

A PROBLEM-SOLUTION PROJECT

Overview and Rationale for the Project

The teaching/learning experience that you are about to review is the first-person narrative of a first-year, fourth grade teacher in an urban school district on the southside of Atlanta, Georgia. Mrs. Burnley, the teacher, is a young, white female teacher who is pursuing an advanced degree in Early Childhood Education at Georgia State University. In the school where she teaches, ninety-seven percent (97%) of the students are African American and ninety-five percent (95%) are on free and reduced lunch. There are no white students in the school. Most of the children that the school serves come from surrounding apartment complexes in the neighborhood. Out of a total of 26 students in her classroom, there is one student from Mexico who has been in America only 2 years, and 3 students from Africa who have moved into the area within the last 3 years and whose first language is French. The remaining students are African American. Although income levels vary within the classroom, only 2 to 3 students pay for school lunch. The first grade classroom that is also featured in this project has a similar composition of African American, Mexican and African students.

Mrs. Burnley wanted to explore with her students their responses to issues of racial and social justice. She did not hesitate to think that such issues would be too complex for her students to study. The day-to-day descriptions that follow are her account of her activities with the students and their responses. The project that she planned is a Problem-Solution Project, which directs students to answer questions to identify a societal or world problem and to test out their solutions to their selected problem. It is presented in this curriculum guide as an example of one teacher's use of the 12-Step Questions, not as a model for the "right way" to explore such topics with children.

This Problem-Solution Project is a reminder that all successful leaders adopt a strategy to solve the problems that beset them. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. learned the power of non-resistant social change from Mohandas K. Ghandi, who fought for the liberation of the Indian people from British rule. Nonviolence became the overriding strategy for the '60s Civil Rights Movement. Children today must be taught the power and use of such a strategy; but more importantly, they need to understand that they too can develop and create effective strategies to solve complex problems in their world. The knowledge of how to approach any problem and to see it through to some positive resolution is the greatest challenge of our teaching. Children at all ages need to understand that they can think deeply about societal problems and can produce positive results within their own sphere of experience. They need to know that they can positively control many aspects of their lives and those of other people. Once again, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is our role model.

With this curriculum project, it is hoped that you will see the value of such learning, which is based on the Dr. King's commitment to making a positive difference in the world by helping others.

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Cross-Curricular Lesson Ideas

Reading:

- read trade books on citizenship, the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., freedom, getting along with others, civil rights, Women's Rights, the Civil Rights Movement, etc.
- read for literacy concepts emphasizing comprehension strategies such as compare/contrast, main idea, noting details.
- read for literature concepts such as non-fiction, realistic fiction, historical fiction, biography, autobiography, folktales, allegories, etc.

Language Arts:

- study and use verbs, adjectives and quotations.
- write:
 - ✓ journals from different points of view
 - ✓ letters
 - ✓ brochures for information
 - ✓ newsletter to parents, school staff and peers
 - ✓ announcements for intercom
 - ✓ speeches for assemblies
 - ✓ agendas for working with a group
 - ✓ persuasive writing (persuading children to get along)
 - ✓ personal narratives (writing about a time someone judged you based on looks)
 - ✓ expository writing (recording research findings; "How To" guide for children)

Vocabulary Development and Spelling Words:

- citizen/citizenship
- equality
- conscience
- impartial
- oppression
- compassion
- generosity
- cooperation
- conflict
- respect
- prejudice
- civics
- justice
- liberty
- tolerance
- altruism
- courtesy

Mathematics:

- solve mathematics problems based on Problem-Solution topic:
- Example: **Letter Writing Campaign.** Determine how many letters would have to be written to reach everyone in the school? How many would each student have to write to reach that goal? What if we tried to reach the community? How long would it take? How many would each student have to write each day to reach that goal? How much would it cost to mail one letter to every student in the first grade? Every student in the school? What are the Post Office weights for letters vs. postcards vs. brochures vs. fliers? How much money would we need for postage?

Social Studies:

Investigate and Study:

- The Civil Right Movement
- Women's Liberation Movement
- Bill of Rights/The U. S. Constitution
- Social Action

Technology:

- research the Internet on appropriate topics
- send messages via email to set up meetings with other teacher's students
- research videos on appropriate topics
- create Power Point presentations for assembly
- type agenda for group meetings, minutes for group meetings, and research findings

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Curriculum Learning Objectives

Social Studies:

Citizenship:

Equality: the right and opportunity to develop one's potential as a human being.

