

## IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME

**GRADE LEVEL:** 4 and 5

**TOPIC:** Problem Solving and Letter Writing

**CONTENT AREA:** Social Studies  
Language Arts  
Science  
Mathematics



**LEARNING OBJECTIVES/QCC:**

The students will:

Social Studies: Civic Participation-

- Formulate and defends positions on an issue,
- Recognize the right of others to present different viewpoints,
- Participate in planning for effective civic actions and demonstrate effective civic actions,
- Recognize appropriate ways to influence public policy and civic actions;

Science: Science Inquiry, Process Skills and Problem Solving-

Asks questions, makes and keeps records of observations, classifies objects and events, communicates with others, makes inference and predictions, uses estimation and measurement, uses evidence to construct explanations, makes sketches and diagrams to explain ideas, organizes data into tables and

charts for interpretation, reads and interprets various types of graphs, formulates simple hypotheses, identifies and controls a limited number of variables, and designs a simple experiment; and

Language Arts: Writing –

-Communicate ideas using the writing process: Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Publishing.

### **CRITICAL QUESTIONS:**

1. How can written communications help us solve problems and promote understanding?
2. How relevant are nonviolent strategies for peace in today's society?
3. How can children address and attempt to solve real-life problems?
4. How do the principles and steps of nonviolence compare to the principles and steps of social action?

### **BACKGROUND:**

In this time of emails and instant messages, the art of letter writing could become outdated. Yet, going out to the mailbox and finding an unexpected letter from a friend is possibly one of the great, simple pleasures of life. Letters have a way of keeping us close to our friends and loved ones and help us to hold on to the voices of past generations.

As well, letters have often been used to communicate important ideas and thoughts about social issues. Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" is an example.

Benjamin Banneker wrote a compelling letter to Thomas Jefferson refuting the premise of the Declaration of Independence. His letter took issue with Jefferson's declaration that "all men are created equal..." Banneker reminded Jefferson that the Negro in America had been denied equality in America.

The first lesson will allow students to help "revive" the art of letter writing and highlight the importance of written communication. (Additional background information can be obtained from the National Postal Museum. See the Website in the reference section of this document.)

The second lesson allows students to discuss and determine problem-solving strategies based on the following Dr. King quotation:

*"Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power."*

Martin Luther King, Jr. "Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?" 1967

## **MATERIALS/RESOURCES:**

### **Print:**

Colbert, J. and Harms, A. (ed.) (1998). *Dear Dr. King: Letters from Today's Children to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Hyperion Books for Children.

Coleman, Evelyn. (1999). *White Socks Only.* Albert Whitman Publishing.

Johnson, C. and Adelman, B. (2000). *King: the Photo biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, NY: The Penguin Group.

Kurusa (1995). *The Streets are Free.* Buffalo, NY: Annick Press.

## Online:

The National Postal Museum

<http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/>

The National Postal Museum, a Smithsonian Institution museum, is a great source of information on stamps, stamp collecting, letters, history and so much more.

Letters, Letter-writing and Other Intimate Discourse

<http://www.wendy.com/letterwriting/>

This site has a wealth of information about letter writing, the history of letter writing, links to famous letters, and much more. The teacher should view this site first – it does include some sensitive information such as origin of the “Dear John” letters.

Decode the Barcode

[http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/activity/8c\\_deco de3a.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/activity/8c_deco de3a.html)

The National Postal Museum has a wonderful activity page that includes How to Decode a Barcode. This interactive Website leads the student through several pages of hints that instruct the student on breaking the code.

A Brief History of Letter Writing

<http://www.beloit.edu/~amerdem/students/morrow2.html>

This page is a portion of a larger website that discusses the art and history of letter writing.

Flag Stamp Issues 1981-2002

<http://www.coilcorner.com/eCatalog/flag/default.html>

This page is a good site to help identify the flag stamps issued 1981-2002. Whether it is the Flag and the Supreme Court or the Flag and the Capitol,

each flag stamp issued in this range of years is identified.

Social Action

<http://www.socialaction.info/socialaction.html>

This Website describes the SOCIAL ACTION PROCESS.

### **Videos:**

“Children of Courage.” (1999). 16.04 min. National Park Service.

“One Million Postcards.” (1999). 12 min. Literature Resources – AFSC.

