Jennifer Martin and Jennifer Chavez

**Third Grade Curriculum Project Proposal: Biographies, Past and Present**

**Introduction:**
This third grade thematic unit will focus on the Common Core English Language Arts standard of reading informational texts. The unit will expose students to this standard through biographies. The biographies chosen for instruction will serve as a method to discuss leadership skills, characteristics and introduce minority group achievement into the classroom by teaching students about notable people from different time periods, cultures, races and economic status. This unit was inspired by the research gathered on Hartford public schools and our school placements. The Hartford School District Profile 2011-2012 shows Hartford has a 90.3 percent minority student enrollment. We noticed that in our school placements, teachers did not incorporate many diversity rich components into their units curriculums despite their diversity rich classrooms. We realized students of color rarely see people like them in books. If all children read about is white people and families they start thinking of their language or practices or familiar places and values as not belonging in school (Rich). This information inspired us to create a unit that would demonstrate to demonstrate to all students, particularly lower income minority students that their cultures and people are valuable and to inspire them to embrace their cultural and ethnic backgrounds inside out and outside the classroom. This unit will inform and influence Hartford public school students on minority achievement, offer students a platform through which to develop higher order and critical thinking instead of memorization and regurgitation, and mobilize these students to take action in their own lives.

**Context:**
This unit will be taught to third grade students over the course of one school week, beginning on a Monday and ending on a Friday. This thematic unit will be carried out during five 45 minute Reading periods and one 45 minute writing period. The unit will be conducted primarily in the classroom with one visit to the school library. Throughout this week, the unit will be completed through whole class discussions, mixed reading ability groups of four students each, class activities as well as individual assignments for students to complete as homework. Class time will be split between conducting teacher presentations, such as read alouds from a biography, teaching a lesson on biographical writing and having students complete activities such as filling out a graphic organizer about the subject of a biography, and holding mixed ability group discussions on their homework. Students will also learn about what primary sources like speeches, songs and pictures can tell us about a figure, so they can discuss and debate as a class how to analyze why a person was important, how he or she was influential, and what made that person a leader.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn how to identify the important facts in an informational text by reading biographies of notable individuals.

This objective was created as a way for students to “determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea”, CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.2, a standard put forth by the Common Core State Standards which the state of Connecticut utilizes. When students learn how to identify the important facts in an informational text they will be better able to contextualize the achievements and success of the subjects of their biographies.

2. Students will identify key characteristics that made/make these people notable, and compare them to people today/in their own lives.
This objective was created to demonstrate to children that despite the knowledge or skills of white people or the wealthy that schools often valorize, they shouldn’t believe people of their culture’s knowledge or skills make them inferior. Social reproduction theorist Annette Lareau found that schools valorize the cultural capital of the upper class. Cultural capital is the “general cultural background, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next” (Bourdieu 13). We want to show the students that there a diversity of cultures which inspire different skills and characteristics in their people that made them great and led them to success. Through objective two students will be able to identify characteristics that a variety of diverse notable people exhibited and connect them to people in their own lives so they understand that people of their culture that they know have qualities that make them notable too.

3. Students will identify and define leadership skills that will mobilize them to incorporate these skills into their own lives.

This objective is rooted in Common Core Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.4, which is to help students, “determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 3 topic or subject area.” We want our students to feel inspired by the biographies they read and understand that changing their lives is not only about verbal intelligence, memorizing words and taking tests in school, it is also about interpersonal intelligence. Howard Gardner states that, “each individual possesses at least seven such relatively independent mental abilities or intelligences” (Gardner, 1). A person with interpersonal intelligence is a leader in whatever capacity they can, whether it means listening to others or having others listen to them. This objective is also inspired by James Bank’s Social Action Approach to Multicultural Education. Once students know what it means to be a leader they will have the knowledge to implement these skills into their own lives and create positive change.