Freedom of conscience and expression: the right to hold beliefs, whether religious, ethical or political, and to express one's views.

Justice: equal and impartial treatment under the law.

Liberty: freedom from oppression, tyranny or the domination of government.

Tolerance: the allowable deviation from a standard. Indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own.

Social Studies:

Respect for Others:

Altruism: concern for and motivation to act for the welfare of others.

Civility and cheerfulness: courtesy and politeness in action or speech.

Compassion, kindness and generosity: concern for suffering or distress of others and response to their feelings and needs.

Courtesy and **cooperation**: recognition of mutual interdependence with others resulting in polite treatment and respect for them.

Technology:

Information Processing:

Gathers information through reading, listening, observing and surveying.

Locates and utilizes information from a variety of sources, e.g., books, newspapers, atlases, glossaries, photographs, laser-disks, computer software, others.

Analyzes information from two or more sources for agreements, contradictions, facts, and opinions.

Social Studies:

Problem Solving:

Identifies and states a problem related to topic under study.

Suggests alternative solutions to a problem.

Chooses a solution to a problem after supplying the evidence.

Social Studies:

Civic Participation:

Follows established rules.

Shows respect toward others.

Works in a group, following set rules of procedure to complete an assigned task.

Identifies and uses alternative methods of conflict resolution.

Participates in planning for effective civic action; demonstrating effective civic actions.

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Critical Questions

Teachers should use the 12-Step Problem-Solution Questions to guide their instruction when implementing a Problem-Solution Project. Guide students to thoroughly answer each question.

1. How can we know what problems exist in our world?
2. How can we determine which problem to work on first?
or On which problem can we have the most impact?
3. What is the selected problem?
4. How can we state the selected problem so that we can take actions that we can measure?
5. What knowledge and skills do we need to begin to solve the selected problem?
6. What support and/or permission do we need to begin to solve the selected problem?
7. What can we do about it? or How can we solve the problem?
8. How can we test out possible solutions?
9. What are the results and consequences of each possible solution?
10. What solutions appear to work best and present the fewest negative consequences?
11. How can we state (communicate) the best solution so that others can try (replicate) it?
12. If we had to solve the problem again, what would we do differently and why?

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Materials and Resources

Books:

Children and Social Action:

Clark, Sondra (2003). You Can Change Your World! Sondra's Tips for Making a Difference. Revell, Fleming H. Company.

Haskins, James. S. (1983). The Guardian Angels. Enslow Publishers.

Hoose, Phillip (1993). It's Our World, Too!: Young People Who Are Making a Difference (and They're Doing It). Little, Brown and Company.

Hoose, Phillip (2002). It's Our World, Too! Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Isler, Claudia (2000). Volunteering to Help in Your Neighborhood. Scholastic Library Publishing.

Kessler, Paula N. (1995). Amazing Kids! Random House, Incorporated.

Kielburger, Marc (2002). Take Action! A Guide to Active Citizenship. Wiley, John, & Sons, Inc.

Lewis, Barbara A. (1993). Kids Who Make a Difference. MasterMedia Publishing Company.

Lewis, Barbara A. (1998). Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose – and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action. Free Spirit Publishing, Inc.

Rusch, Elizabeth (2002). Generation Fix: Young Ideas for a Better World. Beyond Words Publishing.

Siegel, Danny (2001). Kids Can Do Mitzvahs. Kar-Ben Publishing, Inc.

Children's Literature and Prejudice:

Dr. Seuss (1976). The Sneetcher and Other Stories.

Taylor, Mildred D. (1998). Gold Cadillac.

Cosby, Bill (1997). The Meanest Thing to Say (Little Bill Series).

Blume, Judy (1976). Iggie's House.

Williams, Vera B. (1984). A Chair for My Mother.

Hopkinson, Deborah (1995). Sweet Clara and the freedom Quilt.

Parr, Todd (2001). It's Okay to Be Different.

Taylor, Mildred D. (1998). The Friendship.

Couric, Katie (2000). Brand New Kid.

Fox, Mem (2001). Whoever You Are

Raschka, Chris (1998). Yo! Yes?

Polacco, Patricia (2001). Keeping Quilt.