### **Other:**

- Canceled stamps
- Poster boards
- Glue
- Scissors
- Notebook
- Pencils
- Chart paper
- Markers



**Note to the teacher: Before beginning this unit have students begin collecting and bringing in canceled stamps. Collect as many as possible. (The National Postal Museum sells bags of 500 canceled stamps for about six dollars.) Contact the National Postal Museum Shop at:**

**Smithsonian Institution  
2 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
Phone: (202) 633-8180  
Fax: (202) 633-9393**

**The museum is open 7 days a week 10:00 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (EST)**

## **Attachments/Handouts:**

- Handout 1: Comparison /Chart (You and Girl)
- Handout 2: KWL Chart
- Handout 3: Comparison Chart (Similarities and Differences)
- Handout 4: A Step-By-Step Process
- Attachment 1: Social Action Principles and Steps
- Attachment 2: Six Principles and Six Steps of Nonviolence
- Attachment 3: Sample of Dichotomous Key

## **PROCEDURES:**

Lesson 1: Dear Dr. King

1. Read the book, *Dear Dr. King, Letters from Today's Children to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*



**Note to the teacher:** *If students know little about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement, share and discuss the book *King: The Photobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Have the students listen to the CD "Who will Speak for the Children," from *The Children of Selma* or have them view a video such as "Children of Courage."*

2. Discuss with the students the kinds of things they might write if they were to compile a book like *Dear Dr. King*. Make a class chart of the students' ideas.
3. Tell students that they will compile a book of letters from the children of their city to Dr. King, Hosea Williams, Medgar Evers or a living

movement leader such as Congressman John Lewis. Teach students the appropriate greeting – Dear Congressman Lewis.



**Note to the teacher:** *This can be a class project or it can be extended school-wide or citywide.*

4. Have students draft their letters using the writing process.
5. Solicit the help of parents and other adults to help type the letters written by the students. (Many students will be able to type their own letter; however, additional adult supervision is always helpful.)
6. Using a digital camera, take pictures of the students to use in the book and on the cover.
7. Have groups of students design covers for the book and have a cover or book jacket contest to select the winning cover for the class book.
8. Make enough copies of the book to share with each student, the school's media center, and the person or family of the person the letters are written to.
9. Bind the books using a bookbinding machine.
10. Share your treasures.

### **CENTERS/EXTENSION IDEAS:**

1. Divide the class into small groups; give each group a pile of stamps. Ask each group to classify their pile. The students may elect to sort their stamps any way they choose. After organizing all stamps, the students should report to the class how and why they

chose to classify their pile in a particular way.  
Discuss stamp classifications.

2. Classifying items can be as simple as putting like objects together (triangles vs. squares) or as complex as telling the difference between a true cedar and a larch (types of trees.) At this point, we want to take classifying to a higher level and introduce dichotomous keys to the students. Usually used in the natural sciences, a dichotomous key is a tool that allows the user to determine the identity of items in the natural world, such as trees, wildflowers, mammals, reptiles, rocks, or fish. Keys consist of a series of choices that lead the user to the correct name of a given item. “Dichotomous” means “divided into two parts.” Therefore, dichotomous keys always give two choices in each step. This activity stretches across the curriculum to include science process skills and teaches young children how a dichotomous key is organized. Students will be able to categorize and differentiate between stamps according to like characteristics. Materials needed: stamps with US flags, a sheet of construction paper, markers, pencils, or pens. Have the students work in teams of 2 –4 students.
3. Ask students: Have you ever wondered what the barcodes on the front of mail stand for? Have students discover the hidden message in this interactive activity. Decode the Barcode. Have students visit the website below and discover how it is done.  
[http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/activity/8c\\_decode3a.html](http://www.postalmuseum.si.edu/activity/8c_decode3a.html)
4. **Stamp Decoupage:** Have students create wonderful pieces of art with odd shaped bottles or cigar boxes and stamps. Collect cancelled stamps, odd shaped bottles or cigar boxes. (You will need hundreds of



stamps.) In the art center, cover a table with newspapers. Make a solution of water and glue. The mixture should be about half glue and half water. You might have to do a little experimenting to get it just right. Allow students to apply the stamps to the surface of the bottles or boxes, using a small sponge brush. Stamps should slightly overlap so as not to leave any blank spaces on the surface of the object being covered. Completely cover the bottle or box with stamps. Allow to dry thoroughly. Share as a gift or keep as decoration for the classroom.

