

A Moment of Understanding: Getting on the Bus of Justice

Jan M. Sabin

*How can we teach early writers to state what they understand and believe,
take a position, and support it?*

The Michigan Department of Education Curriculum Framework requires us to teach children to put their ideas into action. They require us to prepare students to become responsible citizens. In English Language Arts we develop skills and processes in listening, speaking and writing. In Social Studies we support students in learning how to “*explain decisions made by others as reported in stories about the past, and compose a statement expressing an opinion on an issue.*” To accomplish these tasks students need to connect what they are reading and learning in both subject areas and begin writing across the curriculum. They need to demonstrate their level of understanding.

I have spent the past decade trying to come to terms with how to guide second graders into understanding the core democratic values of justice and equality while encouraging them to take a stand for these concepts and write down what they believe. Much class time is used for developing their prior knowledge from personal and reading experiences in the prewriting stage. Kids always do well when we talk about rules and why to follow them. They understand that Martin Luther King stood for peace because he believed in using non-violent ways to accomplish change. We discuss why Abraham Lincoln is the only other president besides Washington whose birthday is honored on its own special day. We listen to segments from Dr. King’s famous speech, and we watch reenactments of Rosa Parks on the bus in the *Mighty Times* video. Then we empathize with Ruby Bridges as we look “*through her eyes*” while the courageous seven year old walks through angry mobs into an all white school. Around my classroom innocent eyes begin to question inequality and injustice.

Yet, when it comes to telling about standing up for something they believe in, this age group tends to recount minor incidents of sharing candy and not letting kids cut in line. Their stories seem trivial compared with these landmark historical events. Lessons seem to fall short when I


try to get my students to report about social justice through their own personal experiences. And so, it is here that we begin to write. Students start with quick writes in their notebooks. We brainstorm and chart possible meanings as they define equality and justice. I model writing a personal experience about a time I had to ask friends not to tell jokes that were hurtful to other people. My youngsters try to visualize a time when social injustices were witnessed on the playground, in the cafeteria, at home or in their communities. We have oral rehearsals of possible situations, engaging in substantive conversations. We push our pencils for five minutes (or more) using our best invented spelling. We do a read-around sharing our thoughts and ideas. "What is a child expected to do when they see these injustices?" We question our responses.

The next day I send home an assignment where family members are asked to help. Children seek support in writing about a time when they (or someone they know) stood up for their beliefs and helped someone, or something, in some way. These home connections give me insight into the kinds of experiences my students have had. Those unable to complete the assignment listen to stories from the others.

We summarize what it means to take a stand by reciting a poem I composed with a colleague:

Take a Stand

I'm gonna take a stand
 Make my feelin's clear to you
 I'm gonna take a stand
 With a core democratic value
 I'm gonna take a stand
 Tell you what I know
 I'm gonna take a stand
 My information will show



Thursday, January 27, 2006

Dear Parents/Caregivers,

Upon completing our social studies unit on the core democratic values of equality and justice we are asking students to recall a time they, or someone close to them, may have taken a stand against an injustice or something that was not done fairly or equally.


We have discussed what it means to take a stand or stick up for what you believe when you see someone being bullied or treated wrong. We have also used examples from important people in history such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. We have learned about the importance of tolerance and non-violent ways to try to get people to work together when they disagree.

We have stressed that when a situation is disturbing, destructive or dangerous, children need to tell a trusted adult. We have also shared stories of people who have worked to change laws that did not represent all citizens.

Your child needs to write about a time someone (hopefully them) saw something wrong and has taken a stand against the injustice. For example, maybe their sibling was being picked on and they told the bully to stop, or they told a trusted adult about the problem. In other words, they did not let peer pressure keep them from helping someone in need. Please assist them in filling out the bottom and returning it tomorrow (Friday, January 18, 2005)

