Is Academia Worth It?

Our lesson plan is intended for an 8th grade English classroom in the Hartford public school system. Over the course of one school week, our lessons will present the students with literature and statistics that help to display how significant of a role education can play in their futures. The “rags to riches” stories that the students usually seem to be motivated by have to do with achieving success in athletics, the entertainment industry or other glamorized worlds outside of academia. We hope to show them that success through the world of academia is a possibility they are able to work towards regardless of their backgrounds, proving that they are not relegated to succeed through in ways that few have been able to. We will analyze the experiences of Ben Carson and Sonya Sotomayor in order to break psychological hindrances and expand their prospects. Then, at the end of week we will determine how these stories have affected the students’ view of “success” and the opportunities available to them. We hope that this unit will inspire them to become passionate about learning, and to see the value that a commitment in the classroom can have on the rest of their lives.

We base the importance we place on this subject on the success of the Futures Project launched by Jeanie Oakes and John Rogers and reported in *Learning Power: Organizing for Education and Justice*. It enlisted the fieldwork of minority students at Wilson High School to study and document the injustices they experienced via
“participatory social inquiry.” The student researchers were required to use their own experiences and observations along with scholarly studies to analyze the effects of social policies implemented in their school through the scientific method. The purpose the student researchers felt as result of this project stimulated their sense of agency. Many students reported that they felt better equipped to cope with the academic hardships they face. Many of the students felt empowered by “their knowledge, their articulateness, and their power to disrupt commonplace thinking” (64). Futures ended up graduating 97% of its students with an average 2.52 GPA while other minorities graduated at a rate of 75% with an average of 2.37 GPA. Futures’ student researchers enrolled in institutions of higher education at a rate of 90%. We wanted to expose and address a root cause of many students’ unwillingness to participate in formal education. We modified the objectives and exercises to be more fitting for an eighth grade level English classroom, so that students could actually enter high school with the empowerment these students did not have access to at the beginning of their high school career. That way they could start working towards self-established academic goals from the beginning of the years colleges and universities are more inclined to scrutinize to determine whether would like to the grant the students admission.

In order to ensure that students can make intellectual gains as result of what is presented during this unit, we have set up a clear list of objectives that we will aim to reach over the course of the week. We will first have the students identify what their view of “success” is and discuss how their life experience has shaped these views. This will serve to get the connotations that are associated with the word “success” into the open during our initial discussion, making students aware of the preconceived notions they
may have subconsciously adopted. Getting these ideas into the open will create the foundation necessary for our examination of “success” by establishing where our students initially were on the subject, permitting us to track growth throughout the weeklong unit.

Next, the students will compare and contrast statistics, including high school graduation and college enrollment rates, which represent the different socioeconomic groups in the educational system. This step is not meant to scare them, considering the data is often stacked against minority groups such of black and Hispanic students, as well as those who come from low income families. It will serve to confirm that the obstacles they will inevitably face in their academic pursuits will not be unique to them, empowering them to establish the willpower necessary to overcome the temptation to give up when faced with hardships. We will use this information to spark the desire to exceed the expectations society has for them, rising above the statistics.

The students will then identify and outline the educational qualifications for their desired occupations. This will allow students to make more personal connections with the material presented in this unit and open their eyes to the necessity of education for advancement in many different fields. At this age, many 8th graders have yet to make direct connections between academic achievement and the quality of life. This exercise will show the class the real world significance of furthering their education, and letting them know the countless number of doors it can open up for them in their futures. This will make them aware of how the grades may impact their lives in the future.

The next, and probably the most significant objective of the lesson, is that the students will be asked to relate the experiences of Ben Carson and Sonya Sotomayor to
their own lives. These two figures are amazing role models, who have very relatable life stories to the student’s in Hartford, and who were able to change their lives through the power of education. We want to know if the students see the similarities, and if they feel that they will or have encountered some of the same challenges as they did in achieving their goals. We think that this will be an important part of lesson because we want the students to realize that although it may not be an easy road for them, that there are people out there who have done it before them, and whose lives are tremendously improved by staying the course. Examining the experiences of Ben Carson and Sonya Sotomayor through their respective books, Gifted Hands and My Beloved World, will be a change from the traditional curriculum that is usually void of in-depth study of important figures who are minorities from impoverished backgrounds.

