

Overview

My project plan will be based on a literature study of *Hana's Suitcase*. The project will consist of five separate activities. The activities will intertwine with each other to help build understanding and empathy within the classroom community.

Context

- grade 5/6 multi-age classroom

Objectives

The purpose of my project is to help build a more inclusive classroom community. Generally, many of the students have grown up together since they were in nursery. However, there are many families who have settled into the area with older children. Thus, this project will help bridge the stories of the newer families with the stories of the established community. The project will also help serve to introduce my students to the social studies curriculum, where they are required to learn about World War II (WWII).

There are several objectives to my project. Through the use of *Hana's Suitcase*, the students will learn the reading comprehension strategies of making connections to the text, visualization, and questioning to help them analyze the meaning of the text. The second objective is to teach students about self-reflection and why it is important. The third objective is to have students realize the factors that give people their identity. The final objective is to empower students, and give them hope that there is a better way to solving conflicts besides war.

Rationale

To meet the objectives of the project, I have designed the activities to be hands-on, interactive, and reliant on personal experiences. Through the use of storytelling, I hope to give my students a chance to share their experiences with the other students in the class. There are so many factors that make one's identity, and for the students to understand that we are a community, they need to realize that each one of us is connected in some way. Also, the students have to develop an appreciation of differences. As Mara Sapon-Shevin (1999) suggests, if we are not taught about our differences then those factors that make us different become our source of fear, thus leading to exclusion and eventual conflict.

Storytelling is such a powerful tool in building community. It is also easy to implement into the classroom because "it is easily organized, accessible, and able to take many forms, and it provides for a collaborative process of meaning making and relationship building" (Senehi & Byrne, 2006, p.236), fostering mutual respect. The setup of storytelling, with a student as the storyteller sharing his/her story

to his/her peers, bodes well to what middle years students need. Through my teaching experience, children are more likely to remember a lesson if they discover the information themselves and if they are given the chance to learn from their peers.

At the beginning of the school year, many of my students have not been given much time to self-reflect and to have dialogue with each other, thus a connection has not yet been established. According to Senehi and Byrne (2006), for young people to form their self identity, they “must come to terms with and make sense of their experiences and the wider political context and where they fit into it” (p.240). Thus, this project will act as my students introduction to each other and build their understanding and appreciation of the different identities inside the classroom.

The critical component of this project, to help build our classroom community, is the suitcase that the students will fill to tell their stories. The suitcase acts as the metaphor of each student’s individuality. The inside will be filled with objects that tell their own personal stories because each object is to be linked to the different factors of a person’s identity. Alas, through the sharing of their stories, the students will be able to gain a better understanding of each other’s experiences. Also, the students will be able to find commonalities between themselves and the classroom community, allowing them to understand how they fit amongst each other, and creating the sense of safety and belonging.

This project plan is significant to community and peace building because it empowers the students. For there to be change in the world, children need to have a voice, and for them to succeed they need to have hope that there is a solution to the problem (Helsing, Kirlic, McMaster & Sonnenschein, 2006; Nordstrom, 2006). The students that will be undertaking this project will learn about how conflict affects children’s lives. Through self-reflection, they will be able to understand who they are in relation to the greater community, and that the children they have heard in *Hana’s Suitcase* and *Three Wishes* are children just like them. The project is taken one step further by getting the students to make three wishes for the future, giving them the sense that there is hope and that they can influence further world events.

Project Plan

Activity #1: Hana’s Suitcase Read Aloud

Hana’s Suitcase by Karen Levine will be shared with the class as a read aloud. The book is broken up into several chapters that happen during two different periods to time. Each day, the students will be listening to the events that unfold to tell what Hana had gone through during WWII. After each reading, the students will be guided to have meaningful discussions about what they have heard to help them understand what is happening in the story.

The first comprehension strategy the students will learn will be making text-to-self connections. There are many events in the story that relate to the daily lives of the students. These events will be flushed out and brought about during whole-class discussions. The students will be asked to reflect on the events and talk about how those events relate to their lives. The events that the students will be reflecting upon will include: a time when they were separated from their parents, what do they want to be when they grow up, has there been an object that has aroused your curiosity, and talk about a time when you felt excluded.

Next, the students will be guided into making text-to-world connections. There are events in the story that relate to many current events. Again, through whole class discussions, the students will be talking about the events that Hana experiences during the war. Once the students have brainstormed all of the events, they will be sent home to watch the evening news, read the newspaper, listen to the radio, and/or look for current news stories from the internet with their families. As they search through the different media source, they will need to look for current events where conflict and war is involved. As they are observing the news information they will be instructed to discuss and jot down the events that are similar to the events that Hana experienced and observed in the story.

The next day, through small group work, the students will have a discussion about their findings. Through their discussions, the students will be asked to write, on chart paper, the current event they observed in one column. In the other column they will be instructed to write what event(s) in the book are similar to each particular current event they have listed. Once the groups are finished, they will present their findings to the class.

