Black Ants and Buddhists

Thinking Critically and Teaching Differently in the Primary Grades

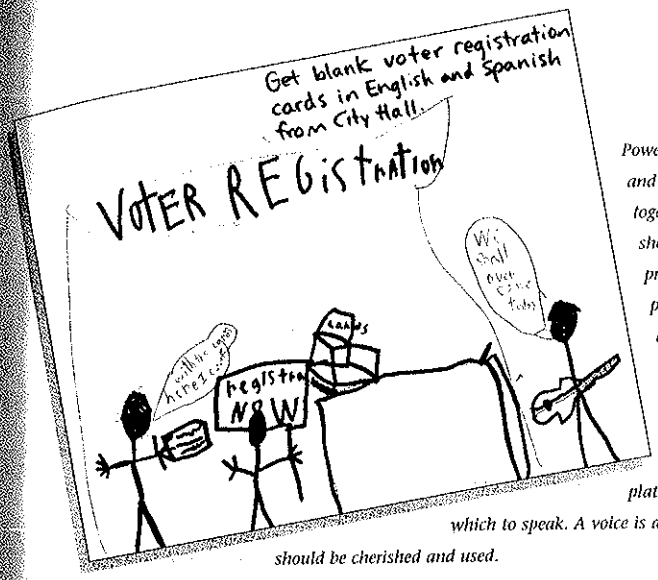
Mary Cowhey
Foreword by Sonia Nieto

Stenhouse Publishers
Portland, Maine
2006

activity related. Does children's participation in a dialog about responsibility for personal action, which might involve risk or sacrifice but might still seem insignificant in the eyes of society, make a difference? I think it does, if that dialog is authentic, powerful, trusting, and thought-provoking enough to resonate, if it changes the perception of reality from static entity into something that can be transformed, if that dialog has the power to continue into homes, into the community, into a school across the ocean. It makes enough of a difference to keep doing it. But without dialog, without truly listening or connecting, we might not have known that.

CHAPTER 6

learning through activism



Powerlessness and silence go together. We . . . should use our privileged positions not as a shelter from the world's reality, but as a platform from which to speak. A voice is a gift. It should be cherished and used.

—Margaret Atwood

As a second-grade teacher, I receive samples of glossy weekly publications for children, promising to be on grade level and tied to curriculum frameworks. In August 2004 I received one with photos that showed the presidential candidates and told the names of their dogs. Weighing budget cuts and educational value, I hadn't ordered them.

With Election Day only weeks away, I struggled to find a developmentally appropriate, authentic, and meaningful way to teach my students about the election process. I thought about the voting debacle in the 2000 presidential election. Fear paralyzes, but hope inspires action. I decided to teach the history of the struggle for voting equality, starting with abolitionists and women suffragists such as Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Sojourner Truth. We moved on to the civil rights movement to learn about the march to Selma and Sheyann Webb, a third-grade girl who marched and sang for voting rights there.

When I teach history or civics, I try to teach it so children will care. Many seven-year-olds are too young to understand the complexity of all the presidential campaign issues, but I don't want them to think it is about the name of a candidate's dog. They are old enough to understand that thousands of people fought for the right to vote for years and that many died in that struggle because the vote is powerful and because exercising it en masse does threaten the status quo. When these kids grow up, I believe they not only will register to vote when they turn eighteen, but will be more active in the democratic process than the kids who just learned the name of Bush's dog.

After discussing what we could do in relation to the upcoming election and the importance of the right to vote, my class decided to organize a voter registration drive. One morning before school, my students buzzed around under their big "Voter Registration Drive" banner. They excitedly asked all approaching adults if they were registered.

A woman came up to me with an intense look on her face. I wondered if she'd been asked four times. "This is a subversive activity, you know." Her finger pushed the stack of voter registration cards. I felt defensive for a moment, thinking, "Wait, we got an okay from the secretary of state to do this." Then I felt protective of the dozens of completed registration cards and wanted to pull them closer.

"Do you know what would happen if every school did this?" she asked. I was still trying to read whether her expression was hostile or supportive. She leaned toward me and said, "It would change the entire country!" She gave the registration cards a satisfied pat, said, "Thanks," and walked away.

