**Indigenous Persons Study**

**Make This a School Days “ON” Focus Middle School and Beyond**

By Dr. Rose Reissman

As our national school day calendars become more responsive to awareness and to study of multiple cultures that are reflected in our American society, more school districts are designating “days off” in commemoration of these cultures. While that is certainly a “gift” to many students and perhaps to be honest a few educators as well, how much more of a “gift” would be these designated days off were they accompanied by “days on” study in school?

But given a set curriculum and very specific literacy deficits plus limited grade level “accurate” resources, many teachers in middle school, argue that they have few freely accessible authentic validated resources to teach this material and even more important many have no students representing these cultures actually enrolled in their classrooms to resonate through their own home cultures the values taught. What to do? Just acknowledge a “day off” or even post a sign celebrating a “designated month” but not “teach” it in the already packed curriculum calendar?

In particular, for me, a literacy support in a very diverse – over 60 different ethnic groups – Brooklyn Kensington Ditmas IS 62, it has been a challenge to teach actively and authentically indigenous studies. That challenge is intensified by the fact that even with over 60 diverse cultures enrolled at our school, none of them were indigenous or if they were aware of that culture.

I and my two colleagues (a Social Studies and an English Language Arts teacher) decided to develop a unit with authentic literature written by Indigenous authors, a Social Studies, a module on the Code Talkers and updated Indigenous culture news story perspectives.

First, we used two pieces from Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for kids (edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith-an actual enrolled tribe member). Each of these pieces written by “real” indigenous affirming authors focused on the Powwow. Ms. Xavier and I felt that this arts and dance event as featured in both a poem “Powwow” (Kim Rogers) and the story “Fancy Dancer” (Monique Gray Smith) was an excellent anchor study for Indigenous culture. To make certain to connect it authentically with the lives of our highly diverse students, we asked them to share their experiences as 6th graders who had attended family events that celebrated rites of passage or holidays. They shared events and “moves” (dances) from various celebrations along with the specific foods, songs, traditions, and dress that they had experienced in that context. From these personal conversations and connections, we moved the students to an analysis of how the Powwow indigenous celebration described in the poem and the story resonated with their own cultural experiences and differed from their own experiences. Students were facilitated to identify through close printed text analysis and discussion the values explicitly stated in both pieces which were “indigenous” to the Powwow. Among the values which they identified were: respect, resilience, love of ancestors, hope, culture, family, strength and love of tribal music/dance as an expression of that culture. The story also emphasized the importance of a middle school aged peer happily affirming his tribal mother’s culture by “learning” the moves, regalia and steps to be “a fancy dancer” as opposed to negating his indigenous background by not “learning” how to dance.

From this literary text focus, we (including 7th grade Social Studies teacher-Mr. Carideo) moved with the use of the Who Were Navajo Code Talkers?(James Buckley, 2019), to consider actual documented key Navajo contributions which made the strengths of indigenous culture and its language come live for students. While we did have access to the well written and concise Buckley book, we felt how better for students to learn about this key Navajo World War two contribution to the Iwo Jima victory than to hear about the way the Navajo language helped develop an exclusively Navajo code talker tool for American military victory, than from the Navajo Code talkers themselves? We used oral histories spoken by the actual Iwo Jima Navajo code talkers themselves recorded decades after their crucial success –

<https://youtu.be/QmiqnAQTTCI>.

– recorded by the US Department of Veteran Affairs. Before the recording we gave the students the following focus questions:

What was the time it took to send the code message in Navajo Code?

How long would the message have taken in English?

What is the quote or comment made by the Navajo Code Talker which reveals his feelings about what we all need to do for our country now – Navajos and all Americans?

Tell why you agree with him or explain why you disagree?

Then we shared the comments of Thomas H. Begay also recorded by the United States Department of Veteran Affairs as an oral history.

We focused student attention on the video by using these questions:

<https://youtu.be/iaqz-QdHjPE>

What was the training required for being on the code talker team?

In what ways did Mr. Begay as a member of this team, although he and others were specially protected by the marines so they could serve?

Despite this protection, Mr. Begay says that he suffered tremendously. Explain why he suffered.

