

# Tapping into Feelings of Fairness

By Karen Miller

**W**hen I tell people I've been teaching social studies for 10 years in middle school, I often see a vacant look on their face. Teaching social studies they understand. But middle school?

They know the term, but you can tell that many are just not sure what this neither fish-nor-fowl, neither elementary-nor-high-school phenomenon is all about. On the other extreme, you get those who confidently act as if they understand middle school — why, it's just like elementary school, only the kids are a year or two older.

If only it were that simple.

Over the years I've come to realize that to effectively teach middle school in general, and to teach about social justice issues in particular, it's helpful to understand some of the specific characteristics of this age group.

Some of the critical issues are the same as with any age group. The curriculum, for example, has to relate to the students' lives, lessons have to be interactive, students have to be involved, and students must have choices, whether in choosing writing topics or interdisciplinary projects. With middle school, however, it's essential to realize that the kids are embarking on a precarious transition from child to adult. Their peers are more important than anything else in their lives, and a successful teaching strategy must involve a high degree of peer interaction. It's their friends, not the teacher, who provide the positive feedback the students are looking for as they cope with the insecurities and questions they face in their lives.

There is also a healthy questioning among most middle school kids. It's an age when many kids are just starting to discover that it's OK to disagree not only with mom and dad, but also with the teacher. From there it's easy to sug-

gest that it's OK to disagree with history books or the president. Once the students have discovered it's OK to disagree with authorities, then my role as a teacher is to help them learn how to form opinions, to understand what those opinions are based on, and, I hope, have them act on those opinions.

Furthermore, social justice issues are a natural for middle school students. The kids seem to have an inherent concern with being treated unfairly and they are quick to voice that concern. In general, they haven't yet developed the cynicism that unfortunately helps poison the atmosphere in some high school classrooms. If I can tap into those emotions over fairness, it's a short leap to helping them understand how somebody else might feel when they are treated unfairly, whether it's African Americans, or workers in a factory, or immigrants. The key is to approach the kids at their level and then nurture a broader understanding.

## Prejudice Toward Immigrants

My approach to teaching is shaped by the specifics of my school, a predominantly white, working-class school in Portland, Ore. If I had to pick one main social problem in the school, it would be prejudice and racism toward other students. I feel it is my responsibility as a teacher to address this issue, and to try to mold my curriculum accordingly.

In my school, the tensions focus on immigrants who have moved to Portland in recent years, predominantly from Asia. About 12% of our students are in our English as a Second Language program; over 70% of the ESL students are Asian American, mostly from Vietnam, and another 25% are Russian. A few are Latin American. Our white students are not immune to the

anti-immigrant sentiment increasing in this country, and a small minority take out those sentiments on fellow students.

Two years ago a Russian girl named Tatyana came to my class in tears. A normally quiet student who never complained, Tatyana said, "I just can't do it anymore. I'm not coming back to the school because of the constant teasing."

Partly it was a language question, she said. When a teacher called on her and she had to answer a question, she could hear kids giggle. Out in the hall, she said, kids would imitate her speech and accent. Kids also taunted her because she didn't "dress right" — she wore skirts and blouses instead of jeans. Tatyana stayed in school, but she was only there about half the time. When I called home to ask why she was absent, I was told she was baby-sitting. This was probably true. But I also knew that her school experience was very painful to her and that this contributed to her absence.

I remember another incident several years ago, this one involving Mia, a Vietnamese girl. Mia had written a very moving story, published in a local book of short stories, about her experience living on the streets in Vietnam and selling gum in order to survive. The story also recounted how Mia was picked up by police, placed in an orphanage and ultimately adopted by a family in the United States.

Because her story had already been published, Mia gave permission to have it read aloud to the class. It was an emotionally powerful story, and many students were quite moved. However, we also have some "skinhead" wannabes in our school, who go out of their way to prove their "skinhead" political credentials. Mia later told me how two of the "skinhead" wannabes later said to her in the halls, "Hey Mia, want some

gum?"

I knew I had to get the kids to deal with this growing problem of "skinheads," racism, prejudice, and stereotypes. And I knew it couldn't be just during the cracks of the school day but had to be a core part of my teaching.

### Immigration and Discrimination

So what does this mean in practice?

There's not a quick answer, and perhaps the best way to explain is to go through a particular unit on immigration I have done with eighth graders in recent years as part of a history/language arts block.

As is true for many teachers throughout the country, I am not free to completely mold my own curriculum. The immigration unit was given to me as part of a team-teaching decision by teachers of 8th grade U.S. history.

Although I was handed the task of doing a 3-month unit on immigration starting with the 1880s, within that I was able to develop my own approach.

