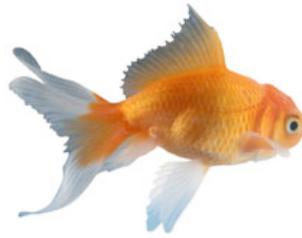


## **Kick-startin' the "Culture of Life" unit with the help of a goldfish...**



I originally heard this story during one of Fr. Lou's homilies during a weekday ACE Mass in Fisher Hall and I immediately thought of using it for this unit. Fr. Lou mentioned it in reference to a friend of his who had tried this activity and failed miserably. The fish died – and worse yet, the kids were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade! Needless to say, he received parent complaints for days and weeks. Yup, you can definitely say his lesson “flopped” (sorry, just had to say it!). But anyway, the article below highlights everything you need to know AND includes all kinds of great thoughts and insights from both the teacher and student perspective. The whole thing is worth the read. Afterwards I HIGHLY suggest you discern (through prayer and thought and discussion with your principal) whether or not performing this lesson would be suitable for your students. If not, I'm sure there's another creative way you can do this – or, even simpler, you can just tell this story as sort of a hypothetical situation for them to think, write and discuss about. The possibilities are endless – and the lesson rocks!

Good luck!  
-Greg

### **The Story of Rachel and Sadie: A unique lesson on how teachers can help their students think about the obstacles to speaking up and standing together for social justice.**

By S. J. Childs

Marvin is shouting. "Sadie! Sadie! Rachel! Rachel!" He cries out, standing up to his full six feet two inches.

"Okay. That's a referral for you, young man. I told you, 'No Talking!'"

"But ... but ..."

"Sit down. Or do you want to turn one lunch detention into two?"

Marvin falls silently back into his chair as I finish writing up the referral. I am sitting at the table in the center of my room, my teeth clenched against my own horror. A stack of blank referrals sits off to one side, and one completed referral rests in front of me.

In the middle of the table sits a fishbowl with one fish. However, my kids are focused on what is in front of the bowl - another fish, jerking and flopping in a tiny puddle of water, choking to death. The expression "like a fish outta water" takes on new meaning for me. I try not to look at the fish. Instead I scan the room and check the clock.

Three more minutes to go. Can I make it? Will the fish make it? Some students giggle. I let them know I am writing them up. Katrina groans and looks away. She gets a referral too. Terry puts his head down on the desk. McKenzie glares at me in judgment. I look away. The fish has jerked itself to the edge of

the table. What if it flops off? Can I take it? Can it?

Scott runs his hands through his hair, pressing his temples, as if the decision he is trying to make is hurting him. He looks like he might get up, but he does not. Instead he mutters, shaking his head, "She's killing the fish. She's killing the fish." I fill out a referral on Scott. The pile in front of me is growing.

The fish is now about to flop off the table and onto the floor, already sticky with dried soda pop and mud from my students' shoes. I can't bear it another second. How can they? I hold my breath as I scoot the fish onto a piece of paper and drop it back into the bowl. It resumes its graceful swimming, and I silently ask for forgiveness.

## **THE RISK OF RESISTANCE**

I borrowed this lesson from Amanda Weber-Welch at Gresham High School in Oregon who borrowed it from Carol Kilpatrick when she was at West Linn High. Weber-Welch has done the fish activity for the last two years, but this is my first time.

To set the tone, I tell the kids that I am fed up with their behavior (I act frustrated with them for a couple of days beforehand). I lecture that they need practice in discipline. I act tough. I stay tough.

On the day of the lesson, I begin by telling them that for the next 10 minutes they must sit silently at their desks, looking straight ahead, hands folded neatly. If anyone makes a move or a sound, they get detention or a referral.

Then, casually, I scoop the fish out of the bowl and onto a table in front of the kids. I wait. I have been told that the fish can live for at least five minutes out of water. I don't want to risk more than two or three minutes. As kids move or shout I write down their names and warn them again.

Eventually, either a kid saves the fish or I put it back. Then comes the discussion. I start with, "Why did we just go through that? What am I trying to teach here?" At first some kids think it is about discipline, but they catch on quickly.