Hoffman, Mary (1991). Amazing Grace.

Mills, Lauren A. (1991). The Rag Coat.

Derolf, Shane (1997). Crayon Box That Talked.

Dorros, Arthur (1997). Abuela.

Cohn, Janice (2000). The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate.

Wells, Rosemary (1998). Yoko.

Bruchac, Joseph (1999). Trail of Tears.

Online:

Intentional and Unintentional Prejudice

<http://www.eburg.com/beyond.prejudice/Understand.html>

Social Action Principles and Process

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

Study Guide:

Batiste, D.A. (2000). A World of Difference Institute Anti Bias Study Guide (Elementary/Intermediate Level)
New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League.

Pamphlet:

“Close the Book on Hate: 101 Ways to Combat Prejudice.”
(2000). Barnes and Noble and the Anti-Defamation League.

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A Teacher's Procedures and Reflections

PROCEDURES:

Day 1: Introducing

When I first introduced the idea of “social action” my students didn’t have a clue. So I stepped back a little and we defined relevant words like *society*, *problem*, *action*, etc. Each table of students looked up a different word in the dictionary and then reported to the class. I summed up their definition of “social action,” and they began to relate it to charity. That was enough for the day. This activity took about 15 minutes.

Day 2: Brainstorming

The next day, I asked my students if they were aware of any problems in our society that they would like to see changed. While it took a minute for them to get started, once they did, it was like I couldn’t get them to stop! This session lasted about 30 minutes. I couldn’t believe the ideas they were coming up with!! Some of the things they said I tried to reword more appropriately when writing on the chart paper. For example, a boy in my class said that he saw on the news about strip clubs! I wrote *nightclubs* and talked about violence and drugs. Another child said “Dads beating Moms.” I wrote *domestic violence* and explained about violence and family. Other examples are plentiful. Here is the complete list from my chart paper.

| | |
|------------------------|------------------|
| Crime | Terrorism |
| Dropping out of school | Night clubs |
| Skipping school | Racism/prejudice |
| Lyrics in rap music | Dangerous pets |
| Stealing | Hunger |

| | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Clean water | Health/diseases |
| Child abuse | Rape |
| Domestic violence | Poison ivy |
| Pollution/littering | Drugs |
| Gun control | Smoking/second-hand smoke |
| Suicide | Poachers |
| Child non-support | Drunk driving |
| Vandalism (damaged property) | Weapons in school |
| Forest fires | Kidnapping |
| Homelessness | Eating habits/malnutrition |
| Lack of exercise in school | |

I was surprised at a few things. First, I was surprised some knew about issues such as government. A child said, “Why can’t the government just tell people that they can’t buy guns and that the stores can’t be open to sell them?” I took a brief minute to explain the Constitution and Bill of Rights. Other issues I didn’t think they would know or be concerned about were second-hand smoke (I guess the commercials are working!), suicide, nightclubs, and forest fires. The other aspect of this experience that was surprising was the fact that my students thought of things I would never have thought of. For example, a girl said, “Sometimes dads don’t pay child support on time and we need to ask the police to punish them more.” This insight could only come from experience. Another thing I thought was odd was that I had a hard time getting them to come up with local problems. They couldn’t think of anything wrong with the school. Only one student said anything about city government when she suggested we fix the entrance sign to her apartment complex, because it was ugly to everyone that drove by. My students stuck mainly to national issues.

I think a lot of the topics came from the news. For example, kidnapping has been in the news recently and it related directly to students their age. Students tend to remember important stories about other students. Lyrics in rap music have been discussed on MTV News a lot lately centered on the performer Eminem. I know a lot of my students watch MTV

consistently. Other things that might have come from television include forest fires, child abuse and crime. Other topics, as mentioned earlier, might come from a child's personal problems or experiences. Child support payments, domestic abuse, smoking (parents and others), racism, and perhaps vandalism are issues that a 9-year-old might have seen or heard about in the community. These were things they could talk more freely about.

Day 3: Narrowing the Choice

The next day, we needed to make some decisions. We reviewed the purpose of our social action project and I explained to them that in order to have some effect on the issue, we could only work on one. I wanted to choose something that they had experience with, but I didn't want to sway their decision at this point. However, honestly, I discussed racism quite a bit, because I was hoping to investigate this topic with them. I asked them to pick the three most important things on the list. I divided the class into 4 groups and each group had to come up with their top three topics. They had to talk about things they wanted to work on to make a change. I heard some conversations saying "That would be impossible" or "We could do such and such." After doing this twice, we all agreed on the following three topics.