4. Students will defend comparisons they make between notable people from
biographies and people today/in their own lives through a variety of evaluation techniques.

This objective was created to incorporate the evaluation level of Bloom’s taxonomy and add critical thinking and higher order thinking as a skill the students may cognitively develop instead of mere memorizations or factual recall. Through this objective, students will be empowered to think critically about leadership, their cultures and their surroundings. This culminating objective serves to empower students through their culture or ethnic background. We want our students to end the unit knowing that their culture and peoples are valuable and celebrated; most importantly we want students to be able to know the reasons why.

Activities

Monday:
On this first day of the unit the teacher will introduce the class to the topic and foundational material that will be covered. The class period will start with the teacher posing the question, “What is a biography?” to which students will be able to volunteer their own definitions. The students will be able to build off each other’s ideas, and agree or disagree, with the teacher only stepping in to call on people, or prompt conversation if the students do not seem to be answering. This open conversation will last for the first few minutes, following which the teacher will transition the class into a read aloud story called Dolores Huerta: A Hero for Migrant Workers for approximately ten minutes. This biography provides exposure to an important human rights figure, who many of the students may not be familiar with, despite potentially having things in common with her and her mission. The book is grade level appropriate, a suitable length for a read aloud, and it is accompanied by beautiful illustrations.

Following the read aloud, the class will have another class discussion where they identify the most important parts of the biography, responding to questions about who, where, when, and why but
also about drawing more thoughtful responses such as “Why is it important to know about this person and their story?” From this question, and the responses that the class comes up with, the teacher will segway into a discussion about what it means to be a leader. Students will partake in giving examples of people who they think are leaders, and then identifying the ways in which Dolores Huerta exemplified that she was a leader based on what was just read in the book.

Following this discussion, the class will go to the library where they will be instructed to pick a reading level appropriate biography to read independently for homework. The teacher will communicate with the school librarian prior to the start of the unit, so that he or she has enough time to compile and set aside a variety of biographies for the students to borrow. After students select their book, and the librarian or teacher verifies that each child’s book is reading level appropriate, the class will return to the classroom.

In the last few minutes of class, the teacher will distribute both a graphic organizer for students to complete along with their twenty minutes of reading for homework, and a checklist for the students to keep track of their participation. For Monday night, the sections entitled “important characteristics,” and “important contributions” will be assigned. Students will be informed that the next day they will be expected to be able to discuss and teach their classmates about what they learned from their reading, and have notes taken in their graphic organizers.

**Tuesday:**

At the beginning of the class period, the teacher will spend the first ten minutes of class reading another biography aloud called *My Name is Celia*, about Celia Cruz, another Hispanic leader and important figure that students may not already be familiar with. Following the read aloud, the class will listen to “La Vida es Un Carneval,” a song by Ms. Cruz. The teacher will project a Youtube video with the lyrics so the class can follow and sing along. Spanish speaking students will be encouraged to help translate some of the lines, as a way to further incorporate a cultural element into the unit. This activity will also draw off the argument of Brice Heath, who advocated teaching
bilingual students to see the strength in their ability, and treat it as cultural capital. This activity will also give English language learners an opportunity to shine, and will capitalize upon the theory of Guadalupe Valdez, who argued that ELL students should be able to use their native language as a tool in the classroom.

Following the class activity, the teacher will break the class into groups of four to five students, with mixed reading abilities. Students will work in mixed ability groups because researchers have argued that this is a method for students at different ability levels to learn from one another and gather different ideas, as opposed to the method of ability grouping which does not allow students to hear from many of their peers and learn from one another (De Marrais and LeCompte). In these groups, students will act as experts in their mixed ability groups on the person they read about for homework to model one of Robert Slavin’s cooperative learning strategies, structured team-achievement divisions. Students will work in groups because it allows them to interact with one another and engage in meaningful, purposeful activities, and teach their peers, which reinforces their own learning and understanding of the unit material. This method of learning is influenced by John Dewey’s social constructivism, where he holds that learning is a social process. The graphic organizers will serve as a template for the small group discussions to guide the conversation.

