



Summer 2005

Finding Solutions Newsletter

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DISCOVERING HOPE IN A WORLD OF POVERTY... By Martin C. Fergus

For a number of years I have taught a course on poverty that focuses both on the United States and on the developing world. Many students find taking this course an eye opening experience because it exposes them to a reality they previously knew little about. They are surprised by poverty's scope, its intensity and its tragic human costs. At times they are overwhelmed by the fact that, while some progress against poverty has been made, the most compelling verity is poverty's persistence. The first few times I taught the course, students sometimes told me that they ended the semester with a feeling of hopelessness and even despair.

This was the exact opposite of what I had intended. The course was originally part of Fordham University's Values Program, which encouraged students to examine issues not only empirically but also normatively, and to discover ways to put their values into practice. While I did not want to convey to students a rose-colored-glasses image of the poverty problem – the first step to addressing any problem is always a realistic understanding of it – neither did I wish to leave them without hope and with a feeling of powerlessness.

There was also another reason for not wishing to leave my students with the impression that nothing could be done. Simply put, this did not correspond to the reality I had experienced outside the university in my own efforts to address the issues of hunger and poverty. I had been involved for many years with Bread for the World, an organization that lobbies in Washington, D.C. on hunger issues. I had seen enough legislative successes over the years to know that the lives of poor and hungry people, both in this country and abroad, not only can be improved but have been improved. In addition, I was familiar with the work of Lutheran World Relief, which provides direct development assistance to many projects throughout the developing world. In 1994 I had the opportunity to visit some of these projects in southern India and had seen for myself the effectiveness of these efforts. And I was aware of many other nongovernmental organizations that were doing similar work.

About this issue...

This issue marks the first time we are taking a closer look at the challenges and opportunities that face educators in teaching about hunger and poverty. These are not easy subjects to present to students at different stages of their education, but due to the persistence of poverty in this world they must be discussed and investigated.

Professor Martin C. Fergus (pg.1) offers an undergraduate course on poverty at Fordham University. You will see how despite the subject matter "student's transform feelings of discouragement or despair they might have into feelings of empowerment and hope."

The Caedmon School in New York City is an unusual Independent School that reflects the leadership of Carol Goose DeVine (pg. 3). She addresses the question of "why teach about social justice issues?" Caedmon is a school that only goes through 5th grade, but that does not hold the teachers back from presenting students with difficult issues to grapple with.

Dr. Ava McCall (pg.5) is back, and as usual we are better for that. She deals with the frustration she feels with the reluctance of students and teachers to include the discussion of poverty in their curriculum. She outlines three common sense suggestions to overcome resistance.

Finally, an "Open Letter" (pg. 7) sent to us by a teacher from Michigan who conducts an after school art class for 4th and 5th grade students. Janine Murphy-Evenson helps students use their artistic talents to help people in their community. Along the way, they start to learn about hunger and poverty and realize that they can make a difference.

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The question became, how can this *reality* of hope and empowerment best be conveyed to students? I try to do this in two fundamental ways. First, while looking at poverty analytically and in terms of its human impact, I also emphasize from the beginning of the course that, while the poverty problem as a whole is far from being solved, there have been many successful efforts to address parts of the problem. Examples are given both for the United States and for the developing world.

Second, I give my students the opportunity to discover these efforts for themselves, and that they can also take part in them. Each student is asked to select an organization that is already addressing the problem of poverty or hunger, either in the United States or in developing countries (or both). They are asked to describe the history and activities of their organization and then to evaluate its work in light of what the students have learned in the course about the poverty problem.

Every semester I am gratified with student responses to this project. Most students are surprised to discover how many different organizations there are from which to choose and encouraged by this multiplicity and diversity. They are also surprised to learn that these organizations are addressing many of the same concerns and issues we have considered in the course, that there really can be a connection between the ivory tower and the real world.

