

December 2020

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Recommended Citation

Nix-Stevenson, D., Shelton, L., & Smith, J. (2020). Fighting Back Against Anti-Asian Xenophobia: Addressing Global Issues in a Distance Learning Classroom. *Middle Grades Review*, 6(3). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol6/iss3/7>

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Fighting Back Against Anti-Asian Xenophobia: Addressing Global Issues in a Distance Learning Classroom

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Abstract

This practitioner essay will outline a project designed by a team of three critical educators at The Experiential School of Greensboro (TESG), a new grassroots charter school in Greensboro, North Carolina. In this essay, we will describe the social context of TESG, discuss how we built towards addressing complicated topics related to systemic racism, and outline the ways we addressed anti-Asian racism and xenophobia in a remote learning context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Educational Context

The Experiential School of Greensboro (TESG) focuses on experiential education and design-based learning by integrating social justice content across the curriculum. These pillars allow teachers and students to investigate relevant problems in their community and address them through social action, encouraging a range of civic engagement from students, families, and community members. TESG's K-8 and multi-age classroom arrangement allows students continuity of school culture so by the time they leave for high school, they are confident global citizens and solutionaries for their world (Crawford et al., 2015). The school houses roughly 360 students and is ethnically diverse. The student demographics are as follows: 11% Latinx, 30% Black/African American, 3% Asian, 1% American Indian, 51% white, and 5% report more than one racial identity. With most students reporting as middle class, 34% of the student population receives free or reduced lunch.

Experiential education invites our students to reflect on their learning in order to apply it elsewhere. The “do, reflect, apply” model allows students to connect their learning to their world (Spencer & Juliani, 2016). Coupling Experiential Education with Design-Based Thinking requires students to give their work an authentic audience so they can help shape their community. Our focus on Design-Based Thinking is twofold because we see ourselves as instructional designers (Kilbane & Milman, 2014) that create and adapt curricula with our students' needs in mind; and our students participate in the design process by engaging in

relevant content and develop solutions for an authentic audience. Both design processes require consistent reflection and drawing purposeful connections across content areas for salient moments of integration.

By participating in ongoing professional development in design-based learning with our grade level team developed a shared understanding of the principles of design using John Spencer's LAUNCH Cycle and reading *Launch: Using Design Thinking to Boost Creativity and Bring Out the Maker in Every Student* (Spencer & Juliani, 2016). As a result, we went through the steps outlined in the acronym LAUNCH: “Look” (observe), “Ask questions,” “Understand the problem,” “Navigate ideas,” “Create a prototype, and “Highlight and fix” (Spencer, 2019) to design solutions for our classrooms. Taking a deeper dive into the LAUNCH Cycle as teachers and instructional designers helped us develop strategies for integrating design-based thinking with our students. For example, we embedded opportunities for students to continually observe the world around them and collect information to understand problems that they notice in society. Additionally, our fifth and sixth grade students continually engaged in maker and art projects as prototypes to represent their learning.

As students craft solutions for their audience, Teaching Tolerance's social justice standards are woven into content to integrate social movements and civic action into the curriculum (Teaching Tolerance, 2016). Teachers use design principles to develop units and learning experiences based on current events and the

student population. The civic engagement-based framework allows teachers and students to be culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and culturally sustaining (Paris & Alim, 2017) in their approach to the curriculum. This approach to teaching and learning is particularly important given the recent attack on racial topics being addressed in schools by the current political administration (Balingit & Meckler, 2020). As we integrate social justice across the content areas, we also encourage students to be critical of historical power structures that have created inequities. This helps shift students from feeling sorry for disadvantaged populations to learning the root of inequalities so that they can help create a more just society (Mikander, 2016).

Social Justice throughout the Year

We cover a wide range of social justice topics and our students are skilled knowledgeable activists. The students at The Experiential School of Greensboro were prepared to handle difficult conversations about race and bias because of their previous social justice work. TESG imbeds social justice learning into all that we do, and is a core tenet of our school philosophy (Crenshaw, 2017; Teaching Tolerance, 2016). See the reference section for relevant lessons and articles (Fine, n.d., Gendered Beliefs, n.d.; Morris, 2016; Mulholland, n.d.; Picturing Accessibility, n.d.).

During the 2019-2020 school year, students learned about and participated in a variety of social justice centered activities and lessons. Early in the year, our focus was on climate science. Students researched climate change and eco-activism. They participated in The Global Climate Strike (Taneja, n.d.) through protest art and a march, as well as creating performance events, books and teaching materials for other students and our community. In the fall, all learners participated during Ally Week, as part of our ongoing conversations about LGBTQ++ issues and intersectionality (Identity Lesson Grades 3-5; LGBTQ History Timeline Lesson). Students engaged in reading and discussions around identity and allyship, and developed research projects and essays around the history of LGBTQ++ leaders and history in our country. Instead of observing Columbus Day, students debunked the Columbus myth and focused on Indigenous People's Week (Bigelow & Peterson, 2003). Students researched

different groups of indigenous people, their history, and their contributions to our culture.