I thought about the literal meaning of subvert, *"to turn from beneath." The voter registration drives of the civil rights movement certainly were subversive, but was this? These children will grow up with the staggering weight of a huge national debt and the ramifications of a preemptive war and occupation. This election was about these children, and they had a right to speak up about it. I looked at the handmade signs hanging crookedly around their necks, with their slogans: "Voting is your right. It's your responsibility." Tom's said, "It's free. It's easy. It's your destiny!"*

Rachel approached me and said, "Ms. Cowhey, I think we should sing now. You know, like they did." She cocked her head knowingly, in reference to the civil rights organizers. We gathered and began to sing "Oh Freedom." A blind woman walked into the lobby just then, with her guide dog. She did not see the banners, table, or registration cards, or the children of all shades, with serious faces or proud smiles, but she heard their voices. She stopped and sang with us. People came out of the busy office to listen. Everyone in the lobby stood still. The children ended their repertoire with a Jane Sapp song called "Vote for Me." And for a few minutes, struck by the power of the children's brave voices, the grown-ups stopped and listened.

learning through activism

Learning through activism is powerful because the need to use vital academic skills for social justice motivates their acquisition. These skills include reading, writing (reports, letters of thanks or inquiry, news articles, speeches, etc.), speaking, singing, listening, researching (asking good questions, finding people with answers), gathering and representing data, noting observations, making posters and banners, raising money, getting to know political leaders and how to access them, or more specific skills, such as how to organize a voter registration drive. The most important skill that can and must be developed through activism is critical thinking.

Learning through activism also helps children develop a sense of social justice, a sense of fairness and equity that begins with personal and community experience and extends globally and historically. It also empowers children and their families in concrete, authentic, replicable ways. It is not just about feeling good in the moment. Learning through activism recognizes and honors "everyday activists," which in turn cultivates more activism among students.

oter registration drive

My students studied the history of voting rights and criteria for U.S. citizenship, including the abolition of slavery and women's suffrage (see Figure 6.1).

They studied the civil rights movement, with a focus on the participation of "everyday activists," especially children such as Sheyann Webb, and young people such as Bernice Johnson Reagon, a teenage civil rights activist and freedom singer who became a founding member of Sweet Honey in the Rock, an African American female a cappella group. I enjoy using the interviews conducted by children in the book *Oh, Freedom! Kids Talk About the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made It Happen* by King and Osborne. They also learned about the important role of music in the civil rights movement, for inspiration, courage, and solidarity. They learned to sing several songs from that movement, including their favorite, Jane Sapp's "Vote for Me." Students made their own posters and banners to hang in the school and neighborhood. They wrote announcements for the school newsletter, to publicize the drive.

Figure 6.1 Essay by Yulia, a recent immigrant and English language learner

Elisabeth Cady Stantoh
Worked forWomeh toVote
She Was really old, but She
Still tried to vote,
even though the Meh
threw her Vote in
the garbage. She got
Women to help her.
Later, More Women
helped her. She Said
Wheh this girl grows
up, shewill Vote! Wheh
She died a lot of women
were Still fighting soeven/single
Woman could Vote. Wheh
I grow up, I willvote.

One goal of the project was to increase student and family understanding of the right to vote, which is too often taken for granted and ignored. I focused on teaching the history of the struggle for the right to vote, with the realization that without the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, the opportunity for immigrants to gain citizenship, the civil rights movement, and the Voting Rights Act, three-quarters of our class (girls, African Americans, immigrants, and Native Americans) would have been denied the right to vote as adults. Students were indignant about the injustice of that and were eager to educate others.

We also wanted to educate voters about their rights, so they would not be turned away from the polls. We did this by inviting an attorney to explain the Help America Vote Act. We learned how to register voters from the registrar, and in turn taught others. We publicized the deadline for voter registration and informed people who needed to reregister (i.e., those who had moved or had not responded to the city census). We also educated people about how to ask for and use a provisional ballot, if there was a problem.

Students who were not citizens got interested in how to become citizens. One student wrote a note to his mother, an attorney, asking her to explain how classmates adopted from other countries become citizens.

We got voter registration materials from the city registrar. Our class parent volunteers sent home a notice to the families and scheduled the family volunteers. We ran the voter registration drive at a table in the school lobby for a half hour on each of three mornings and afternoons, as staff and parents were coming and going. Each table had an average of four parent volunteers. A total of twenty parents volunteered; some volunteered two or more times. One parent would supervise a group of children wearing sandwich-board posters outside the school, inviting people inside to register. Our principal, and other adults who direct traffic in the parking lot, also wore posters.

Students politely approached adults to ask if they were registered to vote. If not, students asked if they were U.S. citizens, older than eighteen. If they were, they invited them to come to the table to learn how to register to vote. In addition to the twenty-two students from our class, three other first- and second-grade sisters volunteered regularly at the tables.