1. Dropping out of or skipping school (another surprise)
2. Racism/prejudice
3. Pollution/littering

After I wrote these on the chart paper, the students were asked to take out a sheet of paper for a silent vote. They had to include which topic they wanted to work on and tell me why they chose that particular issue. The papers I got back were very helpful. I was able to see what they knew about the topic they were choosing before we went on. The vote went to racism/prejudice although dropping out of school was a tie until I put in my vote. I really wanted them to work on

racism, but I needed a buy-in as well. I think it worked. Here is one student's reason for her vote for *racism*:

Racism

"I picked racism because I think it is important that everyone know not to judge by the color of your skin. It doesn't matter if you're Mexican, American, or African, we all are God's children and we are the same."

Sheronica
4th Grader

Day 4: Getting Started

A few days later, I asked the students to brainstorm about ways we could help end racism. I asked them to work in groups to come up with ideas. They discussed the issue for 3 to 5 minutes. Then, they got out a piece of paper and made three labels.

1. In our school
2. In our community/city
3. In our country

Individually, I asked them to write down three ideas for each area on how we, as a class, could help with the issue of racism. These papers were so good, funny, interesting, and weird that I'm going to list the ideas that came directly from the students' work. These ideas did not have anything to do with me. This activity was done without my help!

In our school: bring everyone to the gym to straighten out the problem; have an assembly to discuss the problem; hang anti-racism signs; send people to the counselor; have a morning or afternoon club; call the club the "Get Along Club," include a message on morning announcements; walk away from people who are mean; make people who are mean because of race go to the "opportunity room."

In our community: have two community meetings to help; make speeches and flyers; put bookmarks in stores with information on them and ads in magazines about racism; ask our churches to help; send bulletins to courts; make a commercial; meet at people's houses about it once a week; have meetings at church; write to the newspaper; start an anti-racism club for all students.

In our country: give a speech in NY; make signs; deliver lots of speeches like MLK; create shows on television; have the government make anti-racism a law; send notes/letters to the president; take field trips to tell people about it; visit other countries to see other people relate to different races of people; create billboards; put messages on Coke cans; tell someone about racial injustice and let them pass it on; take down any racist black and white signs; put racial abuse stories in all the newspapers.

REFLECTION:

In the Beginning...

When I first started this project I was very excited about it because of the response I got from my students. While I was surprised at their interest, I was not surprised that they wanted to do something "new." Curriculum can get dull and boring and gives little or no opportunity for the students to help others. The students were readily engaged and their momentum kept rolling longer than I expected.

Getting started was pretty simple although I didn't know what actions we would take as we went along. Tasks had to be planned and rearranged to make it work. For example, the topic of *racism* wasn't necessarily easy. I had to really think about how the students could take action on the problem. After much consideration, we decided that *prejudices* against anyone would be a better issue. *Racism* does affect my students, but not in school because there is almost no diversity in the school.

PROCEDURES:

Day 5:

To get an idea about where the students stood on their knowledge of the topics as well as how they felt about helping people, I asked them to write a paragraph explaining their feelings. When the project was completed, I asked them to write about their feelings again. I hoped to be able to see more detail on the topic and specifics on helping children. This is one of the best ways to assess what they learned.

One student's response was insightful:

"I think prejudice is wrong. People should not judge other people by their skin color. Just because someone is darker than someone else doesn't mean you can't be friends. Should light-skinned people only play with light-skinned people? I think they should play with whoever they want to."

"I think helping people is kind of fun. I don't usually get a project that helps my school. I think I will like this project. Because it won't just help me, it will help everyone, especially the people that do talk about prejudice. It makes me feel good when I help people."