The activity has been used by other teachers for various reasons. One teacher I know used it to look at issues of private property. Should a person be able to do whatever he wants to his property no matter the consequences, no matter the morality? Are there higher values than the sanctity of private property?

I use the lesson in my sophomore English class during my unit on Night, an autobiographical narrative about the Holocaust by Elie Weisel, and conformity as it applies to the Holocaust and to their own lives.

I risk the life of a goldfish to invite kids to resist my authority for the sake of another. In my classes this year, no one takes that invitation. It is too close to the beginning of the year. The kids don't yet know what I am about. I am "an authority figure." In Weber-Welch's class (she does the unit in the spring) someone always risks punishment to save the fish.

Whether students do or do not save the fish, the activity is unparalleled in dramatically highlighting the importance of standing up together for a cause. As one of my students, Travis, writes in his essay

reflecting on the lesson:

Then something life changing happened. I walk into class and we are all having our usual lively conversation about nothing important. Then Ms. Childs flips out on us. "Sit in your desk and be quiet for the rest of the period or I will keep you in at lunch!" My stomach instantly let out a grumble, almost like it was talking back to her. I thought the teacher had flipped her lid. "What am I gonna do?" Then I sat down and shut up. I followed orders. Exactly what I was supposed to do. Then out of nowhere she hastily takes the fish out of the bowl and plops it on the table. The fish starts to die right in front of us, and I'm thinking she is going to kill the fish. I tried to get the words out of my mouth but lunch was too important to me. Finally Ms. Childs put the fish back. She asked us why we did not help the fish. Everyone said because we would have gotten in trouble. This proved that if someone put fear into another person it gives them control.

Rose, in her final assessment for the year, writes:

One activity that was an amazing experience was the fish. I sat at my desk, eyes glued to the fish and its emotionless face, wildly gasping for air. The thoughts that raced through my mind had only the message: SAVE THE FISH! But my feet would not respond. This activity gave me insight as to what the year would hold. ... Keeping quiet was not an option. Participation was a must.

Rose "got it." If there was one thing I had hoped my kids got out of the lesson, it was that "keeping quiet is not an option," not when witnessing injustice, not when others are being persecuted.

Of course "keeping quiet" is always an option, and each person's decision to act or not act must be made according to his or her own value system. But I want students to explore why some people resist and some do not - to ask what keeps us from being social justice activists.

When I ask the kids why no one saves the fish the responses are various and enlightening. One student explains her reason: "You told us to be quiet. Not to move or make a sound. You had said you wanted us to practice obedience and discipline. You said we would get referrals for lunch detention. My mother would die if I got in trouble. How could I explain it to her? It doesn't matter what the reason - you never disobey the teacher and you never get in trouble."

Margaret defends her actions with, "It was just a fish. Who cares?"

"I bet that's what some folks said about the Jews and the Gypsies! It's still a life!" shouts Terry.

"Ah come on," Margaret replies. "You can buy another fish for 15 cents at the store!" But Margaret is alone in this one. Kids start shouting in outrage.

One student insists he didn't see the fish flopping on the table, even though he was sitting front and center. The other kids refuse to believe him. I had the class examine his excuse. "Didn't many people claim they didn't know what was happening during the Holocaust? Are they telling the truth? Is it denial or fear?"

Joe explains that because I am the teacher he assumes I would never do anything bad. He trusted me - even though it was the first month of class, and he didn't know me. But I was in charge so it must be

okay.

As one excuse after another fell from my students' lips, the kids quickly saw why many did not resist or stand up during the Holocaust, even if they weren't in favor of Hitler's anti-Semitic agenda. The condemnation they first felt for the generation of Germans/Europeans who did nothing melted into understanding.

But it is not enough to let the kids leave the lesson simply feeling compassion for those who do not stand up. The lesson's purpose is to help the kids see ways they can resist and help them analyze how society keeps us from standing up together.

One student points out that if they had all stood up together - saved the fish and gone down to the vice principal to tell her what I had done - they wouldn't have gotten in trouble. I would have. "But we couldn't talk about it," says Danai. "How could I know you would go down to the VP with me? I barely know you." The discussion shifts to what keeps us apart.

