

Social Studies for Alternate School, grade 8 and 9 – Homelessness

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Engaging the students who have failed, repeatedly, to find success (in all its forms) at regular high school is a daunting task. Choosing curriculum when some have almost finished grade 8 or 9 Social Studies when they come to us - and others have never heard the word *Renaissance* is extra daunting. I often go “off road”.

Homelessness is quite visible in our small city outside Vancouver, BC, and Canada has a tradition of making the concerns and issues of homelessness visible every February with *Toque Tuesday*. This is a day when toques are sold to benefit the programs of the **Raising the Roof** society which tackles homelessness politically and on the front lines. And, how many times have I heard teenagers denigrate a “homeless guy”, “a bum”, “a druggie”, and so on? It seems like an engaging topic. But how to link it to curriculum.

And, what is the *real* story that is being told in an exploration of homelessness? What is the heroic quality? What are the images, the limits and extremes? Homelessness lends itself to an Imaginative Education *Romantic framework* for planning.

The binary opposites that I started with were free will and fate, personal agency and victimhood, personal failing versus political failing. The heroic qualities depend on whether we land on the free will, personal agency, personal failing side or if we understand homelessness as determined by events outside the individual's control in which the homeless are victims of political, and perhaps social and parental failing. The heroic qualities we explored were determination, survival, compassion, and doing the right thing.

Images of the homeless abound and I included those from around the globe.

We discussed the definition of homelessness, questioned whether or not “couch surfing” qualified as homeless, whether living in a permanent slum dwelling in India qualified as homeless. Once defined to our satisfaction we did individual and small class webs to explore the reasons for homelessness. They included both personal inadequacies, political malfeasance, and both compassion and blame.

The following class I handed out pieces of a world map. I had loosely cut out continents as well as India and China separately. Without aid of “ocean” pieces small groups were to reconstruct a world map from the pieces and label anything they could – without reference to an atlas. Many of these grade 8 and 9 students are quite naive about political geography. We moved quickly to reorganizing with the aid of atlases, spent some time discussing how to use an atlas, and made guesses about which countries might have the highest homeless populations.

This is a bit of a trick because the easiest figures to find are numbers of people but that doesn't allow a relative comparison without doing some Math and finding percentages. We were also able to observe photos of homelessness and discuss the extremes and limits, deciding that cold climates and drug addiction were the worst extreme of homelessness.

Spontaneously, the students asked if there was something we could do to alleviate some of the suffering as it was winter (in a cold climate) and there are many visible addicts on our streets – some known to, or related to, the students. We explored the **Raising the Roof** initiatives (<http://www.raisingtheroof.org>) with the intention of participating in *Toque Tuesday*. There was also

suggestion that we do some baking and hand out cupcakes or brownies. We are still finalizing our plans.

The next part of the lesson needed a change of context and some individual research. For each of the 10 countries with the highest percentages of homelessness and 5 countries with little homelessness, students chose one to research in terms of form of government and economics, and who is expected to respond to homelessness and poverty (government programs, church, family, charities, etc.) For those who wished to go a little further they were asked to record and comment on any innovative responses to homelessness that they found. Information was shared.

Forms of government became our next topic of conversation with the question of whether or not democracies or monarchies or socialism or capitalism (and other more specific categories) seemed to coincide with higher rates of homelessness. For a group of students who wouldn't sit still normally for a definition of monarchy we were able to discuss and explain many types of governance models.

Finally, we discussed how homelessness might best be addressed politically, drew conclusions about the responsibility of the individual and the government, and began our *Toque Tuesday* and baking plans in earnest. Students showed what they learned by completing a simple map exercise showing the countries we'd discussed, type of governance, and an icon to indicate level of problem with homelessness. They also had a choice to write a lengthy (for them), well-crafted letter to a politician of their choice or to write in role as either a homeless person or a politician to show their understanding of both sides of the issue.