

Enhancing Education Through Creative Instruction and Student-designed Projects

Clare Meehan

Community and Restorative Justice internship (Spring 2021)

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About the Alliance and the Community and Restorative Justice Project

The Alliance for Sustainable Communities–Lehigh Valley is a nonprofit organization that focuses on a wide variety of environmental and social justice issues that contribute to more-sustainable communities. Based in Bethlehem, PA, the Alliance has been active since 2003 and offers summer, fall, and spring internships to college students in the area to work on projects with the aim of creating a more sustainable Lehigh Valley.

This spring, Clare Meehan (Lafayette College '21) and Nadia Manasfi (Lafayette College '23), researched the justice system and developed proposals and future project directions for pathways to a more just and equitable justice system.

Previous interns have tackled projects such as Climate Action Planning for the Lehigh Valley, Sustainability Practices for Independent Cafés and Restaurants, Brewing Sustainability (sustainability for the craft brewing industry), Sustainability Impact Assessments, Interdisciplinary Teaching on Climate and Sustainability, Healthy Food for Healthy Communities, Campus Sustainability (various), and Sustainability in Healthcare.

Introduction

As a graduating college student, I'm at a time in my life where I am constantly reflecting on my childhood and life thus far. I often am thinking back, grateful for the instilled values of education and learning my parents and life created. I grew up in the upper middle class, majority white town of Farmington, CT, known for its schools and friendliness to families. I never questioned my education. School was easy for me, and I enjoyed it. It was not until I reached college that I began to wonder to what extent I was the product of Farmington. My education feels like it was incomplete and misleading, as it is in so many schools.

There are countless experiences I now look back on and question. There may not have been any intention to be racist, culturally appropriate, or insensitive, but that was absolutely the outcome. Students learn a hegemonic perspective of America. They learn the good side, the side that white males have written, and we are not taught to question that. Something as simple as a teacher pointing out the author of our textbook would have perhaps led me to have a lightbulb go off about the problematic nature of learning today.

Our world, and specifically the United States, is facing various challenges and crises. Knowing where to start and what to work on is a daunting task, one that can at times feel overwhelming and pessimistic. I started with three interests—the criminal justice system, policing, and education. As I looked further into how these problems can be corrected, I chose to focus on curriculum and creative teaching in schools.

The Criminal Justice System

As of March 2020, the American criminal justice system holds almost 2.3 million people in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention centers, and 80 Indian Country jails.¹ There are also other places people are detained, like military prisons, civil commitment centers, psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in U.S. territories. The scale of incarceration is now nearly eight times the historic average and the highest in the world.

In addition to the massively high numbers, the prison system has huge social and economic disparities, and these disparities follow ex-cons throughout their lives. It becomes intergenerational, interfamilial, and yet invisible. The invisible—ignored and not discussed—institutionalized inequality has renewed and amplified race and class disadvantages. As of 2010, African Americans were seven times more likely to be in prison or jail than whites.² Serving time in prison or jail diminishes social and economic opportunities.

Northampton County jail presents several issues. There are disparities with gender in the jails, with correctional officers, mishaps with medication, misplacements of women, mental health concerns, and lacking reentry programs. Mealtimes for women are extremely odd—they have breakfast as early as four AM, lunch at 10 AM, and dinner at three PM. Mental health in the jails is also a concern, because jails are not designed to accommodate or treat mental health problems. Some inmates would be better served in a rehabilitation program, outpatient therapy, or an inpatient psychiatric facility. The United States has been “reforming” the criminal justice system for decades, yet there remains widespread racial, socioeconomic, and gender inequities, as well as lacking programs and the fulfillment of basic necessities within jails. According to one person who has worked within the prison, the jail is there to “monitor, not to help or improve” inmates’ mental health. Northampton county jail has no effective trauma-informed practices, and there is an unbelievably tedious process for grants and funding for any mental health programs.

Lehigh and Northampton Counties have implemented programs. Certain programs like Leaving Jail exist, however they are not being properly executed, and are therefore ineffective.

The Lehigh Valley Justice Institute promotes a reimagined criminal justice system, one that is equitable and fair for all. LVJI is a newer organization, and they are in the research phase of their three-step process. Over the next two to three years, they will be doing a deep dive study of criminal justice systems in Lehigh Valley and Northampton County. They plan to investigate probation, parole, reentry programs, and are conducting

in-person visits and interviews with incarcerated people. One of their committees is dedicated to researching, developing policy, and advocating for a no cash bail. Cash bails have been compared to a criminalization of poverty.