## **PROCEDURES:**

### Lesson 2: If It Is To Be, It Is Up To Me

1. Read the story *White Socks Only* by Evelyn Coleman to the class.

*White Socks Only* tells the story of child, now a grandmother, as she relives an event in her past. The grandmother recalls facing discrimination when she was not allowed to drink from a water fountain with a sign that read: "Whites Only." Misunderstanding the sign, the girl thinks it is referring to white socks only. The event results in the removal of the sign, and changes the life of the town.

2. Discuss the story.

Ask students:

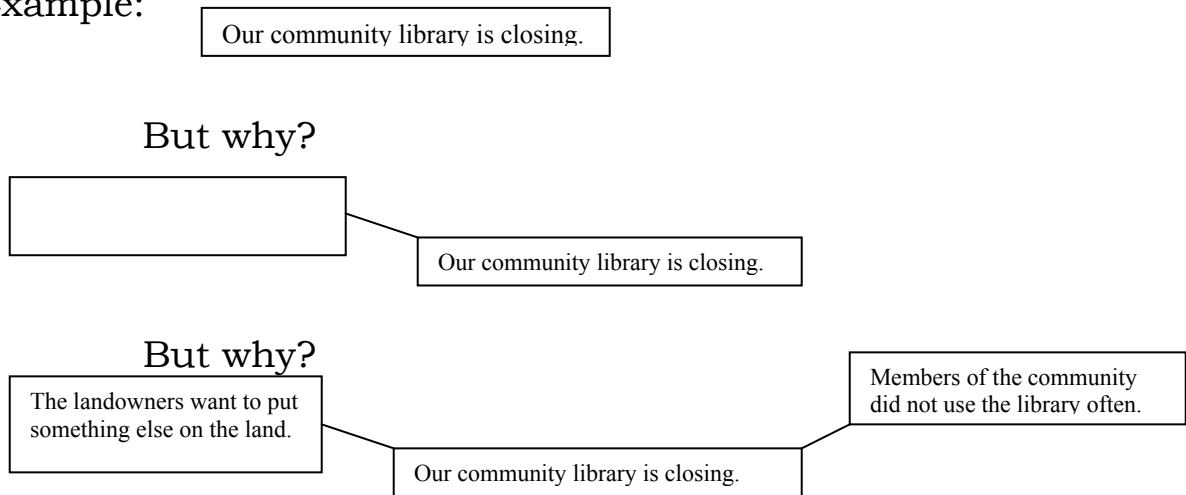
- (1.) What did Mama mean when she said: "Well, I guess you can go to town by yourself now 'cause you're old enough to do some good?"

- (2.) Do you think the girl did “some good”? How did the girl’s mistake/misunderstanding change the lives of people in her town?
  - (3.) What have you done that is courageous and made a difference in someone’s life?
  - (4.) What have you learned about yourself? Compare yourself to the young girl – how are you similar and how are you different? (Handout 1)
3. Read and display the quote “Our nettlesome task is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power.” Discuss the quote and define words, if necessary:
  - a. Nettlesome: causing vexation: irritating
  - b. Compelling: to drive or urge forcefully or irresistibly
4. Have the students begin a KWL chart by having them share what they know about organizing strength into compelling power (solving problems). Record students’ statements. (Handout 2)
5. Next, entertain suggestions as to how this might be accomplished. Add these comments under the W column.
6. Have students list some issues that resonate with them – problems in their community (the closing of a local library), school (no recess), and neighborhood (trash everywhere). List the

problems on a chart as the students share their ideas.

7. Have the students draw a picture of their issue.
8. As a group, select one issue to explore. (Students share their illustrations and ideas as to why their issue should be chosen as the group's project.)
9. The group must agree on an issue or problem to address.
10. After an issue has been identified, create a web to get at deeper problems to identify the reasons why the problem exists so that any solutions devised will attack root causes and not just symptoms.

