

We are the **Future** We are the **Agents of Change**

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How do you inspire young learners to become agents of change? How do you engage young learners in participatory citizenship?

First, study and learn from the many leaders of the past and present. Who are agents of change? What did they do? How did they do it? What are common characteristics that agents of change share? Second, provide the opportunity for young learners to discover that they can be agents of change right in their own local school, community, nation or world. When young learners use their minds, hands, and hearts to address a real community problem, they become motivated to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to be a person who makes a difference! At Shady Brook Elementary School, we believe that this is an essential part of the education and future we provide for our young people.

Shady Brook in Kannapolis, North Carolina, is a Title I school that serves 331 students in grades K-4. We enjoy a partnership with the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. The Shady Brook Professional Development School (PDS) has a shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants including university faculty, school faculty, administrators, and teacher education candidates.

A recent PDS project created integrated units of study that incorporated literacy, social studies, technology, and service learning. The intent of the project was for elementary students to develop a deep understanding of what it means to be an agent of change, and then to connect them with their community to provide authentic opportunities for the development and application of literacy and civic skills to improve their own community life through service. The project presented here is a third grade integrated unit entitled: "Agents of Change: People Making a Difference." The unit can be adapted for grades 2-5.

Curriculum Framework

Big Ideas

Third grade teachers, a preservice teacher, and two university faculty consultants generated these five powerful statements to guide the unit development and implementation. The statements focus on the major ideas that were to be explored and revealed through the unit of study.

1. Agents of change have common *personal characteristics*, such as being knowledgeable, determined, and willing to take risks. (Students will come up with other characteristics as they study

examples of leaders of change).

2. *Collective effort* by responsible citizens is often necessary to bring about efficient and productive changes in a community.

3. *Communities are dynamic*, changing over time as a consequence of industrialization, war, technology, cultural transmission, natural disasters, and social justice movements, for example. (Again, students will uncover other reasons for change).

4. People who work as agents of change are *committed to their work*. They engage in the following tasks, a list which forms the acronym A.G.E.N.T.S.:

A - Awareness of Issue

G - Generate knowledge

E - Empower Others

N - Navigate and Negotiate Pathways for Change

T - Take Action

S - Speak Out¹

5. *You can be an agent of change at any age!* Historical examples show that leaders in social change have come from all walks of life.

Essential Questions

The big idea statements were transformed into questions to guide student thinking and to keep the class focused on the major ideas of the unit. These questions are written in student-friendly language and posted in the classroom so that students can use the questions to guide their inquiry.

- Who are past and present leaders who have brought change to their communities?
- What are common characteristics of agents of change?
- What causes change in a community?
- How is change brought about?
- How can I be a leader for positive change in my community?

Goals

During the planning phase the team also generated goal statements that align with the big ideas, but identify knowledge, skills and dispositions that we hoped the unit would develop in our students:

- Identify individuals from different times and places who have been agents of change
- Generate common characteristics of leaders who create change

- Appreciate the struggle and sacrifice of those who bring change
- Identify processes necessary to initiate and bring about change
- Learn to speak and communicate effectively
- Learn research skills
- Improve writing skills
- Utilize technology in the research process
- Practice democratic processes for bringing about change in the community
- Plan, implement, and reflect on a service learning project

Social Studies Curriculum Standards

This unit of study reflects many themes from the curriculum standards for social studies, but especially **1 CULTURE; 2 TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; 5 INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; 6 POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE; and 10 CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.** In addition, this unit aligned with many of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study Goals/Objectives in social studies, reading, information skills, and technology.

Assessment

The planning team decided to formally assess the research process by examining the students research folder, living history presentation, and final written “Agent of Change Profile” (a one- to two-page report) using a rubric. The service-learning project was assessed by observing student participation and collaboration in developing and implementing the plan and by examining individual written reflection at the conclusion of the project.

Unit Implementation

Phase I: Who Were They?

The first phase of the unit involved learning about agents of change and required a four week period of time with two to three 45-minute sessions a week. In the first two weeks, students were introduced to the unit by discussing what it means to be an agent of change. Several texts were commonly read aloud or in small, guided reading groups to provide examples of a variety of people who have been agents of change. We wanted to make sure that we presented leaders from different geographical, cultural, economic and historical backgrounds. Some good example texts to present at this grade level would be; *Listen to the Wind*; *The Story of Dr. Greg & Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Morenson, *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* by Kathleen Krull, *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins* by Carole Boston Weatherford, and *A Boy Named Beckoning: The True Story of Dr. Carlos Montezuma, Native American Hero* by Gina Capaldi.

During discussion, the students identified character traits of the leaders described in these books and completed a graphic organizer. They listed leadership characteristics (evidence that this person was knowledgeable, courageous, and determined) in the various columns and then compared these historical and contemporary leaders with each other. We led students to understand that lead-



ers of change have many shared characteristics, and we had them reflect on times in their own lives when they demonstrated some or all of these characteristics.

