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The Mothers of Exiles: Authentic Project-Based Learning in a Social Studies Classroom

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§113.18.b.23.D. Students will be able to describe how immigrants and refugees have a difficult time transitioning to life in a new country.

This standard no longer exists in the sixth grade social studies curriculum. In fact, the term “refugee” is absent from all social studies standards at the middle school level for the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). When I think to my sixth grade social studies classroom, I think of Maria and Zaw and Krat Wa. I think of my limited English-proficient students and my students who claim refugee-status who cannot express themselves in English and remain silent for the majority of their day. Not only are our students silent in school, but so too are the conversations we have about where our students came from and why.

By engaging in thoughtful and inclusive curricular instruction, we are beginning the process of having this conversation. And it takes even more time to develop that with our students. When one thinks about the typical middle school mind, students are very much centered on themselves (Jensen, 2010). Therefore, forcing them to sit in a classroom that does not relate to their lives is not at all realistic. Students are forced to continue in these classrooms feeling invisible due to the fact that they are not represented in the formal curriculum. While students remain in a place of dissonance, they hear the echoes of administrators calling for *diversity*, but are unable to see the administrative follow through as the echoes draw silent.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight authentic learning that not only followed state curricular standards, but was also inclusive of our student population and rigorous in the critical thinking and real-world applications. The title of this paper – “Mothers of Exiles” – is drawn from the poem at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It is another name for Lady Liberty and one that we often forget. My hope with this project was for students to understand that there are hardships faced by refugee and immigrant families, with which the vast majority of my class can

relate. but also systems in place – albeit poorly functioning at many levels – that they have access to. This country can be a “mother” of exiles, and these students learned ways to navigate this system for themselves and others. The deliberate example that I will use to highlight this throughout my paper is a project that I implemented in my third year teaching sixth grade social studies in which I was intentional in bridging between the standard (§113.18.b.23.D) and my students. Within this paper, I also stress the importance of independent and relevant learning through a project-based learning model known as SAGE (student choice, authenticity, global significance, and exhibition).

Following this introduction, the paper begins with a section entitled “Get Involved.” In this section, I set the stage for how a simple objective was able to be transformed into a more meaningful project through collaboration, innovation and openness to new ideas. The next section builds on this foundation and provides the background information on what the SAGE method of project-based learning entails. Subsequently, a section entitled “Projected Based Learning and the Invisible Pedagogy” allows for a description on the pedagogical implications of teaching in a nontraditional capacity. “Mothers of Exiles” and “Daily Breakdown” provide a framework and detailed anecdotes about what each day of this extended project entail. The final section wraps up my own impression of the project and hopefully inspires similar risk-taking on the part of educators in their own classrooms.

Get Involved

Yes... YOU need to get involved. I am not claiming to know who you are and how you are with your students. What I am saying is that for many teachers, the curriculum is something to be dictated to students – not an organic process of learning. When I first read the TEKS standard: *Students will be able to describe how immigrants and refugees have a difficult time*

transitioning to life in a new country, I immediately felt excited! Many of my students *are* this standard. They have so much to teach *me*! I reigned in my enthusiasm after a meeting with our cohort of social studies teachers. “Sarah... there is only ONE question about refugees on the entire common assessment and seven questions about surplus and scarcity. You cannot afford to waste a day on this when your kids are already so far behind,” one colleague cautioned. I disagreed with this colleague, but was unsure how to address this. I immediately started to question if I had the confidence, courage, knowledge, and experience to go against this advice.

Fortunately for me, I had another more adventurous mentor. When I told her my idea, she jumped at the chance to help. She sat with me for an entire Saturday. I almost regretted going to her as we languished through protocol after protocol from her school reform “Bible” on Critical Friends Groups (CFG). CFGs implement protocols for building skills and a culture that is necessary for reflective dialogue and collaboration. But... it takes *forever*. “This is a waste of time,” I muttered as I rolled my eyes and wrote down what I had just told her and what she was now saying back to me. After a long day of planning, our idea was born – rather than a one-and-done lesson plan on refugees – I had transitioned from (briefly describe what the original plan was) to extending the project to two weeks! Having a mentor who shared a similar educational philosophy and who did not hesitate to push the rigor in my project design was pivotal in creating an opportunity that would have meaning beyond my classroom walls.

SAGE Advice

My mentor left me with one final present before hopping in the car to drive back to San Antonio, “Try pushing yourself *and your students* by planning a project that follows SAGE.” My admiration for her allowed me to shirk my distrust of acronyms – a bitter taste had been left in my mouth after new teacher induction where I found I was less than fluent in “Teacher Talk.”