In most instances students are greatly impressed by the accomplishments of the organizations they have selected. They see positive impacts on the lives of the poor. Furthermore, they become aware of the many opportunities they have for personal involvement. Some join or volunteer for the groups they have researched and this commitment often continues long after the course has been completed. A few even have a life changing experience.

More than one student has ended up pursuing a career

that they had never known about or considered before taking this course and doing this project.

The bottom line of all of this, of course, is that by emphasizing what is already being done to address the poverty problem, and by providing students the opportunity to discover this for themselves, the potential that studying poverty has to produce discouragement or despair is turned instead into empowerment and hope – and maybe even a job after graduation!

Dr. Martin C. Fergus is Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Political Science Department at Fordham University, Bronx, NY. He may be reached at FERGUS@FORDHAM.EDU

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Ed. Note—Professor Fergus has given us a list of books that he considers to be of importance for all who are interested in increasing their understanding of the worldwide problems of hunger and poverty. His suggestions along with descriptions of the books, may be found at <http://www.kidscanmakeadifference.org/Suggestedbooks.htm>.

KIDS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE® FINDING SOLUTIONS NEWSLETTER **A PROGRAM OF WORLD HUNGER YEAR (WHY)**

Published by:

Jane Finn Levine, Ed.D. and Larry Levine

1 Borodell Avenue, Mystic, CT 06355

(860) 245-3620, FAX (860)-245-3651, email: kids@kidscanmakeadifference.org,

WHY TEACH ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES: ANSWERING AN ESSENTIAL QUESTION...

By Carol DeVine

I am perplexed and sometimes left speechless by some of the things people say to me. I find it difficult to answer questions whose answers seem so obvious. The title of this article is such a question.

Throughout my thirty-five years in education, it always seemed apparent to me that the primary reason for all that I did was so that the children I was teaching and the adults I was influencing in myriad ways would eventually go away with the idea that they were responsible for more than themselves. Samuel Johnson once said that knowledge without goodness is dangerous. Thus, it would seem implicit that all of the information and skills that we convey to our children is without merit, if we do not simultaneously give them a purpose for having that knowledge.

Currently in the field of education, the approach to curriculum planning involves answering essential questions about what to teach, how to teach it, but most importantly why are we teaching it. There are, of course, specific short term goals for every skill or concept introduced, but in what way do we keep an eye on the longer term outcome of all that we are doing? The first step is to define a clear, unambiguous mission for the school and then to compare what is developed in the curriculum to that essential mission. In part, Caedmon's mission states: "We foster in them (the children) the empathy and compassion to see the world from perspectives other than their own. We nurture in them the self-assurance and courage to one day address the social concerns of their age... By committing to this mission, we believe that our children will grow to take command of their natural gifts with a greater understanding of our complex world and their eventual role within it- a role that will increasingly demand empathy and responsiveness, as well as knowledge, ambition, and skill. It is for this that we teach."

Considering that Caedmon only goes through the 5th grade, people have asked how we can commit to this lofty mission with children who only get to be eleven before they leave us. I ask, "How can we not?" It is a commonly accepted idea that children are dramatically influenced in these early years and much of what they end up believing may be traced back to what they were exposed to during this formative period. If we don't begin at the beginning, how can we ever hope to establish in an adult

a sense that he/she has an important role to play in creating a world that is more equitable and just? A cousin of mine recently sent me this quote from the writer George Scialabba, renowned reviewer of books related to politics, policy, and the culture of our time. Scialabba wrote: "Progress depends on extending our imaginative range, identifying with those who are unnecessarily suffering." This resonated with me as I contemplated writing this article, because it so eloquently articulated why it is necessary to instill a long term view in our children...helping others is as self-serving as it is altruistic, for without it we will not advance our culture and our lives. Without ever having read Scialabba, a child in one of our Middle Level classes (third/fourth grade) wrote the following in answer to "Why should we care about people we don't know?"