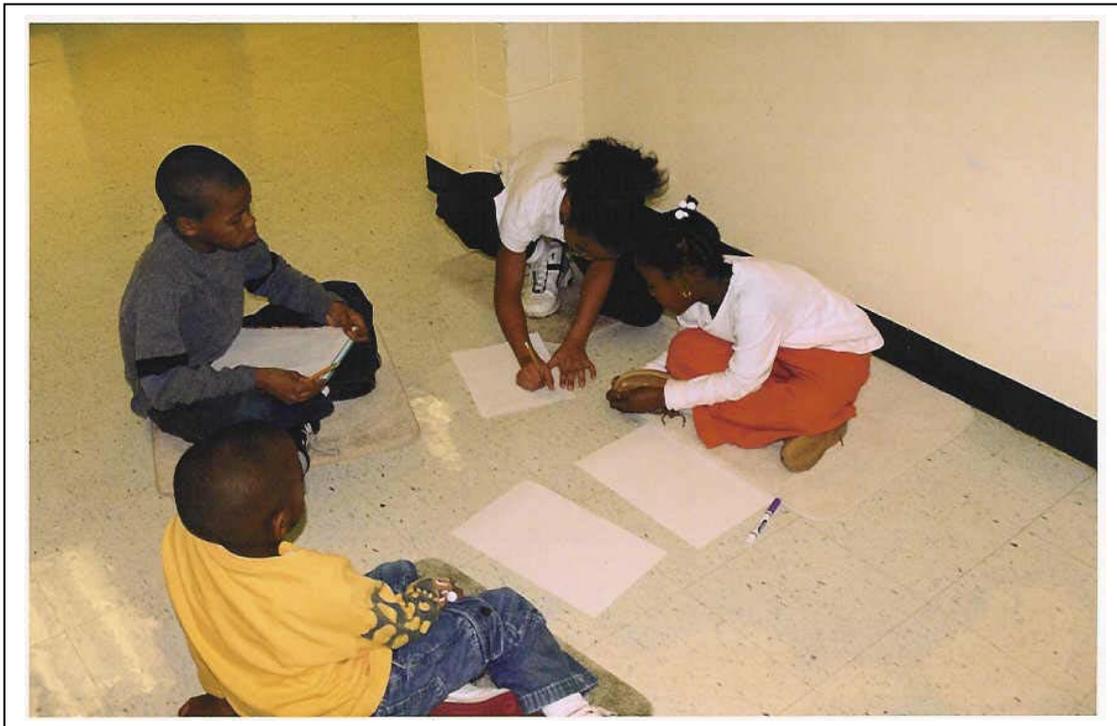
*Tatum
4th grader*

Day 6:

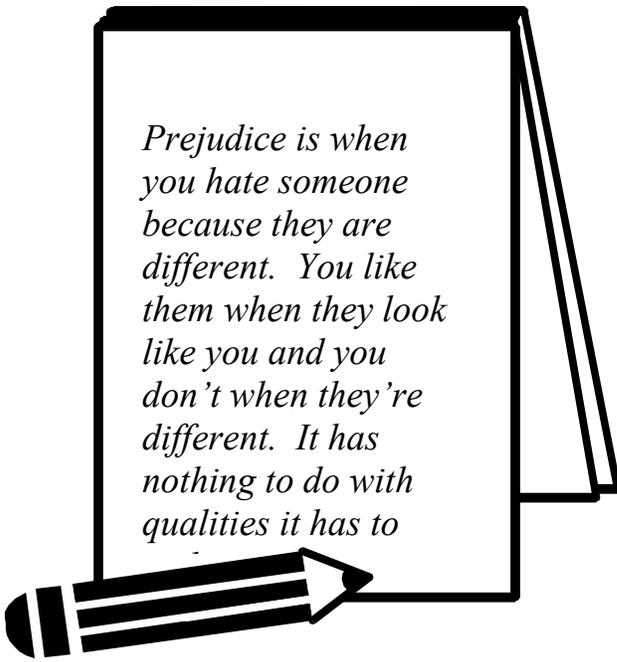
I wanted the students to come up with some questions before beginning to research the topic of *prejudice*. At this point, I actually taught the topic and what it means. I asked the students what they thought we should research and these are the exact questions one group wrote:

- *What do you think others think when you talk about prejudice?*
- *How do you know about prejudice?*
- *Who can you talk to about prejudice?*
- *What do we need to know about prejudice to help?*
- *Do you know what prejudice is?*
- *When did prejudice start?*
- *Who has tried to stop it?*
- *Why do you talk about prejudice?*