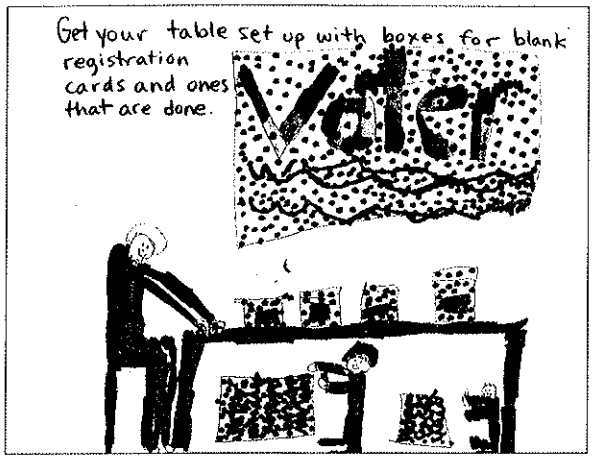
Juan's mother, Eneida Garcia, works at Casa Latina, a local organization that advocates for Latino community members. Between getting four boys out to school each morning and working full time, Eneida was unable to volunteer at the table, but she recruited Evelyn, a volunteer from Casa Latina, who came each morning. It was especially important for us to have a bilingual volunteer and registration materials in Spanish. One parent volunteer was so enthusiastic that she took voter registration forms to work and signed up three coworkers.

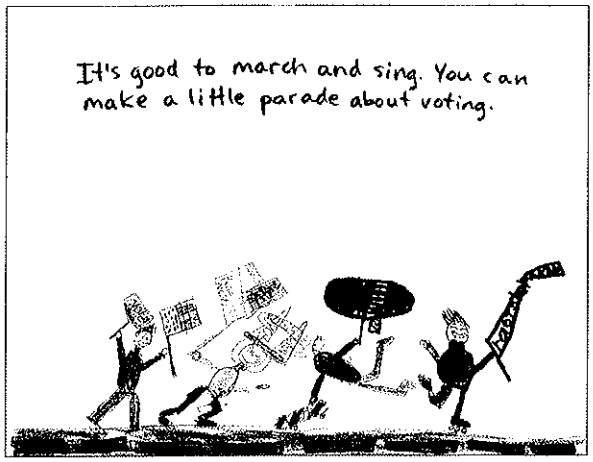
We wanted to reach parents of students at our school, as well as citizens of Northampton and surrounding communities. We were particularly hoping to register people of color and others who may have felt disenfranchised. We made posters in Spanish and English and posted them around the school, at the two apartment complexes across the street from the school, and at neighborhood stores. Of the thirty-six voters registered, about half were people of color and/or bilingual.

Some additional people took forms home to register a relative, neighbor, or coworker, but we did not count those unless they returned a completed form to us. More of those forms were probably mailed in. Hundreds of adults who were already registered to vote thanked our students for reminding them how important it is to vote. One student, whose mother had not registered to vote in twenty years, convinced her that this was the year to register and vote again. Dozens of people thanked us for holding the drive right in the school, because it was so convenient.

After completing the drive, the students rode the city bus downtown to deliver the completed voter registration cards to the registrar's office at city hall. Students were asked to prepare an exhibit for the mayor's office and wrote captions for a collection of drawings they had done titled "How to Register Voters." The registrar of voters, the mayor, and her staff were supportive. The evening before Election Day, students organized a reception at city hall to open the exhibit, followed by a candlelight vigil on the steps to encourage voter participation. The local director of the American Friends Service Committee assisted with the candlelight vigil, one of more than eighty nationwide that night, by providing candles and sending out a press release. About fifty people

Figure 6.2a and b Excerpts from the voter registration guide written by students





participated in the vigil. After the election, the students analyzed the results using the local newspaper, with a particular focus on understanding the arithmetic of the Electoral College.

Another goal of the voting rights project was to empower students and their families as active citizens participating in the democratic process by inviting lots of parental participation for the voter registration drive (volunteering at the tables), the field trip to city hall to meet the registrar and visit the mayor's office, the art exhibit reception and candlelight vigil. Most students and many parents have never been to the mayor's office. After visiting there twice, having their artwork exhibited there, organizing a vigil there, and receiving letters from the mayor and her staff, my students feel like they belong there, that they have access.

In addition to increasing interest in the election here in the United States, this project increased student interest in elections worldwide. That September and October, we had a Swiss teacher working in our classroom for three weeks and a British teacher in our classroom for a week. Our students were very interested to learn more about voting rights and participation in those countries. One of our students was Australian, and we learned from her mother that voting in Australia is compulsory. Those who fail to vote are actually fined.

Ripple Effects

Local news coverage of our voter registration drive got our students interested in newspaper reporting. With the volunteer help of parent and journalist Jo Glading-DiLorenzo, several other parents, and a grandmother, we launched a class newspaper called *The Peace Class News* (see appendix). The first issue had a story about the voter registration drive. The second had a story about the candlelight vigil on Election Eve. Our third issue had stories about the contested elections in Ukraine and the recount in Washington State. Students' work on the voter registration drive got them "tuned in" to voting and elections in an effective and ongoing way.

A favorite line from Jane Sapp's song "Vote for Me," sums it up when I hear my students sing, "Voting is more than a right, you see. Voting is your responsibility to ME!" My students are passionate about voting rights. Many parents told me stories of how their second graders would politely ask adult friends and relatives if they were registered to vote and if they were planning to vote—ready to meet any negative replies with instructions for how to register and a pep talk on the importance of voting.