"We should care about people we don't know because someday they might help UNICEF, or help the world be a better place to live for us. But also because every living thing on the planet helps the world in one way or another. If we ever stopped caring about a poor person we might not see what they could do with just a little support and a caring person. So if you help them, it's not only going to help them by caring, it might help you."

This is quite an insight for an eight year old. However, it is the kind of thing we have come to expect as a result of our efforts to educate the children about the social concerns of our time. Will this carry over when they are grown and making decisions about what they will do with their lives? That certainly remains to be seen, but there is no question that attitudes are formed early, and we have an obligation to give them experiences that will help them develop a sense of their community and global responsibility.

Another quote from the peace journal of one of our fourth graders gives an indication that even nine year olds are capable of thinking about how they might act for the benefit of others, actions which might ultimately benefit themselves:

"My responsibilities as a global citizen are to feel empathy for others who are in bad situations. Another of my

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responsibilities is to care for others going through hard times. One more of my global responsibilities is to respect differences. After all, if you try to surround yourself with people just like you, you'll be missing out on a lot of friendships."

I find it extremely satisfying that given even a little bit of education about global responsibility young children can have insights such as these. It gives me hope when I see, on the other hand, the ideas that a number of adults have. The epitome of this kind of disengagement was articulated in a letter to the editor of The New York Times. In the beginning of the discussion about privatizing social security, Bob Herbert wrote an op-ed piece about the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt and his intention to provide old age security for those less well off. Mr. Herbert referred to the "litany of rights", which Roosevelt felt every citizen had.

**A PROPOSED WORLD CONSTITUTION—
as seen by Caedmon Students**

- **Everyone gets their fair share: food, water, safety, shelter**
- **Good education and good teachers**
- **No bad drugs, smoking or opium**
- **Everybody is equal**
- **Everybody lives in peace**
- **More money given to nations in debt, and those lacking food, water, shelter and democracy**
- **Prevent Global Warming and Ozone Depletion**

In response to that op-ed piece Jerry Tempelman of Florida wrote:

"F.D.R.'s litany of rights is nonsense. The problem with calling for a universal right to food, or housing, or employment, or health care, is that such a right for person A is meaningless unless person B simultaneously incurs an obligation.

Person A may argue that he has a right to food or to a job (a right presumably based on his need), but it does not follow that person B therefore has an obligation to feed or employ him. B may wish to help A (by means of private charity, for example), but B's moral intuition does not transform into A's legal right."

When I emailed Larry Levine of "Kids Can Make a Difference" about this, and other letters to the editor that were equally disturbing, I said, "Clearly, Mr. Tempelman didn't go to Caedmon!" It is alarming to think that children would grow and mature without the sense that all human beings had certain basic rights and that as members of this

world we were all obliged to see that everyone had them in whatever way we could. If this is what we believe to be right, then this is what we need to tell them day in and day out from the time they are very young. It is also what we need to show them in very real ways through first hand experience.

Last year a group of parents here at Caedmon met to discuss becoming more involved in community service initiatives with the children. They were all taken with the notion that my daughter was then in Uganda, spending the semester studying development issues related to AIDS orphans, refugees, hunger, and myriad other problems in a third world country. The parents all wanted to know how she got to this point in her life, at twenty years of age, that she would hope to make this her life's work. The answer was simple: partially she was in Africa, because she spent her early years in a shelter for homeless women. From the time she and her brother were two or three, my husband and I took them to a shelter on a regular basis when we went to set up each week for our guests. Her knowledge of poverty was first hand and very personal. I can still see her sitting up on a desk in the shelter, her short legs swinging as she talked with Mary, one of the homeless women who had befriended her. For my husband and me it is very clear: how we got from there to here was to start when they were very young.

The same principle applies in school: teach them at an early age and they will never forget. If you decide, as we did at Caedmon, that our responsibility as educators extended beyond the three R's, then it is essential to define the long term vision you have for your children in a clear mission statement. It is essential that you provide them with the knowledge and experience that will lead to greater understanding, and it is essential that this experience foster the compassion that will encourage their commitment to social justice. This is, after all, the reason that we teach.