As we moved through the year, we continued to explore intersectionality and focus on social justice content. We completed a unit on disability justice, viewing the life and work of Frida Khalo through that lens. In leading up to what is often taught as Black History Month, we deeply explored the experience of African Americans in the US from initial enslavement through current times and the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM at School, 2020). We did this work to shift our thinking from just looking at historical perspectives to looking toward the future with a study of Afrofuturism. Students explored many forms of media, including visual and musical artists, writers and scholars as they studied this topic. They wrote about what Afrofuturism meant to them and created art pieces of their own to further display their thinking. These topics represent just a few of the ways that we prepared our students to view the world through a social justice lens.

Addressing Student Anxiety in the Pandemic

Once the pandemic quickly spread in March, 2020 and new changes were implemented daily; we began to see anxiety, misinformation, and xenophobia in our world and classrooms (Tavernese & Oppell, 2020). The teaching team saw a need to address these growing concerns with our students. We immediately started planning lessons on Chinese History, Chinese immigration to the United States, xenophobia, and disease spread. We started with educating students about Chinese culture to combat xenophobia. Immigration into the US showed our students that there are some deep-rooted misconceptions about Chinese people. It was important for us to show that anti-Chinese sentiment is not a new, but an antiquated issue stemming from another time in our history. Disease spread really hit home with our students. Easing the student's anxieties about getting COVID-19 was a necessity. We fought their fear and anxiety with knowledge.

As we shifted to remote learning, we had to reframe what anti-racist and liberatory education looks like in a digital schooling environment where knowledge is no longer co-constructed in the classroom, but students are suddenly required to be self-directed and their discussions are with family members instead.

With these concerns in mind, we began to craft a list of what we want students to learn from the project and we made sure to consider what these experiences would look like as family members support their children through online learning. This process began by identifying four big themes within the project: shifts in government, disease spread, immigration flow, and understanding U.S. attitudes towards Asian Americans. Then we took these four themes and curated resources that we felt addressed them and devised a timeline for how we would assign the readings and documentaries. The project was designed to culminate in a final piece of artwork that the students would create to showcase their learning through inquiry.

Delving into these ideas taught students how to learn about history and our world more critically and with more depth and gave them the capacity to be thoughtful and empathetic as we moved to the Asian American experience in this country. The whole of these experiences created a platform that our students could stand upon as they began the conversation about anti-Asian sentiment in the time of COVID-19, as well as the historical context of these sentiments, as well as the overall journey of Chinese Americans in the US. It also gave students an opportunity to move from being merely learners to advocates for social justice in their homes. Students would repeat, reflect and discuss these concepts at home with their families. This intergenerational transfer was something that we received feedback from time and time again, solidifying that the messages and purpose of our teaching was not being lost.

Teaching about Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia in Distance Learning

Since this unit was executed during Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month and at a time when people of Asian descent were being unfairly targeted by rising hate and racism, xenophobia, in recent months due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it offered a reimagined (Frierie, 1972) anti-racist teaching moment for our students to grapple with the historical and contemporary ways that Asian American identity has been stereotyped and depicted in racially unjust ways. Therefore, in establishing the learning goals for this unit, we chose texts, such as the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) Documentary Asian Americans, to foreground the Anti-Asian racism in the US as not beginning with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Therefore, amid the racialized rhetoric surrounding COVID-19, this unit aimed to simultaneously lift up Asian American identity as one that is woven into the fabric of American history that can be critically examined through multiple texts and perspectives from an anti-racist lens while offering students multiple learning opportunities debunking stereotypes and pathologizing mythologies. Our goal for this integrated social studies unit was for students to understand the historical context of the xenophobic rhetoric related to the current pandemic and offer solutions for them to counter racist tropes.

When teaching this way, centering Teaching Tolerance social justice standards, integrating multiple media sources, and working collaboratively, it is imperative to seize the opportunity to offer students learning opportunities to dispel xenophobic rhetoric and position themselves as solutionaries. If this is not the learning goal or outcome, then rampant ignorance and misinformation about the novel coronavirus, experts say, will persist in racist and xenophobic attacks against fellow Americans or anyone in the US who looks East Asian. Deciding whether to be an upstander or act when a racist attack or tirade is witnessed is a deeply personal choice. Without a doubt, choosing to look away is to be complicit with historical anti-Asian racism, often referred to as Yellow Peril. The resources that we used describe the ways Yellow Peril sentiment fueled many anti-Asian U.S. initiatives, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the Gentleman's Agreement, and the Cable Act. The most important thing to note is that Yellow Peril sentiment reduces Asians to always being foreign, never considered American (Thanh Nguyen, 2020).