Our voter registration drive was strictly nonpartisan. At this age, students' views most often mirror the political views of their parents. I encouraged families to engage in discussion of political topics with their children. From our discussion of current events in our morning meetings, it was clear that many of the students were engaging in lively political discussions at home. Students did come to understand that although it is good to engage in political debates with others, no one can tell someone else how to vote, and that all people have the right to keep their votes and their political opinions private if they so choose.

Students and their families came away from this project with the belief that social studies classes are very relevant. These students aren't looking at civics as some dry and dusty topic. They understand it is their duty as citizens to keep informed, think critically about issues, and participate actively in the electoral process, that democracy is not a spectator sport. Many parents said they wished they had learned social studies like this when they were students.

Students, families, and community members also came away very impressed at how effective our second graders were. In fact, many commented that the budget override vote in our city was defeated by *one* vote the previous spring. That story was very motivating to the students, who understood the difference even one vote could have in an election. The students also felt very empowered at how much they were able to do as seven-year-olds. They all said they would vote when they became old enough, and many were looking forward to participating in voter registration drives and political campaigning in the future.

These children and their families learned lessons about citizenship, democracy, and voting rights that will not easily fade or be forgotten, lessons that have changed their lives forever. These children learned not only important lessons about American history and civics, and rules about the Electoral College and recounts, but also how to make an effective poster, how to politely approach an adult and engage in effective dialog, how to speak to reporters and write their own news stories, how to talk to local politicians and attorneys, and how to target and reach particular constituencies in our community. Although they may not think of it in these terms, they know from their own experience what is possible. They have the skills, motivation, and confidence to be active citizens for life. Our voter registration drive was one of six school projects in the country to win an award from the national League of Women Voters for increasing parental and community involvement in the national election.

I-World Recycling

One year my first and second graders were working on a science and technology unit about materials that can be recycled. We read *Just a Dream* by Chris Van Allsberg, a picture book about a futuristic dream through which a boy learns the importance of taking care of the environment.

We read other books about environmental activism, including *Hey, Get Off Our Train* by John Burningham, a great participatory read-aloud picture book, suitable even for preschoolers. The dreamy illustrations are delightful. Children love to join in on the refrain. It is dedicated to rain-forest activist Chico Mendes. His name, and the habitat-loss issue, led us to a book about the rain forest, *The Great Kapok Tree: A Tale of the Amazon Rain Forest* by Lynne Cherry, in which rain-forest animals attempt to persuade a tree cutter not to cut down their home. Cherry has another great book about water pollution, which I use for this unit as well as for studying the water cycle, *A River Ran Wild: An Environmental History,* also mentioned in Chapter 4. It focuses on the story of the Nashua River in New Hampshire and Massachusetts and how the river changed over hundreds of years, the eventual death of the river through pollution, and how it was revived and reclaimed through environmental activism and the passage of the Clean Water Act. *She's Wearing a Dead Bird on Her Head!* by Kathryn Lasky features Harriet Hemenway and Minna Hall, rather proper ladies who became passionate activists for the protection of birds and helped found the Audubon Society.

My goal for this unit was to change student as well as family behavior in relation to reducing, recycling, and reusing. However, I did not want all the families to end up cursing me for nurturing new obsessions in their children. I learned from my son that first graders are capable of quoting their teachers verbatim in the most annoying way, repeating, "But Miss Blahblah *said* . . ." Over the years, good-natured parents have informed me that I have unwittingly become an authority on subjects ranging from hand-washing protocols to sugar content in breakfast foods.

I had one student in particular, an intellectual, articulate boy named John, who would argue until he was blue in the face but do very little. John was in the habit of bossing his parents around, telling them, for example, "Carry my backpack!" I decided that role playing might be an effective way to go. To prepare, I spent a couple of days picking through the classroom trash and the recycling bins in my neighborhood to gather my props.

First, I chose a student to be the parent while I role played a child who was bossy, lazy, and self-righteous about recycling. "Mommy, you should compost those banana peels, you know. And you know it's dumb to waste all those paper towels when you clean up the juice I spill. You should use a rag or a sponge so you don't kill all those trees." I asked the student playing the parent how she felt. She said, "Like *Why don't you do it if you're so smart? Don't boss me around. Do it yourself!*" I asked the children if they thought that this parent's habits would change because of what I said. They thought they wouldn't.

I invited John to be the child in the next role play. As the parent, I pretended to pour him a glass of milk, then threw the plastic jug in the trash. He stood up all agitated. "There's a recycling symbol on that jug, you know."

"Oh yeah?" I replied, pretending to wash dishes.

"We could recycle it," he said.

"I guess so, but I'm busy. I have to go to a meeting tonight," I answered.

He scratched his head and nervously shifted his weight. "Just do it, John," a student whispered.

