

CHICKENS IN THE CLASSROOM: A LESSON IN MULTI-ETHNIC PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

BY MANDY FISCHER

Angela McGregor was teaching Lawrence Barnes first graders a lesson about chickens when something unexpected – and extraordinary – happened: a little chicken leapt across a cultural divide.

Ms. Julie Benz's class was in the middle of a six-week unit entitled "Food Cycles in Our Community," developed in collaboration with teachers, Benz and Julie Brown, and the Sustainable Schools Project. Grounded in a philosophy of place-based education, this unit, which is expressive of a yearlong focus on cycles in the community, utilizes real world experiences as a catalyst for deep learning about food and animal life cycles, including our place as humans within these cycles.

On this Thursday morning, Angela and the class were studying chickens. They made a detailed list of chicken-related words and pictures, and the class had dressed up one student like a chicken in order to demonstrate the bird's different body parts. They discussed the similarities and differences between meat chickens and egg-laying chickens. Then Angela settled the students at their desks, and they quietly began drawing pictures of chickens. She snuck out of the classroom and down the hall to the teacher's lounge, where she was hiding a promised special guest – a real life chicken from Shelburne Farms, known as Speedy due to her small size and agility. Angela had planned to take the chicken around the classroom and let the students touch her and name her parts, and she was expecting excitement and enthusiasm from Barnes' bright-faced students.

What she was not expecting was the flood of stories that came out of the class's Somali Bantu students, whose eyes lit up when Speedy entered the room. To them, seeing this chicken was like seeing an old friend, as they eagerly explained. One Bantu boy spoke of how Speedy reminded him of the chickens in the camps, for which he was responsible. Another talked about how Speedy was different from the chickens in Africa, who would sometimes be eaten by lions. The other children and Angela were captivated, as these sometimes timid newcomers began to speak about their lives in Africa. One could sense how chickens must have provided stability and companionship for these children during an unbelievably stressful time in the lives of their young families. A little chicken had provided a bridge for these children that spanned from that not so distant past to this Burlington classroom.

Burlington is one of several towns and cities in the United States that is serving as a resettlement site for Somali Bantu refugees. Originally brought to Somalia as slaves over 100 years ago, the Bantu have long been a marginalized group in that country, which erupted into civil war in the 1990s. Many impoverished Bantus were forced to flee into refugee camps in Kenya, where food and shelter were limited and formal education was extremely rare. Bantu refugees have been resettling in Burlington since 2003 with about 200 refugees slated to make the move here; about 50 Bantu students have already enrolled in Burlington schools, many of them at Barnes.



A Barnes student holds a chicken at Shelburne Farms.

Adjusting to their new life in the United States cannot be easy, as adults and children alike must learn to negotiate a wholly different culture from their own. Students arrive knowing little or no English. They are not used to the weather, the food or the customs. Some special English as a Second Language classrooms have been established to help students acclimate, though most students district-wide divide their time between English language learning and conventional classrooms. At Barnes, forty-two children attend English as a Second Language classes; the vast majority of them are Africans born in Kenya, Somalia, Burundi or Sudan. These children have a spoken and written language to learn and lots of new rules and guidelines to negotiate, from finishing homework to behaving correctly during a fire drill.

To help these students flourish, educators must develop lessons that speak to what these children already know. Chickens turned out to be a way to reach students from diverse ethnic backgrounds; as the Bantu children showcased their knowledge to the other students, a palpable sense of pride and awe filled the room. In this way, place-based education at its best contains universal lessons grounded in the specificity of a child's own experience. Chickens ignited fires within these children, compelling them to express themselves, as first graders love to do.

(Continued on reverse)

Food becomes a great connector, as food is a common denominator at the heart of all culture, a universal necessity that is also a source of pleasure and a marker of cultural



identity and history. By highlighting a food source with which the Bantu children are intimately acquainted, an educator validates their experiences and personal histories, encourages further learning and growth and teaches a lesson in cultural affinity to a multi-ethnic classroom.

At Barnes, the progress these remarkable students are making is evident daily in their openness, their willingness to share and their empathy for others. The

first grade teachers continue to teach with chickens, having chosen them as the focus of a unit of study on informational texts in large part because of the interest Speedy sparked. This nonfiction investigation, which took place this spring, culminated in each child creating a research report. Though many of the Bantu children may not meet the standard because they cannot yet write in English, their drawings and enthusiasm demonstrate that they are actively engaged in the learning process. Further, they are validated, as their specific interests and histories are recognized as a springboard for learning by their new teachers in this new classroom, which is, as one of them pointed out to me, so far away from Africa.

Some information for this article was obtained from the Burlington Free Press. For more information about refugee resettlement in Burlington and around the country and what you can do to help, please visit: <http://www.refugees.org/>.



Photos clockwise from top: Barnes students meet the chickens at Shelburne Farms, Champlain students on Walk to School Day.

From Shelburne Farms'
Sustainable Schools Project
Newsletter Spring/Summer 2006
1611 Harbor Road Shelburne, VT 05482
www.sustainableschoolsproject.org
