



Familial Wisdom in the Classroom

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At Anacapa Middle School in Ventura, California, many teachers believe that change begins in the classroom at the grassroots level. These educators are working to create units that integrate peace education. What is peace education, and what does it look like in practice? According to Bajaj and Chui (2009), peace education includes the co-disciplines of development education, human rights education, environmental education, conflict resolution, and disarmament education (p. 449). On this campus, groups of teachers collaborate to create units that focus on peace with ourselves, peace with each other, and peace with the planet. They use a critical framework that asks students to assess their attitudes, beliefs, and actions on a spectrum from isolating to building community. They practice evaluating both local and global events (from bullying to bombing) using this framework and common language. The unit discussed below was developed and implemented in this context.

Nadia was a 7th grade student in a 4th period English Language Arts class at Anacapa Middle School during the 2016-2017 academic year. Her teacher, Danna, had taught middle school for over 20 years. The unit presented here, *What does it mean to be educated?*, sought to invite community and family members into the classroom in order to tap into familial wisdom, generate cross-generational conversations, build classroom community, and foster a home-school connection. In this article, Danna and Nadia (now a ninth grader) describe what they experienced while creating their projects.

Into: What were you thinking as you began this project?

Danna :

This unit was inspired by my grandmothers. Although my parents were loving and involved, my grandmothers, in large part, helped raise me. They cooked, cleaned, groomed, corrected, encouraged,

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and loved me. Two very different women – Pamela Mae Tirado, my paternal grandmother, and Sarah Lucy Bray, my maternal grandmother – were among the smartest women I know; yet neither of my grandmothers (or grandfathers) went to college, nor did my parents.

Grandma Pam was born in Bakersfield, California of Mexican and Irish first-generation U.S.-born parents, and she did not attend school beyond 6th grade. Bright, funny, and inquisitive, Grandma Pam loved reading the dictionary. She was a true wordsmith who kept daily logs of the details of her life for over 30 years. She wished she had had more formal education, and she would have excelled in school. Given access to university, Grandma Pam would have been an even stronger advocate for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged and those with special needs, or she might have become a famous writer and best-selling author.

Grandma Lucy was born in Lamar, Arkansas of farming parents. Quiltmaker, culinary artist, singer, seamstress, painter, weaver, and gardener, she did graduate from high school, but she did not attend college. If she had had access to higher education, Grandma could have thrived in the study of sustainability, agriculture, art, music, nutrition, business, or public policy.

It makes me happy to think about my grandmothers. It's fun to imagine what they would have studied had they gone to college. Still, even without having attended university, both extraordinary women lived interesting and full lives. In creating this project, I hoped to somehow bridge home and school, to offer students the opportunity to have meaningful discussions with the adults in their lives and to try to make sense of what it means to learn and to be educated. I hoped they could have the types of conversations I wish I could have today with my grandmas.

At our Title I school, 66% of students receive free or reduced lunch, and those who will go on to attend college are likely to be the first in their families to do so. Like my grandmothers, the adults in many of our students' lives have not had access to higher education, yet they have a variety of skills and a depth of knowledge that they share with their children. Their familial wisdom is a valuable resource in our school community, but it is often untapped. This unit was developed with the intention of offering students a structured opportunity to look more closely at the gifts, talents, knowledge, and values of the adults in their lives and to have conversations about life, learning, and education. In addition, this unit is structured to include live interviews which serve as an invitation for parents to come into the classroom. The essential questions students were asked to consider were: *What does it mean to be educated? And is school worthwhile? Why or why not?* For the project, students were asked to interview an adult in their lives whom they admire and then create a presentation about their loved one's experiences.

Nadia :

At the beginning of the project, before I even had a topic, I thought it was going to be very interesting to see what everyone had to say about the school system and about what it meant to be educated. I wanted to know what they thought just because I knew that most of my classmates, if given the opportunity, would stop coming to school.