Carol Goose DeVine is Head of School at The Caedmon School. She recently became a member of the KIDS Advisory Board. She may be reached at devine@caedmonschool.org

2005 KIDS Teacher Guide Available



SSH! WE DON'T WANT TO MENTION IT: RESISTANCE TO ADDRESSING POVERTY IN TEACHING...

By Ava L. McCall

“Kids” newsletters are replete with inspirational accounts of teachers who educate their students about poverty and hunger and take action with them to alleviate the problem. These stories help educators maintain their resolve to address such a difficult issue. However, we also need to acknowledge that teachers are not always successful when including this social problem within the curriculum, and students may not respond favorably to dealing with the issue of poverty and hunger. I have struggled with this issue for the past 10 years as I work with students who are preparing to become elementary teachers. Perhaps my experiences will be of use to educators who find challenges when teaching about poverty and hunger.

In my social studies methods course and the concurrent clinical teaching experience, I encourage preservice teachers to include real world, social issues such as poverty, racism, and sexism in the social studies curriculum and to recognize that elementary students come from diverse cultures and social classes, including poor and working class backgrounds. These goals correspond to the overall aim of social studies education to encourage children and youth to become good citizens, understand their rights and responsibilities, and take action to strengthen the “common good.” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994). My intentions also account for the realities of schools. As recently as 2001, 16% of American children were living below the official poverty level and 38% of children were considered poor because their families earn up to 200% of the official poverty level (Anyon, 2005).

Poverty among students cannot be ignored. It affects children’s cognitive development, health, and behavior, often due to lack of family resources and parental emotional stress (see Anyon, 2005 for a review of this research). Most of my students have not experienced poverty personally, which may make the issue more difficult to teach because of a lack of understanding or, if they have known poverty, they find it a very painful topic to address. The majority of my students (86% from the past two years) are similar to most teachers and preservice teachers in identifying themselves as being from the middle or upper middle class. A small minority (8%) claim

to come from poverty or the working class, and a few recall the powerful effects of poverty or surviving on a limited income. These students remember their single-parent mothers working three jobs while they cared for three younger siblings at a young age, earning money to help pay their family’s bills, not having enough food to eat or items they wanted, never taking vacations, and living in a house trailer or a small home.

Although I recognize the issue of poverty and hunger is difficult for preservice teachers to address as learners and as teachers, I utilize various resources and strategies to make the issue relevant and engaging. I use a lesson from the curriculum guide *Finding Solutions to Hunger: Kids Can Make a Difference*, introduce children’s and young adult literature which deal with the social issues of homelessness and poverty (see <http://www.socialstudies.esmartweb.com> for an annotated bibliography), show current statistics on poverty among school-age children, and ask my students to reflect on their own culture, social class, and discrimination experiences.

At times, the schools and elementary classroom teachers who work with my students discourage attention to social issues or children’s social class backgrounds, even though 30% to 60% of their student body qualify for free or reduced meals. For example, one teacher prepared a memo explaining that the preservice teachers from my class did not need to know the percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced lunch in her classroom because it was irrelevant for the social studies unit my students were preparing to teach her students. This unit focused on the economics topic of purchasing goods and services in the local community, which is obviously affected by the families’ economic resources! Upon investigation, I discovered that the school policy was to keep hidden the number of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch, even from the school’s teachers. Eventually I learned that approximately 30% of the students at this school could be considered low-income because they qualified for free or reduced lunch, important information for teachers concerned about providing appropriate educational experiences for their students. For most area schools, it is rare to find classroom teachers

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who supervise my students' clinical teaching experiences who encourage them to keep the children's social class backgrounds in mind when they teach their social studies units.