Following the peer group discussions, the class will transition into their writing class period, which for this day will also be focused on the biography unit. After speaking to real elementary school educators, we found it was important to give the students more instruction on biographical writing since that was the method through which their final unit project will be evaluated. The teacher will start the writing unit by conducting a short ten minute lesson about writing a biography, that covers both the important background information about the individual, as well as examples of what makes the person unique and important. On the board, the teacher will list the different criteria that a biography needs, including name, birthday and location, other important identifying characteristics,
things that make the person special, and anecdotes to support why the person has special characteristics.

Following the lesson, students will be put in pairs of mixed writing abilities, for comparable reasons to why we used mixed ability groups in the peer groups. In these pairs students will interview each other to be able to write about each other in the format taught during the lesson. Students will spend ten minutes interviewing each other and then they will have about ten minutes to compile their writing assignment about their classmate. The writing period will end with an opportunity for students to share their short writing piece with the class. Not only does this activity incorporate feedback from educators about how to strengthen the unit, but it also gives the class a chance to get to know their peers on a deeper level, and elevate them through celebrating the things that make them unique and special.

For homework, the teacher will assign another twenty minutes of biography reading and the next two sections of the graphic organizer entitled “Things you admire about this person,” and “People in your life who exhibit these Characteristics.”

**Wednesday:**

Wednesday’s class period will begin with a final biography read aloud lasting about ten minutes. The book is called *Marvelous Mattie*, and it tells the story of Margaret E. Knight, a female inventor known as “the lady Edison.” This biography will expose students to women in science, technology, math, and engineering fields, which may inspire some of the girls in the class to pursue their interests in the field. The teacher will facilitate a short discussion following this biography about jobs or fields that students think of as being male or female dominated. Students (and the teacher) will offer examples of people they know who push the box of these stereotypes (example: My uncle is a nurse. My mother is a doctor.)
Following this five minute discussion, the teacher will show students some primary sources about important biographical figures. The teacher will project an image of Ruby Bridges being escorted into her school by guards. The teacher will provide basic biographical information about Ruby, and then the class will discuss how you can tell she is brave from the picture. The teacher will talk about other primary sources we have access to that give us a deeper understanding of what these biographical figures were like at the time they lived. We have letters they wrote to friends and family, speeches they gave, photographs, and many other things. This will help expose students to Common Core standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.3.7, which includes gaining information from an illustration.

Next the teacher will distribute the direction sheet for the unit evaluation project (described in depth later). Students will choose one of the three options to complete as their unit project, which will be evaluated by the teacher and shared with the class. The options include writing a biography, creating a poster comparing an important figure from the present to an important figure from the past, or authoring an autobiography. Students will have the remainder of the class period to work on their final evaluation projects and ask any questions they have about getting started. The teacher will provide materials like poster board, lined writing sheets, and markers and colored pencils. Students only homework assignment will be to continue working on the final evaluation project in preparation for the Friday due date and project presentations.

**Thursday:**

Thursday’s class time will be entirely devoted to giving students time to work on their unit projects. The teacher will be available to walk around and assist individuals, and students will also be encouraged to help each other workshop their ideas and solve problems and questions that come up, building off of the ideas of Vygotsky and Dewey. Students will have this time to address any issues they encountered during their time working on the project at home, so it will be important that they showed up prepared to move ahead. However, for students who procrastinated, this will give
them some extra time to get work on their assignment before the due date. For homework, the students will finish whatever is left of their project in preparation for the following day.

**Friday:**
For the final day of the unit, the students will come to class with their finished unit projects. The class time will be devoted to each student having one to two minutes to present on their project and what they got out of the unit. After the presentations, students will display their projects on a table in the classroom which will serve as a short term “library.” During downtime in the following week, or at recess, students can “check out” one of their peers projects to read. This will expose them to more biographical material, and also help them build stronger connections and a better understanding and respect of their classmates.

