

make choices to create a better world describes our work within classrooms as teachers and students as well as our life work as human beings.

References

Exploring Action and Responsibility through Literature

by Jennifer Griffith, First Grade Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

My goal as a teacher is for my students to become independent thinkers and learners. Often in early childhood education this can be seen as impossible or unnecessary because the children are “too young.” It is my job as an educator to ensure that first graders leave my classroom with control of their thinking and without being dependent on me as their teacher. I want students to be able to stop and think, to reflect on their learning, and consider the consequences of their actions before they act. I also want them to understand that they are part of a community and that they have a responsibility for their actions to their classmates and to the broader world.

When our study group decided to tackle the global issues around human rights as a school-wide inquiry, I knew that it would be challenge to engage six year olds in thinking reflectively about their actions and choices related to human rights. At the same time I knew that if my students could develop conceptual understandings of human rights, this experience would help them in their journey of becoming independent, self-reflective learners.

Our experiences in the classroom are connected to our work in the Learning Lab, a room we visit weekly for instructional engagements facilitated by our instructional coach, Lisa Thomas. We began exploring the concept of human rights with first graders in the lab through having the kids create maps of fair and unfair occurrences at our school. We explored "rights" as what you deserve and how you deserve to be treated, not just what you want. The kids worked in small groups to list what they felt were their rights at school. Some of their ideas included:

As our work continued we attempted to shift our thinking and language from fair and unfair to the concept of human rights and it was immediately clear that the kids were struggling with understanding rights as something you are entitled to. For example, the kids said, “She has the right to not be bullied” about a character in a book, but they were not able to say what she had the right to do. As teachers we also noticed the first and second graders were okay with adults telling them what to do and did not understand taking action related to their rights. They didn’t realize that they had choices that led to actions and consequences. They felt that if an adult told them to do something, then that determined their right-- their right was to do what adults demanded of them. We found it intriguing that this belief was in conflict with the ways in which young children

negotiate with and manipulate the adults in their lives when they want something. Their lack of agency and empowerment as young children to make decisions and consider their actions concerned us.

Jaquetta Alexander, the second grade teacher, and I decided to bring the thinking and language of human rights into our classrooms to extend students' thinking about these issues. We chose to read aloud a chapter book to the class to convey the idea of rights. We hoped that if students experienced rights through a character in a book, they might be able to bring the thinking back to their own lives. We wanted to use a novel so that students could really get to know that character in greater depth. We decided to read *Moxy Maxwell Does Not Love Stuart Little* (Gifford, 2007) because I had recently read the book and fallen in love with the spunkiness of the main character Moxy.

Moxy Maxwell is a procrastinator. She was assigned *Stuart Little* over the summer and still has not read the book on the last day before school is to start. Moxy's mother has given her an ultimatum--if the book isn't read by the time her mom gets home from running errands she won't be participating in her water ballet performance as the eighth daisy petal. Moxy's intentions are good but events keep getting in the way—her room needs to be cleaned and the dog has to be trained. Her imagination gets the best of her and she comes up with new inventions, including planting a peach orchard in the backyard (with bad results of course).

Jacquetta and I had both been using literature circles, response logs, webs, and charts in our classrooms and so we knew our kids had the background to make connections to their own lives, between books, and to the work in the Learning Lab. We decided to put our classes together to read aloud and discuss *Moxy*. Our goal was to encourage the kids to think about and discuss the rights or unfair and fair events they noticed in the book and to give them the opportunity for reflection about the story in their response logs. As a combined class we would chart the "Big Ideas" that kids saw as important in the book. Ultimately we were hoping to encourage kids to think about their actions and the consequences of those actions.

Our first read-aloud was met with excitement, laughter, and engagement as the kids were introduced to Moxy Maxwell. On our first day we wanted the kids to get into a routine of listening, discussing, recording, and responding in their response logs. We began with a discussion of their first impressions of Moxy. Many of the kids thought she was funny and they couldn't believe her new teacher had assigned homework over the summer. We spent a lot of time talking about Moxy's in-between's, a word she used to describe the time she had between activities and how she filled those in-betweens with other things such as having to clean her room, or train the dog, leaving her without time for reading *Stuart Little*. We then moved to our "Big Ideas" chart and recorded their observations and questions.