One of the advantages of classroom practice being ignored in most policy discussions about school reform is that teachers sometimes have a fair amount of freedom once they close their classroom doors.

I also have many of my U.S. history students in a separate reading block, where issues can be tied in to the history/language arts block. During the unit on immigration, for example, our reading block may be discussing *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a book by Mildred Taylor about Cassie, a young African-American girl in the 1930s. In the book, Cassie's understanding of racism grows and she stands up for her beliefs. Another book I have used in this context is *Lyddie*, by Katherine Paterson, which deals with an immigrant girl working in a textile factory who must decide whether to join other workers organizing for better conditions. Although I don't necessarily tie either reading into the immigration unit, since not all the students are in both blocks or in the history class, those who are often make the connections on their own.

My main approach in the immigration unit was to forgo a "just the facts" approach and to pick out themes that ultimately would connect with the students' lives and the issues of racism and discrimination. I also knew that a lecture approach wouldn't work, but that somehow I would have to tap into the kids' emotional feelings toward such issues.

My co-teacher and I decided to first approach the issues historically, to have the students experience issues of immigration in a safe way, and then to bring the curriculum to current issues. But before that, we began by breaking the students into groups of four and asking them to answer the question, "What is an American?" A seemingly simple question, it is fraught with complexities. Is a recent immigrant from Russia an American? What about people who emigrate but don't become citizens? Can one be both a Vietnamese and an American? My main purpose in this exercise, however, was not to provide a definitive answer but to get kids to think about the assumptions they brought to the question. The lists, for



S. BETH ATKIN FROM VOICES FROM THE FIELDS

Latinos are one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups.

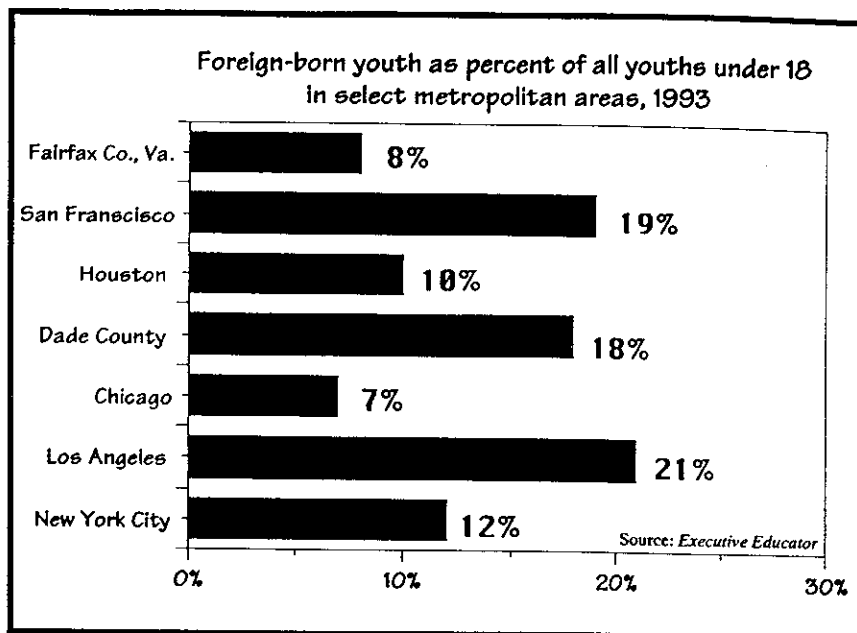
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instance, tended to include things like white, speaks English, born in America — definitions which left out a lot of the students and families at our school.

After the “What is an American” exercise, my co-teacher and I started a month-long project under which students would assume and develop the identity of an immigrant. First, the kids were divided into groups of four or five and assigned to a pretend-family from a particular country. Their first assignment was to come up with names from that country, their ages (they must represent three different generations), occupations, religion, and a history of their family experience. Because we started with the late 1800s, we focused on countries of that era, which tended to be mostly European. In addition to providing some historical background, this also kept the majority of students within a manageable comfort zone when they began the project. They weren’t immediately forced to deal with current animosity toward Asians, Russians, or Latinos, so their defenses were down because, after all, this was just history.

Using different resources and providing ample time for research, the kids began developing a family history and scrapbook. They kept a journal written by their new character. Entries dealt with issues such as how it feels to leave home for a new country, the type of dinner they have their last night at home, why they are leaving, what they think they might find in America, and so forth. Many students recreated birth certificates for the scrapbook, or drew maps of their homeland, described traditions and customs, or listed favorite foods. While kids developed new family histories and scrapbooks, we read stories of immigrants from various novels, watched appropriate movies, and so forth. Each time I teach this unit, I am surprised at how quickly the kids adopt their new identities, many calling each other by their new names. One of the most interesting parts of the unit, however, is what comes next.