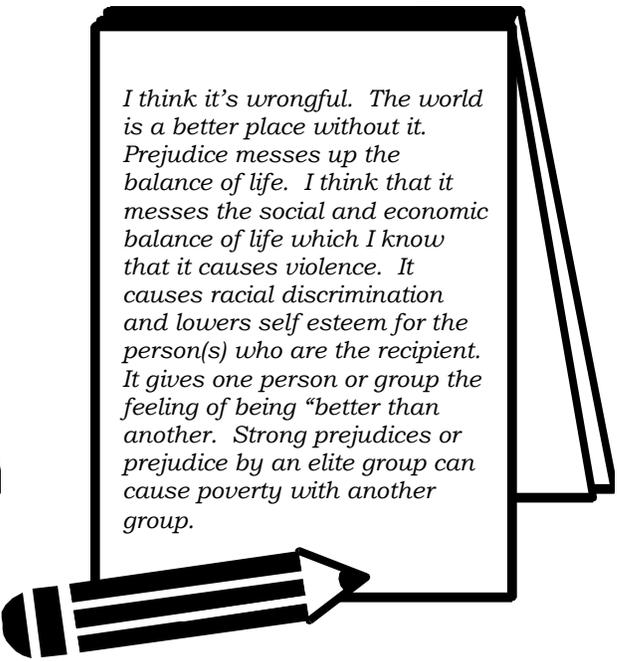
While some questions seemed more insightful than others, this gave me the opportunity to guide them in their research.



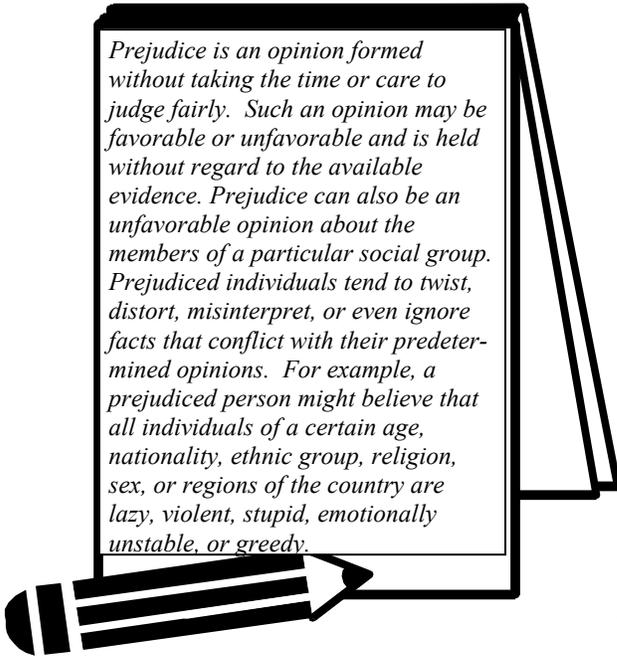
Here are some of the note cards the students developed based on their research:



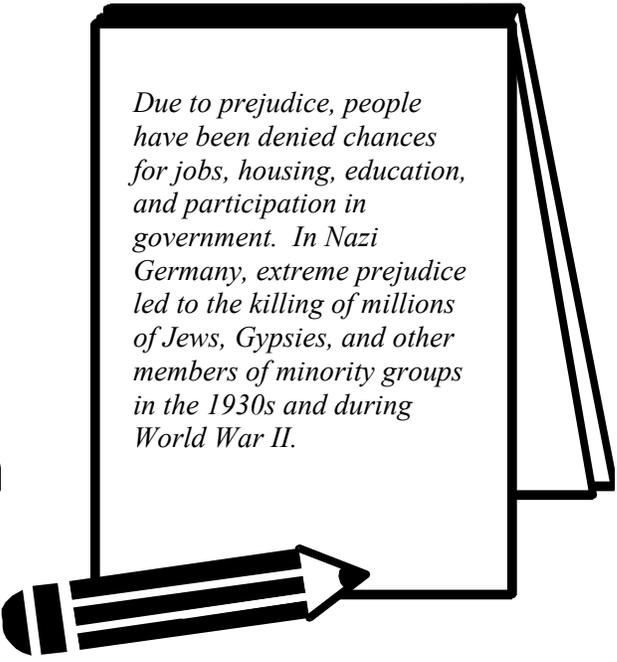
Prejudice is when you hate someone because they are different. You like them when they look like you and you don't when they're different. It has nothing to do with qualities it has to



I think it's wrongful. The world is a better place without it. Prejudice messes up the balance of life. I think that it messes the social and economic balance of life which I know that it causes violence. It causes racial discrimination and lowers self esteem for the person(s) who are the recipient. It gives one person or group the feeling of being "better than another. Strong prejudices or prejudice by an elite group can cause poverty with another group.



