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Learning Beyond the Classroom: Developing the Community Connection

I learned that some people are very, very neat and others are very messy. I also learned that everyone had a different way of putting their stuff inside the tent. I also learned that some people were slowpokes and other people got up and ready in less than ten minutes. Other people would go slow walking and others were fast because they wanted to get there as soon as possible or other people would just walk kind of fast and kind of slow. I also learned that some people got surprised whenever they saw something and others didn't. I also learned that when some people saw a deer they would start screaming and shouting while other people would just look at the deer and watch quietly.

(Michelle Gonzales, 4th grade student, Melrose School)

The thing that surprised me the most was that there was a lot more to see than just the immigration and the forests. You could see the whole Bay Area from the top. You can find animals. You get to see footprints, and many more things that make you wonder.

(Violeta Soledad Obrera, 5th grade student, Melrose School)

As teachers struggle to understand and respond to an increasingly diverse student population, they have felt the need to transform their curriculum so that it recognizes and builds on this diversity in meaningful ways. The curriculum is particularly inadequate in reflecting the culture and voices of immigrant and language minority students: "Our old curriculum is too narrow. Immigrant children seldom find their own experiences or histories reflected anywhere in the classroom or the texts. This cre-

ates among them a sense of unreality and unimportance about their past ..." (Olsen, 1988, p. 68)

The search for an appropriate multicultural curriculum has focused a lot of attention on changes in both the content and process of teaching. For example, the language arts curriculum has been broadened by the integration of multicultural literature. Social studies textbooks have been revised to reflect a wider range of social, cultural, and historical information. Whole language and cooperative learning techniques have helped to build more effective learning processes in the classroom.

But in creating a curriculum which values diversity, teachers often miss one of the richest and most readily available resources – the real world beyond the classroom. This paper will present some examples of learning in which teachers and students have deliberately left the familiar world of the classroom and have built their curriculum upon real life people, places and issues in the surrounding community.

One of the best known models of the connection between the school and the community is an experiment known as Foxfire which has been carried on by students in northern Georgia for more than 20 years. In the Foxfire approach high school students engage in research on aspects of their own Appalachian culture and history and publish the results of their research in the form of magazines and books. The process goes beyond simply engaging the students in experiences of cultural journalism, though. It is grounded in the conviction that students must have a genuine voice in planning what happens in this process. Thus, it also emphasizes core practices such as community building, choice, democratic decision making, collaboration, and reflection.

The Foxfire process spirals out of classroom activities such as tape recorded interviews with local people, photo documentation, and searches of official records including newspapers and local archives. This information is brought back to the classroom in the form of sharing and discussions and leads to further activities such as transcribing, editing, photo developing, layout, and printing. Using the Foxfire approach, students have developed a deeper and more personal understanding of the lives and happenings of their local community while, at the same time, mastering the academic skills required by the state language arts curriculum.

Using Foxfire as a model, a group of teachers in Northern California has experimented with community-based projects at various grade levels over the past three years. Many of these projects have grown out of the need teachers have felt to respond more effectively to the diversity of languages and cultures in their classrooms. By reaching out beyond the classroom, the students have discovered new avenues for exploring diversity

through their connection to people, places, and experiences beyond the classroom. The result has been to change the way teachers and students look at themselves, the purpose of learning, and their relationship to the wider community.

The following is a description of three of the projects which have been carried out in bilingual and ESL classrooms.

Connecting to the Local Community: Gum Moon Women's Residence

This project was undertaken as part of a three-week Chinese immersion program for students of Chinese ethnicity during a summer at Commodore Stockton Elementary School in San Francisco. The 25 students in a second grade class received all of their instruction in Chinese. The teacher, Annie Ching, wanted the students to develop a sense of identity and pride in their culture through a study of their community.

Since only half of the students were from the local neighborhood, the teacher suggested looking at local landmarks as a way for them to begin to explore the community. One of the landmarks was the Gum Moon Women's Residence, an old brick building across the street which the students passed every day on their way to school but knew nothing about.

In preparation for a field trip to the residence, the teacher wrote the students' questions and initial observations on a chart. There was a lot of discussion, especially around the issue of gender – Why didn't men live there? Would boys be allowed to go into the residence? The teacher then helped the students organize themselves into teams and prepare a list of questions they would ask at Gum Moon.

The visit to the residence provided an opportunity for the students to see inside the building, meet some of the women, and learn a little about the history of the residence. They discovered that Gum Moon was a boarding house for women (mainly recently arrived immigrants from China) and that it had been in operation since 1912. The students were fascinated by the old pictures of girls and women dressed in different style clothes. They asked questions about the daily life of the residents – their food, their chores, their communal living situation, their English classes. They were surprised to find that some of the women had children and that child care was provided at the residence while the women attended English classes.