But SAGE was something different. The purpose was to create a project that addressed state standards but also pushed the rigor through the incorporation of four components:

1. Student Choice
2. Authenticity
3. Global Significance
4. Exhibition

When it comes to student choice, the educator must give them an opportunity to opt-in or give them ownership of the project at least through some lens. In this case, our students were given a photograph of a family. This family had a life – we could see life in their eyes. Along with the photograph, we had a short paragraph about the families. We learned that Malik loved the National Football League (NFL) and his favorite team was the Houston Texans. We learned that Sofia had always wanted to be a fashion designer. And our students broke into groups almost organically based on the family with whom they identified.

The authenticity of “real life” tasks that students are asked to complete prepare them for the types of mindsets that they will have as they increase their roles in our democratic society. The authenticity piece pairs nicely with the global significance of SAGE in that the hope of education is to prepare our students for an active position in their community. The problems of the world are manifest in the hardships and institutionalized structures of oppression in which our students live on a daily basis. So, relating it to that makes what they are doing worth something. The final piece to the puzzle, exhibition, allows students to present their learning to an external audience – there is a greater purpose to their work. If done adequately, you have already created the space for student engagement through project-based learning.

Project-Based Learning and the Invisible Pedagogy

Collaborative learning and learning through community have been popularized by social research in education (Dewey, 1922; Freire, 1970). Project-based learning is a perfect example of something that can be enhanced through collaboration. It allows students to work with their strengths and to learn from each other. In addition to this strength, there are others. While project-based learning (PBL) has been modified through the years, one key element is that students *choose* the project with minimal instructor guidance (Fleming, 2004). The extension on PBL exists through the service-learning component of this specific project. It only further serve to engage the students. This can get complicated and it is a valid question to ask – is it worth it?

It definitely can be easier for a teacher to plan a traditional lesson – you talk, they do, you observe, and we correct. It is clean, it is neat, and it is easier to manage. Although maybe messier, project-based learning can do far greater good for our students. Rather than memorization or process of elimination thinking, students have to compare and contrast the situations of their refugee families in the mother country compared to the situation they will face in the host country. They have to analyze cause and effect – if they selected a certain type of transportation arrangement for the family or a certain type of living situation, what type of effect could that have on the family? They must make decisions that have a real impact. It pushes the critical thinking that “teaching to the test” methodologies avoid. The decisions made by our students end up affecting more than a test grade. It has the potential to affect the standard of living for a family. Their thinking is pushed to a more extreme level.

For many of us teaching in Title-I schools (schools with high percentages of students from poverty and minority backgrounds), the dominant oppressive culture is replicated in the classroom – the teacher controls and the students are forced to be submissive (Langhout,

Rappaport, & Simmons, 2002). Traditional methods of oppressive teaching must be revisited. We are doing a disservice to our students if we continue to prepare them for a passive role in their learning. Michael Apple (1992, 1996) in Langhout, et. al, (2002) suggests that teachers who allow for invisible pedagogy (child-centered and loosely controlled) in their classrooms may create an environment where disenfranchised youth are able to engage in a learning process that does not promote the oppressive visible pedagogies of traditional methods. In our Mothers of Exiles project described below, the readers will see an example of how a group of students respond when they are given freedom and authenticity in their learning process.

Mother of Exiles

“The New Colossus,” engraved on a bronze plaque and mounted inside the lower level of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, calls the ‘weak and huddled masses’ to our shores. The poem calls for a “mighty woman with a torch, whose flame is the imprisoned lightning, and her name Mother of Exiles” (Lazarus, 1883). Yet we oftentimes forget what this huge moniker actually stands for. At the start of the project, my students read through the poem. After initially scouring it for literary devices, we shared out our favorite lines and related it to our own stories. Personally, I discuss how my grandfather was forced to change his name from Guida to Guido, which is a pejorative slang term for a working-class urban Italian American. He was forced to change his name because someone thought it would be funny to give our family a derogatory reshaping of our name. For others, it may be the whispered conversation of hiding in the back of trucks or shaking hands with *coyotes* to cross the Rio Grande. All the while, I am showing pictures of various refugees whose eyes burn from the projector screen.

Following this gripping introduction, students are divided into groups and given a file. These files represent real families. My students are asked to help. They are asked to be the

Mothers of Exiles, with each group taking ownership over one real family that will eventually be relocated to the United States with refugee status. With ironic sixth grade innocence, one student struggled to understand, “Sooooo... it’s like finding a cat on your doorstep. You just can’t leave it there. You need to let it in and give it some milk. Yeah, I get why we’re helping these families.” And so, my students opt in. “Of course we’ll help. What else would we do?”