**Evaluation:**
Students will choose one of three unit projects as their final evaluation. This affords students a level of autonomy to choose how they want to display their knowledge and understanding of the unit, while still guiding their process and having expectations in place. We were inspired by Linda Christensen’s portfolio assignment where she allowed the students the opportunity to choose what works they included in their portfolios but also maintained requirements for the assignment (Christensen 161). Although we cannot ensure that students will be equally distributed among the three options, each project will be held to the same rigorous standards ensuring that students will be held equally accountable. The three options that students can choose from are as follows:

a. Students can prepare a poster board comparing someone today to a notable person from the past (ie a figure from one of the biographies talked about in the Unit). The present day person can be famous or a family member, friend or local figure the student is inspired by

b. Students can write a biographical sketch about a present day figure and use either personal photographs, drawings, or computer images to illustrate the story and importance of that person

c. Students can create an autobiography sketch about how they share characteristics with important figures talked about in class (students can talk about aspirations/ speak futuristically about what they want to accomplish).
These evaluation methods fulfill all four of our learning objectives. Students would have learned how to identify the important parts of an informational texts through their homework and group discussions. They will be expected to incorporate these skills in whichever evaluation method they choose. In each activity the student must choose a biographical subject and either talk or write about them using the characteristics and leadership skills discussed in class. If they choose to do the poster board as their project they will have to state to the class the comparisons they made between the people discussed in class and the subject of their biography. This helps develop higher order and critical thinking. If they choose to write a biography or autobiography they must do the same but have it in writing. In comparing the people they read about in class and the subject of their biography or poster they expected to defend how the people they write about are heros, and cite specific examples to support this. In all three projects students state how they would choose to incorporate leadership skills and other characteristics into their own lives which mobilizes them to change their lives.

We will evaluate our students on their participation throughout this unit and their final project. It is important to us to have the children interacting with one another and engaging in meaningful discussions, like Dewey argues is best for learning. Originally we had planned to give students a copy of the same evaluation and participation rubrics that the teacher will use to grade their assignment and conduct during the unit, however, we were advised by an elementary educator to modify the rubric and give them one that was more kid-friendly. Therefore, we created a participation checklist for students to use while they work with the class, smaller groups and by themselves. We kept the original rubric, which includes the same components as the checklist, as a grading guide for the teacher.
Resources:

http://www.tfcbooks.org/book/9780873588720

Inspiration for Biography Graphic Organizer Model:
http://printables.scholastic.com/content/stores/printables/priv/09/98765TEajan09-005.pdf

Book lists for students to find their own individual biographies to read:
http://www.teachingkidsbooks.com/3rd-4th-grade/biographies-for-3-4th-graders
http://www.the-best-childrens-books.org/biographies-for-kids.html
http://www.the-best-childrens-books.org/Wilma-Unlimited.html

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaZoajkutG8


Gardner, Howard. Theory of Multiple Intelligences.
http://www.ibiblio.org/edweb/edref.mi.th.html

Lyrics “La Vida es Un Carnaval”


Picture of Ruby Bridges:
https://www.google.com/search?q=ruby+bridges+photo&espv=2&biw=1321&bih=702&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwil5KuwypHMAhXjtYMKHek0BDQQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=NxHZ378sQ7h9M%3A


Strategic School Profile Hartford District 2011-12. Connecticut Department of Education


## Participation Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did I...?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did I raise my hand during class time?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did I ask questions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I listen respectfully to my peer's comments?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I try to answer my peer's questions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I discuss the biography I read for homework with my peers, using my completed graphic organizer as a guide?</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I discuss in detail the characteristics of the subject of my biography, as well as their contributions to society?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I dedicate time to the similarities students between the subject of the biography and and someone I know?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I listen to peers discuss their own biographies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I show interest in biographies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I ask my teacher or peers questions when I didn't understand something?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did I do my work without distracting my peers?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Name: ______________________