John took a deep breath and a resolute step toward the trash can. He pulled out the milk jug and walked to the pretend sink. "Excuse me, Mother. I'd like to rinse this out." I stepped aside while he made lots of *Pisssshhhhh* sound effects and then shook it out. "Uh, where's our recycling?" he thought out loud. He brought it to the recycling bin and dropped it in. "Oh, right! Crush it!" he told himself. He pulled it out, stomped on it thoroughly, and put it back in the bin. He nodded, looked at his classmates, and took a bow. As the parent, I said I felt inspired by his example and appreciated his help.

The role plays became a favorite activity as we continued the unit. They were often interspersed with problem-solving brainstorms. We debated the advantages and disadvantages of cloth versus disposable diapers, weighing laundry-water consumption against landfill use. We investigated the cost saving and environmental benefit of buying in bulk (yogurt, juice, snack foods) and repacking in washable plastic containers. We examined products and packaging to find out which companies used recycled paper to make their boxes or paper products, realizing it wouldn't do much good to recycle your own paper if you didn't support companies that used recycled paper. I sent home a family letter about the investigation and asked families to work together on three

homework assignments about how the students could help their families reduce, reuse, and recycle. Here are some of their ideas:

"Carry our compost to our neighbors' compost pile."
"My brother can reuse some of my stuffs, like Step 1 books and baby toys."
"We can reuse plastic containers in lunch boxes."
"In the food store, do not ask for something that is wrapped in nonrecyclable material."
"We recycle clothes when we give our clothes to the Jesse's House." (Jesse's House is a local shelter for homeless families.)
"We can wash out Ziploc bags more."

We went downtown to visit the mayor to discuss local landfill and recycling matters with her. We met with a recycling expert while we were there. The children were shocked to learn that although Styrofoam often has a recycle symbol on it, it does not get recycled in our city.

One morning Maureen and her twin daughters, Eileen and Kaitlyn, came in from the free breakfast program in the cafeteria and said they were disturbed to notice that the school had started using Styrofoam trays instead of the regular plastic ones. They also noticed how many plastic utensils were being thrown away. We decided to ask Mr. Benoit, our custodian, to give our class a "waste tour" of our school. He showed us the trash Dumpster and the paper-recycling Dumpster and talked about how much waste our school produced each day. Eileen and Kaitlyn decided to gather data about waste in the breakfast program. They enlisted Maureen's help and recorded how many trash barrels of waste were produced each morning. Then they estimated how much using washable plastic trays and metal utensils and recycling plastic cereal bowls could reduce trash.

They wrote letters to the assistant superintendent, who was in charge of district purchasing, to find out what the school spends on waste disposal and recycling. They also wrote to the director of food services for the district to find out the costs of items such as Styrofoam trays and plastic utensils. They asked Mr. Martinez, a parent and classroom aide, if he would chat with the cafeteria workers to find out how the dishwasher worked in relation to plastic trays and metal utensils.

We were nearing the end of the school year and still had not received a response from the director of food services. The children asked me to call him. When I did, he apologized, saying he'd never received the letter, but he offered to come visit the class to discuss the issues.

While all of the first and second graders in our class that year had done the role playing, the family homework, and the field trip, this particular "recycling group" of about eight second graders, including Eileen, Kaitlyn, Sorny, John, Beth, and Nancy, had chosen to pursue the cafeteria investigation by gathering and charting the data, writing additional letters, and so forth. On the day of the visit, Nancy and the other members of the recycling group pushed two rectangular tables together to make a conference table, arranging little chairs all around it. They set up two easels to hold their charts and posters. They reviewed their questions and recommendations. A call came from the office, saying that Mr. Fenwick had arrived. I sent another student down to greet him.

Nancy gathered her group around and said quite seriously, "Look, even though we know we're right, we shouldn't scare him." The other students nodded in solemn agreement. A moment later, Mr. Fenwick filled the classroom door. I gulped. He was the size of a refrigerator. Nancy calmly walked over, shook his hand, then held it as she walked him over to the table and offered him a tiny chair beside the easels.

Nancy and the other students presented their data, asked their questions, listened to his answers, and presented their suggestions. Mr. Fenwick was not disrespectful, but he was brusque as he said that children are not careful in the cafeteria, that they dump metal utensils in the trash, that it is too expensive to keep replacing them. My students silently bristled at the stereotype that all children are careless about throwing their metal utensils in the trash, but Nancy promptly offered to organize a silverware drive at the school. He declined her offer. He said that if they used plastic lunch trays and metal utensils in the breakfast program, they'd have to pay someone to put them in the dishwasher and take them back out again. Beth pointed out that that could be a job for a parent who needed work. Besides, he said, he'd just purchased 10,000 Styrofoam trays.