Schools and Values-based Learning

High and rising inequality is a pressing economic and societal issue in the United States. Our education system is supposed to compensate for these inequities, and provide children with a more level playing field. However, this is not the case. Social class is a predominant factor in determining the educational success of children. Researchers have determined that performance gaps take root in the early years of life, and then fail to narrow in the years that follow.³ Thus far, we have failed to minimize the social-class-based skills gaps.

What is the fundamental purpose of a school? Is it to create workers? Is it to develop active citizens, build character, and foster personal achievement? Of course, we would hope this is the case, however, schools often have a ranking or tracking system of some sort, which fosters competition, and creates increased amounts of stress and pressure on students. Standardized testing is more in line with a mission to create workers and rank students.

School districts compete with each other as well. Success is based on numbers— who has the best test scores, the most graduates, the most students meeting competence standards on state tests, etc. Schools and students are evaluated based on results in math, literacy, and science. This practice—inherently deemphasizes the arts, social studies, mental health, and free time.

Although schools do not often state that their mission is to create successful workers for a capitalist system, their practices often do just that. If a school's mission is to help students become active citizens and follow their passions, the organization and curriculum would need to change. Unfortunately, the government sets standards and requires students to take standardized tests. The Every Student Succeeds Act requires states to have students tested in reading and math once a year in grades three through eight, and once in high school.⁴ States also have to publicly report test results and other measures of student achievement and school success. If a school does not meet the state's standards, penalties are introduced. Ultimately, test scores are measured by scores on tests.

I believe that our education system has been hijacked by numbers and politicians. An education should help a student grow as a human, academically, and socially. Many argue here that the purpose should be to "help grow American citizens"—however in today's society, that is hard to define. What does it mean to be an American citizen? The past decade has shed light on the ugly side of America—racist and uneducated on our nation's history—and its deeply embedded roots. What do we want for our children?

This is where a values-based education becomes that much more important. A school's values should be based around growing educated, anti-racist, kind, hard-working, thoughtful, empathetic human beings. Of course, this list is not all-inclusive. Ask not "how successful is this student/school" and instead, "how is this student/school successful?"

Bethlehem Area School District⁵

I chose to look at this school district due to my proximity to it as well as its unique demographics, with minority enrollment in the high schools of 55%. The Bethlehem Area School District [BASD] includes two high schools—Liberty and Freedom. BASD's mission statement, states:

The Bethlehem Area School District, in partnership with the home and community, is committed to providing a safe and supportive environment in which each student will attain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become a productive citizen and life-long learner in our technologically demanding and culturally diverse society.

It goes on to say:

The job of the Bethlehem Area School District is to graduate students who are college and career ready... The 21st Century high school is about more than just the acquisition of credits. Students should begin planning for their post-secondary success even before they enter high school.

These two statements seem to contradict each other. BASD recognizes the value of building productive citizens, but they continue to place a huge emphasis on numerical values and success rates. Many students graduating college still do not have a clear career pathway, and that is okay — career paths can be nonlinear. The idea that students should be planning for their future before they are 14 years old seems extreme and privileged.

According to the BASD program of studies, they are working hard to move beyond standardized test scores. At this point in time, however, they still hold great importance. This document lists six factors to measure success:

- % Proficient / Advanced on PSSA/Keystone Exams
- Meeting Annual growth Expectations (PVAAS)
- English Language Proficiency
- Graduation Rate
- Career Standards / Readiness
- Chronic Absenteeism

This document goes over an extensive amount of information, from course descriptions, to the community service requirements and career exploration timelines. BASD has great ideas, but implementing anything new, can take a long time. The United States' culture needs a change, which of course is a sweeping statement. It is hard to say how that can happen, and who needs to do what, however, I believe that one way this can begin is through education and a change in curriculum. Curriculum is one way to spearhead a generational shift in the way people think and feel about various topics. Currently, despite the goal of building productive citizens, public schools are failing their students and the global world. Even a forward-thinking district like Bethlehem is still tied to those six factors that are supposed to measure success.

Proposal for Change

In an ideal world, the education system in the United States would be completely reworked. However, in a realistic world, we can start fixing our schools from the inside out. Administrators, school boards, and communities all play crucial roles in the development of their schools. The hiring process for teachers, the expectations and goals for teachers, as well as the accepted curriculum and lack of creativity are all changeable factors.