We selected Ben Carson and Sonya Sotomayor for class examination because they have been able to reach prominence and recognition through the pursuit of formal education, despite their shared socioeconomic and cultural background with the majority of Hartford’s public school students. Ben Carson was raised in low income Detroit neighborhood by an overworked single mom with a third grade education. He was frequently teased by his classmates for receiving the worst grades in the class and was written off as a troubled student by many of the adults around him. He then made a sharp turn towards academic excellence as his passion for knowledge developed with the direction of his mother. Today, his accomplishments astound those who once denied his capacity to learn. Once he began taking his education seriously, he was able to gain admittance into Yale University to study Psychology. He went on to study neurosurgery and become the Director of Pediatric Neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins at the
young age of 33. He is now a neurosurgeon that is highly regarded for separating Siamese and radical hemispherectomies. This recognition gained him admission into the Academy of Achievement and a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Sonya Sotomayor was raised in a housing project in the South Bronx by a single mom who was a Puerto Rican immigrant, causing Spanish to be her most comfortable source of expression. At 8 years old, she was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes. Her health complications and socioeconomic background did not cause her to rule out her ability to become a judge. Her dreams led her to obtain a bachelor’s degree in from Princeton University and graduate from Yale Law School. She went on to be appointed as a judge in the Federal District Court and US Court of Appeals by George W. Bush and Bill Clinton respectively. She is not the First Hispanic Supreme Court Justice.

Lastly, to conclude our lesson, the students will evaluate the importance of their education after synthesizing all of the information presented in the unit. We want to know how the lesson plan has affected their outlook on success, and gauge the growth that occurred after the introduction of the unit. It will be interesting to see how the lesson inspired or motivated them if it did, and why it did not if it didn’t. We will also be evaluating how much each student participated in the class and group discussions in order to evaluate their engagement throughout the unit.

In order to achieve all of these objectives, we have planned out a five-day schedule of activities and exercises. On the first day of our lesson plan, we will start by spending the first fifteen minutes of the class having the students write a brief paragraph, using their personal experiences and observations to identify what has influenced their image of success. This will help to give us a primary outlook on their individual feelings
and perspectives on the topic. Then, for the next fifteen minutes or so, the class will form into groups of three or four in order to combine their individual images of “success” and create a tree diagram that depicts these ideas. The group that they get into for this activity will serve as the group they work with for the rest of the unit. Then, after they have created this image, the class will come together and share what each group came up with and why. We will spend the last fifteen minutes of the class discussing how the students’ environment may have shaped their current image of success. After this first day of class, we will give a homework assignment where the students will go home and write a paragraph about what they want to be when they grow up, and what steps they think they will need to take in order to achieve it. This homework will obviously be encouraged, but will not have a profound impact on the next day of class if it is not completed.

On day two, the students will use a computer lab to individually research the level of education or other qualifications that would be necessary in order to pursue their desired career interests for 25 to 30 minutes. They will be provided with a list of websites that will have the pertinent information that they are looking for. The students will then spend the next ten minutes of class time writing their desired professions on the board and choosing a few from that list to analyze more closely all together. After we have discovered and discussed the results of that research we will use the remainder of the class period to examine data, provided and presented to them in a PowerPoint presentation, which will depict the correlation between high school graduation and college enrollment. We will then discuss the positive effect that high educational achievement can have on the quality of life, in terms of financial stability and its impacts.
Considering there is a lot to process from this day, there will be no homework assigned, but conversation with their parents on the topic of “success” and education will be encouraged.

On day three, the students will spend the first ten minutes of class time analyzing an excerpt from Ben Carson’s book entitled, *Gifted Hands*, that will provide them with a brief introduction into his background and accomplishments. Then for the next 25 minutes, we will ask the students to break up into their assigned groups where they will be given another passage from the book to read and interpret collectively. After reading through the given excerpt, each group will then act it out as if it were a scene from a play for the rest of the class. This will cause them to physically engage with what is going on, so that their minds cannot wander due to stagnancy, and hopefully allow them to have a little fun with the material. After the skits, the last ten minutes of the class will be spent discussing their thoughts and feelings about the particular scene that they participated in, as well as the ones that they observed, and on Ben Carson’s story as a whole.