Even though most of the preservice teachers in my class initially seem open to a focus on social issues in the curriculum and sensitivity to children who come from poverty, they often resist or ignore them when they develop and teach social studies units in their elementary clinical classrooms. Throughout the curriculum development process, I consistently encourage my students to address social class issues within their lesson plans, but I allow them to make the final decision. Often my students tend to believe that most adult family members who want jobs have them and avoid addressing job loss and facing unemployment when they teach about families. When they focus on economics topics in their social studies units, most of my preservice teachers assume the children in their clinical classrooms are middle class and that they and their families have the disposable income to purchase what they need and much of what they want. They frequently assume food and clothing are purchased from retail and discount stores rather than obtained through food banks, second hand stores, and rummage sales. When my students ask families to reinforce their children's learning at home, they tend to believe that families have such resources as writing and drawing materials, Internet access, and funds for recreation and educational opportunities, such as visits to museums or historical sites. When teaching children about consumers, producers and banking, two of my students sent a letter to families encouraging the families to take their children to the local bank and set up a savings account for the child. While this is a worthwhile project, it ignores families who have no extra money for a child's savings account.

In order to move beyond my frustration with students' and classroom teachers' reluctance to include poverty within the curriculum, I find it helpful to understand potential underlying reasons. Insights from others educators who have studied students' resistance to social justice issues are enlightening (see Goodman, 1997). First of all, some students may believe we live up to our democratic ideals and all people have equal opportunities. If children and their families are poor, it is because they have not taken advantage of opportunities. Secondly, preservice teachers may tend to assume we live in a meritocracy with people succeeding due to their talents and efforts rather than through racial, class, or gender privileges. Those who do not achieve economic self-sufficiency are less talented or

do not work hard instead of the impediments of sexism, racism, and classism limiting their success. Third, preservice teachers' resistance may stem from their feelings of uncertainty or fear regarding how to address such a difficult topic as poverty. They may not know how to handle their own feelings if poverty is a painful part of their lives or their lack of knowledge and understanding about this issue. They may be uncertain of their students' responses to the topic, especially if children share their experiences with poverty or economic struggles. Finally, students may experience cognitive dissonance when their beliefs about living in a democratic and meritocratic society are disrupted as they learn about people who are talented and work hard, but remain poor. Learning that poverty is cyclical and systemic challenges their view of the world as equal and fair.

For educators who also experience resistance or reluctance to addressing the issue of poverty and hunger, I offer the following suggestions.

1. Develop a safe classroom environment for students to express their views about difficult topics such as poverty and hunger. As a class, agree on guidelines for discussions and interactions so that students listen to and respect each other's contributions.

2. Remember that students' openness to learning about the issue of poverty and hunger is different from a commitment to teaching about it. Frequently it is a developmental process to move from awareness to understanding to action in developing a commitment to teach about this issue and to address students' social class backgrounds in their teaching. Continuously raise the issue to illustrate the significance of poverty within families, communities, society, and the world as a whole and its impact on children's learning and experiences.

3. Acknowledge that poverty and hunger are difficult issues to deal with as learners and teachers because of the pervasiveness and complexity of the problem. Encourage students to take small steps in solving the problem, suggest resources and possible actions, and affirm their efforts to address the issue.

Sometimes young children's responses to preservice teachers' introduction to the issue of poverty and homelessness provide important affirmation of the topic's importance. For example, last semester one of my students read the children's book *This is My House* (Dorros, 1992) to her kindergarten class (in a school with a 60% poverty rate) as they focused on the topic of "Where We Live." The book deals with different types of homes around the world, including living in one's car because of not having

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a home. The class discussed different reasons why some people cannot afford to live in houses and must live on the streets or in cars. Some of the kindergarteners laughed at this living arrangement, but others asserted its truthfulness, an “eye opening” experience for my student. Perhaps she understood that when we ignore such an important topic as poverty, we neglect children’s experiences, knowledge, and questions.