It takes about a week for the kids to develop their family histories. After that, we have them go through a role play about entering Ellis Island. (The



first year I used the packaged simulation mentioned at the end of this article.)

### Ellis Island Simulation

We had trained students from another class to come in and play the role of officials at Ellis Island, and my co-teacher and I also played the role of officials. We pronounced the immigrants’ names incorrectly, we were impatient with them, we pushed and shoved them, we deported a few for “health” reasons, and we grilled them on their occupations, education, English abilities, and plans in America.

The “immigrant” students, needless to say, became upset, angry, and hurt. We actually had some kids in tears, one because one of the officials repeatedly kept pronouncing her Italian family’s name wrong. In frustration, she changed her name from Marticelli to Martin because it was easier to say and sounded more American. (I can guarantee you that the students in the Marticelli “family” had a new understanding of what was and wasn’t an “American” name.)

After the Ellis Island simulation, the students continued in their role for about three weeks, again combining historical research, readings from novels, and development of their family histories. They had to look for a city to live in, a home or apartment, their first

job, and so forth. They also maintained their journals during this time. For their final project for this section, each family finished the scrapbook they had already started: they rewrote their journal entries, took family photos (a lot of the kids dressed up in historical dress and took pictures), made pretend tickets from their voyage, passports, and birth certificates. Many of the students in the various “families” became quite attached to each other.

That was the first phase. The next phase jumped a bit, historically.

As a history teacher, I am not overly concerned about teaching chronologically. Instead, I tend to teach thematically. I find this strategy works with middle school students. Timelines and facts are not particularly important to them. What sticks in their heads are dramatic events, issues that tap into their emotions, that make sense to them personally. Emotions, not logic, rule.

As a transition, we had a panel of immigrants come and talk to the class to show the range of immigrants currently coming to this country. Members of the panel included a student’s mother from Norway, a teacher at the school who had emigrated from Canada, a student’s grandparent from Russia, and an 8th-grade Korean student. When the students interviewed the panel, it was clear that the extended role playing from the previous three weeks had in-

fluenced their thinking. Some of the questions included: How did people treat you when you first came here? Do people pronounce your name wrong? Why did you come here? Was it hard to learn English?

After this transition, we wanted to start dealing with immigration issues that would more closely touch on the current discrimination and prejudice in our school. But we knew that topic was a bit too close to jump into immediately. So first we had the students write about a time when they experienced discrimination — whether it was based on race, religion, or age (adolescents all seem to have stories about how they were treated unfairly just because they were teenagers). Students took the assignment seriously and wrote from the heart. While there were a number of moving essays, the class was particularly struck by the experiences of Amber, an African-American girl.

"People get discriminated against all of the time because of their race," Amber wrote. "Sometimes it's just some name calling or teasing. Other times it can be as bad as personal harm. I can remember once I almost got my hair set on fire because I am black. I have also been assaulted a number of times in the past three years."

We shared the essays while sitting in a circle. Those students who wanted were allowed to pass. If students write something they feel is too personal, they are encouraged to write another essay that is less emotionally loaded to share. The key in any exercise of this sort is to help the students to open up, but also to ensure that there is ample support and flexibility. As with the extended role play on the immigrant families, the exercise helps build a sense of community in the class: students see each other as an integral part of the group — a very important concept at the middle school age.

While the students read their essays, I took notes and wrote down what emotions came up (anger, discouragement, cynicism) and how the students coped with such emotions (talking back, walking away). We then came up with a list of emotions and strategies that we pasted on the wall. This was a concrete

way to continue to tap into the students' feelings about discrimination as we started talking about current issues.

### Need for Collective Action

As useful as this exercise is, I also learned that we need to deepen the student's sense of discrimination and what to do about it. My students tended to approach discrimination as an individual problem that needed only an individual response. There was little sense of the need to take collective action to change attitudes, or laws, or practices — whether through petitions, meetings, or lobbying.

One of the changes I have made over the years to instill a sense of activism is to bring in people who are combating discrimination. Speakers, for example, have ranged from a woman from Cascade AIDS Project to speakers from a local shelter for street youth. I have also started clipping news articles or collecting stories about activists, especially teenagers, in order to provide concrete examples.

Another activity that has helped students deal with current issues is pairing students in my class with students from an English as a Second Language class. They ask the ESL students about their personal interests, hobbies, why they moved to this country, what it was like. My students then write a biography-poem about the ESL student. Often we display the poems on the walls, complete with photos of the partners.