Example:



11. Keep fleshing out the question until you cannot go any further.

12. Share with the students some ideas as to how other children have worked together to solve real problems
  - a. The video “One Million Postcards”
  - b. The book “The Streets are Free”
13. Brainstorm ways the chosen issue can be addressed:
  - a. Write letters to inform others of the problem
  - b. Write a public service announcement for the radio or television
  - c. Create flyers on the subject
  - d. Take a fieldtrip to find out more information
  - e. Learn about propoganda and making generalizations
14. Address the problem. Follow-through on one or more of the above actions.
15. After addressing the problem have students discuss what they discovered about this process.
16. Compare this process with Dr. King’s steps to nonviolence. (*Attachment 2*)

**CENTERS/EXTENSION IDEAS:**

1. Have students research a young person in their own town who has done a great and courageous deed. Share their efforts with the class.
2. Divide students into teams to investigate a question like:

Science: Can you really fry an egg on the sidewalk? How can we find out?

Have students develop a step-by-step process for finding out the answer to the question.

(Handout 4)

# Handout 1

## Comparison Chart

	Girl in the Story



**Comparison Chart**

<b>Differences</b>	<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Differences</b>



**A Step-By-Step Process**

**Question:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Step**

**Procedure**





### WHAT IS SOCIAL ACTION?

Social action is made up of two essential and inseparable elements—the principles and the process. These do not stand alone, but are completely dependent upon each other. Combined, they form an effective approach for working with people and a powerful force for change.

### THE SOCIAL ACTION PRINCIPLES

- **Social action workers are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, disability or any other form of social differentiation.**

Social action is about fighting for fairness, equality and justice and this needs to be stated clearly. We recognize that injustice, discrimination and oppression exist and take a stance against it, in all our work.

- **We believe all people have skills, experience and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. Social action workers understand that people are experts in their own lives and we use this as a starting point for our work.**

Our job is to help uncover what is already there, to encourage people to use the insights and knowledge they possess to bring about change in their own lives.

- **All people have rights, including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed upon them.**

Ordinary people's right to be involved in the changes that affect them, to have a voice and a stake in the society they live in, is fundamental to social action work. The right to "name their world," to define themselves and the world around them is something we insist on. Too often people have to contend with labels imposed upon themselves, or the places they live, for the ease of policy-makers and professionals.

- **Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment and the economy. Social action workers understand people may experience problems as individuals but these difficulties can be translated into common concerns.**

We recognize that there are many different problems in individuals' lives. They may feel overwhelmed and daunted by these, they may even feel blamed for them. Social action gives people the opportunity to break free from this negative view, understand their individual problems in a wider, political context and to do something about organizing to overcome them

- **We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack the power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.**

Oppression is maintained through isolation and division, though the majority experiences it. Our job is to bring people together so that they can share their experiences and pool their resources and skills to fight injustice. Finding common cause may give individuals the will and power to tackle more complex issues than they might have dared on their own.

- **Social action workers are not leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody's contribution to this process is equally valued and it is vital that our job is not accorded privilege.**

Social action workers value all skills and knowledge equally, making no distinction between experience and formal qualifications. Our job is to work alongside the group, resisting the temptation either to become a group member or a group leader.

## **THE SOCIAL ACTION PROCESS**

As already mentioned, the principles and the process of social action are inseparable.

**The role of the social action worker is to facilitate the group through a five-stage process. The intention is to change the traditional relationship between service users and the professionals employed to work with them. A social action worker is a facilitator,**

**not a provider. In this process service users are not just consumers, they are active agents for change.**

Working alongside community members in this way requires the ability to plan and prepare well, to be creative, to listen actively, to be patient, to be disciplined and to be interested in people's lives. It is also essential to maintain a consistent and realistic level of optimism and enthusiasm that will fire the group.

The five stages are as follows:

### **WHAT**

This is all about discovery, finding out what is happening in people's lives. What are their issues, problems and concerns? What makes them angry, frightened, happy, and frustrated? What occupies their thoughts? The social action worker designs ways in which the community members can express all this, creating as comprehensive a picture as possible of what is going on in their lives at present, *without interpretation* and without at this stage having to worry about what to do with the material. This is often the longest stage of the social action process. Video, role-play, photography, drawing and discussion will all be used during this exploration of life in the community.

