough to eat in the form of one small shared bowl of rice. They also read novels, such as *Nory Ryan's Song* (Giff 2000) about the Irish Potato Famine, and *A Long Walk to Water* (Park 2010), about a “lost boy” from the Sudan, to gain insights into the experience of hunger, as well as nonfiction books, such as *Famine* (Bennett, 1998).

Only after examining root causes did children identify ways to address hunger through working with community and global organizations that focus on sustainability where those receiving a gift use it to take responsibility for their own



survival. Books such as *The Good Garden* (Milway 2010), about a family in Honduras who learns how to use their garden to provide their food, and *One Hen* (Milway 2008), about a young boy in Ghana who uses a small loan to buy a hen, as well as a visit from a volunteer in our local food bank, helped them understand the issue of sustainability through gifts that provide ongoing support and agency for the recipients. This inquiry involved children taking action locally through a community garden project at the local food bank, as well as globally through organizations that provide seeds and animals for communities.

The hunger inquiry occurred during a time of economic crisis in our community when some families went from a comfortable lifestyle to the threat of homelessness and hunger. One fifth-grade student tragically lost his father when he suffered a fatal epileptic seizure because he could not afford medical care. The mother also lost her job, and so the family was suddenly at great risk while struggling with grief. The children in his classroom immediately mobilized themselves for action with fundraisers for the family as well as supporting their peer with compassion and friendship. The boy who had argued for his rights over his classmates at the beginning of the human rights inquiry walked his neighborhood for several weeks, telling them about his friend and asking for donations so the mother could repair their car and find work. This shift in his sense of agency as involving not only himself, but also others in need, was an enormous change in perspective.

Final Reflections

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 protec-

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tion, and a sense of possibility in order to develop agency. Children are constructing themselves as human beings and 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 them toward multiple perspectives and social action.

Children's agency in taking action is based on their ability to move beyond accepting or critiquing the current world into thinking about possibility (Freire 1970). There is no reason to take action if children believe that the current structures and practices of society cannot be changed or are not part of their responsibilities. Literature in which the characters take action for social change provides a way for students to "see big" and envision new potentials (Kornfeld & Prothro). Engagements around these books open up spaces in classrooms for conversations that challenge their world views and the ways in which they work with others to take action. These perspectives are especially critical when children are coping with trauma or difficult situations in enabling them to gain a sense of agency and possibility for their lives and world.

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