Where can we start? How can we implement change for our children? Creativity in the classroom is vital. Within the existing curriculum standards, teachers can use various pose questions, raise awareness, and help their students grow into global citizens with an awareness of inequities, privilege, and of the need for a cultural shift. In an art class, for example, teachers can propose a project involving social justice, directing their students to create a work depicting an important historical (or contemporary) figure, and write an artist statement reflecting their research and thoughts. In English classes, teachers can have students read and reflect on books on thought-provoking topics as opposed to the common *Of Mice and Men* and *Lord of the Flies*. Independent reading and reports could focus on social justice topics. In history classes, use books that are not from hegemonic perspectives. Geography courses could trace First American history and the impacts of colonialism. Music classes can intentionally choose to use arrangements and instruments from other cultures. Gym classes can teach more than just the box step, and instead go through dance in a cultur-

al manner, learning its origins and its meaning. This could be done in various ways: videos, bringing a local community member in to demonstrate, or using students from other cultures.

There are countless ways different subjects can honor different cultures and teach students from a global perspective. There are ways to teach within the standards if we just employ creativity and a bit more effort.

Based on my own public school education, I know that there are gaps and places that creative curriculum can fit into. There were independent research projects, days where we watched movies, homeroom periods and service projects, to name just a few. School districts, administrators, and teachers can implement creativity into the classroom to enrich the education of their students. Why aren't more of them doing this today?

Implementation of Ideas

As I thought about my experiences in education, I began to wonder how to open up questions about historical narratives, curriculum, and students' education. The education system has seen many changes in the last 50 years – but not much has changed in terms of what they teach. Although I cannot change the curriculum or change the way we approach education as a nation, I can question and start small. I can present a problem to students outside of their curriculum mandates and see how they respond. A project can open their eyes to experiential learning, giving them an opportunity to craft their own ideas and way to learn. I have created several project proposals for high school students, all formed around an effort to promote and campaign for change, social or political.

My ultimate goal and vision would be to have every high school student complete projects such as these, however, it may start as a couple of passionate students.

In public schools, there is usually time towards the end of the year. AP exams typically are given in early May, and other exams usually closer to the end of the year. Either way, there is some flexibility. These last few weeks are usually filled with movies, final projects, and teachers have to create something for the students to do. The projects I have designed are aimed to get students to think about their learning, why they are learning it, and how it is constructed. They are examples, and students and teachers can use them as a guide to create their own.

Project #1: Designed for Activism

As a high school student, you've most likely learned some history of the United States, how to solve for x , and how to write a solid essay. This was most likely dictated by your teachers, and their teachers, and federal standards. In this project, you will determine your own learning. Choose what you want to learn more about, and then create a service project dedicated to a local social justice issue. For example, you could look into a problematic monument that's still standing, gentrification, food deserts, access to community sports fields, and more—find something that you are passionate about and work to create a solution. The goal is to help you understand your position in your own community, as well as raise awareness and create a change. The final project could be an art project, a piece of writing in any form, music, a short film—your choice. Be creative!

Essential Understanding: What steps can help resolve a current social issue in your community?

Project #2: Focus on US History

Have you ever wondered about the historical narrative you were taught, and who constructed the class, determined the textbooks to use, the movies to watch, etc.? Why did you learn about the Marshall Plan, but not the Tulsa massacre or the coups the United States government orchestrated throughout Latin America? This project is designed to help you determine what your course did not cover in US History, and then think about what you learned that wasn't taught in the regular class? Then create a presentation for the Board of Education explaining the history of the event, who was affected, the main players (i.e., countries, political leaders), the aftermath, and why it may not have been included in the curriculum. What was the role of the

US government? What steps did US actors take at the time? How has the government responded or mitigated the situation since? How has this affected communities and people?

Essential Understanding: How is your historical narrative of the United States distorted? Why are things the way they are?

Project #3: Incorporating the Criminal Justice System

Many Lehigh Valley students are affected by the criminal justice system, whether directly or indirectly. In this project, you'll have the opportunity to learn about the experiences of formerly incarcerated women through a film about inmates in Northampton County jail and a program called The Journey Home that gathers their stories, their writing, and their art. At the end of the program, you will create a reflection piece to convey what you have learned, what you are still interested in, and questions you may have.

Proposal #4: An Ideal World with Infinite Resources

There is more to the United States than most people realize. We often think we have to travel outside our country to experience other cultures and their languages and art. There are 350 languages spoken in the US,⁶ 11 distinct cultures (which function like their own nations) in North America, and five regions.⁷ As defined by author and journalist Colin Woodward, the nations of North America are the left coast, the far west, el norte, the midlands, the greater appalachia, the deep south, tidewater, new netherland, yankeedom, first nation, and new france..

In a one to two week program, high school students will have the opportunity to work with Borderlands Produce Rescue, an organization dedicated to reducing food waste on the Arizona-Mexico border. While students are there, they will see the town's intersection with the bordering country of Mexico. They will also have the opportunity to visit the border, seeing the juxtaposition of barbed wire intertwined with handmade paper airplanes. This opportunity is most likely only possible in a private institution or with a grant and scholarship possibilities.