Do any of you have relatives who have served in this country or in other countries and have returned to your family after war?

In what ways have they also “suffered” even if they did return home alive after the war?

As follow-up students were able to expand and share these videos with family. They were encouraged to get family reactions to the experiences shared and also encouraged to get family reaction to the general ideas about the price of battle expressed in the videos.

From this print to video exploration, we provided an arts expression opportunity by using butcher paper and allowing our students to divide into groups to develop Indigenous Studies banners. We also photocopied the Navajo code images that were in the Who Were the Navajo Code Talkers book for them to use as potential inspirations if they chose.

To end the unit, we updated to contemporary Indigenous person issues, beyond securing a day on a school calendar or a month theme slot. We looked at a sports-based issue many indigenous advocates were upset by. That meant the using of Indians or tomahawks or tribally associated terms such as chief in sports logos or team names. We looked at the Cleveland Guardians – <https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/31868331/cleveland-changing-name-indians-guardians> – once the Cleveland Indians and the Kansas City Chiefs who removed Captain Wahoo but would not change their name: <https://www.npr.org/2021/07/27/1021373125/kansas-city-chiefs-removed-their-offensive-mascot-but-have-no-plans-change-na>. Students read and analyzed the pro and con arguments behind the Cleveland team name change as well as the resistance of the Kansas City Chiefs to changing their team names. They also looked at the actual Chief Wahoo logo: <https://g.co/kgs/5o8wCp>. They analyzed whether in the context of indigenous cultural awareness, the ongoing use of this as a mascot was indeed offensive to actual indigenous persons and to all seeking to genuinely study cultures. Of course, the students were not all in agreement, but they did grasp the various perspectives of this complex issue.

At the conclusion of this module of study in sixth grade Ela and 7th grade Social Studies classes, students were asked a question which certainly rang true for their futures as not only diverse student citizens in NYC, but also as citizens learning more and more about cultures as they grow in a global world: Should we pause to study cultures and their values which are not reflected in our school or community population at the point of study? Most students cited the excitement of learning about a range of cultures so that as they travelled beyond their current community, they would have at least a start familiarity with the culture. Many expressed a joy in learning about and comparing many unfamiliar cultures with their local ones.

They also expressed excitement at having the opportunity to create a shared group banner with their project and the chance to see how the issues they were studying actually translated into news stories currently discussed in the local media. Ironically the NYS education department as of late November 2022, required that schools under its jurisdiction change Native American Mascots by the following school year <https://www.mytwintiers.com/news-cat/nys-education-department-requiring-schools-change-native-american-mascots/>. Unlike many adult citizens, the students who had experienced this module of study understood the issues and concerns involved from multiple perspectives.

During this Indigenous studies module of experiences, students had also authentically enhanced their close print text analytic, interpretative, and argument writing skills. They had worked with visual documents and created their own which they reflected on in artist statements. They had weighed in as diverse citizens themselves on debated cultural issues. They had critically viewed digital oral histories and actually followed online news breaking stories which focused on indigenous concerns. So, in this focus on the calendar designated Indigenous Persons day and the theme of Indigenous Persons November Month, middle school students got a multiple fiction and nonfiction, page, digital and arts introduction to the complex and ongoing concerns of Indigenous persons without sacrificing skills instruction. Rather than experiencing a “blank” day off from study association with Indigenous persons, they became part of the ongoing dynamic of celebrating and studying Indigenous values and issues. Instead of using sanctioned public holidays and months as band aid salutes to multiple cultures with school signs or nods in the calendar, let us take time to really plunge into these cultures so students in their present as young citizens and futures as global change advocates will begin to be cognizant of what these “celebrated” cultures represent.

Every diverse student and teacher will be the more knowledgeable and caring citizen for this module and others like it.

**Resources:**

James Buckley, Jr. (2019), Who were the Navajo Code Talkers. New York: Penguin.

Cynthia Leitich Smith (2021), Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories for kids. New York: Harper Collins.

**Other Video Resources:**

Navajo Code Talkers WWII Legacy to be Immortalized in New Museum.

<https://youtu.be/am1BYQ3Y_bg>