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Another successful activity involves a "Pledge of Appreciation of Cultural Diversity." For this assignment, each student is asked to write and sign an individual pledge showing their commitment to respect all people, and outlining specific activities they plan to do to make a difference. To underscore the seriousness of the pledge, students have a witness also sign their pledge.

Many of the pledges noted that it was important for kids to know who you are and what your background is — an understanding that for many students sheds a new light on things such as Black pride or the Vietnamese students speaking Vietnamese at lunch. Other examples of pledges included:

- I will not make fun of people whose language is different from my own.
- I will learn to correctly pronounce three names of ESL students.
- I will learn to say hello in three different languages.
- I will invite two ESL students to have lunch with me.
- I will tutor a student who is learning English.

In the big scheme of life such pledges may not seem profound. But for students who began the year wondering whether you had to be white to be an American, my kids had come a long way.

Perhaps our most interesting final project involved a mural the kids designed and painted. (That year we had a grant to work with a muralist.) The kids wanted to tie in the mural with immigration, discrimination, prejudice, and social problems, and the muralist worked with the kids on designing and painting the mural. The kids voted to divide the mural into three parts: past, present, and future. For the past, they depicted characters like Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King. The present wasn't too hard to figure out — the themes revolved around gangs, drugs, deterioration of our neighborhoods, and so forth. The most difficult part was deciding what to do for the "future" panel.

The kids decided to have an intersection with two roads right before the "future" panel: One road led to a world

filled with gangs and violence and poverty and segregation. The other was a kind of yellow brick road to utopia, where people and animals lived in harmony.

We asked the students how they could let people know they have a choice about which road to follow? So the students decided to paint a trash dumpster at the intersection where one could choose whether to throw off gang jackets, drugs, and guns.

The kids were thrilled with their ideas, and the mural turned out to be both beautiful and provocative. To this day, it remains in our school. But in retrospect, I also feel I missed an opportunity. I too was caught up in the excitement of designing and painting a mural and didn't encourage the students to reflect a bit more on its message and assumptions. We made it seem that everything was just an individual decision, and that individual decisions alone were enough.

I have found that instilling a sense of activism and collective responsibility is one of the most difficult aspects of teaching for social justice. Partly this is because our society discourages collective action and instead encourages the view that people are individual consumers and workers who need only concern themselves with their individual careers, lifestyles, and families. I don't have any pat answers and, as I mentioned earlier, one solution I have used is to bring in a number of speakers who talk about their activism.

Another area that I still struggle with is trying to move the students beyond viewing discrimination as an individual problem and helping them understand there are issues such as institutional racism and sexism. With middle school students, however, there's not as much latitude as with high school students. Plus, there are limited resources for these grade levels. When I find high school materials that address such issues, I try to rewrite or modify them for middle school students. My main goal, however, is to encourage students to understand that stereotypes exist, that they are learned and passed along, and that the students need to question their assumptions about other groups of



SUSAN LYNN RUGGLES

*Helping students understand the difference between individual and institutional bias is difficult but necessary.*

people. Thus my students may not understand the institutional intricacies of who is served by discrimination and racism, but at least they understand that such "isms" exist, and they are better equipped to recognize them.

Another issue, complicated in part by the unit's focus only on immigration issues beginning with the late 19th century, is helping students understand that, contrary to the view of most textbooks, the United States is not "a nation of immigrants." Such an approach ignores Native Americans, the African-Americans who were brought here as slaves, and the Chicanos who found themselves living in the United States only because the U.S. conquered roughly one-third of Mexico during the Mexican-American war in 1846-48.

While trying to address such issues, I also try to be careful not to spend all our time looking at injustice, racism, and prejudice. I think it's critical with middle school students to develop a classroom community. Helping my students develop a democratic community emphasizing equality and caring may be the most effective result of my classroom practice.

There are times that it is easy to be discouraged by what I realize are the many shortcomings in my curriculum. I try to improve, but I also try to remember that change is a constant struggle. Just because I have not yet reached the state of perfect teacherhood doesn't mean I should abandon the few gains I have been able to make with my students.

I, along with my students, am on a discovery process of teaching and learning for social justice. □

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An essential resource is "We Left Our Homeland, a Sad, Sad, Day," by Nora Elegreet-DeSalvo and Ronald Levitsky, *The English Journal*, October 1989. Many of my ideas were based on suggestions from this article, which provides a good overview of how to do an immigration unit.

Another good resource is *Ellis Island*, a simulation by INTERACT, PO Box 997, Lakeside, CA, 92040, 619-448-1474. The simulation is easily adaptable and is a good starting point for those who have never done a simulation before.

For other books dealing with these issues see the resource guide on p. 187.