In the end, Mr. Fenwick did not promise to make any of the changes the children suggested, but he said he'd consider them. When he left, Beth said, "You know, Ms. Cowhey, next time your kids do this, we have to try to think of even more what-ifs, like what if he says this or that." They did not feel defeated. In September, I had a new group of students. Mr. Fenwick got a new job somewhere else. The district never switched back to metal utensils or plastic trays.

A part of me felt disappointed. I wanted Mr. Fenwick to say, "Gosh, you're right! I'll return all those Styrofoam trays today! We'll go back to using plastic trays and we'll hire a parent to operate that dishwasher again." I guess I expected him to be kind to my students because they

were so sincere, and had worked so hard researching this and . . . I hate to say it, because they were cute. He treated them brusquely, like . . . adults. Well, I supposed, it was good that he didn't treat them like children. He didn't condescend or tell them they were cute. They didn't cry or even take it personally. My students assumed that of course my next class of students and I would pick up the torch and continue the battle against Styrofoam trays the next year. The reality is that we didn't. The reality is that school years, no matter how packed they are or long they feel, ultimately come to an end. If I'm not looping, a new year brings new children and new interests and new projects.

So was it worth it? Yes. James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed unless it is faced." My initial goal was to change student, and ideally, family, behavior in relation to rethinking, reducing, reusing, and recycling. By the end of the year, these kids were routinely rinsing yogurt cups and juice boxes to take them home to recycle. Parents replaced plastic spoons in lunch boxes with metal ones that kids brought home to wash. Parents were buying snack and lunch items in bulk, with less packaging. Many families told me stories about starting their own compost piles or arranging to contribute regularly to a neighbor's, as well as stories about children taking a much more active role in recycling and composting.

Were the efforts of the recycling group for naught? No. Our school has been participating in a composting program for about five years now. I think it started because someone at the vocational high school got a demonstration grant, not because of our efforts. Beth Bellavance-Grace, a parent from my class who works at our school as an aide, organized a schoolwide recycling program. Now we recycle paper, milk and juice cartons, yogurt cups, water bottles, soda cans, cell phones, and printer ink cartridges. Although my future classes never did resume the battle against Styrofoam food trays, my current students participate in composting and recycling, just as part of responsible citizenship in our school community.

Nancy and Beth demonstrated important lessons that day about gaining confidence by respecting and caring for your adversaries, instead of fearing or trying to intimidate them. That recycling group learned a lot about how to gather data through observation, inquiry, and correspondence. They learned how to represent data and articulate their arguments. They learned how to listen to an opponent, and they learned the value of thorough preparation. Although they didn't win the specific issue they tackled, they helped make our school a more environmentally conscious place in the long run. They are at the middle school now, but the new second graders who sit in their tiny chairs today stand up responsibly to recycle our paper and milk cartons every day like it is the most natural routine in the world.

taking it to the playground

Sometimes children use skills developed through activism, such as persuasive letter writing, poster making, petition writing, and negotiation, to resolve conflicts on the playground.

One year I had a class with a lot of athletic kids who were very passionate about football. A group of students played football every day at recess. Inevitably, they came in angry and upset about losing, accusations of unfair team composition, getting injured, and getting screamed at for making mistakes or not knowing the rules. At one point, the boys "in charge" of the game had decided, "Anyone can play, but you have to know all the rules." Several girls and a boy who had just come from India felt excluded because they did not know the rules, although they were willing to learn. We discussed not excluding others and how the kids who knew the rules could explain them at the beginning of each game. After having invested a lot of instructional time to problem-solve this particular issue, I finally said they had to take a break from playing football, and we brainstormed other things they could do at recess. These ideas included wall ball, which could also be contentious.

Jack decided to write a nonfiction piece, which he published as a poster:

Ideas for Making Recess Easier and More Fun

Observation	*Suggestion*
People are sometimes getting yelled at when they are learning a game.	Teach the person the game if they don't know it.
Some people aren't allowed to join a game.	Let the person join the game and then rule 1.
In wall ball, some people catch the ball a lot.	If you catch the ball a lot, back up to let the other people catch the ball.
People are mad or sad during or at the end of recess.	Try to talk to the other person and compromise.

Jack presented his poster and hung it up in the classroom.

One day Ben brought in a petition he had written at home.

Dear Ms. Cowhey,

I want to know why we can't play football. We are not having too much fun, it's getting boring playing wall-ball, and we never get to work out how to include people in football. Could you give us another chance? I promise that we will include people, have fair teams and not have too much fighting. If you decide after this note that we still can't play football, I will feel very sad. Could you please read this out loud and see who else wants to sign it?

Love,
Ben

I read Ben's petition out loud at the morning meeting, and eleven other students signed it. I then asked students to remember why football playing had been stopped. They were quick to offer, "There was some pushing, and fights about fair teams and winning. Some felt left out and excluded. It was hard to get into the game. People got hurt. There were fights about rules and penalties. Talking about teams was distracting during work times in class. There was lots of crying because of injuries and hurt feelings."