### **WHY**

Once the issues have been agreed upon, it is important to identify the reasons why they exist so that any solutions devised will attack root causes and not just symptoms. Asking "why?" helps people examine their private troubles in the wider context. It provides them with a deeper understanding of their causes. This is necessary if community members and service users are to go on to create and own positive social change. This stage of the process allows the community members to engage in analysis and to present their understanding of the problems facing them. It also helps to discover the most effective point of intervention; the place at which it is possible to make changes that will affect the final outcomes. The social action worker, without interpretation, accepts this analysis once again, reinforcing one of our basic beliefs: *people are experts in their own lives.*

### **HOW**

So what do we do with this understanding? How can the community members change things in a meaningful way themselves? Here the role of the social action changes. The responsibility now is to create safe spaces where the group can test out their ideas for change before putting

them into practice. It is vital that the community members are not set up to fail and that their ideas undergo a rigorous examination before taking them to the world outside the group. The decision on which ideas will be taken forward lies in the hands of the group, but the social action worker must question their viability without crushing enthusiasm.

### **ACTION**

The group then put their ideas(s) for change into effect. They should be now have a realistic sense of the possible outcomes, whether it will solve their problem or simply be the first stage in a longer struggle. Even if the action disappoints, as sometimes happens, the legacy of the work is that the group members now have an understanding and practical experience of the tools needed for dealing with problems that they will face in the future.

### **REFLECTION**

The fifth stage is for the social action worker to bring the group together and ask: "What happened? Now that we have carried out our action, are the issues, problems and concerns the same?" This critical reflection enables the community members to learn from their experience and to plan future actions for change. The *What, Why, How* process begins again.

## Attachment 2

### Six Principles and Six Steps of Nonviolence ...as developed by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

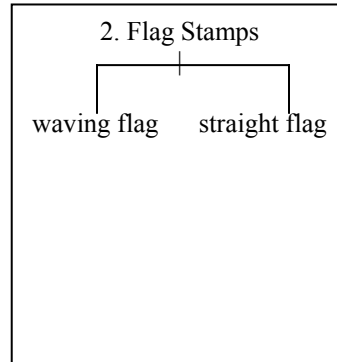
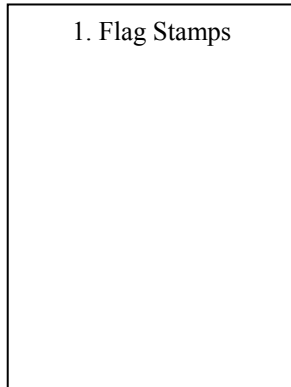
<h3>Principles</h3>	<h3>Steps</h3>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Nonviolence is a way of life for courageous people.</li><li>2. Nonviolence means seeking friendship and understanding among those who are different from you.</li><li>3. Nonviolence defeats injustice, not people.</li><li>4. Nonviolence holds that suffering can educate and transform people and societies.</li><li>5. Nonviolence chooses loving solutions, not hateful ones.</li><li>6. Nonviolence means the entire universe embraces justice.</li></ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. <b>Gather Information</b> Learn all you can about the problems you see in your community through the media, social and civic organizations, and by talking to the people involved.</li><li>2. <b>Educate Others</b> Armed with your new knowledge, it is your duty to help those around you, such as your neighbors, relatives, friends and co-workers, better understand the problems facing society. Build a team of people devoted to finding solutions. Be sure to include those who will be directly affected by your work.</li><li>3. <b>Remain Committed</b> Accept that you will face many obstacles and challenges as you and your team try to change society. Agree to encourage and inspire one another along the journey.</li><li>4. <b>Peacefully Negotiate</b> Talk with both sides. Go to the people in your community who are in trouble and who are deeply hurt by society's ills. Also go to those people who are contributing to the breakdown of a peaceful society. Use humor, intelligence and grace to lead to solutions that benefit the greater good.</li><li>5. <b>Take Action Peacefully</b> This step is often used when negotiation fails to produce results, or when people need to draw broader attention to a problem. It can include tactics such as peaceful demonstrations, letter-writing and petition campaign.</li><li>6. <b>Reconcile</b> Keep all actions and negotiations peaceful and constructive. Agree to disagree with some people and with some groups as you work to improve society. Show all involved the benefits of changing, not what they will give up by changing.</li></ol>

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## Attachment 3

### Sample of Dichotomous Key

1. Give each team a set of flag stamps (10-12 stamps). Label the paper flag stamps.
2. Have the students study these stamps and divide the set into two groups –example: straight flags and waving flags.



3. Next students will set aside one group of stamps and divide the remaining set into two groups – example: flags with words and flags with pictures of monuments.
4. Again, students would set aside one group of stamps and reclassify the remaining group. Example: stamps with the flag waving over nation's Capitol and stamps with a flag over the Supreme Court.