When I started this project, I had no clue who I was going to interview and what their skill was going to be. But then I started thinking about the people who have shaped me and my experiences, and my dad instantly came to mind because of everything he's been through in his life. I thought that his story showed a different form of education that my peers should hear. I wanted them to hear what it was like for someone who didn't actually go all the way through school. I thought that doing my project on how

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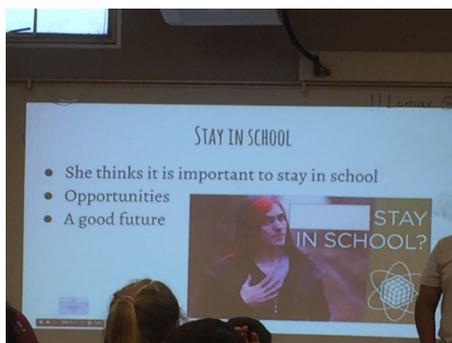
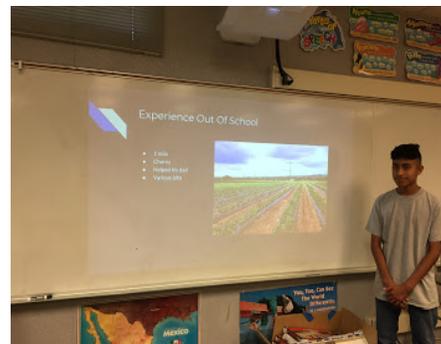
he was able to rehabilitate himself (after not getting much education from the school system) would show again a different perspective of the essential question: What does it mean to be educated?

Through: What was it like to do the interview? How did you feel while you were doing it?

Danna :

I was absolutely amazed by the students' presentations! Students chose the mediums for their work and created presentations, brought artifacts and/or food, conducted live interviews, made films, and uploaded work to YouTube. They celebrated family members who cook, play instruments from their home countries, travel, work, parent, or dance all in the context of "what it means to be educated." I was honored to watch students interact with their family members and listen respectfully to each other's stories. Students learned about one another, heard many adults talk about what it means to be educated, and realized that their families' stories matter.

One student shyly began telling her mother's story by saying, "Well, it's not a very interesting story, but my mom's special skill is parenting. She has helped my sister who got pregnant in high school get all the way to college." I respectfully interrupted the student, and I reassured her that I was really interested in her mom's story and special skill. I asked for a show of hands of the students who were also interested. Nearly every hand was raised. While listening to stories like this one, students practiced empathy, became vulnerable with each other, and built community on a deep level.



Students conducted live interviews, created presentations, and made videos.

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When I was creating the video, I was nervous. First of all, I was nervous because I knew my classmates were going to see it, and secondly, I was nervous because I thought about the impact this would have on my dad. I didn't want to bring back any bad memories, but I wanted our point to be clear. I wanted kids to see that even if you didn't get enough school you could survive, but you should still go to school because it opens more opportunities. In my interview, my dad makes it clear that staying in school would have been better because he liked school, and life would have been easier for him and given him more choices.

During the video, I was fidgeting with a string because I was just that nervous. About half way through the video my dad said he didn't like where this was going so we stopped to collect ourselves. He was uncomfortable because he felt like he was going to have to talk about all the bad things that happened in the past when he wasn't in school. So we stopped the video. We decided that was not the point of the interview. The whole point was to prove that although an education is important, it is okay if you go another route. Your life can still turn out ok. So we went back to filming and started the interview again.

It was scary to film this interview. Why? Because it was kind of hard to have this conversation with my dad. His past is not normally something I would talk about with him. Overall, though, it was good to do this interview because we did get to talk about the impact that not being able to go to school had on his life.

Nadia's Interview Video



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Beyond: How does it feel looking back at this project? What did you learn? What might you have done differently? How will this project impact your work in the future?

Danna :

In Room 9, we use the “Spectrum of Peace” to measure our behavior, attitudes, and responses. The Spectrum of Peace is a continuum between ISOLATING and BUILDING COMMUNITY. When people interact, we analyze their behaviors using this model. Does a given action bring people together or separate them? Is it neutral? We use this continuum not only to consider our own behavior, but also to reflect on issues that arise at school, topics that come up in the curriculum, and current events. This work borrows from Elise Boulding’s concept of “peaceableness” which she describes as “an action concept” involving “a constant shaping and reshaping of understandings, situations, and behaviors” that create “well-being for all” (as cited in Crews, 2005, p. 78). Boulding maintains that it is important to understand the nature and history of conflict, but she encourages us to focus more on the types of interactions that are respectful, collaborative, positive, and peaceful. Boulding, Professor Emerita of Sociology at Dartmouth College and a renowned peace activist, has focused on imagining and constructing notions of peace that exist as separate from conflict (p. 38). Boulding acknowledges the work against structural and cultural violence, yet she advocates for setting up a “parallel system” that focuses on promoting the concept of peace that does not include a discussion of violence (p. 39). In doing so, she has developed the concept of cultures of peace. Boulding defines cultures of peace as:

A mosaic of identities, attitudes, values, beliefs, and institutional patterns that lead people to live nurturantly with one another, deal with difference, share their resources, solve their problems, and give each other space, so no one is harmed and everyone’s basic needs are met. (p. 39)

For Boulding, part of the work of promoting peace is “to imagine, play, and daydream about that peace culture” (p. 40). Boulding’s definition of peaceableness offers an alternative approach to peace that goes beyond peace as a reaction to violence. This project was intended to be a peace building project. It provided students opportunities to develop empathy as they listened to each other’s stories and realized the complexity of each other’s lives. It also provided them opportunities to imagine together the possibilities for themselves and their families.

Relationships happen over time, and this project helped students build community and peace in our classroom. During the year, Nadia had been a strong, outspoken voice in our class. She confidently spoke her mind about a variety of topics including feminism, the 2016 election, and immigration. It seemed to me that Nadia was often targeted because she was willing to voice her opinion. In this project, Nadia was honest and vulnerable, and it seemed that, as a result, some students softened toward her. She took a risk, and her colleagues appreciated and reacted to her willingness to show her heart.

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Nadia :

When I presented the video to the class, I was proud of what I made. I thought it was a good interview. Re-watching the video nearly 7 months later, I am still proud. Now this video has become kind of famous. Ms. Lomax asked me if she could use it as an example for all of her future classes, and I was honored. Then the video was seen by people at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and they filmed my Dad and me (separately) and asked us questions about it. Then Ms. Lomax told her friend, Kaia, about it and she suggested we write an article about the experience. With everything that has happened because of the interview, I am prouder than before. I had no clue when I was watching it for the first time just how big its impact would be. I think the impact is so big because I'm letting people see my Dad and me just talk about our lives, and people don't usually get to see that.

In this project, I learned that being educated doesn't just mean graduating and getting a college degree. Before this project, I thought that getting a degree was the most important thing in the world, but I now know that not everyone gets a chance to go to school, and it's okay to get your education somewhere else. Don't get me wrong, I still think going to school and getting a degree is important, and I definitely plan to go to college. But at the end of the day, it is YOUR education and you can do what you want with it...if you go a different path, it can be ok. My Dad has a great life and a great family.

My relationship with my dad has grown from this interview because I think that now he knows I respect him no matter what form of education he got. We got to bond over filming with the camera crew from Southern Poverty Law Center. We talked about the questions they asked us. Another thing I learned from this project is that it is good to share your knowledge, whatever it may be, with other people. I don't think I would've done anything differently. In the video, I think I should've looked up more, but I also think my nervousness gave the video a touch of emotion. I want to be a music teacher when I'm older. I think that I will use projects like this that ask kids about their families and lives so that I can connect with them.

Mother Teresa once said, "If there is no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other" (2008). When we take the time to welcome the community and familial wisdom into our classrooms, to celebrate each other's skills and knowledge, and to play and imagine together, it becomes clear that we belong to one another.

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About the Authors



Nadia Rosales is a 9th grade student in Oregon. She is a scholar athlete who plays on the high school soccer team and plays the violin. Her college of choice is undecided, yet she is determined to pursue university education. Her goal is to be a middle school music teacher. She would like to thank her dad for agreeing to participate in this interview and her mom for being the camerawoman.

A mother, bilingual educator, and activist, Danna Lomax currently serves as the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support Teacher in Ventura, California and Lecturer at California State University Channel Islands. She creates trans-disciplinary, project-based units in Spanish and English that encourage students to promote peace with themselves, each other, and the planet. Danna's recognitions include: Earth Charter Summit Award, PBS Innovation Award, Fulbright Teacher Award, AAUW Career Development Grant, and 2018 Excellence in Teaching Award from Teaching Tolerance. Danna believes that peace education must lead to action.

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