Ramadan said, "*Now* I remember why we don't play football." I said we needed to try again to think of some solutions to respond to the petition. One suggestion was to make copies of Jack's poster and send them home for students to discuss with their families, and to review the poster before going outside. I had recently returned from a trip to visit schools in England and told the children what those playgrounds looked like. My students asked me to develop and bring in those pictures so they could get ideas for fun things to add to our playground for recess.

I told the children that I was not an expert on football because girls were not encouraged to play it when I was little and no one in my family played it, watched it, or went to games. Because of my lack of expertise, it was hard for me to understand, let alone resolve, some of their complicated arguments about rules and penalties. I reminded them that this was the playground, not the Super Bowl, and that we didn't have to play by strict and complex NFL rules. Perhaps we could find a simpler way to play so more people could learn and fewer playtimes would be lost to arguing. We wrote a letter to ask our physical education teacher to teach us a simpler version. I went with my class to the next few P.E.

classes to learn, and that was the football they played for the rest of the year.

Another year there was a dispute between some of my first-grade boys and girls over "the platform." This was a flat concrete slab about five feet square, raised about eight inches from the blacktop. A group of girls began to use the platform to play "baby" (a version of playing house) in which some girls were parents and the rest were babies who crawled around. Then a group of boys decided they wanted to use the platform too. This grew into a daily contest between the girls and boys. The girls became increasingly upset. They said the boys weren't really playing on the platform; they were just sitting there to keep the girls from using it. The girls wanted me to "make a rule" that the boys couldn't chase them off.

I said that I didn't particularly have jurisdiction over the platform, but that Ms. Agna, our principal, might. I said they would all have an opportunity to write a persuasive letter to Ms. Agna, clearly laying out their arguments in support of their proposed solution. The girls wrote letters developing their arguments in detail, describing their play, the advantages of the concrete platform over the wet grass for the crawling required by their pretend play, and so forth. During our discussions, the girls argued that the boys should be prohibited from using that space, but in their letters, they proposed that perhaps the platform could be used for "playing baby" and "relaxing" on alternate days. The boys wrote briefer letters, just saying they liked to relax on the platform, without any particular reasons why they needed that precise space. I noticed the boys looking over at the draft notebooks of the girls at their tables, and then developing their arguments and proposals a bit more. I stressed to them that Ms. Agna would bother to read only legible letters, because she's a busy person. Eventually they submitted their letters. Ms. Agna read them, then came and met with the class to determine an equitable solution.

thinking critically about causes

> *The question is not "Can you make a difference?" You already do make a difference. It's just a matter of what kind of a difference you want to make, during your life on this planet.*
>
> —Julia Butterfly Hill

One day Terrance, one of my second graders, brought in a news clipping about American schoolchildren who were holding a penny drive to buy

the freedom of Sudanese slaves. My students were shocked to learn that slavery still existed in the world. We looked at a map and found Sudan on the continent of Africa. They thought they might want to collect pennies. I told them that there was historic precedent for this. Muslims used to buy the freedom of slaves as a form of *zakah* (charity) during the holy season of Ramadan. Quakers used to sometimes buy slaves, such as Sojourner Truth, and release them. Nancy asked me to read the article again. It mentioned that some people had been captured as slaves two or three times. She said it would be sad if we bought freedom for a slave and then he or she got captured again. Then Beth asked who would get all those pennies. Would we be giving our money to slave traders? One student, sounding a bit like a parent, said that perhaps we shouldn't give money to the slave traders, or "we would only be encouraging them." Beth concluded, "It's bad if Africans buy slaves. It would be even worse if a bunch of Americans started buying them too."

The news article discussion got these first and second graders to think about the economic principle of supply and demand, as it applied to slavery. They were not able to think of a solution to the problem of slavery in Sudan, but they decided that giving money to slave traders could make the problem worse, so they did not participate in the penny drive.

This is an important point for activists of all ages. A critically thinking activist doesn't jump on every bandwagon that rolls into town. Realistically, no one can do everything. Critically speaking, not everything out there is worth doing. That is not to say that the things I decide against doing are "bad" things. Maybe the cause is just but the method is ineffective. Maybe the motivation for the project is dubious. Maybe the idea is good, but I have too many unanswered questions about how the organization operates or who it is affiliated with to feel comfortable working with it. Maybe the project is important, but the issue itself is too disturbing and developmentally inappropriate for the age of my students.

With something of a reputation as an activist teacher, I receive lots of suggestions, requests, invitations, and ideas about all kinds of projects, causes, and campaigns to work on with my students. I can't do them all, and I shouldn't do them all. Sometimes it is hard to sort out or pull back, especially if I have begun the project in some way.