Daily Breakdown

What makes a project such as this so authentic is that the real-life applications are not theoretical. This project generated community partnerships that not only enhanced the learning in my own classroom but benefited the families for which these programs work to help. On the first day, Ghulam, the founder of the Al-Amaanah Refugee Service Center in Houston, came to talk with our students. He explained the relocation situation of the families with which he worked and even had some of his refugee clients share their stories. We needed this day in order to discover what background information currently existed with our students and to create investment in the purpose of developing relocation packages.

The next day, Peter—who works with Catholic Charities in Houston—came into our classroom to teach our students how assist recent refugee immigrants to look for apartments. He showed pictures of current apartment complexes that are open to refugee relocation services. “But I live in *Los Arcos*, too,” exclaimed Maria in confusion. This pivotal moment served to show our students that these refugees were not “other” but were actually a part of our community. Using our packet information on our families, the students selected two or three apartments that would work for their clients. Students had to think about funds available, family size and location in order to make this recommendation.

Peter was followed by Jean—who works with Refugee Services of Texas—who helped us navigate the welfare system through Medicaid and food stamps. I was grateful that she brought a few coworkers with her into my classroom as these forms were insanely difficult for our students to navigate. And still, this was a valuable conversation starter in our classroom. Many of our students' families are coming to the country with limited English proficiency. Oftentimes, the children will become critical translators on the path to success. We talked about the challenges and pressure that our sixth-graders felt when handling the family business for their parents or translating at doctor's appointments, or talking with bank tellers. Our students, with the support of the volunteers from Refugee Services of Texas, used the family information to fill out these forms for welfare services and Jean also left forms for our own students who qualified but currently did not receive these welfare services. While an overwhelming day in terms of legalese, many of our students were used to the challenge of navigating this system as they often took on this role in their own family dynamic.

Shirin, the liaison for Houston Independent School District's (HISD) Refugee Program, shared enculturation programs for ESL students. Students learned about the kinds of services that refugees would receive in HISD – counseling, enrollment guidance, supplemental summer ESL classes, supplemental materials and school supplies. Students learned about the support that HISD Refugee Programs offer to the parents as well – enrollment support, translation services, parent information, and tutorial support. Students thought critically about how this compared with the services offered at our own school and we acknowledged our deficits. Almost unanimously, the students decided to recommend the refugee families send their children to HISD schools.

And finally, we had our school counselor come in to talk with our students about PTSD and counseling options so that we had a full system in place to support the families when they arrived. We examined push and pull factors (per TEKS requirement) and then students had to research the political environment of the countries from which our families would come. We had access to mobile labs on this day and to facilitate the speed with which this research needed to be done, each group was provided with two websites that would provide a nice synopsis of the current political, social, and economic situation in their refugee family's country of origin. They presented the potential push factor that would necessitate their families' immediate relocation and we talked about the potential signs of PTSD.

Perhaps the most powerful moment of this day was our students' own reflections on their own stories and the stories of their parents. One of our refugee families came from a Central American country. Our students did not even have to do the research to be able to describe the political oppression and economic decline that their families experienced. This day served as a cathartic experience for many, as an opportunity for our own counselor to see where our students came from, and to highlight how oftentimes these services can be inaccessible for people who lack knowledge of the welfare system or the language necessary to access it.

With the student choice and authenticity pieces in place, the next focus was on global significance. The task of creating a welcome package for real refugee families as well as relating the struggles of immigration to my own students' identities definitely falls into that category. At the end, we presented our portfolios to a few of our parents as well as all of our guest speakers. The portfolio included data analysis, budget planning, navigating the welfare system of the United States, reflections, and presentation skills.

100% Got that *ONE* question right!

We didn't have the highest performance in the district on our common assessments. And honestly, that is not something that I aim for as an educator. We completed the project in December thinking that we had done something amazing and impactful. Eventually, though, we forgot about the projects and our families. Other projects come up, there are tests to take, clubs to join, a life to be lived. But then, one day a letter arrived from Peter. Inside the envelope there were seven pictures. Seven families staring back at us with smiling faces and eyes just as alive as ours. These are the seven families that my students had worked with months before – preparing for their arrival. My now seventh grade students were astonished, “Miss... this was real? Like for real, for real?” The pride expressed in that moment is beyond anything I could hope to do as an educator on a multiple-choice test.

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