Sincerely,

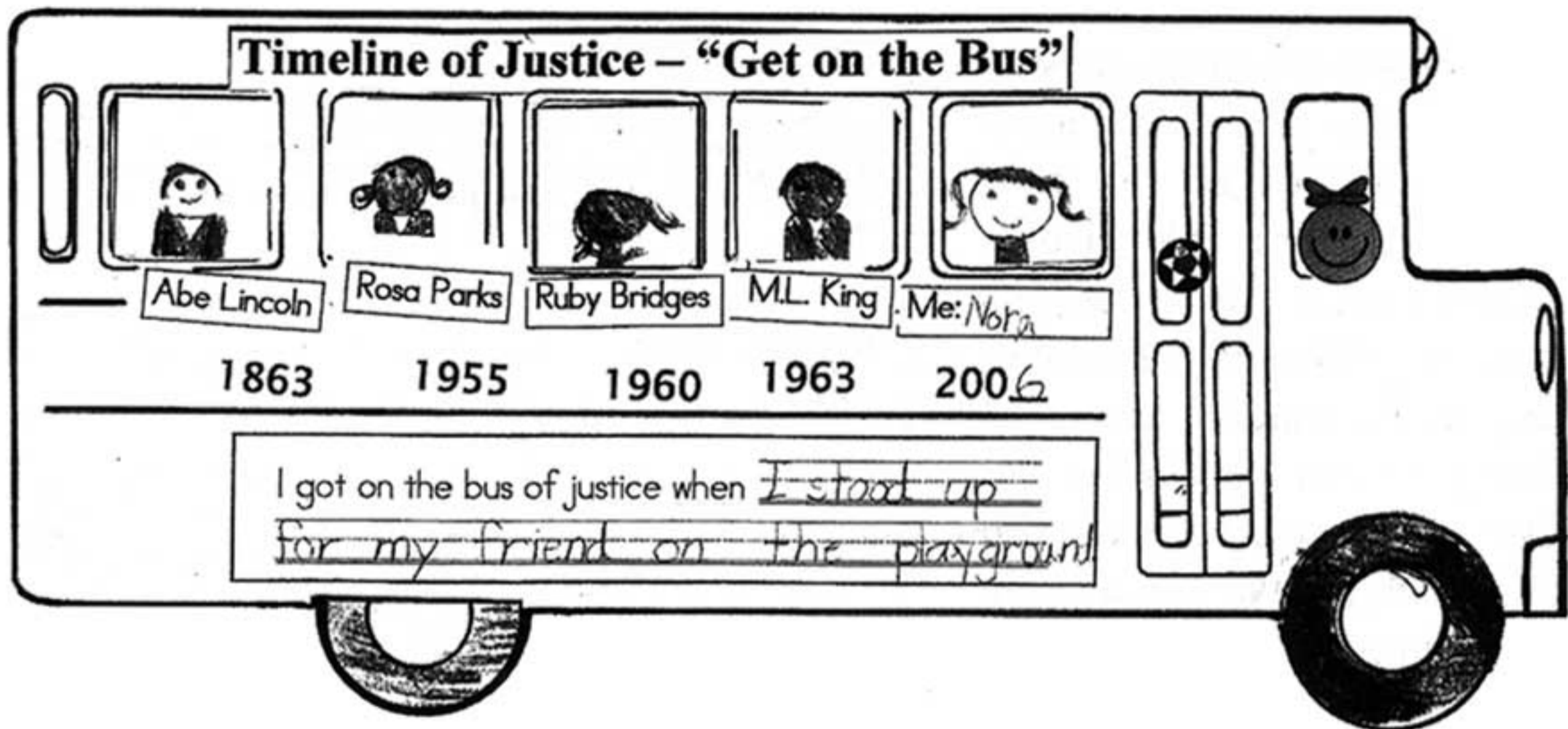
Ms. Jan Sabin



I or () took a stand for justice
 and/or equality when I or ()

Students stand up and do stamp-stamp-clap motions to the verse. Then we role-play a few of their stories. Mikael acts out a time he was teased about his choices in clothes. His friend Annie defends him by saying people shouldn't be teased about the style or color of their shirts explaining that different outfits make kids more interesting. Maggie chimes in about a time kids were making fun of her little brother's hair cut. She demonstrates how she told them to stop because it made him cry.

The home assignment is a rough draft from which comes one single sentence, hand-printed on a special form and glued to a bright yellow construction paper bus shape.