Resources

- Anyon, J. (2005). What “counts” as educational policy? Notes toward a new paradigm. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75, 65-88.
- Dorris, A. (1992). *This is my house*. New York: Scholastic.
- Goodman, D. (1997). Understanding and addressing resistance to social justice issues. *Democracy & Education*, 12, 20-23.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (1994). *Expectations of excellence: Curriculum standards for social studies*. Washington, DC: National Council for the Social Studies.

Ava L. McCall is Professor and Chair of the Curriculum and Instruction Department at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and a member of the KIDS Advisory Board. She can be contacted at mccall@uwosh.edu.

AN OPEN LETTER TO KIDS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Heart Art

Thomas A. Edison Elementary School
3559 Pollina Avenue
FortGratiot, MI 48059 810.984.6507

Dear Kids Can Make A Difference:

Thank you for your correspondence and invitation to include information on our *HeartArt group* efforts. It is a great honor to be featured in your publication, and our students have been enthusiastic about your organization and eager to read your newsletter. The students were pleased to have helped in your organization's annual fund-raiser.

As you requested and with great pride, I give you some details of *Heart Art* at Thomas A. Edison. It actually began with ideas springing from my involvement in Imagine/Render effort Empty Bowls and information gathered from Kids Can Make A Difference literature. With my background being in the arts, I began thinking of ways in which students could utilize their artistic abilities to help the less fortunate in and around our school district. After conferring with school administrators, it was set that an after-school enrichment class would be set up for students to indeed use their hearts along with the arts to help the needy.

The group, which consists of 14 fourth graders along with one fifth grader, began meeting in late October in recognition of *Make a Difference Day*. The initial meeting was set aside for students to cooperatively brainstorm ideas as to how their talents could be utilized to help the sick, the elderly, the homeless and the hungry. As soon as our ideas were created, the students began to work – and they truly work earnestly and provided many with generous and noble deeds and gifts of artistic endeavors. These kids really came up with wonderful philanthropic ideas.

Our efforts included: placemats and small Christmas decorations for the local soup, cards for the *Color-A-Smile* organization, ornaments for a local nursing home, wreaths made to be auctioned at a hospital children's charitable holiday function, the creation of a quilt and other decor to be used for a Martin Luther King school district ceremony, a locally televised concert of Christmas songs for local shut-ins, a sing-a-long and a read-in at a local assisted living home, and a cookie and pin sale to aid Tsunami victims. Our main fundraising event took place in December in which students made cookies and a variety of handmade chocolate candies to sell at school lunches to raise money to help in the 2005 *Kids Can Make A Difference* organization effort.

Our efforts continue and our intentions will broaden next year, inviting new students to join in the effort and hopefully spreading interest to more of the community. Ultimately, we will remain true to our goal of helping others, and we will pursue means to continue to aid your organization and its efforts to instill children with the power that can make our home a planet where no child nor adult is left hungry. Your work will remind us of how small people can make a big difference and your inspirational literature will warm and energize our hearts!

Thank you, peace be with you, and may your days be filled with heartfelt love!

Janine Murphy-Evenson, Thomas A. Edison Art Teacher and Director of *Heart Art*

2005 TEACHER GUIDE AVAILABLE

Contains Updated Statistics & Resources

Finding Solutions To Hunger: Kids Can Make A Difference by Stephanie Kempf.

Uplifting, engaging, interactive and challenging lessons for middle and high school students on the root causes of and solutions to domestic and international hunger. Examines colonialism, contemporary development projects, the media, famine vs. chronic hunger, the working poor and more, as well as valuable ideas for how kids can make a difference in their community, and in the world around them.

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“If I were a teacher struggling to help students remain human in a sea of cynicism and self-absorption, I would grab onto this book as if it were a life raft and use it to bring my class to shore.”

*Joan Dye Gussow, Professor Emeritus,
Teachers College, Columbia University*



A Program of World Hunger Year

**1 Borodell Avenue
Mystic, CT 06355**

The purpose of **Kids Can Make A Difference®** is to inspire young people to realize that it is within their power to help eliminate hunger and poverty in their communities, their country, and their world.