

“There are three ways of seeing animals: dead and preserved; in their own habitats for the short time of a low tide; and for the periods in an aquarium. The ideal is all three.”

The Log of the Sea of Cortez

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Project Title: Sowing Seeds of Steinbeck for 5th graders; seamless integration into existing curriculum

Background and Purpose:

Developmentally, 5th graders are moving from concrete to abstract thinking. By design, the 5th grade classroom, with one teacher for approximately twenty-five students, with the teacher acting as composer and conductor for the integration of science, language arts, social studies and emotional-social learning, is ideally suited to the holistic approach to investigation and living which Steinbeck champions.

Several of the recurring themes in Steinbeck's work will seamlessly integrate into four primary themes explored throughout 5th grade, enhancing and enriching the existing curriculum, while also preparing students to study Steinbeck more in-depth in later years. While exploration of the themes recurs throughout the year, the chronological Introduction of the four themes is generally as follows:

- 1) Immigration and migration;
- 2) The importance of family (however defined);
- 3) Justice and fairness; and
- 4) An ecosystem/ecological approach to understanding the world.

In a low-income school, with a significant percentage of English Language Learner (ELL) students, accessing prior knowledge, building background and scaffolding is essential to successfully accessing new material, and such an approach benefits all students. Steinbeck's recurring themes are of interest to all ages, continue to be relevant, and are conducive to provision of specific background building techniques which engage and benefit all students.

The first major premise studied in current 5th grade English Language Arts (ELA) is that how where one comes from affects who one is, providing the gateway for us to start the new school

year off by getting to know each other through the history of our families, their and our journeys, our languages, customs, and geographical/land-based connections.

Our second major unit is about justice and fairness, and the history of and evolution from discrimination towards some groups into raised consciousness, citizen action and eventually, legal and societal changes, though the reality is of course not always so linear, and not always permanent.

Our third major unit is about our natural environment, explored both locally (we are at the southern tip of the Puget Sound), as well as more broadly, and which is initially studied through an ecosystem (food-web) approach.

Strategies for Integration

Standard practice for engaging students/inviting them into the conversation is to start with them talking with each other in pairs or small groups about their experience/connection to the topic at hand, and then sharing out some part of those conversations with the whole group.

Explicit vocabulary instruction by the teacher, such as pronouncing the word, clapping through syllables, noting the part of speech, defining the word, providing and then eliciting examples of the word being used appropriately in context (as well as not), and then putting a clear visual "word-card" on a word-wall further supports ELLs, as well as all other learners. Teacher and students further build bridges among themselves (and enhance/de-stigmatizes ELLs) by emphasizing shared cognates of words, and how knowing them, and a second language, provides a "cool" code-breaking ability, which mono-lingual students have to work harder to access.

Carefully selected use of relevant and vibrant graphics, photos, outlines and other graphic organizers, reading, music and film/video provide further context and connections for students to compare/contrast their own experiences with what is being studied.

Physically and mentally engaging students in an investigation/close observation (be it a text, photo, painting or living creature), and having them draw it, or write/discuss in a notice/wonder/and reminds-me-of exercise further engages students.

Listening to text read by a teacher, especially that which contains new vocabulary, and then engaging in a (first guided, then individually-done) close-reading, using a "text-says/I say/I infer process," deepens understanding of text.

Conclusion:

By providing 5th graders an early look at the richness of Steinbeck's relevant and engaging work, moving outward from the familiar to the less so (concrete to abstract), via exploration of various works of lasting relevance, and with existing 5th grade content related to themes of

immigration and migration, family, and justice, and doing so with a holistic approach to understanding the world, students will be more interested in and prepared to address those recurring themes throughout their lives, both academically and as engaged citizens.

Appendix in Progress:

***As Steinbeck-related content and local/regional connections often apply to multiple themes, the organization of the appendix lists content and local connections, with a letter(s) denoting which theme(s) is addressed.**

Immigration/Migration (I)

Family (F)

Justice/Fairness (J)

Ecological Approach (E)