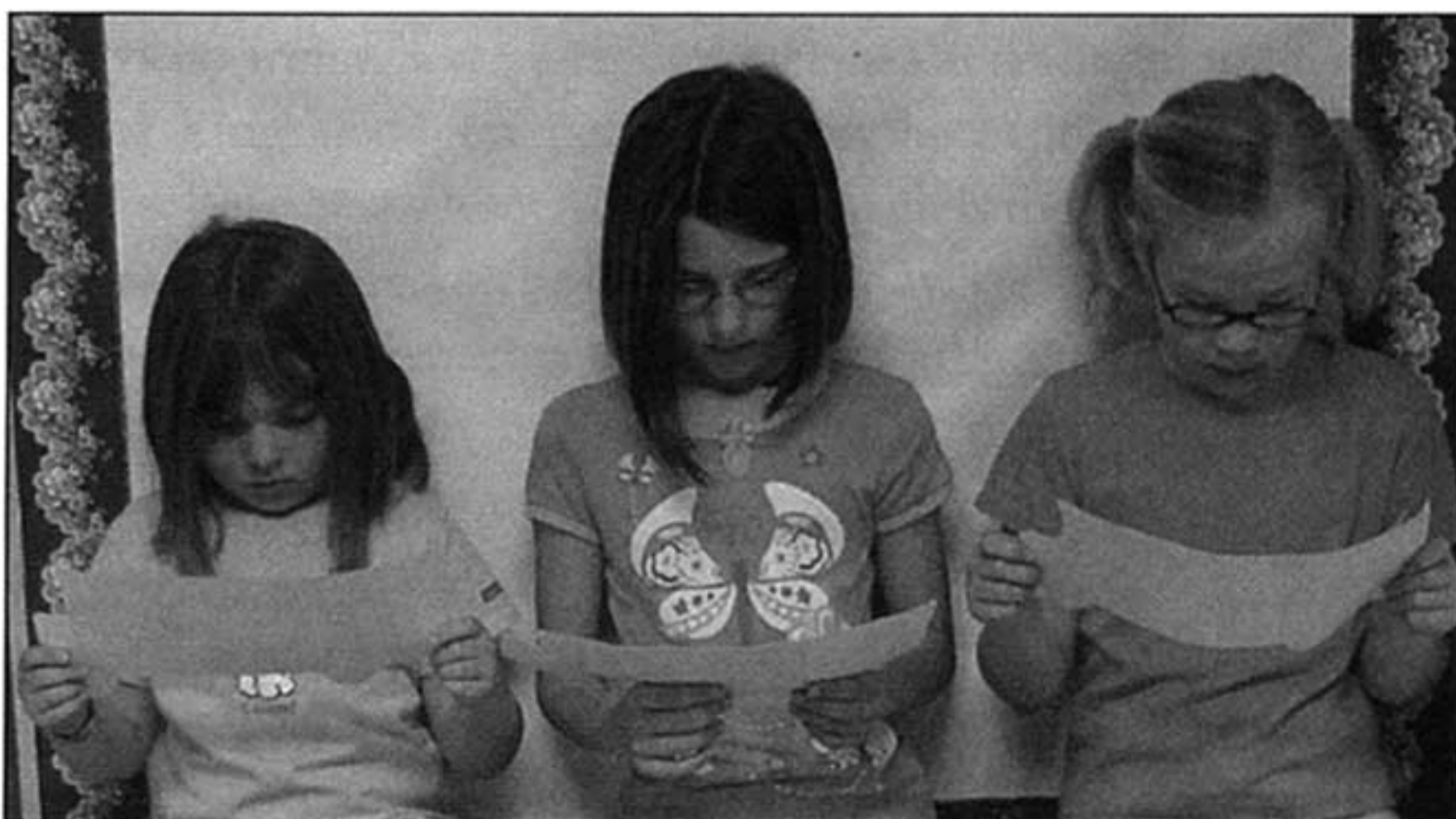


Students practice reading their sentences to one another. The "bus of justice" is a timeline of important civil rights' dates. Drawings of Lincoln, Parks, King, and Bridges peer out of the windows. The final seat on the bus is for the young author; a place to mark the time my students took a stand for justice and equality.

