

Cesar Chavez Books for Tots Project

A Eureka City Service-Learning Project

Contact Information

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Introduction and Description of the Lesson

The importance of reading in the life of a young child is indisputable. Not only does the act of reading itself provide children with a strong base for their later academic and intellectual pursuits, the stories children read (or are read) are inexplicably woven into a deeper part of themselves. This project addresses the needs of the youngsters, catering to their blossoming love of reading.

This project was made possible by monies available through the Cesar Chavez Healthy Communities Project. Towards the beginning of the semester, English ninth and tenth grade students were asked to select a few books that were important to them when they were younger. With the grant money, and a generous discount from Walden Books, enough books were purchased for each of the roughly 120 ninth and tenth graders to have a book, though some of their old favorites were out of print. These students would ultimately give the books to mothers of newborn babies at the local hospital.

An AmeriCorps member attended each of the participating classes to discuss how this project applied to Cesar Chavez and his values. The ability to read and to think critically is crucial to the empowerment of the disenfranchised classes, for which Chavez fervently represented. With this overview in mind, the students then wrote personalized letters to the new mothers, encouraging the mothers to read to their babies and discussing not only the general importance of reading, but the role that reading or being read to had in their personal lives.

The letters were inserted into the books and the students wrapped the books, ready for delivery. The students then took a field trip to the local hospital where they delivered the books to a hospital representative. The students were then treated to a tour of the hospital. The project came full circle at the end of the morning when the students took a tour of the county library and were able to pick up a library card application.

This project enabled the students to potentially connect with a dormant part of themselves, as they rediscovered a love of stories and reading. In the letters they wrote

they were able to reflect on their careers as readers, as well as impart a love of reading to a younger generation.

Instructional Process

Preparation

In this particular project, largely due to the source from which money was made available, students used the model of Cesar Chavez and his core values to understand the importance of the service-learning project. An AmeriCorps member visited each of the classes to discuss how this project applied to Cesar Chavez' values. The ability to read and to think critically is crucial in the empowerment of the disenfranchised classes for which Chavez fought so fervently. In addition to this, Chavez promoted a celebration of community, which involves sharing expressions of culture and identity through art and literature, as well as tolerance and support for ethnic and cultural diversity as a means of strengthening communities. The books the students chose, intimately woven into their personal development, are also meaningful expressions of their own culture and community. By sharing these important symbols of their personal community with the next generation, the students engage in a discussion among communities, among cultures.

With this overview of Cesar Chavez' values in mind the students then wrote personalized letters to the mothers, encouraging the mothers to read to their babies and discussing not only the general importance of reading, but the role that reading or being read to had in their personal lives. This required the students to know (or learn) how to compose a persuasive letter. They were asked to reflect on the importance of reading in their own lives and to convince the mothers that exposing their children to literature and stories truly is a worthwhile endeavor. Because many of the students selected books of particular relevance to their own lives, they were urged to respond to the specific ideas in those texts and describe the effects some of those ideas had on them personally.

Through these activities, the following ninth and tenth grade Language Arts Writing Standards were met through the Cesar Chavez Books for Tots Project

- 2.2
- 2.4
- 2.5

Action

The first thing the students learn in this project is the appropriate way to compose a letter. Many students are unaware of exactly how to address and date a letter or how to address an envelope. These skills are imparted from the start. The students are also asked to reflect on the content of the book they are giving as a gift, to digest the ideas in it and express how these ideas shaped them as readers and as human beings. The students then use their reflections to persuade the mothers to expose their children to a life and love of reading. The introduction to Cesar Chavez enables the students to identify their social responsibility and to act on that responsibility.

The letters the students compose are intended to be personal and so are not meticulously critiqued or edited by a teacher. This allows the students freedom to express themselves in a way they deem most appropriate. Because of the nature of the project, the letters are invariably persuasive. What is important in the letters is the reflection the students go through as they compose. Embracing the importance of reading and understanding the role reading has played in their own lives is crucial to the educational process. The letters serve as an indication that this kind of critical thinking in fact took place.

The field trip the students take to the hospital to deliver their gifts must have some adult supervision. Often it was the teachers of the English classes who chaperoned the trip and AmeriCorps members as well were useful because no substitutes are required to fill their position. Depending on the location of the local hospital, buses are required to transport the students.

Reflection

This project is largely based on the reflection of the students. The information about Cesar Chavez' values serves as a good jumping off point to get the students thinking about their own community as well as the community with which they will potentially connect (e.g. the new family's community). It is a time for them to reflect on the stories that proved important in their own lives, to develop a better understanding of the role these stories played in their personal development. As they think back to the stories that really affected them in their formative years, they are able to reconnect with a fundamental joy they may have lost sight of. This rediscovered excitement allows them to effectively pass it on to the next generation. The writing of the letters is the culmination of this reflection. The sincere words the students write to the mothers are an indication of the process of reflection they have completed.

The tour of the library at the end of the field trip gives the students a final chance to think about how important it is to fall in love with reading. Hopefully the students will carry their rediscovered love of reading into their further exploits, a goal that is hard to measure or evaluate from a teacher's standpoint, but a realistic expectation nonetheless.

Student Assessment

Teachers will informally assess each student based on the completion of their letters. The letters serve as a good indication that the students, in fact, reflected on the importance of reading and attempted to pass on that knowledge to the new mothers. As long as the letters get completed, and it is clear that some amount of thought and reflection was involved in their completion, the students' performances should be viewed as successful.

Project Evaluation and Expansion

Since this project is largely based on the students' personal letters, teacher evaluation should not be based on any traditional grading scale. The letters should demonstrate genuine thought, and should be in acceptable letter format (properly addressed and dated). The loose criteria for a successful performance are due to the fact that the more personalized the letters are, the larger the effect will likely be on the recipient. The actual response to the literature the students have is less important than the processes they went

through in constructing their letters; their response should be the inspiration for their letters and does not necessarily need to be evaluated per se.

The roll of the community partner, namely the hospital staff, is to facilitate the tour of the hospital and to actually deliver the gifts to the mothers.

In order to expand the project the class could learn more about children's literature and dig a bit deeper into the impact these stories have on the lives of children. They could write more in-depth reflections on their own lives as readers. They could also learn more precisely the standards for personal letters and business letters, understanding the differences and knowing when each is appropriate, thus better conforming to the Content Standard.

Celebration and Public Recognition

The Cesar Chavez grant also provided funding for the students to have a snack or a drink at the hospital cafeteria. At this little celebration the coordinators of the event and the hospital staff thanked the students for their efforts and reiterated how much these gifts would mean to the mothers. Local news media is also invited to the event to inform the public.

Materials and Staff Development Needs

Materials needed

*wrapping paper

*scissors

*tape

*stationary

*pens and pencils

*envelopes

Funding, Resource Support, and Sustainability

Funding came through the Cesar Chavez Healthy Communities grant through the Redwood Community Action Agency. Funding was needed to buy the books, transport the students to the hospital and library, and other miscellaneous supplies. Funding may also be needed for substitute time. AmeriCorps members were utilized in this project to present information about Cesar Chavez and to serve as chaperones. Searching for funding through smaller grants, perhaps from book stores or publishing companies, would be a good way to sustain this project. Meeting a greater number of Content Standards also would help the sustainability of this project.

It should also be noted that this project likely would not have been as successful if not for the generous discount from Walden Books, almost 30%.