New UNH Exhibit Showcases Cultural Exchange Between N.H. Elementary School Students

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DURHAM, N.H. – They come from different backgrounds and experiences, but two groups of New Hampshire elementary school students have learned how much they have in common after participating in an art-based literacy project through the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy at the University of New Hampshire that allowed them to share their family’s immigration stories.

“The project was designed to foster mutual understanding and respect between students new to this country and longtime residents,” said Beth Olshansky, director of the Center for the Advancement of Art-Based Literacy. “The art-based literacy process was a fabulous way to immediately engage all students while offering a universal language for English speakers and English language learners alike to record and share their family story.”

The project, “Our Stories in Pictures and Words: Immigration Past and Present,” will be featured in an exhibit on the third floor of the UNH Memorial Union Building. A reception for the opening of the exhibit and a presentation on the project will be held Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2012, noon to 1 p.m. in MUB Room 302. The exhibit and reception are free and open to the public.

The event will feature a short film that captures recent immigrant and refugee students sharing their poignant stories in pictures and words. Olshansky discuss the rich learning that occurred when the two groups of students came together to create their stories.

The project involved students from Webster Elementary School’s English Language Learner (ELL) Magnet Program in Manchester and Moharimet School in Madbury. Each student created a book about their family’s immigration story. Many students from Webster Elementary School are recent immigrants while third-graders from Moharimet School delved into their ancestor’s journey to America long ago.

The exhibit provides a glimpse into the lives of New Hampshire’s recent immigrants such as Ayat, an 11-year-old student at Webster Elementary School who emigrated from Iraq in 2010. “I am so sad to leave Iraq, even with the fighting and the people dying. I am crying because I leave my home, my friends. My country was beautiful before the war. I hope in America, there is no more fighting, no more guns,” wrote the student, who drew a photo of an airplane leaving Iraq.

Then there are stories from students whose families came to America long ago, such as Evan, a third-grader from Moharimet School whose ancestors emigrated from England in 1621. “We sailed on a ship called The Fortune. The bright setting sun sank behind us. Water crashed against our sturdy brown boat. The sails rippled in the strong breeze. I was lonesome and sad. I was leaving my friends and my home. I was leaving England.”

As Moharimet students researched and shared tales of their family’s journey to America, they discovered that “we are a nation of immigrants, and that the bravery and courage of their ancestors is why they are here today,” Olshansky said. Students from Webster School’s ELL Program discovered that almost everyone in America came from somewhere else at one point in time. This helped them to feel more at home in their new country.

The exhibit grew out of a cultural exchange between two diverse classroom communities designed to foster mutual understanding and respect among students from different cultural backgrounds. Forty-four students participated in the exchange, which was conceived by Moharimet Principal Dennis Harrington.

Webster Elementary School resides in Manchester, a national center for refugee resettlement. More than 70 languages are spoken in Manchester schools.
Through the process of creating their own books, students became engaged in recording their family’s immigration story and realized they had an important story to tell. They discovered that while their native countries, cultures, and languages varied greatly, their stories shared many commonalities, including tales of hardship, courage, resilience, and hope.

“We really wanted to make sure that it was an exchange -- the Webster student could feel more welcomed and our students to develop some sensitivity to those children’s stories. For our students, one way to accomplish that was to explore their own ancestor’s immigration stories and to look for the similarities,” Susan O’Byrne, a teacher at Moharimet School.

Students used the Image-Making Within The Writing Process, an art-based approach to literacy learning developed by Olshansky, to construct a sequence of collage images fashioned out of hand-painted papers. Each sequence of images depicted their family’s immigration story. The students then developed a written narrative for their stories.

“It really does facilitate the writing process and learning that way. If you are working with two groups who are unfamiliar with each other, the art becomes the common language,” Donna Papanikolau, teacher at the Webster Elementary School ELL Magnet Program.

For more information about the exhibit and presentation, contact Liz Arcieri at 603-862-3691 or email eja@unh.edu.

PHOTOS

Ayat, an 11-year-old student at Webster Elementary School, created a picture depicting his family leaving Iraq in 2010. [http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Ayat.jpg](http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Ayat.jpg)

Evan, a third-grader from Moharimet School, created a picture depicting his ancestors emigrating to America from England in 1621. [http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Evan.jpg](http://www.unh.edu/news/img/Evan.jpg)

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