What’s happening around the network

We’ve cancelled the flight!

As we approached our *Where we are in place and time* unit of inquiry; ‘Lifestyle is determined by the location in which we live’, my Year 1 teaching partner and I felt an impending sense of dread. We had both done this unit together in the previous year and upon reflection we felt it was not one that we, or more importantly, our students, were able to truly connect with.

Let me paint you a picture. Last year we had begun the unit by creating an airport and aeroplane in our classrooms. The students entered on the first morning of term and then we were off on a pseudo ‘journey’ around the world for the next 10 weeks.

Many teachers of junior classes will be finding this a familiar sounding scenario as I have encountered the exact same type of unit in many classrooms at different PYP schools. It is most certainly an enjoyable unit when done in this manner. The students enjoy a wide variety of crafts, multicultural dress-ups, foods and the busy colouring in of flags throughout the following weeks. We invited a host of enthusiastic parents in to share their own cultural backgrounds (cue in more food!).

Although we all enjoyed the sharing of cultural food, craft and parent involvement, we began to wonder if we were really delivering an inquiry unit or rather an extended thematic ‘show and tell’ experience. Firstly, we have a relatively affluent student population, many of whom have had opportunities to travel around the world in real life as opposed to on our imaginary plane. Many of them had experienced other cultures themselves on many occasions. How authentic and meaningful would our visits to 10 countries in 10 weeks be for them? What were they gaining from our classroom journey?

We ultimately felt that the unit had become tokenistic and was simply ticking the multicultural boxes without really engaging the students in any valuable inquiry. It was time to critically re-assess our planning document and look for connections between our central idea and summative assessment. We also needed to seriously look at our lines of inquiry and whether they truly reflected our chosen concepts. Armed with last year’s reflection, we had a series of collaborative meetings with our PYP coordinator and specialist staff.

During these meetings we decided to adapt one of our lines of inquiry to read ‘an inquiry into the lifestyles and opportunities of young girls around the world’. This particular line of inquiry would prove to be a game changer. It reflected our concept of ‘connection’ strongly. We teach Year 1 girls and felt that exploring the lifestyles of children of their own gender and age would resonate with them in a meaningful way.

Choosing to inquire into the lives of only girls was an interesting idea that our team grappled with during our discussions and planning. Ultimately, we felt that the lifestyles and opportunities of girls and boys are different around the world and this was something worth exploring. As our inquiry progressed it allowed many opportunities to compare and contrast the lives of girls and boys from a variety of countries.

To kick off the unit of inquiry, rather than the traditional ‘plane journey’ experience, we gave each girl a holiday task. Each girl was to create a way of presenting five elements of her own ‘lifestyle’ to the class in the first week back after the holidays. The presentation style was open and we enjoyed seeing how the girls interpreted this task in a diverse range of ways.

This tuning in task was an invaluable activity. Lifestyle is a key word in our central idea and most certainly a related concept for this unit. The girls’ presentations really helped us to unpack the concept of what a lifestyle means and also gave us a very clear direction for the inquiry.
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Some girls made posters, others shared photos or used the interactive whiteboard to show a PowerPoint. During the week that each girl presented, we made a list of each element they believed represented their own lifestyles. A small selection of examples included family, play, sport, friends, travel, celebrations, school, clubs and special places such as the beach.

Later in the unit we studied a simplified version of the Rights of a child together. Using the list of the elements our classes considered represented their lifestyles and the Rights of a child, we then worked in small groups to split the list into needs and wants. This formed the 'hook' for getting the girls to write their own wonderings or student questions to guide the inquiry.

Already the girls were engaged. The student wonderings were clear evidence that they were connecting with the central idea and in particular our line of inquiry into the lifestyles and opportunities of girls around the world. Some girls wanted to know what school was like for girls in other countries. Others wanted to know what sorts of sports and games they played. We were pleased to notice some students wondering if girls in other countries had enough food and water. The cogs were beginning to turn.

After examining and reflecting upon the student wonderings and our own teacher questions we spent the next few weeks researching and inquiring together into some key areas of girls' lifestyles around the world. The areas that we explored as a class included learning about girls' access to food and water, their homes and shelter, their health and medical care, their education, work and play and their traditions or celebrations.

During this phase of the unit, we found the UNICEF series of books including, A life like mine, A school like mine and A faith like mine to be invaluable. We were also thrilled when our librarian gave us a new, age appropriate series of texts from Oxfam. Each brightly photographed text covered a different topic such as homes, school, animals, etc and showed a wide variety of cultures from a child's perspective.

It is important to note here that the unit of inquiry included other lines of inquiry, concepts, assessments and learning engagements beyond what has been shared in this article; however, in the interests of brevity, I won't write about every detail of the unit. The various learning engagements done during the unit by specialist and homeroom staff are too many to list but a few were especially memorable and meaningful for the girls and staff.

One involved each girl going home and counting every tap in her home and bringing in that number to share. We then made a pictograph of all the taps in our homes. Later we learnt about the water supplies for some girls in third world countries. We added them to our graph under their country names and the students were amazed to observe that whilst some of them had 18 taps in their own homes, a village in Afghanistan may need to share one tap between many villagers.

We were heartened during the unit to find many of the students developing some empathy for girls who did not have the opportunities that they are fortunate enough to experience. The girls were shocked to find out that some girls in Ethiopia could be married at the age of 12 and may not ever attend school. They were saddened to hear that many little girls around the world have to work in the home or fields from a young age and missed out on playing and having fun due to responsibilities such as collecting water or caring for younger siblings.
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During the unit, as a staff, we reflected often on the way that our previous ‘plane journey’ driven unit would not have allowed the girls these opportunities to learn about the less positive aspects of living in another country. Previously, we had really only focussed on the festivals, the celebrations and the more colourful and exciting parts of living in a different country. Throughout the unit we heard the girls say many times, ‘I am so lucky to live here in Australia’. Appreciation was not necessarily something we intended to arise from the inquiry so this has been added to our reflection as something to focus on next time.

The summative task for this unit was for the girls to create a piece of work that reflected the perspective of a girl from another country. They researched their chosen country to find out what access to food, water, medical care, housing, play, education and so forth would be like for a girl who lived there. We eventually created our own class big book based on the idea of the UNICEF text, *A life like mine*. Ours was titled *A girl like me* and each student contributed a page about her own girl.

The girls used iPads, various texts and even our parent and community ‘experts’ to learn what life would be like for their chosen girls. Some even researched traditional names for girls in their chosen countries so that they could name their own girls. Caitlin named her Spanish girl ‘Catalina’, Abigail became ‘Adelina’ and Makayla’s Ethiopian name was ‘Makeda’.

Our book was shared during recent student led conferences and now takes pride of place on the classroom bookshelf. It is an often read book that the girls take enormous pride in and like to share with classroom guests such as their buddies or visiting teachers. Keeping our book in our classroom environment invites the girls to remain engaged in the unit and possibly will inspire some student initiated action in the future.

As a class we reflected on the unit and were pleased to observe many girls saying the ways in which their thinking had changed during the unit. Comments such as, ‘I used to think that all girls could go to school, but now I know that some girls can’t.’ were shared. We talked about how a change in thinking can be considered action and recorded these thoughts on our student ‘action board’.

Overall we emerged from the unit with a greater sense of accomplishment than our previous ‘plane journey’ had ever achieved. The girls certainly seemed to form deep connections and understandings from the unit and as a staff we felt that we delivered a unit that allowed true and meaningful inquiry to occur. In the end cancelling our flight was the best thing we could have done.

For further details about the unit or resources feel free to contact lopie@mentonegirls.vic.edu.au

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