

# "Helping Students Find Their Identity through PBL in the ELA Classroom"

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Through problem-based learning and inquiry in English Language Arts, students explore topics focused on the confluence of their identities, including their families, their community, and the world around them. Three English teachers formulate units that empower students, encourage reflection, and implement research through literature and composition over the course of their middle school careers. This presentation describes these units and provides information for other English teachers to use these ideas in their own classrooms.

In sixth grade, students answer the question, "What is my origin story?," by conducting family interviews to explore their origins in the community and the country. This unit incorporates superhero graphic novels and stories to engage students to think about how they came to be in the country and in our state of West Virginia. Students learn how to conduct research, to hold effective interviews, and to use this information to create a graphic novella depicting their origin stories in Morgantown, WV.

In seventh grade, students strive to understand, "How can I relate to people who aren't like me?", by investigating perspectives different than their own in literature and discussion. Throughout this unit, students learn how to have difficult conversations and ask questions in a respectful way to gain an understanding for folks who are somehow different from them. Finally, students create a piece of art from the perspective of a protagonist, representing the complexity of the character and how different people can relate to them.

In eighth grade, students focus on identifying who they are as individuals and as members of a global community by asking themselves, "How does my story fit into our world?." This acts as a confluence of ideas from the previous two years as students begin to think about how their stories can be seen through the lens of others. Students write their own story to share in a student-created literary magazine to be shared in the school and the community.

Students take initiative in these student-centered units to discover their own identity through multiple lenses over their middle school career because we recognize that this can be a complicated time for our students as they figure out who they are. This three-year problem-based learning experience allows students to know themselves in an ever-changing world while meeting the academic expectations of the ELA classroom.