Prejudice is an opinion formed without taking the time or care to judge fairly. Such an opinion may be favorable or unfavorable and is held without regard to the available evidence. Prejudice can also be an unfavorable opinion about the members of a particular social group. Prejudiced individuals tend to twist, distort, misinterpret, or even ignore facts that conflict with their predetermined opinions. For example, a prejudiced person might believe that all individuals of a certain age, nationality, ethnic group, religion, sex, or regions of the country are lazy, violent, stupid, emotionally unstable, or greedy.



Due to prejudice, people have been denied chances for jobs, housing, education, and participation in government. In Nazi Germany, extreme prejudice led to the killing of millions of Jews, Gypsies, and other members of minority groups in the 1930s and during World War II.

A number of elements may contribute to prejudice. Prejudice may develop when one group fears that competition from another group will deprive them of prestige, privilege, political power, or economic opportunities. Religious ideas.



Day 7:

This is the next assignment that I gave my students to determine the best process to use to begin our social action project. Jermeka's response to the three options demonstrate typical student responses:

Please research the following options from our brainstorming session. We need to find out the cost of each, what we would do to prepare, the permission we would need, and any other considerations I would need to know in order to help you DO this. Be sure to include pros and cons of acting out each plan.

Option 1: Small group meetings with first graders.

"We will need to know what to say to the 1st graders. Make sure they learn something by giving them a worksheet."

Option 2: Assembly for all 1st graders.

"Find a speaker. Get permission to use the gym."

Option 3: Brochures full of information to give to first graders.

"Good advice posters"

Based on the research and the desires of the students, we decided to work with a small group of students from Ms. Meriwether's first grade class. Other points that were researched were denied as a group.

Option A – Meet with a small group of students that Ms. Meriwether has identified as having trouble getting along with each other based on prejudices about looks, family, money,

and reading group. Meeting with a small group would be cost-effective and would easily fit into our schedule.

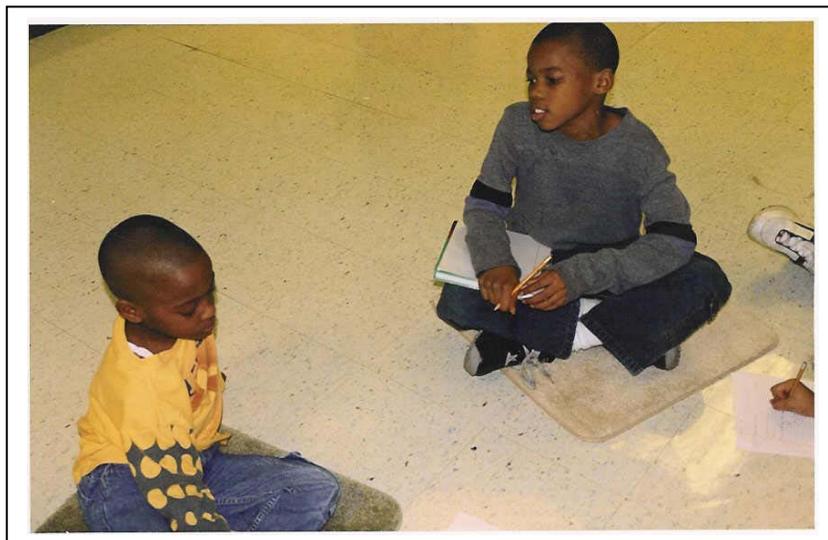
Option B – Hold an assembly for the entire first grade. This option would be more difficult to implement due to time, space, and permission needed from many people. It also might not be as effective, because it would be based solely on whole-group speeches that first graders might not understand or be able to sit long enough to listen to. The topic would have to be broader to cover all students so we couldn't focus on particular children or prejudices.

Option C – Produce brochures for first graders and their families about causes and preventions of prejudice behaviors. We decided not to do this because many first graders cannot read this type of material, and we couldn't control what the families did with the information.

