

## I Can Change the World: Teaching Human Rights in the Classroom

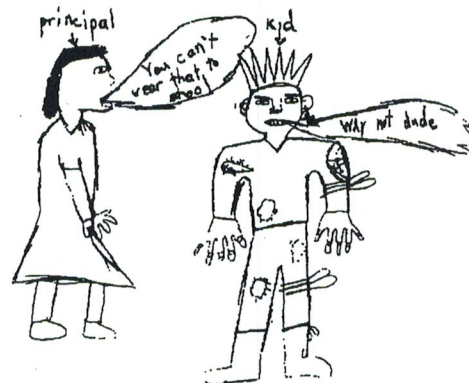
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On a cold night last November the world lost a wonderful young man, a truly beautiful spirit, and I lost a dear friend. Mike Jupp taught me that there is no fight nobler than to save the children and that with my small voice I must continue to scream "Do not sin against them." When I first met Mike, he was the Executive Director of Defense for Children International-USA. I was writing curriculum about the death penalty, abductions, and other human rights violations, in addition to giving workshops on teaching human rights. It was Mike Jupp who inspired me to focus my energies as a human rights activist on children. At the time, children's rights seemed to imply a lighter burden to bear. However, much to my surprise the state of the world's children was sometimes more

grim than the "hard issues" I had addressed in the past. I will be forever grateful to Mike Jupp for the experiences and knowledge he shared with me, but most of all for his spirit of "dedication to the cause."

Mike invited me to work on a project co-writing a 5th/6th grade curriculum based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This Convention is a United Nations document designed to establish world-wide standards for the rights of children. The document took ten years to write and was adopted November 20th, 1989, by the UN General Assembly. If this document is to become International Law, the next step is ratification by at least twenty member nations of the UN. Though the rights (see accompanying art work) seem fundamental, a close examination reveals the true complexity of these issues. For instance, we all agree that children must be protected in wartime, but dissension arises over the appropriate age for recruitment into the armed forces. The Convention says that states need to "take all feasible measures to insure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities." But some member states feel 15 is too young to fight, and are reluctant to ratify the Convention. Despite still unresolved issues, it is necessary for all people concerned with human rights to be aware of this document and to work on the local political level for ratification. If the Convention is ratified, it would become part of International Law and provide a vehicle to put pressure on governments to improve conditions for their children.

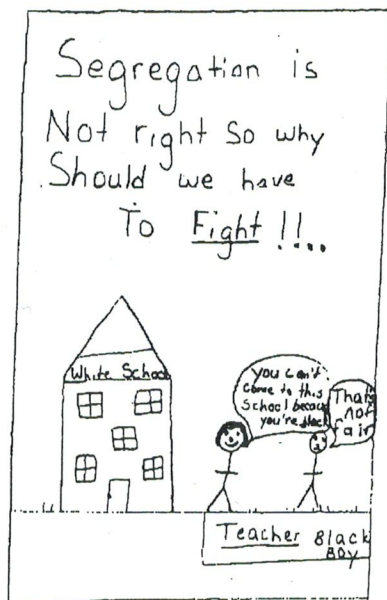
### Freedom of Expression and Information



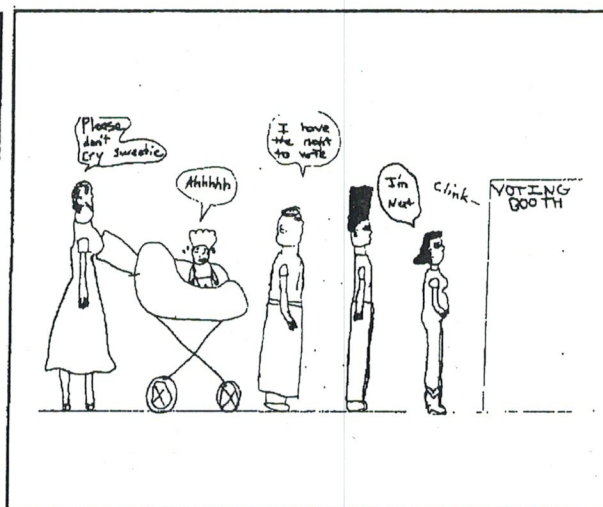


*I have been teaching about human rights in my classroom for four years. I consider myself very lucky to be able to work in a school where children are considered to be important. At Central Park East II, I spend my days with 29 wonderful fifth graders. Human rights is the major focus of our curriculum, and this year I have been using the Convention on the Rights of the Child as the primary document. The art accompanying this piece is an outgrowth of that teaching.*

