

Global Literacy and Empathy Final Report

Pittsville Elementary School 2019-2020

In the Fall of 2019, Pittsville Elementary School received \$500 dollar to implement our Global Literacy and Empathy grant program. Pittsville is a very rural community in central Wisconsin that experiences many of the financial and psychological effects of rural poverty. Like most of rural Wisconsin, the Pittsville community lacks cultural diversity and Pittsville's students often lack the resources to seek opportunities to broaden their cultural appreciation on their own. Since the award of the grant funding, several migrant families moved into the school district. Many of these students were native Spanish speakers with varying degrees of English language proficiency. During the year we also had a student who identifies as transgender transfer into our junior high. Although the addition of these students does not shift demographic statistics of the school very much, these students presented a unique and new different way of viewing the world for many students and teachers. In a very small school, even one student who does meet all the cultural norms can noticeably change school culture. Although the judgments made by the Pittsville community were not perfect, the school community was generally very welcoming and willing to meet the needs of all students.

This antidote is being shared because it proves the need to integrate cultural awareness and empathy for different viewpoints in all areas of curriculum. The teachers who participated in the writing and implementation of this grant understood that even remote and small Pittsville was part of and affected by the global community and teachers had a responsibility to prepare students to become active and empathetic members of their global communities. Our point was unexpectedly proven during this school year.

The \$500 dollar grant allowed to purchase to over twenty titles of book sets related to current issues in the global community and presented different cultures and different viewpoints accurately and respectfully. We also purchased several titles that focused on offering different perspectives of important historic events. This grant specifically focused on enhancing reading materials for 4-8th grade students, but covered a variety of reading levels so students of all abilities would benefit from the new learning materials. Book titles were chosen based on student input and recommendations from several organizations focused on multicultural children's literature. The 4th-8th grade reading curriculum focuses on allowing students to choose their own reading materials to prove that they have mastered different literacy skills.

Teachers at the different grade levels focused hard on questioning students about how things like different viewpoints and cultural norms affected elements of their story like plot, character traits, and setting. For example, students reading the book *Blood on the Water* were asked how the different viewpoints of land of the Jamestown settlers and the Powhatan Confederacy led to the massacre that was the climax of the story. Students who read *The Storm Runner* not only learned how to sequence important events; they also were able to compare the story's portrayal of the Mayan gods to how they were portrayed in their nonfiction social studies texts. When asked to describe the character traits of the main character in *Amina's Voice*, students often noted that the child refugee was shy and quiet. Students were able to

describe how the effects of war and moving to a new country might affect a person's ability to make friends. Books like *Inside Out and Back Again* and *The Red Pencil* introduced students to different Asian cultures and allowed them to learn about telling stories in verse and poetry.

Final units for the upper elementary and middle school ELA units ask students to write persuasive essays and engage in advocacy projects. Teachers were very excited to see how using these books and engaging in conversations about different cultures would affect students' abilities to consider different opinions and accept different viewpoints during this unit. Unfortunately, a world pandemic and a switch to remote learning affected these plans. There was simply not enough time to adjust this unit to a remote learning setting this year. While teachers were cleaning out lockers, many of the new books were pulled out with bookmarks about three-quarters of the way through the pages. Like these books that will hopefully be finished next year, the cultural awareness and empathy learning of most Pittsville students is not over. This learning will continue as student progress through the grades and the books are reused and enjoyed over and over again.

The current state of affairs has offered further proof that leaders need to understand the interconnectedness of world communities and empathy for different viewpoints is needed for everyone's success, even for people in Pittsville. It is clear that learning goals will look different in the future. These books will continue to help guide Pittsville teachers as they design curriculum that meets the needs of future global leaders.