Several other options were researched but quickly excluded from the plan of action. Guest speakers and starting a club are examples.

Day 8:

My students planned their agendas for their first meeting with the first graders.



One group's agenda appears below:

Agenda for Meeting 1

Topic: Getting Along With Others

Points to Discuss:

1. Discuss why they don't like each other.
2. Discuss how they can stop fighting.
3. Discuss what *prejudice* and *racism* mean.
4. Ask how you think others feel when you talk about them.
5. Ask them questions about themselves and with that point out how different and similar they are.

I was curious and anxious to see what the students would write about the process. I asked them questions related to the project and working with the first graders.

Post-Assessment/Student Reflection

After meeting with the first graders, how do you feel about helping them?

"I feel good because they understood what I asked. They gave me really good answers, too."

Do you think your meetings were helpful to them? Why or why not?

"Yes, because the one I helped told me ways she could say sorry. Then she told me why she fights."

Do you feel any differently about prejudices than you did before? In what ways?

“No, I don’t really feel any different. I feel the same way I did before.”

Do you think the first graders understand what prejudice is? Why or why not?

“Yes, I do because I showed her an example and she understood.”

Tatum
4th grade

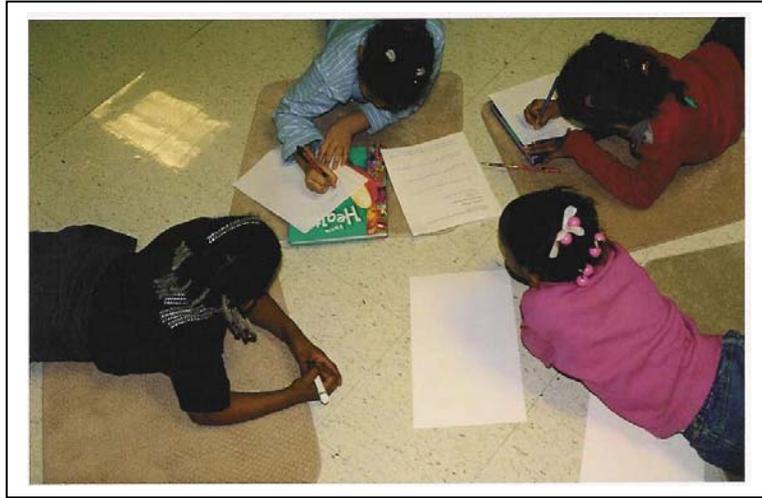
REFLECTION:

By the Close...

Basically, my students felt really good about helping the first graders. This assessment was taken after their first meeting because another meeting would not be scheduled for two or more weeks (due to rules passed down from the administration.) All my students noticed that the first graders were really “into” the meetings.

Two of the students that participated in the meetings had changed views about prejudices, while two did not. One student reflected on his research. He wrote that he didn’t think it was “such a problem.” When I asked him about this, he said he guessed he had never thought about WHY people discriminate. He has just always learned it’s so. During the conversation, he asked about prejudices within the black race such as light skin vs. dark skin blacks. I’ve had this issue come up from the girls participating, but I was surprised that Keithan had noticed it too.

Reading their responses assured me that they enjoyed the experience and learned something from it.



If I Could Go Back...

If I had planned earlier and more carefully, I could have expanded this project and covered the learning objectives more deliberately. However, it was important to have the students decide what they wanted to research and the nature of their social action.

I also might ask other teachers to join our class project. Other fourth grade classes could pair with other first grade classes to really make an impact on the school. Now that I know the process works, I will try it again next year.

*Tonya Burnley
4th Grade Teacher*

REFERENCES:

Online:

Intentional and Unintentional Prejudice

<http://www.eburg.com/beyond.prejudice/Understand.html>

Social Action Principles and Process

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

Study Guide:

Batiste. D.A. (2000). A World of Difference Institute Anti-Bias Study Guide (Elementary/Intermediate Level) New York, NY: Anti-Defamation League.

Special thanks to teachers Ms. Tonya Burnley and Ms. Krissy Meriwether and their students who implemented this project. The students are:

Tonya Burnley's Class

Jermeka Harris
Candle Thompson
Tatum Stewart
Keithan Person
Sheronica Bolden (not pictured)

Krissy Meriwether's Class

Xavierra Gantt
Adam Smith
Alexus Smith
Kiyanna Smith