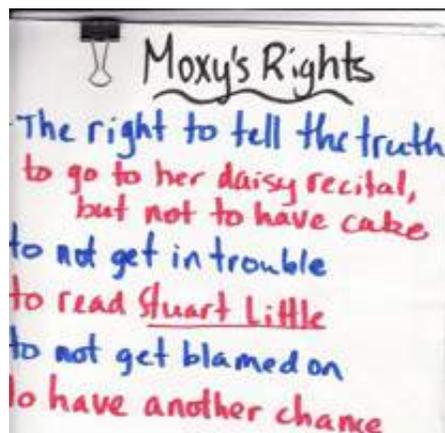
We were excited with their conversation and eager to start thinking about Moxy's rights.

In the following days we noticed a shift in their discussions and the big ideas they were identifying for the chart. The kids started talking about things they saw as unfair in the book. They felt that it was unfair that she was not going to be able to go to the pool and perform with her friends if she didn't get the book read in time, and they were still hung up on Moxy not using her in-between time to read *Stuart Little*.

When the kids responded in their logs, we encouraged them to use the language about rights that we had been exploring in the Learning Lab. I was pleasantly surprised with their responses. Bailey wrote, "She has the right to have in-betweens and go and tell the truth and to be helpful to others." Jacob believed that, "When Moxy has spare time she should read *Stuart Little*." Matt had a different perspective, stating, "Moxy's right is to go to the pool because she needs to be with her friends." Ayden also took Moxy's side, stating, "I think Moxy should have another chance to read *Stuart Little*."

Our time with Moxy continued over the next several weeks and we pushed our kids to think about Moxy's rights. We used an engagement that we had done in the Learning Lab with our thinking about our rights at school and asked the kids to make a list Moxy's rights.

- The right to tell the truth.
- She had the right to go to her daisy recital, but not to have cake.
- To not get in trouble.
- It was her right to read *Stuart Little*.
- To not get blamed on.
- The right to have another chance.



Jaquetta and I typed up these rights and put the kids in groups of four to discuss and narrow the list down to what they saw as the one most important right of Moxy. Astonishingly enough the majority of the groups chose the most important right as “It’s her right to read *Stuart Little*.” I saw this as an indication that the kids were still struggling with rights and with taking responsibility for their own actions. They were satisfied and believed that because Moxy’s mom and teacher told her she had to read *Stuart Little* that it was her right to do so. In their minds a right was a rule or mandate given to them by an adult; they weren’t seeing Moxy’s rights as choices she could actually define for herself. Choice was a child deciding to do what an adult has mandated, not a child determining the options from which that choice is made. We decided to finish the book and see if there would be any change in their thinking.

Their final thoughts that we charted on our "Big Ideas" included comments, such as “Moxy didn’t think she would like the book, but in the end she did” and “She had to look closely at the cover to see the true interest of the book.” Jaquetta and I decided to push their discussion by getting them to think about rights as choices and it was when we used this language that students began to think more critically about their rights as young children. They questioned themselves by talking about Moxy having a choice to read *Stuart Little* but having consequences if she chose not to do so, a word that many had heard from their parents. Kids stopped and thought about Moxy’s rights and reflected on the story, our discussions, and their work in the lab about rights. They were questioning their original thinking that it was her right to read the book and now were thinking that maybe she did have a choice about whether or not to read.

Dewey (1938) uses the phrase “stop and think” to emphasize the significance of reflection on the development of self-control. “Thinking is stoppage of the immediate manifestation of impulse until that impulse has been brought into connection with other possible tendencies, that may include what has happened in the past” (p.64). In other words, reflection allows a learner to stop and think about possible consequences before taking action.

It was exciting to see this shift finally occurring and so we decided to continue our thinking by reading aloud the second Moxy book, *Moxy Maxwell Does Not Love Writing Thank-you Notes* (Gifford, 2008). In this book Moxy has promised to write twelve thank-you notes by the day after Christmas so she and her brother can go to Hollywood to visit their father. But in usual Moxy fashion, her attempts to find ways to more efficiently complete this task cause chaos in the house.

