Since 2013, I have had the pleasure of teaching undergraduates at the University at Albany about psychological issues relevant to when children become involved in the criminal justice system. Through my “Children, Psychology, and Law” course, I expose students to research on the nature of and societal response to child maltreatment, the reliability of children’s eyewitness testimony, juvenile justice, and many unique concerns related to child victims and juvenile offenders. My goal is to train students how to use psychological theories and research to both better understand these issues and improve the criminal justice system’s ability to respond to them.

When first designing my course, I was eager to build in pedagogical techniques that would engage my students in the important content of the course while also motivating them to become change agents themselves. Through the Social Psychology Network, I discovered action teaching, defined as “a high-impact style of instruction that contributes to peace, social justice, and sustainable living at the same time that it educates students.” I enthusiastically adapted Dr. Jennifer Hunt’s award-winning assignment—“Changing the World, $5 at a Time, Through a Grant Assignment”—for use in my course.

For this assignment, students write a grant proposal in which they propose original research about an important issue in the field of children, psychology, and the law. There are several graded steps that take place over the course of the semester to help students succeed on this assignment, which is frequently their first-ever attempt to conceive of a research question and design a study to answer it. To begin, students complete three online tutorials on information literacy. Specifically, the tutorials train students on (a) the process of conducting library research, (b) how to identify and use scholarly articles in their research, and, of importance, (c) what plagiarism is and how to avoid it by citing sources appropriately.

Next, students develop a statement of intent and locating pertinent references. In this statement, they briefly describe their research question, hypothesis, the

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1 An earlier version of this article originally appeared on in APA Division 37’s newsletter, The Advocate, at https://www.apadivisions.org/division-37/publications/newsletters/advocate/2019/10/index
2 https://www.actionteaching.org/
3 https://www.actionteaching.org/award/grant-assignment
independent and dependent variables, and proposed research method. They also identify at least five scholarly sources they intend to use for the proposal, discussing the appropriateness of each source and its format for the topic. I provide students with feedback at this stage, guiding them to consider the novelty of their research ideas and directing them to relevant literature. For the following step, students prepare a detailed outline that includes a clear statement of the research question, discussion of the importance of the question in light of existing psychological and legal literature, a clear hypothesis and supporting theory and evidence, a detailed research plan, and discussion of the proposed results and their implications. During class time, students work in small groups to provide constructive reviews of each other’s outlines. I provide a handout to guide students through this process, instructing them to answer a number of questions about their peers’ outlines (e.g., Can you identify a clear research question?, What is the hypothesis?, What is the first argument that supports the student’s hypothesis?, etc.) and to suggest ways that students might clarify their thesis, hypothesis, and research plans. In exchange for the feedback students provide to their peers, they receive detailed feedback on their own outlines that they can implement as they begin to write a full draft of their paper. As a result, students are generally quite invested and engaged in the peer review session.

The next step is for students to write their grant proposal paper in which they introduce the problem that needs to be resolved, review relevant literature on the issue, present a clear research question and testable hypothesis, detail a research project that will test the hypothesis, and explain how the research will advance the science of psychology as well as legal practice. To further prepare students for this work, I provide guides to writing grant proposals and empirical articles as well as a sample of one of my own funded grant proposals which they can use as a model.

The critical action component of the assignment is that each student is given the opportunity in several class meetings to contribute money to a class “grant fund.” At the end of the semester, students give a 5-minute presentation of their proposed research in class. They are instructed to describe the issue at hand, provide a brief overview of the importance of the issue, and then describe their proposed study. After students present their proposals, students vote to determine which student best described an important social problem related to children, psychology, and law and designed a study that would advance the field’s understanding of and ability to address the issue. The winning student then works with me to identify organizations whose members are working on issues like the one identified in the proposal. The pooled grant money is then donated to a suitable organization to put research into action! I am pleased to report that, to date, my students and I have donated nearly $300 for grant support to the AP-LS, APA’s Division 37, and the Society for Research in Child Development.

My students’ winning proposals have addressed the need for research on teachers’ perceptions of child maltreatment and decision-making related to reporting; risk factors for gang membership within the school setting; older adolescents’ competencies related to Miranda waivers and confessions in light of the notion of extended adolescence; and effects of sex offender registration and notification requirements on adolescents adjudicated guilty or convicted of sexual offenses. As
this list reflects, the grant assignment increases students’ awareness of the many and varied psychological issues affecting the experiences of justice-involved children. It also helps students learn how to formulate relevant questions and think about how research can help to answer those questions, allowing them to go beyond the course material in creative and innovative ways. Most importantly, as Dr. Hunt stated, this assignment also “helps students to see how small actions by individuals (e.g., $5 donations) can collectively contribute to social change.”

I strongly encourage other teaching members of AP-LS to use action teaching in their courses. This work is highly rewarding. It teaches students course content while also showing them how to productively approach the task of making a positive difference in society, helping to build the next generation of psychology and law researchers and justice advocates.

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Dr. Cynthia J. Najdowski is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Albany where she has developed courses in “Children, Psychology and the Law” and “Psychology of Juries.” In preparing her Psychology of Juries course, she noted a lack of texts examining new challenges in the system such as the use of body camera footage as evidence and co-edited a volume on the topic that is now a teaching tool. She is also an accomplished researcher. Dr. Najdowski was recognized with the 2017 Saleem Shah Early Career Award. She also has conducted scholarship in the area of teaching and learning, examining if and how Facebook groups work as a teaching tool and generally how research is used to inform teaching. In 2019 she was awarded the AP-LS Early Career Teaching and Mentoring Award.

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4 https://www.actionteaching.org/award/grant-assignment