To make this project more realistic and accessible, it could be done without traveling to Borderlands. Students could raise money for the organization, zoom with the leaders, and learn about the project through a research project.

Resources for High School Classrooms:

In addition to the work previous intern Sarah Bender completed in the Summer of 2020,⁸ I have compiled another resource list specific to high school students. Below is a list of books, movies, and other resources. These helped me educate myself and grow—not only as a student but also as a human being. I chose these books and movies because they directly confront history. They offer various perspectives that deal with several critical issues—race and equity matters, civil rights and justice issues, and mental health concerns. Although not all-encompassing, I believe these resources provide a solid jumping-off point for educators, students, administrators, and readers. Keep in mind that some of these resources have been criticized in different ways. As a learner, read and watch with a critical eye. Ask why they are created and for whom, and try to understand the multiple perspectives in each.

Books

The Poet X, by Elizabeth Acevedo

Xiomara is a 15 year-old living in Harlem, NY, with a religious mother from the Dominican Republic. This book is told through free verse slam poetry, and tells the story of a teen working through understanding religion and her relationship with the world.

Punching the Air, by Ibi Zoboi and Yusef Salaam

Written by one of the Exonerated Five members and Ibi Zoboi, this book tells the story of a talented young boy put away for a crime he did not commit. It begins just before the jury's sentence of several years in prison, and describes experiences with the police, court, jail, and more.

Brown Girl Dreaming, by Jacqueline Woodson

Told in verse, this is a memoir that follows the childhood of the author from her birth in 1963 until she was around ten years old. This was during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

All American Boys, by Jason Reynolds

This book follows two narratives, one Black teenager and one White, both grappling with the aftermath of witnessing a violent crime. Rashad was assaulted by a white cop, and Quinn witnessed it. It follows both boys' thoughts and traces their growth through a multi-perspective book.

And Still We Rise, by Miles Corwin

Dealing with systemic poverty and affirmative action, Corwin worked with 12 inner-city high school seniors who were deemed gifted due to their test scores and IQ levels. He recounts their experiences and obstacles as students working through a challenging environment.

Braiding Sweetgrass, by Robin Wall Kimmerer

The author teaches at the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science & Forestry and is a member of the Potawatomi Nation, and she believes that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. She reflects on the state of the world today, argues that we need to acknowledge and celebrate our reciprocal relationship with the living world, and shows us how Indigenous knowledge can guide us.

Oak Flat, by Lauren Redniss

This shows the continuous fight between the San Carlos Apaches and Resolution Copper. Redniss pulls from oral history, legal opinions, anthropological accounts, corporate news releases, as well as her own artwork to share this story.

I Am Not your Perfect Mexican Daughter, by Erika L. Sanchez

When Julia's sister, Olga, dies, Julia is left to fill her role as the "perfect" daughter. This coming-of-age story follows Julia's journey to find more out about her sister, her family, and deals with pressure and expectation, as well as the stereotypes of a Mexican-American home.

A Burning, by Megha Majumdar

Jivan is a Muslim girl who is accused of executing a terrorist attack due to one careless Facebook comment. PT Sir is a gym teacher whose aspirations are hitched to a right-wing political party. Their stories intertwine and connect in unexpected ways. This book deals with corruption, justice, dealing with obstacles, and hope.

You're Welcome, Universe, by Whitney Gardner

Julia, an Indian-American Deaf teen, decided to cover up a slur about her best friend with a graffiti mural. She is then expelled and sent to a mainstream school (i.e., not specialized for the Deaf), and finds herself an outcast. She turns to her art, and continues creating graffiti. She never imagined getting dragged into a graffiti war. This book deals with ableism, individuality, and resilience.

Watch us Rise, by Ellen Hagan and Renee Watson

This book explores feminism and intersectionality, breaking down core concepts and key figures in a creative and easy-to-understand way for readers. Two girls decide to start a Women's Rights Club, and their story goes viral. They risk everything for their voices to be heard, sharing their artistic works online, their experiences with racial microaggressions, and more.

Amal Unbound, by Aisha Saeed

Amal has a dream of being a teacher in her Pakistani village, but after an incident, is forced to work as a servant to pay off her family's debt. This book deals with resistance and justice, while also dealing with the issue of indentured servitude.

Lily and Dunkin, by Donna Gephart

Lily is a transgender girl and Dunkin is a boy dealing with bipolar disorder. This book follows the friendship that blooms between the two, and explores mental illness, bullying, family strife, and being different.

