Indigenous Persons Holiday designations- Make this study a class designation as well!

More school districts are designating “days off” in commemoration of Indigenous persons. Should these days off be complemented by middle school and beyond “days on” learning? Many teachers in middle school, argue that they have few freely authentic validated resources to teach this. More important many have no indigenous enrolled. If that is student population demographic, why take time to teach about indigenous persons?

In particular, for me, a literacy support in a very diverse- Brooklyn Kensington public school, Ditmas IS 62, it has been a challenge to teach indigenous studies. None of our 900 plus students are listed as indigenous.

Despite this lack of indigenous students on the register, 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 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 authors focused on the Powwow. We felt that this cultural event as featured in both a poem “Powwow” (Kim Rogers) and the story “Fancy Dancer” (Monique Gray Smith) was an anchor study for Indigenous culture. We started by asking students to share experiences as 6th graders who had attended family events, rites of passage or holidays celebrations. They shared events from various celebrations along with the specific foods, songs, traditions, and dress in that context. Then we shifted students to an analysis of how the Powwow indigenous celebration described in the poem and the story resonated and differed from their own cultural experiences. Students were facilitated to identify through close printed text analysis the values explicitly stated which were “indigenous.” Among values which they identified were: respect, resilience, ancestor pride, hope, culture, family, strength and love of tribal music/dance. The story also emphasized the importance of a middle school aged peer affirming his tribal mother’s culture by “learning” the steps to be “a fancy dancer” as opposed to negating his indigenous background.

Next, we moved to the book Who Were Navajo Code Talkers?, to consider actual documented key Navajo contributions used during World War II. We felt oral history videos offered the most “real, live” way for students to learn about code talkers. We used oral histories spoken by the actual Iwo Jima Navajo code talkers themselves recorded decades after the war. –

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

Focus questions for the viewing were:

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 comment made by the speaker which states what all of us need to do?

Then they listened to Thomas H. Begay’s 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 suffer, despite being specially protected?

From this 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. The Navajo code language pages that were in the Navajo Code Talkers book for them to use were photocopied for students to use.

To end the module, we looked at a sports based indigenous issue. That meant the using of Indians tribally associated terms such as chief in sports logos/team names. We looked at the Cleveland Guardians <https://www.espn.com/mlb/story/_/id/31868331/cleveland-changing-name-indians-guardians>

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 name. They examined the Chief Wahoo logo <https://g.co/kgs/5o8wCp>. They analyzed debated if ongoing use of this mascot was offensive to actual indigenous persons.

At the conclusion of this module, students were asked a question: Should we study cultures not represented at our school? 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/>.

During this module, students had authentically enhanced close print text analytic, interpretative, and argument writing skills. They interpreted visual documents and created their own. They had weighed in on cultural issues. They screened digital oral histories and actually followed online news breaking stories. So in this focus on the October Indigenous Persons day and Indigenous Persons November Month, students got a multiple text range, page, digital and arts introduction to concerns of Indigenous persons. Instead rather than experiencing a “blank” day off for Indigenous persons, they studied their concerns. Let us take time to initiate indigenous study, so students will begin to be cognizant of what these “celebrated” with day off or month theme, cultures represent.

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>