Teaching children about their rights is a wonderful way to empower them and to increase their self-esteem and self respect. Such teaching can help promote children's belief in themselves as individuals and decrease the feelings of alienation children sometimes feel in a society that is perceived to be hostile. When a child in my class writes in her letter to a prison official in South Africa, "...we [children] are your future. Instead of putting kids in jail, you should be helping us to learn," or another child writes to a general in South Africa, "You should be really embarrassed if even a child knows what you're doing," the expression of these feelings combats helplessness and despair.



Human Rights Education involves much more than presenting children with names, dates, and a long list of unspeakable crimes against



humanity. To adopt human rights principles as part of an educational philosophy means much more than teaching children about genocide in Cambodia, Apartheid in South Africa, labor struggles in Europe, and poverty in the United States. Telling children that they matter, both in word and deed, and reminding them that they can make a difference in this world can inspire, excite, and motivate them in ways that nothing else can. "I can change the world" are five of the most powerful words one of my first graders said to me two years ago. Children acquire the strength to make these statements only after having made a viable contribution through direct action.

One of the fundamental objectives of education is to demonstrate to children that they are part of a world that is much larger than themselves. In my class, we sponsor an Ecuadorian child from whom we recently received a letter. Her father wrote the letter and it was translated into English. On the back she did two math problems and drew a picture of herself. The children were thrilled! Our class also hosted two children from Norway who came as ambassadors from Save the Children-Norway. Our kids were written up in a Norwegian newspaper complete with photographs. These activities enlarge their world.

Human rights issues can often be emotional and sometimes explosive topics in the classroom. As educators we can teach children toler-



ance and respect for differing opinions. In our everyday experiences with children, we can demonstrate that opinions rooted in human emotions are good, but that they must be supported by facts when shared with others. Encouraging children to articulate their ideas is one of the most important things that we can do. The ability to express one's self is a skill that children will be able to use in all aspects of their lives. When children gain the skills to take their feelings of outrage and turn them into actions, we must be able to supply them with information and ideas for using their energies in positive ways. This year we wrote letters to children in South Africa to ask them how they felt about Nelson Mandela's release, how it felt to live under Apartheid, and what they wanted us to do to help them. We also answered a call from Amnesty International and wrote letters to the government of Peru on behalf of a 15 year old boy who was thought to have been kidnapped by rebels. He needed letters to support his right to a fair trial.

New York University Law School on the death penalty. Miraculously, they sat still for four hours listening to congress people, lawyers, ministers, and prisoners. They asked wonderful questions which were answered respectfully.

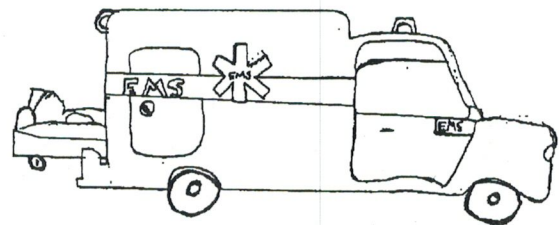
This is a world in which individual and communal rights or privileges are established and developed based on the recognition of one's duties and responsibilities to both oneself and others. Recently, as part of this effort, our class began a recycling campaign for our whole school. The children decorated milk crates and put them in all the classrooms so everyone could recycle paper.

As educators we can introduce children to these issues, but we cannot force our points of view on them. Children will make the final decision on their position on any given issue. One way to foster our ability to trust them is to allow children to decide on what they think needs to be changed in their environment while affording them the freedom to make mistakes as they work toward those changes. Our "Needs Campaign" is one example of how the interaction between student, teacher, and environment (community) works in our class.



