Exploring Women's Rights

The 1908 Textile Strike in a 1st-grade Class

By Dale Weiss

While teaching 1st graders in a small working-class town north of Seattle, I always emphasized issues of fairness—both helping students recognize when something is unfair, and teaching that one can always do something to make a situation more fair.

Through many discussions on gender-related stereotypes and giving girls and boys the same opportunities, my students had a fairly basic understanding of gender equity. However, it was also important to me that they understand sexism within the context of the history of the feminist movement and this country's long tradition of people working for greater equality.

Thus I used the opportunity of International Women's Day to develop a curriculum unit that brought these issues to the fore. The unit took several days, and culminated in a book created by the students.

Bettmann/CORBIS

Women of the Industrial Workers of the World march in New York City in support of the Patterson Silk Strike of 1913. Many women garment and textile workers of the 1910s were active in the movements for equal rights and fair treatment in the workplace.

Day 1

I asked students if they had ever heard of a celebration called "International Women's Day." None had. I explained that the word "international" meant "all over the world." I asked what International Women's Day might be about. The answers were interesting: "A day where women all over the world get to do whatever they want." "When the only people in the world that day are women." "The birthday of all the women in the world."

I told them that during the next few days, we would discuss International Women's Day and make a book about what we had learned. I tried to use age-appropriate language to get my ideas across. I stressed that a long time ago, women did not have the right to vote and that working women were paid very little money and had to work in horrible situations. I explained, for example, that about a hundred years ago, garment workers in factories out East had to work 12-18 hours every day and did not get to take breaks or stop for a snack or meal. Students were particularly shocked when I explained that rats often ran through the factories.

I asked my students to imagine they were participating in the 1908 garment workers' strike.

To make my comments more real, I showed photos depicting women huddled over sewing machines, young children working on huge machinery, and filth and vermin everywhere. Using the photos as a reference point, the students and I discussed concepts such as going on strike and walking picket lines. I used these discussions to move into the specifics of the strike that began on March 8, 1908. (On this day, 15,000 women marched through New York City demanding shorter work hours, better pay, voting rights, and an end to child labor. They adopted the slogan "Bread and Roses," with bread symbolizing fair wages and roses a better quality of life. International Women's Day was first proposed by the Socialist International in 1910, and has subsequently been recognized by a wide range of international organizations, including the United Nations.)

During our discussions of going on strike, Angela, an African American girl who was one of the three children in my class of 23 who was not white, made a connection I had hoped someone would make: "It's like when we learned about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. They had to carry signs to make things more fair and I think those signs helped to make things better."

Then followed an interesting exchange. "It's a good deal because you shouldn't have to do those unfair things," Fred said. When challenged about what was "a good deal," Fred answered, "Don't go to work and just carry the sign for the day. It's not as hard as going to work." Angela immediately stood up, glared at Fred and said, "It's not a good deal, Fred, because if you don't go to work you don't get any money!" Fred said, "Oh, I thought the people got money for carrying the signs!" He was sincerely shocked to learn otherwise.

Day 2

Not wanting my students to think that labor abuses ended in the early 1900s, I explained that, to this day, women are often paid less than men. And that while there are laws protecting young children from working at these kinds of jobs, people do not always follow the law. I also talked about how children and adults who come to the United States from other countries, such as Mexico, often end up working for very little money and in very unsafe conditions. Finally, I explained about child labor around the world.

I then wanted to make the connection between the March 8, 1908, strike and International Women's Day. I explained that International Women's Day is celebrated on March 8, and women and men from all over the world focus on two important things on that day. One, they remember the brave women and children garment workers who participated in the 1908 strike. And two, they talk about the importance of continuing to work for fairer working conditions.

After our discussions, I moved into the book-making phase of the unit. I asked my students to share one thing they had learned about International Women's Day. I wrote each response on a strip of paper and posted them on our chalkboard. We talked about the responses, made corrections where needed, and arranged the phrases in chronological order. I then read the story we had just created. When I asked if anyone wanted to add anything, several hands went up. "It is good that the people went on strike because it is not a good idea for little children to have to work," one student said. Other comments: "The women were very, very brave." "The bosses had to learn the hard way to be more fair."

I told the students we were going to make a book about the history of International Women's Day and that our book would be created from the sentences posted on the board. I divided up the sentences so that each student had one or two sentences to re-copy onto a large piece of paper (22 inches by 34 inches). The pieces of paper were numbered and referred to as a "storybook page." If I were to do this project again, I would be less directive in both my approach and expected outcome. In this project, at times I valued the accurate portrayal of historical fact more than the importance of students constructing their own meaning from the project.

Day 3

Wanting to reinforce the concept of choosing to make unfair situations more fair, I asked my students to imagine they were going to participate in the strike on March 8, 1908, to decide what words to put on their sign, and to write them down on a sheet of paper. Some of their slogans: "Children should not have to work on dangerous machines." "Everybody should get a lunch time." "Women should get the same amount of money as men." "The bosses should get traps for the rats." "Children should be at recess and not at work."

As needed, I worked with the students to correct spelling, and then collected the papers. I then had each student draw, color, and cut out a picture of themselves (the picture was later glued onto the storybook page they had created).

Day 4

At the beginning of Day 4, each student's storybook page included a sentence that was part of the story of International Women's Day and a picture they had drawn of themselves. The goal was to then add picket signs to each student's picture.

I gave each student a popsicle stick to use as the post of the picket sign. The popsicle sticks were then glued onto the self-portrait drawings on the storybook page, as if the "drawings" were holding the sign. Students then recopied their slogans from their sheet of paper onto an index card. For those whose handwriting was quite large or whose sentences were very long, I helped them type their words. The index card was then glued onto the tip of the popsicle stick, creating a picket sign.

After we assembled our storybook pages, several students asked that the book be displayed on a special table. After contacting our school engineer, we were "gifted" with a rickety table that the students colorfully decorated and named "The Be Fair Table." They placed the International Women's Day storybook on the table with both great care and pride.

The moment was perhaps best summed up in an exchange between Angela and Jessica. "I think because of what those people did a long time ago that I can now go to school instead of have to work on a dangerous machine," said Angela. To which Jessica responded, "But Angie, things are still not fair for everybody so we have to keep trying harder."

Angela paused for a moment and then said, "Well it's a good thing then that we wrote our book. We've got a lot of very important things to tell people!" ■

Dale Weiss teaches at La Escuela Fratney in Milwaukee, Wis.

rethinking schools

This lesson was previously published in ***Rethinking Schools*** magazine.

Rethinking Schools is an award-winning quarterly magazine, featuring articles portraying some of this country's finest social justice teaching. *Rethinking Schools* is a must-read for everyone involved in education — first-year teachers, veteran teachers, parents, community activists, and teacher educators.

Rethinking Schools magazine, books, and other resources promote equity and racial justice in the classroom.

To order back issues or to subscribe, visit **rethinkingschools.org**.

Zinn Education Project registrants get 15% off a *Rethinking Schools* subscription by using the code **RSMAGZEP** at checkout.

As a teacher and researcher, I rely on *Rethinking Schools* for information, insight, and inspiration. — Sonia Nieto, Professor Emerita, University of Massachusetts Amherst

More from Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools also publishes books with articles and lessons about teaching climate justice, ethnic studies, teaching for Black lives, immigration, gender and sexuality, people's history, and more. Visit **RethinkingSchools.org** to browse and order online.