As students examined the experiences of selected agents of change, we also presented them with a framework to help them understand some key processes involved in bringing about change in a community. We used an acronym for AGENTS to help them identify common steps used by leaders to bring about change (Big Idea 4, above). The students were asked to describe events in each of the shared texts that illustrated the processes found in the acronym. In most cases, students were able to identify the way the leaders studied or demonstrated each of the steps of bringing about change. During this time, we also began teaching the words and movements to the song “Agents Of Change” by Teresa Jennings.

*We are the future,
We have the power,
We are the agents,
Agents of Change*

*We know the problems,
We got solutions,
We are the agents,
Agents of Change . . .²*

We knew that many of our students would be engaged by this musical/rhythmic activity. We would be incorporating the song into our Living History Museum presentation, so they needed to begin learning this early to allow for adequate practice.

Researching a Biography

In week 3 and 4 of the unit, students were ready to research an Agent of Change independently. To help organize the Living History Museum, each of the four third grade classrooms selected one era of time or theme to focus their agents of change selections. Students selected or were given a person to research from the following time periods/themes: Revolutionary War, Civil War, Civil Rights, and Explorers through History. In each classroom the era of time

or theme was explored to help students gain initial background information about the context the agents of change they would be researching lived in. For example in the classroom that focused on agents of change from the Revolution, a presenter from the local historical society came in dressed as a Revolutionary soldier and engaged the children in telling first person accounts of life during the Revolutionary War. The book, *This is The Dream* by Diane Z. Shore was shared in the classroom focused on the Civil Rights era to help them understand the events before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement. The two books by Phillip Hoose, *We Were There, Too! Young People in US History* and *It's Our World, Too! Young People Who Are Making A Difference*, were also used to provide students with background information about their time period and theme, and to invite them to think of how individuals, including children, worked to bring about change. The teachers, university consultants and media specialist worked diligently to identify lists of names of agents of change for each of the themes and then to gather resources to assist the students in their research.

Students were expected to read both print and digital biographical information. The teachers provided guiding questions and a research folder to assist the students in gathering and organizing information. The technology specialist set up web links to help the students find relevant and accurate information when they came to the computer lab to continue the research. The students used all the information they gathered to prepare a one-minute oral presentation for the Living History Museum. Students dressed in character, developed simple props, and performed for all classes as well as at an evening performance for parents. Students sang their Agent of Change song as a group and then moved to their individual classrooms to stand behind their desks and wait for guests to push their button so they could “come alive” and share about who they were and how they brought about change. The final requirement for the first phase was for students to prepare a written profile about the agent of change they researched for the Living History Museum.

Performance Outcomes

Students came to the consensus that speaking out was often a very significant aspect in a leaders' ability to initiate change. They recognized that there is great power in using your voice and communicating effectively. In many instances, leaders used their voice to rally collective action in order to be able to bring about change.

Although exhausted by the repeated oral presentations required by the Living History Museum, students said that they found this activity to be fun. Many of the students were initially anxious about speaking in front of others, but a practice session with the other third grade classes was helpful. After the first couple of guest presenta-

tions, there was a general feeling of relaxation, and students began to enjoy playing their characters. By the end, most no longer needed their note cards, and nervousness had disappeared. Our school often struggles with having strong attendance by parents at school functions, but this was not the case for this event. The students were very proud of their work and the parents were motivated to come and support their child.

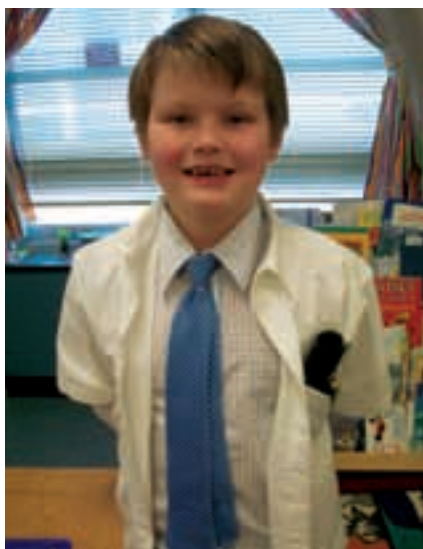
Phase II: Steps toward Action

The second phase of the unit involved students in a service-learning project and took about two weeks from start to finish. Students applied what they had learned about what it takes to be an agent of change by actually becoming one! The projects were student-driven, with minimal guidance from teachers. The teachers were introduced to the Kids as Planners Model by the university consultants and were provided with instruction and resource materials on the rationale, research, principles, benefits, and forms of service learning.³ Several different service learning projects emerged from the various classrooms, however, we will present only one of the projects in detail to show how it developed.

We began the service-learning projects by raising the question, “How can we bring about positive change in our community?” We reviewed some of the leaders we had learned about and applied their action to the acronym AGENTS. We then used the acronym to guide our process.