In the classroom these skills of self expression can be developed through debates, small working groups, and role playing. After much classroom work on such issues as segregation, communism, and the death penalty, we held formal rule-bound debates. Kids presented their arguments based on assigned positions and then questioned each other. As a result of their sophistication, I took them to an adult conference at the

The Right to health care



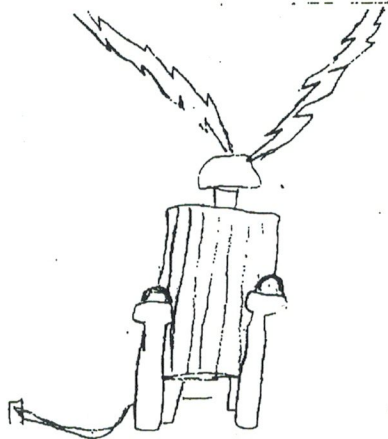
In our early discussions the fifth graders began to focus on the needs of our school. Despite the fact that some of the needs seemed impossible



to meet, I allowed them to start. The children divided into five groups and began to work toward improvements in their own environment.

After weeks of research, interviewing, letterwriting, and meeting amongst themselves, two groups gave up their projects to pursue other goals that seemed more "reachable." One group abandoned the establishment of a much-needed CPEII Medical Room because there was no space and no one to staff it. The other group investigated the possibility of better tasting lunches for all students, but they had to give up because the building has no "cooking kitchen" and lunches must be delivered to the school. Both groups reorganized after these setbacks and quickly focused on new activities.

This time the children seemed to have a greater vision in terms of the people that they wanted to reach. The first group formed their ideas and moved their efforts beyond the walls of our school. As the weather turned cold, they decided to start a clothing drive for the homeless families in our community. They wrote a letter asking the entire school to participate in a campaign. Every morning for two months children



PULL THE  
PLUG ON THE  
ELECTRIC  
CHAIR

brought shopping bags, paper bags, and garbage bags full of clothes to donate. The group members kept careful records of all those who made a donation and made a personal thank you card for each family. The children sorted, folded, and packed the clothes, and on one December afternoon helped movers for the Riverside Church load 44 boxes of clothing onto their trucks.

The second group also looked beyond our classroom. This group initiated a support group for kids whose parents were separated or divorced. Every Wednesday 10-15 children ranging in ages from first to sixth grades come to a small room to talk about their common concerns. The hosts from my class serve them cookies and conduct the discussion. Adults are not allowed to sit in on these meetings because the children say that would "change their words if an adult were looking over their shoulders." The children manage to conduct themselves in a very orderly manner and an adult is never necessary to "police" them. The group from my class runs this meeting very well.

During our early discussions the students overwhelmingly decided that our school needed beautifying. The children found the peeling paint and falling plaster very distressing and felt that no one cared about how the school looked. They formed a committee to fill the need for a "better looking school." In the time between the day that group formed and the moment I write these words, the children have asked hardware stores to donate paint and supplies. They have recruited parents to scrape, chip, and paint. When they received no response for their request for blueprints for our building, the committee started to measure our space with yardsticks. The progress of this group has been slow, yet children have refused to give up their dream for "a place that's nice to look at." With only one positive reply from a small neighborhood paint store, this group forges on.

Most ideas required little or no money, but during these projects they came to understand the relationship between capital and change. Ten children, one third of the class, dedicated all of their efforts to fundraising and in the process they



began to see how low funding translated to the absence of a music teacher and the lack of basic supplies. The group that repaired, cleaned, and tested the bike donated by our assistant director spent many hours making tickets, advertising the raffle, and selling tickets during lunch. They gave up the goal of paying the salary of a full time music teacher and stocking the supply closet after their bike raffle and three cake sales yielded a total of \$75.04. The cake sellers have donated their earn-

ings to help cover the costs of materials for our class. They are still determined to have a music teacher.

Children often learn by example. The teacher is the "most powerful" person in the classroom and we can have a great effect on the children placed in our care. If we expect them to be empathetic, we must be willing to show them empathy. If we want them to be socially responsible, we must work for social change.

# The Right to an Education

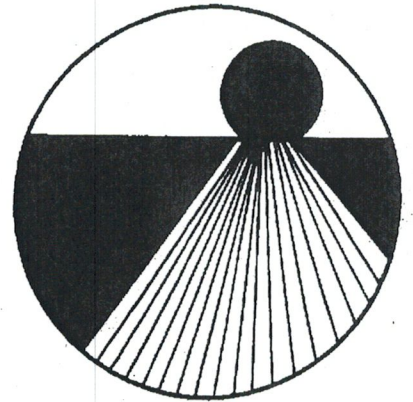


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# PATHWAYS

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Drawings from Central Park East II  
New York City Public Elementary School

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A Forum For Progressive Educators