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**Prospectus, August 2018**

***Exploring Culture Through an English Learner’s Lens***

**Introduction**

I am an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher at George Read Middle School in New Castle, Delaware, which is in the Colonial School District. George Read is a Title 1 (Title 1, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act) school--nearly 41% of its 775 students are identified as being low-income. Almost 9% of the student population are English Learners (ELs), with Spanish being the first language of the majority of them. In addition, over one-quarter of George Read’s students are Hispanic, and a high percentage of those students are bilingual in Spanish and English.

The EL students I see are those with intermediate to high English skills who are placed in the same section of an ELA class in 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. I usually have about 15 ELs in each section of those classes, and I also service some 6th and 7th grade ELs who are identified as Special Ed, and who have been placed in a Special Ed ELA class. I typically service about 50 ELs each year in grades 6-8. A few of the students I service have been transitioned out of the “Newcomer” EL program for middle school students in the Colonial School District that is housed at McCullough Middle School and taught by my ESL colleague. Students in grades 6-8 who are new immigrants or migrant students with limited English proficiency (as identified by the WIDA Screener for English proficiency) are recommended to the Newcomer program at McCullough, regardless of their district feeder middle school. They are in a sheltered classroom all day for all content areas that are taught in English, and are not transitioned out into mainstream classes or back to their feeder middle schools until their English test scores have risen, and they demonstrate the academic, social, and emotional skills that would indicate success in the general school population. This upcoming academic year, I know of at least three former McCullough Newcomer students who will be in my classes at George Read.

Students at George Read come from diverse backgrounds and face many challenges in their school and home environments. My ELs come from an array of countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico and the Caribbean, and though most are conversationally bilingual, they grapple with the increasing rigor of academic English and the demands of state and English proficiency tests. Many of them struggle to express themselves verbally and through writing, and their WIDA ACCESS writing and speaking scores are often what keeps them in the EL program.

**Rationale**

Many of my ELs have been taught to forego cultural traditions in favor of assimilating to life in the United States. They wrestle with learning to navigate American cultural and educational expectations, and how to connect and fuse that with their established cultural principles. Several of my students already work in family businesses during the school year and summer vacations, and have expressed that they will not need to continue their secondary educations to continue working for their families. For example, it is very difficult for them to see how academic speech and writing a thesis and supporting details will aid them in the future. Additionally, gender roles and opportunities in the United States can wildly vary from students’ established family attitudes and positions.

Even students who are second-generation immigrants have difficulty navigating familial and cultural perceptions with American ones. My ELs possess such a rich range of expertise on ethnography, cultural codes, and societal roles, of which they are unaware; their experience has been that they are “*limited* English proficient” and deficient in the academic learningand standards (especially writing) that are required of them in the United States. I can only imagine how surprised they would be to have me tell them that they will get a chance to be educators in a unit, and drive some of the curriculum. I think it would be so interesting to sit down with them and have them share their experiences with me as I demonstrated some aspects of the ethnographic approach.

My hope is that my students will be motivated to come to class and work on a unit of study and writing project, and get a chance to express themselves and explore their communities and families. Many of my ELs come from immigrant families who have been separated from their cultures and backgrounds in an effort to fully acclimate to life in their new country. Often, students are conditioned not to talk about their native countries and cultures or to ask their family members questions. I find that many of my students--especially those who are newest to the United States--really struggle with behavioral and societal norms and bridging what they knew in their native countries to the reality of their current situations.

I would like to create a curriculum unit with my students that is a hybrid between a visual and writing project in which they share their feelings about life in their new country; the union of the two mediums would mirror the cultural synthesis the students must undertake daily. Possible anchor questions could be:

* What was strange or surprising to you about the United States? What are some things that Americans do that you do not understand? What is an American custom that is very different from one in your country?
* What are some things you do to feel more connected to your native country? What do you miss the most about life there? If you could blend the best aspects of both countries, what would they be, and why?
* How does your family try to stay connected to your culture? Is it hard to find the products (such as food) that are most like those in your native country?
* How does social media here compare to what exists in your native country? How have you used it to connect to both populations?

**Resources**

I plan to use excerpts from the following nonfiction books:

* Reyna Grande, *The Distance Between Us* (memoir). Grande tells of her impoverished childhood in Mexico and how she came to the United States as an illegal immigrant.
* *Outcasts United: The Story of a Refugee Soccer Team that Changed a Town* by Walter St. John, a tale of a soccer team made up of recently arrived immigrant boys in a town outside Atlanta.
* *The Arriva*l by Shaun Tan, which is a wordless graphic novel about the immigrant experience. I feel this book would be a good example of how students could integrate art and visuals into their projects.

**Standards**

This year in eighth grade, some of the standards and essential questions students will be expected to learn include:

* *How do I identify the connections and distinctions an author makes between individuals and events in a historical text?*

*Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories). Make inferences and draw conclusions about information in the text.*

* *How will summarizing a story help me to discuss it adequately?*

*Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.*

* *Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing, as well as to interact and collaborate with others.*

By reading and discussing these three selections, students will learn to make connections between the environment, culture and viewpoints that existed when the books were written, and how those factors may have impacted characters’ actions. They will also draw conclusions and make inferences about how today’s political outlook on immigration is affecting their feelings or families’ choices.

Thoughtful and respectful class discussions are an integral part of eighth grade ELA classes, as students prepare to increasingly work on group projects and have partners in high school. They are expected to learn how to conduct discourse in a civil, considerate manner, even when they may disagree with a classmate. Students will be discussing and exchanging views on each other’s projects during the writing process, and will need to learn to do so thoughtfully and politely.