Step 1: Students brainstormed common issues they are aware of in their school, neighborhood, community, and the world. Some of the ideas included: homelessness, drugs, the earthquake in Haiti, the oil spill in the gulf, animals in need, elderly, and hunger. Once all ideas were listed, students used the decision making process to identify the pros and cons of each choice and narrowed down the selection using a democratic voting system until a final selection was made to help a local animal shelter. Many of these students had a special interest and love for animals. Many of them had pets and felt connected to this cause. This passion was a main criterion in their project selection.

Step 2: Many students were not familiar with animal shelters and what they did and had a lack of background knowledge on how to respond. A representative from the animal shelter was invited to come to the classroom and do a presentation. This presentation provided more information about the services provided and what the shelter was in need of. The students asked, “What can we do to help the shelter?” The students learned that the shelter was in need of old towels for bedding and that the shelter had a special fund for monetary donations to use for veterinarian care, food, and maintenance needs. This provided students with guidance on what to do next.



Historical figures: Hugo Chavez

Step 3: Students brainstormed ideas on how to help the animal shelter. Some of the ideas students came up with included getting donations from local businesses, hosting a change drive at the school, selling suckers, hosting a bake sale and garage sale, having a raffle of items and collecting donated old towels. Students discussed the ideas and narrowed the possibilities down to what they were able to do in the allotted time. Students also had to come up with a timeline of when they would finish taking donations and how and when to get the donations to the animal shelter.

Step 4: Students were placed into cooperative groups and determined specific tasks. Group one worked on choosing local businesses to ask for donations and created a script they would use to guide them when making the calls. Group two created advertisements that ranged from letters to teachers, posters that were displayed in the hallways, and announcements to be made over the intercom at school. Group three worked on how to collect the donated items and how to organize the change drive and the sucker sales.

Step 5: Students took their plan created in step four and implemented it. They communicated their needs to the school over the next few days via letters and announcements. Each student was involved in selling suckers outside of the cafeteria for the following three days.

Step 6: Students collected over \$96.00. The money and old towels were presented to a volunteer from the animal shelter during our end of year awards assembly. One student prepared a short speech about the project and presented the items to the volunteer during the assembly.

Step 7: Students reflected on the entire project and wrote about what they learned about becoming an Agent of Change. Their responses showed they loved the experience and learned it takes a lot of planning, cooperation, and a group of people who are committed to a common goal. The students were surprised by the amount of planning and work involved in accomplishing a service project. However, they communicated in their writing that they felt a sense of pride for being able to do something all on their own and to be able to see the difference they were making. Students were unanimous in their belief that they would be willing and able to be an Agent of Change in the future to make their community a better place for everyone.

Reflections by Teachers

Here are few of the lessons learned from implementing this unit, as spoken by teachers.

- Planning and being prepared is 99 percent of the effort. The curriculum framework took a good deal of time to develop, but kept us focused on important ideas. A focus on planning is also essential for students as they begin working on the service-learning projects.

- The AGENTS acronym was a great tool to assist us in this task.
- It is essential to make explicit connections for students to insure that they see how the processes of change that are used by others can also be used by students as they work to bring positive change to a community.

All of the educators in this effort would like to see more use of technology (ex., Voicethread) to allow students to experience whether it increases the power of student voices.

Finally, all agreed that service-learning projects were essential to the pedagogical success of this unit. Concluding this unit of study with service-learning projects:

- Motivates students because it gives them ownership of their learning
- Allows students to apply their understanding through a concrete experience of what it takes to be an Agent of Change and actually become one
- Provides experiences for students to learn new skills by communicating ideas and implementing action plans
- Challenges students to organize their time and work with others for a common purpose.

At Shady Brook Elementary School, the phrase “participatory citizenship” took on new meaning. Students put democracy into action and learned that you can be an Agent of Change at any age. 🌍



Historical figures: Rosa Parks

Notes

1. Tina Heafner, *et al.*, “Advocating for Social Studies: Becoming Agents of Change,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 26-29.
2. Teresa Jennings, “Agents of Change,” *Music K-8* 18, no. 3 (Plank Road Publishing, 2008). Download an audio file (cost \$0.99) at www.music8kids.com/kidstunes/detail.php?sku=194008; a teaching kit (\$16.95) is available at www.music8kids.com; a video of the song is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD8jskbmcA; Lyrics are available at www.lyricsreg.com.
3. Marina Schaffler, *KIDS as Planners: A Guide to Strengthening Students, Schools and Communities through Service-learning* (Auburn, ME: KIDS Consortium, 2005). We provided each teacher with an earlier version of this paper. A great resource for service learning project information and ideas is the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at www.servicelearning.org. See also Rahima C. Wade, *Building Bridges: Connecting Classrooms and Community through Service-Learning in Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 2000).

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