The classroom activities following the visit spiraled in several directions. The teams filled chart paper with the things they learned about the residence and its history. They developed lists in English and Chinese of new words they had learned during the visit and solved math problems (about time) which arose out of their discussions of the past. Each team

made drawings and wrote descriptions in English of the rooms of the residence and compiled these in a book which they shared with the class next door. Finally, they repeated the process, developing the book in Chinese, and made copies which they presented personally to the Gum Moon residents. They also made copies for the principal and other teachers in the school.

The teacher felt that the project helped build a bridge between school and the outside world, making the students more aware of their own local history as well as helping them to develop a personal relationship with the elders in their community. She was told by the receptionist at Gum Moon that as far as she could remember this was the first time students had ever visited the residence, an amazing fact considering that the residence is just across the street from the school. In summing up the benefits of this experience, the teacher remarked, "We often miss the best resources and greatest learning opportunities right in front of our eyes. It only took a little spark to make this project happen and it was a real cultural connection for us all."

Connecting to the Larger World: Angel Island Project

This was a year-long project carried out by two teachers, Suzanne McCombs and Chris Ashley, with two groups of fourth and fifth grade students at Melrose Elementary School in Oakland. The instructional programs in which the teachers and students participated included a bilingual curriculum in Spanish and English, primary language support in Cambodian and Vietnamese, and sheltered learning across the curriculum.

The teachers decided to build on a project they had begun the year before: an exploration of immigration through the experience of the Chinese who passed through the immigration station on Angel Island. The teachers began by taking small groups of students for exploratory trips out to the island on weekends. There they met volunteers from the Angel Island Association, who took them under their wing, showing them around the detention center, and sharing their stories and knowledge of history with them. The students developed a personal relationship with the volunteers which grew throughout the year.

As the students became more familiar with the island and its history, they organized themselves into five research teams – history/geography, immigration, environmental studies, oral history, and camping. Their work inside and outside of the classroom included interviews, reading and writing, and math, science, and art activities. Each team explored specific questions and ideas related to their area of research. Other activities revolved around making the connection between the past and the present. The stu-

dents memorized poems (in translation) inscribed on the barracks walls. They interviewed their own family members about personal stories of migration and immigration. They wrote letters and made phone calls to various resources seeking additional information. They wrote daily math story problems relating to all aspects of the project. And they discussed the social and political situations of immigrants in the U.S. today. The project culminated with a three-day camping trip to the island, the creation of a quilt which was presented to the Angel Island Association, and the donation of \$250 which the students raised to support activities at the immigration station.

Although there were no Chinese American students in the class, the unfair treatment of Chinese immigrants at the detention center elicited a deep response from the students, many of whom were immigrants themselves. They wrote poems and stories in English and Spanish adopting the voices of people who were detained on the island and relating the experience to their own lives:

*Instead of remaining a citizen of Africa
I came to America to make a decent living.
But who am I fooling?
The American just took me,
Locked me up.
They kept me
In a cruel, filthy, dark room.
What can I do?
I just keep wondering and wondering
Why do they have me locked up?
Is it because I am black?*

(Jermaine Brown, 5th grade)

*We are the people
From thousand miles,
We are the people
Who mean no harm,
From deep ocean
Through steep mountains rank,
We walk and run
We're looking for and searching for
The beauty of life,
The best quality of life.
Through fearness and sadness
We go,*

*We hope and believe
There is a place
That give us hope,
Give us freedom.
We are the people
We are immigrant
Who come to a place
That's called America.*

(Sophiden Hak, 5th grade)

One of the consequences of this extensive project was the development of new relationships both inside and outside the classroom. The many group experiences outside the classroom allowed teachers and students to get to know one another beyond their classroom personas. The adoption of the students by the island volunteers also deepened the relationship between the students and the volunteers and led to other opportunities such as a display of the students' work at the immigration center, personal tours of the island, and invitations to attend special events and ceremonies at the immigration center. Along the way, too, the teachers and students received encouragement, support, and participation from the principal and other staff at the school, parents, and community organizations.

In describing some of the results of this intensive community experience, the teachers commented:

The community connection helps students become active, engaged learners. Because students do real work for and with real people, work that has a real effect on themselves and others, learning is connected to them in a personal way. Students become teachers and learners, finding out that classrooms aren't the only source for learning. They find that learning is something that you pursue, go out and find wherever it is, whether inside or outside of school.