The next reading strategy will have students making visualizations about the story. While the story is being read, the students will be instructed to draw a map of what they are seeing. This will give them a chance to lay out the landscape of what Hana had to observe during WWII. The students will also be given time to make a collage of all the images that are being brought about in their minds. Once the students are finished with all of their visualizations, their work will be displayed and the students will do a gallery walk. Through the gallery walk, the students will do nothing but observe each other's work. Once they are finished, the students will have a discussion about the different images that they have seen.

The final reading strategy that the students will be introduced to will be questioning. At the end of each reading, and before any class discussions, the students will be asked if there is anything that they are wondering about. The students will be encouraged to ask questions about the reading or if there is any information that needs more clarification. All of the questions will then be gathered, and will be addressed at the end of the project to help guide their three wishes.

Activity #2: Personal Timeline

Once the book has been read, the students will be guided to look at the structure of the text. The book is broken down by certain points in time and places. Using this format, the students will be asked to talk about timelines and the kind of information that they tell us. As a class, we will create a timeline for Hana's suitcase that tells her story. This activity will also be used to help develop their summarizing skills.

Next, the students will be instructed to make personal timelines. Through a class brainstorming session, the students will learn about important and memorable events that have happened in their lives. Once the students have a list of their different experiences, they will be ready to organize them in the format of a timeline. Using the shape of a tree, the students will delineate the years that have been significant to their lives and write their experiences.

After giving the students a chance to decorate their timelines, it will be put away in a safe place because it will later be used to extend the project.

Activity #3: Factors of Identity

To help students realize the factors that make one's identity, they will be guided to look at the identity of an outside character. As a whole class discussion, the students will be asked to describe Hana. Some key identifiers should include: Jewish, a girl, has a family, age, level of education, some physical characteristics, hopes and dreams, and fears. If students are having trouble describing her, then other stories of children in conflict should be shared. To help facilitate with time, picture books would be the best option. Some books to read aloud and discuss can include *Brothers in Hope* and *A Song for Cambodia*.

Next, all of the students will be separated into five different groups. The students will then need to choose one team member and trace him/her on large art paper and cut out the silhouette. Once the silhouettes have been cut, ask the students what the silhouette needs to make it a person, and have a discussion about the term identity. To help bridge their understanding between their description of Hana and identity, the students can be asked, "What makes Hana, a person?"

Instruct the students to copy down each of the descriptions of Hana onto index cards. As a group, they will then sort out the descriptions into broader categories, such as religion, gender, thoughts and beliefs, etc. When the groups have come up with the factors that shape identity, they can be instructed to divide their silhouette into the number of categories their group has come up with. In each section, the groups can write their categories and share their findings with the class.

Activity #4: Personal Suitcase

Now that the students have a sense of the different factors that shape one's identity, they can be taught how to self-reflect on their own identity. Before beginning this activity, explain to the students that they will need an old, used suitcase. If some students do not have an old suitcase, they can be instructed to go to a second-hand store to purchase one, or one can be made out of cardboard and painted. To help tie in this activity with *Hana's Suitcase*, it will be necessary to go back to the students' timelines. Discuss with the students how Hana's suitcase told her personal story, and using their timeline to point out the future, ask them "If your suitcase was discovered in 75 years, what story would we learn about you?"

With all of the silhouettes hanging up in the classroom, have the students examine the different factors that give a person his/her identity. Next, instruct the students to gather different objects that symbolize their own identity. (For example: to symbolize Filipino culture, a small bag of rice could be included). Once all of the objects have been gathered, they should all be gathered inside their suitcase. As an additional exercise, the students can be given time to decorate the outside of their suitcases with stickers or other pictures/images that show how they believe others perceive them.

When all of the students have gathered their objects, have a storytelling festival. This activity is their introduction into the foray of storytelling. Have each student open up their suitcase and tell their own personal stories about their identity and their experiences. To help guide the students, they can be instructed to start their story with "There once was a boy/girl..." and each object is shown to explain its significance. By sharing their stories, the students will be given the chance to discover their connections to each other and foster a sense of community.

Activity #5: Three Wishes

Shortly after finishing the reading of *Hana's Suitcase*, begin reading several stories from Deborah Ellis' book *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. The stories can be shared before the students work on the activities associated with this project. Also, discussions should continue about the stories that are being shared, to help maintain the reading comprehension strategies that were taught in activity #1.

After the storytelling festival, give the students a chance to reflect about the similarities and differences between their lives, Hana's life, and one child's life in *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak*. The students should be given a three-circled Venn diagram to help focus and gather their

thoughts and ideas. When they are finished, have the students share their ideas with their group members to help them add additional ideas that they may have missed.

As a culminating activity, lead a discussion with the students about the impact of conflict on children, how the lives of children are similar around the world, and how one's experiences impacts our thoughts and ideas. At this point, the questions from activity #1 that the students have asked can be brought out and see if they have been answered. Finally, have the children write three wishes they have for the future and how they can help influence the direction of world events to ensure peace.

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