The ideas discussed in the lesson linger for the rest of the week, in part because the fish bowl sits on the desk, reminding us of what we did and did not do.

## **RACHEL DIES**

I do the lesson in two different periods. Sadie, the fish I torture in 1st period, survives. Rachel is not so lucky. A few days after the lesson, I walk into the class to see her floating in the tank, dead; Sadie is swimming back and forth underneath her.

This is not planned. What can I do? Should I run and get another fish so the kids won't know? I decide to turn this one day activity into a two day discussion. As kids file in they notice right away that one of the fish is gone. I tell them what happened, and I ask the inevitable question, "Who is responsible? During the Holocaust, was Hitler the only responsible party? What about the SS who carried out orders? What about the townspeople who turned away and did nothing? So here - who is responsible? Am I the only one? Or by not saving the fish are you also to blame?" The kids are quick to respond; some defend themselves, some blame me, some take on far more guilt than even I do (and that is plenty).

Finally Noah speaks. "Isn't that how we stay too divided to do anything? By blaming each other? We're not to blame, society is. We didn't save the fish because we were looking out for ourselves. We didn't think to act together because that isn't what is valued in our society. Instead we are taught to compete, to get ahead, to be #1. Sure, once in a while in a class someone talks about cooperation, but the rest of society isn't about that." What follows is a discussion on how society teaches isolation, mistrust, competition and how we, as members of society, can change that.

So what if Danai insists, "Next time I would save the fish!" Would she really? A couple of conversations after one dramatic activity and one traumatic novel won't necessarily turn my sophomores into social activists. What else can I do in my class to help my students to see that resistance is an option, that collective action is an effective method?

## TEACHING RESISTANCE

I want students to read and hear about others who believe that social justice requires standing up together and, who, in spite of the obstacles and the risks, choose to resist. I want the lesson to echo throughout the year. For the rest of the year, I choose literature that allows students to witness the resistance of others and make connections between the fish lesson and their own lives.

In *Bless Me Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya, *Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver students read about resistance to religious and ethnic persecution, military dictatorships, border and immigration laws, and segregation. They connect with Antonio and Narciso, Walter and Mama, Stephan and Taylor. They read short stories and poetry, including the works of Langston Hughes, Mart'n Espada, Gary Soto, Benjamin Alire Saenz, and Margaret Walker. They study the Guatemalan Resistance, the Sanctuary Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. They read about people who face angry mobs, racist neighborhood associations, and the border patrol. They write about the times they stood up and resisted and they listen to each others' stories.

If, as Noah says, society teaches competition and isolation, an important follow-up for this lesson is for students to hear each others' voices, listen to each others' stories, whether about resistance or about running away from home, whether about standing up or playing hide 'n' seek.

Ultimately bringing these issues out into the open, applying them to themselves and to our own times, allows the kids the chance to see themselves in each other. Matt says at the end of the year, "We developed a bond. The whole fish thing changed how we saw ourselves, each other and the world."

But is all that insight worth the life of a fish? How can I teach morality by committing an immoral act? So what if Travis writes, "It was the best lesson I have witnessed about human nature so far." What do I do when Katrina's parent calls to ask me not to ever teach the lesson again, but praises the lesson at the same time? "Katrina has talked of nothing else. It has really made her think."

Will I do this lesson again? I had hoped that writing this article would help me decide whether risking the life of a fish is worth a lesson for social justice. But I am still no closer to making a decision. If kids realize that social justice is a risk they can take together, is there a chance they will become change agents for a better society? Does this lesson mean that there's more of a chance they will stand up the next time they see injustice? What am I teaching my students if I kill a fish just to make a point? As a language arts and social studies teacher, an activist, a mother, a reflective human being - this kind of lesson forces me to examine my own moral structure. It forces me and the students to ask, "What is it worth? Is my own behavior morally justified? Am I standing up for right?"

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S.J. Childs teaches Social Studies and English at Franklin High School in Portland, Oregon. A version of this article appears in Andra Makler and Ruth Shagoury Hubbard, eds., *Teaching for Justice in the Social Studies Classroom* (Heinemann, 2000). Reprinted with permission.

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