Connecting to the School Community: Studying American Culture

This project was carried out in an intermediate ESL class of 20 students (9th to 12th grade) at El Molino High School in Forestville. The teacher, Lynn Stewart, wanted to find a way to give her students a better understanding of American culture and provide opportunities for them to have more interactions with the rest of the school. Her idea was to draw on the students and staff of the school and bring them into the ESL curriculum as cultural resources.

In response to the question, "What do you want to know about American culture?" the students listed more than 20 topics, including holidays, football and the presidential election. The teacher then proposed that they invite different people from the school to come to the class and speak on each of the topics. After much discussion, hesitation, journal writing, more discussion, and group decision making, the students decided to conduct interviews and document the sessions through photography, audio recording, and video recording.

The teacher then guided the students to make preparations for each interview. They worked in small groups to brainstorm their questions on each topic and draft letters of invitation. Then the whole class refined the questions and wrote a composite letter of invitation which they personally delivered to the interviewees. In addition to developing the communicative skills which they needed to use in the process – for example, writing invitation and thank you letters, asking questions, building a broad range of vocabulary – the students also learned to operate cameras, tape recorders, and camcorders.

Before each interview, a student team volunteered to conduct the interview, taking on roles such as interviewer, photographer, and recorder. Throughout the year most of the students had an opportunity to participate in all of these roles. After each interview, the class debriefed the session, discussing, asking further questions, and writing new insights about American culture. The students kept journals in which they wrote their feelings about the project, describing their nervousness before interviewing and their pride in a job well done afterwards. They also created a class culture portfolio, an album of photos and written descriptions of each interview which became their learning record for the semester.

Reflecting on the accomplishments of this project, the teacher described several results:

The benefits were incredible. In the past I taught ESL strictly within the confines of the classroom with no chance for the students to use what they learned in real life situations. They progress so slowly when they have no real audience to communicate with. Not only did my students speak more English than ever before through this project, but they learned a lot about American schools, American teenagers, and American culture. After the project I continued to see the ripple effects spreading outward. My students were speaking to other students on campus; the school staff was no longer frightening to them. In fact, four students became itinerant cameramen, videotaping activities in other classrooms at teachers' requests.

Four Qualities of the Community Connection

Despite the differences in language, grade level, and curriculum content, these classroom examples share four qualities that are at the heart of the community connection: (a) a greater variety of resources in language and culture, (b) a broadening of the curriculum, (c) the development of relationships, and (d) a deepening of the quality of learning.

As students are guided to look beyond the teacher and books for their sources of learning, they open themselves up to a wider variety of linguistic and cultural resources in the real world. By exploring through interviews, community artifacts, and lived experiences, students are exposed to authentic forms of language and culture with all their complexities and contradictions. In interactions with the elders of Gum Moon, students had opportunities to deepen their primary language and discover new vocabulary, new concepts, and new perspectives. In cross-language interactions with the El Molino school community, ESL students were able to stretch themselves to the outer limits of their linguistic competence in English because of the communicative importance of the experience.

As the learning frame of reference expands beyond the classroom, the traditional categories of subject areas or disciplines dissolve in favor of a more holistic view. In their explorations of Angel Island, for example, students grappled with complex issues of time, place, legal systems, culture, and human understanding. The resulting poetry, math problems, art work, and interest in current events integrated the issues into a whole and provided a broader context for discovering the interrelated nature of knowledge.

Connections to people are one of the most tangible features of the experience beyond the classroom. The students' development of relationships is central to the community connection and takes many different forms. First and foremost this relationship was reflected in a deepened sense of community among the teachers and students. New connections were also built cross-generationally, as with the residents of Gum Moon or the volunteers on Angel Island; cross-culturally, as with the larger school community at El Molino; and across both culture and time, as with the connection to Chinese immigrants on Angel Island. These relationships are both the vehicle for and the object of learning. The connections with people begin with the students valuing the community as a vital resource and end with the community valuing the students and their work.

Finally, the community connection changes the way teachers and students view the learning process. By looking to the community as their text and engaging in activities without predetermined outcomes, students open themselves to discoveries about the world and themselves which are powerful learning experiences. One of the students in the Melrose class, Josefina

Alvarez, designed and produced on her own an Angel Island ABC Book, which is being considered for publication by the Angel Island Association. This self-initiated project shows what is possible when students are given the freedom to see themselves not as objects but as subjects of their learning and when the products of this learning are recognized and valued by the community.

The four walls of the classroom shut out experiences which can infuse the curriculum with life and give it a deeper purpose. The community connection breaks through the walls and brings new resources and perspectives to bear on the needs and interests of a diverse student population. ■

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