One May our class received a short-notice invitation from the mayor's office to meet with Tony Lake, former national security adviser to President Clinton, about a children's campaign to eradicate land mines. It sounded official and important, and I was flattered that we were invited. Frankly, those factors distracted my critical-thinking process; I jumped on the logistical details, assuming that of course it would be good to go. Because of constraints imposed by the public bus schedule, the school lunch schedule, and the short time frame, I couldn't take the entire class to the 1:00 P.M. meeting. I wrote a letter to the families with a copy of the invitation and said they would be welcome to pick their children up early from class to take them to the meeting, as representatives of our class and reporters for *Peace Class News*.

About five families said they would take their children. Before they left, I did a short lesson about the issue of land mines, using a children's book by UNICEF called *A Life Like Mine: How Children Live Around the World*. I told them I first began to learn about the land mine issue when I saw an exhibit about it at the United Nations in 2001, and that I wondered why the United States had refused to sign the international treaty to ban the use of land mines.

As it turned out, Tony Lake was unable to attend the meeting, but the Peace Class representatives met with Perry Baltimore III, a representative of CHAMP (Children Against Mines Program) and Rosie, a mine-sniffing dog. They were given folders with literature and an informational CD and asked to collect quarters that would be used to purchase and train a mine-sniffing dog named Massachusetts.

When they returned to school the next day, my student reporters gave me the packet of information and told us about the meeting with great enthusiasm. Sophie had asked Mr. Baltimore why kids were raising money for mine-sniffing dogs if the United States hadn't signed the world treaty to ban the use of land mines. Mr. Baltimore said that Mr. Lake had gotten legislation passed banning the manufacture of land mines in the United States. (In fact, the United States still owns one of the largest stockpiles of land mines in the world.) Mr. Baltimore said that the United States wouldn't sign the treaty because "land mines are strategically necessary in some circumstances." I was starting to feel uneasy, like maybe I had made a mistake and rushed into this too fast.

I read through the material and previewed the informational video. The next day we watched it in class. Using our bias-detection skills, we noticed most of the people interviewed were White men in suits. Many of them had American flags hanging behind them. Only one was not American; he was from the United Nations. We noted that one man was from the U.S. State Department Office of Humanitarian De-mining, which is one of the primary sponsors of CHAMP. We noticed that Jody Williams, the American woman who founded the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and won the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, was

not interviewed or even mentioned. There was a brief clip of Princess Diana visiting a minefield, but she was not interviewed or quoted.

I observed my students' reaction to the video: some were visibly frightened by the explosions and saddened by the land mine injuries. Our discussion demonstrated that some children were especially anxious about land mined African, Asian, and Central American countries where they were born or to which family members traveled, fearful for their safety. Feeling stupid and guilty for having proceeded that far already, I decided the topic of land mines was developmentally inappropriate and downright disturbing for some second graders. I also had a lot of questions about CHAMP, its sponsors, agenda, and purpose. We discussed this as a class and decided not to pursue this quarter-collecting campaign because of the developmental inappropriateness of the topic for elementary students and because we didn't feel like we'd gotten a good enough answer yet to Sophie's question.

One of Sophie's moms, Jo Glading-DiLorenzo, a professional journalist and publisher of our *Peace Class News*, was with us in class when we watched the CHAMP video and was there for that discussion. She and I talked about it when the kids went to lunch. As adult activists, we wanted to pursue it further to get at the underlying contradictions, but it was clear that pursuing it as a class would disturb some children. On the other hand, there were some children, like Jo's daughter, Sophie, who wanted to find out more about CHAMP and why the U.S. State Department was sponsoring this project. After many conversations, much debate, and soul-searching, we made a deliberate compromise. Jo volunteered to work with a small group of interested students to do some investigative reporting about CHAMP. I wouldn't teach about it any further as a topic, and we wouldn't participate in the campaign.

Through our interaction with CHAMP, my students learned that activists have to think critically, that smart activists don't jump on every cause. They learned to use their bias-detection skills to help them think about who is missing, who is talking and who is not, who is providing information and who is not, what information is given and what information is not. Rather than just learn to passively name continents on a world map, they learned to critically read maps and graphs, and to interpret the data on them while considering the source. Because their comprehension skills have been developed through the use of schema, they make connections between what they know and the new information being presented. Because they are used to going to city hall and meeting with community and political leaders, familiar and unfamiliar adults, they are empowered and confident enough to ask those adults

challenging questions. Because their critical thinking has been consciously nurtured, they are in the habit of noticing and pursuing contradictions. They ask more questions, by e-mail, by letter, and in person, when the answers they're given don't make sense. They gain experience in investigative reporting and learn the importance of making and revising a plan in writing as their research helps them clarify where the real story is.

All of these are vital academic skills. Although children will not master them in second grade, they are not too young to begin to learn and use these skills. Will all of this raise their math and reading scores on standardized tests? It sure can't hurt. Will it make them more informed, articulate, active, and participatory citizens who know the power of their own voices? I think so. Is it subversive? What do you think?