HARLEM: TEACHING THE HISTORY OF HOME

By Sharon Fitzgerald

This paper was written for a graduate course in education taken at Fordham University, Teaching Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children*. The assignment was to describe a U.S. history lesson prepared for students with reading difficulties; emphasis was to be placed on the strategies used to develop students' background knowledge and vocabulary, and on strengthening comprehension of content-based materials. The instructional unit outlined below was interdisciplinary (Art, Social Studies and English Language Arts), it was brought to life by my Special Education students at I.S. 195.*

It took a few months to lay the groundwork for my instructional unit on Harlem. Although the history and culture of the community is celebrated throughout the world, the details and importance of this past were unfamiliar to my seventh grade students. They all had watched the double-decker buses overflowing with sightseers, the parade of walking tours, and the cavalcade of newcomers moving into the neighborhood, but they had not matched identities or legacies with the names on street signs and landmark institutions.

The assigned history text devoted a section to the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. When I asked the class if they knew the meaning of the word "renaissance," they declined to answer. We pulled out the dictionary, planted the definition "rebirth" on the wall, and began to consider the inception of the Harlem community and the dynamics of African Americans' migration from southern states to New York.

To intersect the past and the present, I excerpted James Baldwin's essay "The Harlem Ghetto." I created a worksheet of questions and a graphic organizer that asked students to compare Mr. Baldwin's perceptions of Harlem with the community they recognize and inhabit. The essay was a bit difficult for independent reading and so I approached this material as a shared reading followed by a classroom discussion.

The response was startling. Relating Mr. Baldwin's impressions to their own viewpoints was an assignment the students relished. They especially enjoyed unmasking the term "ghetto," a noun and an adjective they embrace with pride. They identified landmarks described by the author as places they knew or took for granted. Excitedly, they began to realize their community's origins.

We discussed the term "migration"—the causes and destinations, as well as the impact of relocation upon social, economic, and political developments. We compiled (and committed to chart paper) a list of universal human needs. Food, shelter, jobs, medicine, and education were among the necessities identified. We read "The Great Migration," the narrative written by artist Jacob Lawrence to propel his epic paintings.

I asked the students to interview older relatives to discover when their families moved to New York (or to the United States from Puerto Rico). To encourage them to personalize what they learned, the students were asked to imagine that they were the person making the journey and to create a primary resource document (either a letter or a diary entry) that described life in their new home.

[When I teach this unit in the future, I will begin by providing students with a journal/diary/scrapbook/learning log in which creative entries, clippings, personal observations and responses (artistic, critical, or literary) can be assembled. There would be a section in the back of the book for class notes, formal assignments, and quizzes. This portfolio would be an important element in assessing each student's understanding and progress; its success would be one of the factors that determine a student's grade.]

To fortify the students' comprehension, I showed documentaries about Harlem's history during several Social Studies classes. A PBS film on Harlem Renaissance artists described both the creative explosion that occurred and the bond that existed between artists and the community. Biographical films were shown that described the lives of Harlem residents Romare Bearden, Jackie Robinson, and Madame C. J. Walker. Critique sheets were distributed upon which students recorded what they learned and shared their responses.

Art catalogs and photography books (from my personal library) were loaned to the class to help bring Harlem's countenances and locations into clear relief. To expand the students' knowledge of research materials, in one lesson they were given copies of the *Chicago Defender* obituary of Madame C. J. Walker and asked to create a chronicle of her life based on what they read.

The ELA curriculum's poetry unit meshed beautifully. The beloved author and poet Langston Hughes dedicated some of his best-known verse to Harlem. The students read and analyzed three of his poems—*Harlem (2), Dreams,* and *I Dream a World*—answered questions on a worksheet and wrote their own poems to echo Hughes' themes.

One of the students had selected Mr. Hughes as the subject of her final project. She searched the Internet, found and printed a biographical sketch. I copied this entry for the other students, read it to them at the start of a Social Studies lesson, distributed highlighters, and had the class accent the information they thought was most significant. In one mini-lesson I explained the differences between a chronology and a timeline and had the students organize key biographical information before creating a timeline of Langston Hughes' life.

The final class project—a scrapbook entitled *Harlem: The Freedom to Create a Community*—was developed during both ELA and Social Studies periods. Some students prepared reports on Harlem leaders Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Jackie Robinson, Augusta Savage, and Madame C. J. Walker. The students' "Dream Poems" were placed in a special section honoring Langston Hughes. One student drew a detailed map of Harlem, another created a collage (an ode to Romare Bearden) featuring public housing.

Yet another student astonished the class with photographs taken of Harlem landmarks. Using a disposable camera, this quiet young man composed nearly perfect images, although he only shot one frame of each site! The photos (laid out by the student on a two-page spread) presented a virtual walking (or biking) tour of Harlem—from Abyssinian Baptist Church, Harlem Hospital, the Hotel Theresa, the Harlem YMCA, and the new Magic Johnson Theater.

At first I intended to have the project bound at a copy center, but as it neared completion I became unwilling to treat the material brusquely. Now I plan to entrust the over-sized pages to a friend (an artist and art designer) who creates handmade books as a hobby. Since it seems that I will be assigned many of the same students next year, I plan to invite my friend to visit the class, talk about bookmaking, and bind the scrapbook with the students' assistance. A book party certainly will be called for. I also would like to have the pages scanned so that each student can receive a copy of the project on a CD.

I intend to expand the research instruction by taking students to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. This excursion would allow them to practice library etiquette and to experience research as a process of discovery informed by written material, art and artifacts, photography and prints, film and audio recordings.

The reading and writing processes were carefully disguised during this unit. Students enjoyed searching books and the Internet to find information and images that would enhance their work. The maps and photographs exhibited around our windowless classroom created a sense of intimacy, of shared purpose, of a work-in-progress. And upon revisiting the history text, my students were able to understand its description of the Harlem Renaissance and also to associate this awakening with other changes that occurred in the country.

Because my Special Education students have difficulty reading, this project's interdisciplinary, multi-media approach helped them to remain focused for an extended period of time. (Their peers marveled when my students lingered in the classroom working at the end of the day.) Reading comprehension improved because the students were interested in learning about the subject and forgot to worry about decoding. And, for once, I enjoyed running from one side of the room to another. Each step brought me closer to helping my students appreciate their birthplace and to accomplish a new goal.

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