Biography Unit Graphic Organizer

Subject of Biography: ______________________

Important Characteristics

1)

2)

3)

4)

Important Contributions

1)

2)

3)

4)

Things you admire about this person

1)

2)

3)

4)

People in your life who exhibit these Characteristics

1)

2)

3)

4)
## Participation Rubric Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Discussion Participation</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student contributes to class discussion with thoughtful questions. Student attempts to form answers to questions on context, key characteristics, and relevance of time period.</td>
<td>Student participates in class discussion with one or two questions or answers. Student is aware of biographical context, key characteristics and relevance of time period.</td>
<td>Students participates only once during class discussion. Student does not adequately attempt to answer questions or demonstrate understanding of key ideas.</td>
<td>Student does not participate in class discussion and is a distraction to discussion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Participation</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student discusses biography they read for homework with peers, using their completed graphic organizer as a guide to discuss in detail the characteristics of the notable person as well as their contributions to society. Student dedicates particular time to the similarities students find between the notable person and someone they know personally, or from today’s time period. Intently listens to peers discuss their own biographies.</td>
<td>Student discusses biography they read for homework. Student discusses all four parts of their graphic organizer with their peers and demonstrates an average understanding of each four parts. Listens to their peers information and analysis on their own biography.</td>
<td>Student does not actively discuss the sections of their biography graphic organizer. Student listens to his or her peers but does not provide feedback or show an interest in what peers have to say.</td>
<td>Student does not talk about the biography they read for homework. Their graphic organizer is nearly empty and they are not listening to their peers.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior and Attitudes During Individual Class Time</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Poor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student demonstrates interest in biographies and takes initiative to ask teacher or peers questions if they do not understand something. Student actively engages in their assignment during individual work time and does not distract peers.</td>
<td>Student asks teacher or peers thoughtful questions about their biography or graphic organizer, often demonstrating reflection in individual work and is easily distracted. Poses a distraction to peers.</td>
<td>Student does not ask teacher or peers thoughtful questions about their biography or graphic organizer, often demonstrating little or no reflection in individual work and is easily distracted. Poses a distraction to peers.</td>
<td>Student does not demonstrate interest in biographies and distracts his or her peers. The student does not complete his or her individual class work.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Direction Sheet
Due Date: Friday Morning

Students will each choose one of the project options in preparation for our class Biography Unit presentations on Friday. All projects will be expected to be done neatly and creatively, and show interest and understanding of the unit.

**Option 1: Poster Board Instructions:**

1. Choose a person from the present day that you believe has characteristics that makes them deserving of having a biography written about them (this can be a family member, friend, or even someone famous).
2. Choose a historical person (perhaps one that we talked about in class during the unit) who had some of the same characteristics or qualities as the first person you chose.
3. Decorate a poster using pictures, drawings, or magazine cut-outs etc.
4. Have at least 2-3 paragraphs of biographical writing on poster board
   - Make a connection between the person in your biography and yourself, or someone you know
   - Write what characteristics or skills you want to incorporate into your own life from the person you write the biography on and how you will do so.

**Option 2: Biography Instructions:**

1. Choose a present day person you want to write a biography about (this can be a family member, friend, or even someone famous).
2. Describe why this person deserves to have a biography written about them, referencing the characteristics we learned about in class that other important leaders and figures had.
3. Describe the growth of this person, providing a short history of who they are (ex when and where they were born, answering questions like does their heritage add to why they are important?)
4. Illustrate or use pictures
Option 3: Autobiography

1. Write a biography about yourself (an autobiography)

2. Defend why you have the same characteristics of some of the important people we have learned about

3. Talk about the way you have shown these characteristics in the past (ex times you were responsible, kind, a leader) and how you want to continue to build these characteristics in the future.

Biography/Autobiography Material