We continued to think about rights as choices about actions and consequences that may arise from those choices. Jaquetta and I pushed the kids to use the language and the thinking that they were exploring as we completed our first Moxy book. We kept our routines with our read aloud the same and began a new "Big Ideas" chart with this book. The kids jumped right into their observations and connections between the two stories.

We were particularly excited about the comment that she had a choice to write the letters because it indicated that they weren't looking at writing letters as a right but instead a choice for her to make.

Time was a constraint as the school year was coming to a close so we focused on whole group discussion and our "Big Ideas" chart with the second Moxy book. Their thinking continued to develop and the kids looked much more closely at choice and how choices affect others in this book. In one chapter, Moxy tries to blame her mother for why Moxy made the choice to use her step dad's new copier. The kids' discussion was eye-opening as they were able to recognize that she was making a bad choice. Matthew blamed her mother, saying "Her mom is helping her get into trouble by leaving her alone." Bailey argued, "I don't think it was her mom's fault because her mom was being nice by leaving her to get a dress for her." Jacob agreed saying, "I would blame it on myself and take responsibility," and Aly chimed in with, "She should tell the truth and not blame her mom."

We were excited to see our first and second graders talk about taking responsibility for their actions and recognizing that choices have actions and consequences. They were coming to this realization through Moxy, recognizing how her action of using the copier created a chain of consequences. The kids saw that Moxy needed to take responsibility for her actions and that, although she had the right to make a choice just as they do in their lives, those choices might have consequences.

As a final reflection we asked the kids to look at the choices Moxy made in both books. Their responses were encouraging.

- Moxy made the choice to read *Stuart Little*.
- Moxy made a choice to not write thank-you letters.
- Moxy made a choice to use Ajax's copier.
- Moxy made a choice to not follow her mom's rules.
- Moxy made a choice to write the thank-you letters.
- Moxy made a choice to blame her mom.
- Moxy made a choice to write a thank you note to her mom.

They met in small groups to discuss the actions and consequences those choices had as a way for them to pull together their thinking.

As I reflect on these engagements with the Moxy Maxwell books, their changes in thinking from the first book to the second book are evident. The kids began with little understanding of human rights, viewing rights as what adults tell them to do rather than a choice they make that has consequences. They came to understand the concepts of taking responsibility and action along with Moxy as her thinking and sense of responsibility changed across the books. Developing conceptual understanding through a character in a book was eye-opening for me. Students were able to connect with Moxy and bring her actions back to their own lives to consider human rights and taking action—thinking normally seen as too advanced for first and second graders. Our explorations of taking action to create a better world in the Learning Lab initially made no sense to my students because they didn't believe that they had choices and that those choices led to particular consequences. They cared about others in the world, but saw themselves as powerless, leaving the responsibility for adults to do something about problems in the world.

The kids went from looking at Moxy's actions as something she had to do to something she had a choice to do and they understood that there are consequences with choices. These shifts in thinking indicate that these first and second graders are moving toward becoming self-reflective and developing self-control in their thinking and learning. John Dewey (1938) argues that “the ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control” (p. 64). In other words, our goal as educators is for students to develop a sense of agency and empowerment that they can take action to make a difference for themselves and for others. Often times our young students are not given credit for being able to think in these ways about themselves and others. Moxy was a catalyst for our kids in gaining awareness of themselves as learners and as people who have a responsibility to themselves and to others. They are coming to understand that who they are and what they do matters for their own learning and for the world.

References

Young Children's Explorations of Multiple Perspectives

by Jaquetta Alexander, Second Grade Teacher, Van Horne Elementary School

Young children are often viewed as egocentric, unable to consider perspectives outside of their own. My own experiences have convinced me that young children can consider multiple perspectives when they are engaged in contexts and inquiries that build from their life experiences. Therefore, when we began a semester-long inquiry into human rights I wanted to further explore the contexts that support young children in this type of thinking. I worked closely with Jennifer Griffith, a colleague who teaches first grade, to incorporate our focus on human rights into our classrooms. To give students many opportunities for exploring human rights, Jennifer and I used