Day Four will expose the students to the remarkable life and career of Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor. We will spend the first fifteen minutes of class watching Oprah’s interview of Sotomayor entitled “The Most Electrifying Moment in Justice Sonia Sotomayor's Life” and then present the class with a PowerPoint presentation that outlines her background and accomplishments. Along with highlighting all of the economic and racial obstacles she faced in getting to where she is, we will highlight the fact that she also suffers from Diabetes. This will hopefully show the students that there can be roadblocks that come in all sorts of different forms, but they are able to achieve whatever they put their mind and effort behind. After the video and brief presentation, the class
will spend the next fifteen minutes of class broken up into their assigned groups, and will be asked to assemble a list of challenges that they feel Sonia Sotomayor had to overcome in order to become who she is today. Then, for the last ten minutes of class, the students will collectively discuss the things that surprised them most about these two stories and if knowing these things influenced their perspective on success or what it takes to be successful.

For the fifth and final day of the lesson, the students will begin class by breaking up into dyads, and spend the first thirteen minutes discussing the obstacles they think they may face in trying to achieve their own personal goals, and brainstorming ways in which they could overcome them. Then, the students will break up and individually devise a plan for their future and the steps necessary to achieve their goals. After ten minutes, those who are willing will be asked to share what they wrote with the class. After listening to some of the students’ goals and plans for the future, we will come together and end the unit by having a twelve minute group discussion about whether or not, after learning all that they have throughout the week, they think education is worth the effort. The students will not be judged or evaluated on their answer to this question, but whether or not they actively engaged in the unit throughout the five days. Students will use the last 10 minutes to evaluate their group members on their engagement and participation during discussions using a questionnaire provided by the teacher. They will then receive a writing prompt to respond to as a homework assignment. The prompt will be “Write a one to two page reflection on this week’s unit. Discuss your view of “success” at the beginning of this unit. What shaped these views? Did your views change over the course of this week? Were there specific parts of the unit or ideas that were
shared that made you think about your future in a new way? Did you set new goals as result of what we learned? How do you feel about your ability to meet those goals? Will this have an effect on the way you approach your academic career?” We will use these responses to assess how students’ were able to understand and formulate their own ideas about the subject matter throughout the week. It will also allow us to know whether we were able to see their potential in a new and more positive light.

After participating in this unit, students will gain the empowerment necessary to improve their quality of life and inspire future generations. Many schools do not see the need to openly address the inequality that is undeniably present in the American educational system, but brushing this issue under the mat is counterproductive to the claimed objective of our educational system. If we as a society truly want each child to have equal access to quality education we must start by taking steps to reverse the psychological hindrances negatively affecting their educational investment that society is responsible for erecting. Minority and low income students know that the odds are stacked against them so why do we continue to subscribe to the belief that we can simply imagine this problem away. We aim to address and combat this issue head on as a means to empower and stimulate agency among marginalized groups. Due to the inequalities that currently exist in our educational system, students will have to draw upon their inner strength and communal encouragement to persevere in the world of academia. The material introduced in this unit will allow them to understand the investment necessary for academic success while assuring them that it is a possibility for them. If this approach was adopted on a large scale so that the statistical gaps between socioeconomic groups could begin to close, future generations will receive increased encouragement in their
own academic pursuits. It will allow them to take pride in their background and not feel that they have to hide their background in order to become upwardly mobile, as shown in the books written by Sotomayor and Carson. As more people from marginalized groups begin emerging as powerful figures, students from similar backgrounds will self-confidence among students from these groups will also increase. More people who can relate to the struggles of these groups will fill position of power, obtaining he ability to make fundamental changes to the structure of our educational system as it stands. However, this requires the agency of the policy makers and the citizens responsible for holding them accountable for their decisions right now in order to get this movement started.
Works Cited


Participation Questionnaire

Identify each of your group mates for this unit, express whether you worked with them in dyads or a group of four. Use these questions to evaluate each person on their engagement during this unit.

1. Did your group members actively engage in the group discussion?

2. Did your group work collaboratively at forming ideas about what success is, and was each member respectful of each other’s opinions?

3. Did they draw from the readings that we discussed in class and express their reactions and responses about the material?

4. Were all of the group members willing to participate in the skit, and express why they wanted to act out the particular scene you chose from the readings?

5. Did the group complete the homework assignment of going home and asking their families about their view of education? If so, were they open and honest about expressing the information that they received?