Etched in Sand, by Regina Calcaterra

This memoir recounts Regina and her siblings' experience in the foster-care system as children. It deals with the abusive and painful childhood they faced, and how they came out of it stronger.

Films

12 Years a Slave | 2 hours, 14 minutes

Solomon Northup, a free Black man from upstate NY, is abducted and sold into slavery.

Hidden Figures | 2 hours, 7 minutes

The story of a team of female African-American mathematicians who served a vital role in NASA during the early years of the U.S. space program.

When the Mountains Tremble | 1 hour, 30 minutes

A documentary on the war between the Guatemalan military and the Mayan population, following the story of Rigoberta Menchu, Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Finding Oscar | 1 hour, 40 minutes

About the search for justice in the devastating case of the Dos Erres massacre in Guatemala. The search leads to the discovery of two boys who offer the only living evidence tying the Guatemalan government to the massacre.

Hotel Rwanda | 2 hours, 2 minutes

Paul Rusesabagina, a hotel manager, houses over a thousand Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia in Rwanda, Africa.

First They Killed my Father | 2 hours, 16 minutes

Derived from the 2000 non-fiction book written by Loung Ung, a Cambodian author and childhood survivor of Democratic Kampuchea. It is her personal account of her experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Green Book | 2 hours, 10 minutes

A working-class Italian-American bouncer becomes the driver of an African-American classical pianist on a tour of venues through the 1960s American South.

The Hate U Give | 2 hours, 13 minutes

Starr witnesses the fatal shooting of her childhood best friend Khalil at the hands of a police officer. Now, facing pressure from all sides of the community, Starr must find her voice and stand up for what's right.

The Trial of the Chicago 7 | 2 hours, 10 minutes

The story of 7 people on trial stemming from various charges surrounding the uprising at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Illinois.

13th | 1 hour, 40 minutes

An in-depth look at the prison system in the United States and how it reveals the nation's history of racial inequality.

Rikers: An American Jail | 1 hour, 10 minutes

This documentary follows the stories of men and women who have been incarcerated at Rikers Island. They describe the cruel arc of the Rikers experience - from the entry, to the extortion and control of other inmates, oppressive officers, beatings and violence, the types of torture endured, and the reentry to the outside world.

Just Mercy | 2 hours, 17 minutes

An American biographical legal drama film, this follows the story of civil rights defense attorney Bryan Stevenson working to free a wrongly condemned death row prisoner. This film conveys injustices as well as justice and how intangible they truly are.

Inside / Outside | 1 hour, 34 minutes

This documentary goes over women and mass incarceration in the US and the struggles they face with sexual assault, substance abuse, and motherhood. It takes place at a Lehigh Valley county jail.

Somebody's Daughter | 2 hours

This film sheds light on the MMIW crisis (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women). It tells the stories of victims and their families through the lens of a legal jurisdictional maze and socio-economic bondage that constricts Indian Country. It shows the roles of drug cartels and gangs in the MMIW crisis.

Wind River | 1 hour, 50 minutes

Taking place on a Wyoming Native American reservation, an FBI agent teams up with a game tracker with deep community ties and a haunted past to investigate the killing of a local girl. Mature audiences. Trigger alert: sexual violence.

Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee | 2 hours, 13 minutes

A historic chronicle based on the book by Dee Brown explains how Native Americans were displaced as the United States expanded west.

Central Park 5 | 2 hours

Tells the story of the five black and Latino teenagers from Harlem who were wrongly convicted of raping a white woman in New York City's Central Park in 1989. The film chronicles The Central Park Jogger case, for the first time from the perspective of these five teenagers whose lives were upended by this miscarriage of justice.

Websites and Additional Resources

Rethinking Schools

Rethinking Schools is a nonprofit organization that wants to integrate social justice and activism teaching. Their goal is to create a foundation for the education system that emphasizes diverse learnings, and experiences.

Trying Together

This website focuses on early childhood education. It talks about ideas on how to incorporate antiracist teachings starting at a young age. The website is about how to educate young students while emphasizing the importance of community engagement, advocacy and social justice.

Zinn Education Project

Similar to Trying Together, this project's goal is to make sure the materials taught in history are accurate and taught from different perspectives. The website includes resources for different grade levels and history topics. They also have suggested classroom activities.

Teaching for Change

This website provides teachers and parents with the tools to create schools where students learn to read, write, and change the world. They connect to real world issues, aiming to build a more equitable and multicultural society through having their teachers and students question and re-think the world insight and outside the classroom.

TED Talks

Geoffrey Canada: Our Failing Schools. Enough is Enough

Linda Cliatt-Waymann: How to fix a broken school? Lead fearlessly, love hard

Endnotes

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