Emotional Literacy Unit Three
"How Do I Solve My Problems?"

This unit is very student-driven and revolves around conversation and openness. Students are asked to create their own "Guide to Life," which they will do by brainstorming the biggest conflicts that they are facing at school and in their lives. This only works if students feel safe with each other and are able to capitalize on the ensemble-building work they have been doing all year while playing theater games at the start of each class.

One of the most important things to do when teaching this unit is to explicitly teach the vocabulary words "conflict" and "resolution." It's important that students realize that every problem they are facing has multiple solutions. If students come up with silly ideas for resolutions (for example, if one of the problems they come up with is "too much homework," and a student suggests, "feed all the homework to chickens," as happened in one class), ask the rest of the class if they agree or disagree. Treat every answer with openness and seriousness, so students know that they are in a safe community to brainstorm their ideas. In the chicken example, a student raised her hand and said, "Homework sucks, but we have to do SOME of it. I want to get a job someday, and I have to do work at home sometimes."

It may be helpful to engage small groups in conversation. You might also consider turning your learning space into a "roundtable." Students can use the conversation piece they've been working with all year during circle time to problem-solve. Reiterate that this is a safe space, where stories and personal details do not leave. Some students may open up about very violent experiences during this unit; some of the biggest problems students come up with have a lot to do with violence and trauma. Let this space be conducive to having conversation, but remain aware of how feelings might grow vulnerable, and be ready to change course if the need arises.

Because this unit relies heavily on writing, offer students the option to create comics or drawings to convey their ideas. Try to avoid having students shut down because they are frustrated with language. Calligraphy can also be an exacting art; let kids get crazy with their own font and lettering ideas. Bring in font books and hand-lettering books as samples.

Although this unit has the potential to be frustrating because of the necessity of language, conversation, and exacting art, it also has the potential to be one of the most liberating units. Students have the opportunity to take ownership over their lives, and they're able to talk about difficult subjects in a safe space. The final product—a finished book—is something they will be proud of all year. It can be exciting for older kids to read their "Guide to Life" to kindergartners in the same building. This project gives students the opportunity to demonstrate leadership and growth in brand-new ways.