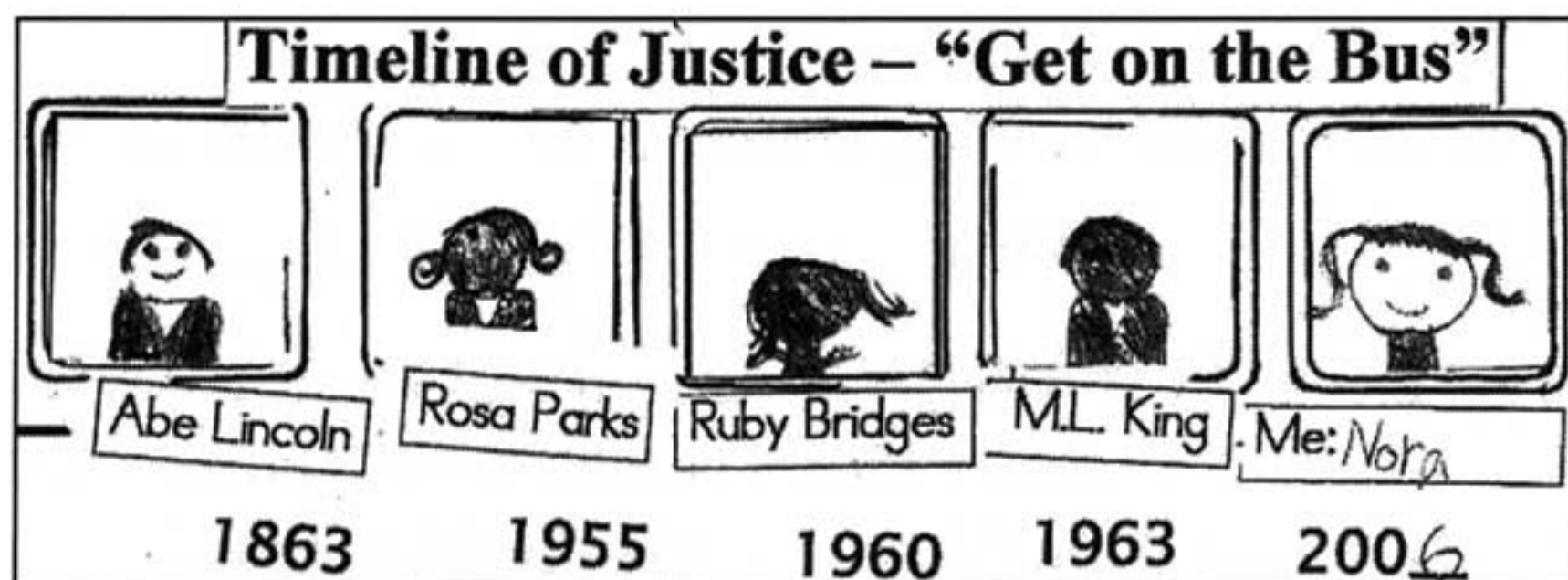
The end result may be a simple statement, but until my young citizens actually have to write it down, they seem unsure of what it means to be involved. They cannot take a position on civic

issues until they've considered what social injustices have been encountered in their own life.

The foundation is laid. This is the beginning ground work preparing children to tackle writing more involved pieces where they must state their opinions and support them



with details. We learn more about the meaning of taking a position. I introduce how to construct an “I believe... because” statement. We talk about supporting our opinions with facts we have read or learned from others. Students become aware of the links we can make between lessons at school and lessons at home. I begin to observe their real world connections, reaching beyond the classroom. This is the true authentic assessment. It is here, during this moment of understanding, that I can judge the work I have ahead of me if I am to guide my students into responsible citizenship. It is here I, too, begin to write our next mini-lesson. Sometimes learning to write comes about by writing to learn.



A rectangular box containing a student's handwritten response on lined paper. The text reads: "I got on the bus of justice when I stood up for my friend on the playground." The words "I stood up" and "for my friend on the playground" are underlined.

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Discussion Questions

1. Jan believes that students can clarify beliefs and take a stand about those beliefs. How does student writing provide an avenue for this to happen?
2. Personal and reading experiences play a significant part in these students' writing. What role do personal and reading experiences play in your students' writing?
3. Jan takes a state curriculum and assessment goal of learning about core democratic values and explores possibilities for meaningful student reading and writing. What other possibilities emerge from the current state curriculum?

Professional Resources

Social Studies and the Young Learner: A K-6 social studies education journal filled with teaching activities.

Social Education. Articles on the latest research and classroom ideas. The National Council for the Social Studies includes a list of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People in their May/June issue of *Social Education*. www.socialstudies.org

Ray, Katie Wood and Lisa Cleaveland. *About the Authors – Writing Workshop with our Youngest Writers*. Excellent source for the how-to's of creating an environment where primary children can grow as writers and authors. Ray devotes a section to eleven different units of study.

Ray, Katie Wood. *What you Know by Heart – How to Develop Curriculum for Your Writing Workshop*. The book gives an insightful look into using our own reading and writing experiences to develop the curriculum of process and product. It encourages us to write like teachers of writing.

"Mighty Times: The Legacy of Rosa Parks," *Teaching Tolerance* magazine, Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit legal and education foundation. www.teachingtolerance.org This classroom resource comes with a 40 minute video, guide and activities. It is narrated by members of her family including young nieces and nephews. Free.

Teaching Tolerance Order Department
400 Washington Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36104

Laura Denstaedt, Judy Kelly and Laura Schiller. *The First Ten Days – A Genre Study for Test Preparation – ELA Writing and Reading Grades 3-4*. This workshop was developed by the Oakland Writing Project, Eastern Michigan Writing Project and the National Writing Projects of Michigan to refresh students in multiple language arts areas in preparation for the MEAP. It is available through the Oakland Intermediate Schools.