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been clear in explaining why the official name for the novel coronavirus is COVID-19 and not the "China Virus" or "Kung Flu" as President Donald Trump and those in his administration have referred to it. WHO wants to avoid the stigmatization that has happened in the past when diseases have been affiliated with geographic regions or ethnicities. Though the virus may have first originated in Wuhan, China, it has become a global pandemic. And as the WHO and many other organizations have noted, to mis-name the virus and call it by its point of origin engages in racist practices of blaming a region and by extension a group of people with

this disease. When government officials and private citizens insist on calling it “Chinese Virus” because the 1918 flu pandemic was referred to as the “Spanish Flu,” this reinforces the problem with using “Chinese Virus” since the 1918 flu pandemic did not originate in Spain, so the logic does not hold up. And when people say it is not racist to say that the virus originated in China, that would be true if we lived in a world in which systemic racism was not still an issue and anti-Asian racism did not still persist. Using the phrase “Chinese Virus” is done deliberately to blame a country and people whom others continue to associate with disease and filth and where Chinese Americans and Asian Americans by extension are still seen as foreign. Since the spread of COVID-19, anti-Chinese and anti-Asian harassment globally has been on the rise (Lee, 2020). In the US, incidents of anti-Asian racism have resulted in Asian Americans more frequently sharing stories of harassment, prejudice, and racism (Woodruff, 2020). As an illustration, the New York state attorney general created a special hotline for people to report anti-Asian harassment (James, 2020). Asian American scholars have created a website for people to report incidents of anti-Asian harassment (Mullis & Glenn, 2020). Mainstream news outlets have consistently reported on anti-Asian harassment connected with COVID-19.

This xenophobic moment in human history provides an unprecedented moment in global education for students to learn about the connection of anti-Asian racism with anti-Black racism and with white supremacy. The current rise of anti-Asian racism feels new, but is not new – the ferocity/violence is a resurgence of anti-Asian racism that emerges when the US is under “threat” (ex: WWII, Cold War, Viet Nam, 9/11) (Rogin, 2020). Anti-Asian racism is not the same as anti-Black racism; however, what both forms of racism share are: (1) They are both subject to and are in service of white supremacy; (2) They are both systemic – it is not about individual people being racist – it is about the systems and institutions in the US that create conditions where Asians are seen as foreign and Black people are not granted basic humanity and rights; (3) If you are learning about anti-Asian racism for the first time, and especially if you identify as Asian American, then you must recognize the ways in which being against anti-Asian racism means you must also fight anti-Black racism.

Practical Suggestions for Teaching

Experiential education and design-based learning by integrating social justice content across the curriculum is needed now more than ever in the face of the Trump Administration’s 1776 Commission (Trump, 2020). Preparing students to be critically engaged global citizens will help counter xenophobia and white supremacy. As children lead the charge into their homes and communities, they offer a space for critical hope and social change (Boler, 2004). For teachers to engage in experiential education and design-based learning by integrating social justice content across the curriculum, teachers must be willing to use students’ prior knowledge to guide their teaching. This means learning about the lived experiences of the children who we teach and connecting those experiences to learning. K-12 teachers can engage this excavation process by taking a student interest inventory at the outset of a unit. Redlinger (2017) suggests that interest inventories provide a unit launching point for teachers to integrate students’ interest into what they are learning. This has shown correlation with increased student interest, participation, and performance in their subject matter. Since our students were learning in a distance format brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and reporting in their daily synchronous morning meeting (homeroom) sessions that they were hearing about anti-Asian racist rhetoric spurred by coronavirus during Asian, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, we seized upon this opportunity as a teachable moment. Further, throughout the unit, we frequently invited our students to share their emotions and feelings about anything and everything happening in their world (their city, school, neighborhood, family).

In order to execute the unit, we divided the unit into three parts: (1) immigration flow, (2) U.S. attitudes, and (3) shifts in government and suggest that other teachers do the same. In order to ensure student’s access to a uniform set of information, we primarily used two text sets, curated Newsela articles and the PBS Documentary Asian Americans. These text sets helped to contextualize students’ background knowledge. The at hand content of this unit, living and learning during a pandemic, and the student’s newly acquired background knowledge, offered our students many journaling opportunities. Since writing is thinking, teachers should anticipate, offering

students multiple opportunities to journal and then share with each other and their teachers.

In conclusion, as critical educators, we recognize that “no one shoe size fits all approach” exists to serve all teachers who wish to teach using the framework of students’ lived experiences. However, we are in full agreement that teaching should be culturally responsive (Gay, 2018) and tap into students’ funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1995). Lisa Delpit (2014) showed that students’ learning benefits from seeing a connection between learning and their lived experiences when teachers create routine situations where students’ lives are brought into the learning and connections are made between the stories that they share and the content being learned. This was our hope when conceptualizing the unit “Teaching about Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia in Distance Learning.” Facilitating the lesson from this framework opened the door for us to explore what Moll et al. refer to as funds of knowledge or skills and knowledge acquired by individuals through cultural and historical interactions that are fundamental for thriving within their community. Like Moll et al., we believe that when teachers use funds of knowledge to validate students’ identities as knowledgeable individuals who can use such knowledge as a foundation for future learning, the types and kind of integrated learning opportunities that can happen face to face or remotely is limitless.

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