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Recovering Lost Local History: *The Daily Record* Project

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Abstract

This practitioner perspective describes a collaboration between students and teachers at three middle schools, along with community partners, to recover and digitize news stories from *The Daily Record*, an African American owned newspaper that was attacked and burned in the 1898 Wilmington coup d'état.

INTRODUCTION

People of African descent have moved and been moved for generations. This movement of Black diasporic people and cultures shaped the evolution of history in the Americas. And although some of this movement stemmed from exploratory travels of African navigators (Diop, 1955/1989; Sertima, 1975), much of the movement also represented forced relocation as part of the Transatlantic slave trade which occurred between European and African nations over four centuries beginning in the late 1400s (Du Bois, 1896; Green, 2014; Radburn & Eltis, 2019; Shumway, 2011). By the 1920s in the United States, African Americans faced persistent economic disparity living in the rural South. In response, they moved from southern to northern cities in search of opportunity such that by the 1950s approximately 2.5 million southern-born African Americans lived outside of the south (Tolnay, 2003). For people of African descent living in the US, movement thus represents different ideological frames. On one hand, it represents exploration, migration, and discovery; while on the other, it represents displacement, dislocation and loss.

In his Migration Series, published in 1941, African American artist Jacob Lawrence captured this ideological tension through 60 panels that bridged the divide between migration and displacement. The faceless images, painted with vibrant colors and paired together as a storyboard, have come to represent the millions of migrants who moved from South the North during the Great Migration (Lawrence, n.d.). As this visual narrative sits amidst a backdrop of complicated, individual histories, more recent historians have worked to trace the genealogies of this movement. Indeed,

this genealogical mapping has important implications for understanding the genealogy of encounter (Zorko, 2019) and the politics of belonging (Menon & Karthik, 2019). As African Americans migrated, they brought a raced and classed interpretive lens that allowed them to translate encounters in new spaces. And, as they migrated, they continually faced the “question of who belongs” in what space (Menon & Karthik, 2019, p. 195). It is this *genealogy of displacement* that frames this paper.

Within this framing, we describe a three-year project with three middle schools in Wilmington, North Carolina called *The Daily Record* project. The project engaged middle school students, historians, writers, community members, teachers, and faculty members in a study of Wilmington’s former African American-owned newspaper, *The Daily Record*.

The 1898 Wilmington Coup and *The Daily Record*

Alexander Manly and his brother, Charles, purchased the rights to *The Wilmington Record* in 1895 and subsequently changed the name to *The Daily Record*. It became the only African American daily newspaper at the time. In August of 1898, the paper published a commentary that supported interracial marriage and gave a scathing commentary on the history of the abuse of African American women at the hands of white men. Exacerbating tensions between the Fusion (a combination of Populists and Republicans) and Democratic parties, the article fueled white supremacist violence in the city. At the time, Wilmington was home to a thriving African American middle class with a solid core of African American-owned businesses and politicians. By November of

1898, almost three months after the publication of the interracial marriage article in *The Daily Record*, white supremacists violently attacked Manly's newspaper, overthrew the democratically elected government, and forced African American political and business leaders out of town. They also killed hundreds of African Americans, although the number of people killed remains unknown and disputed by historians. The white supremacists burned the *The Daily Record* building, and attempted to destroy all its records. Now referred to as the only coup d'état in U.S. history, this series of events in Wilmington, North Carolina led to the permanent displacement of over 2,000 African Americans from the city (approximately 20% of the city's population) (Cecelski & Tyson, 1998).

Through *The Daily Record* project, students traced the genealogy of this displacement, mapped the geography of individual's movement, examined the subsequent political ramifications of those encounters, and worked to recover and digitize *The Daily Record*. In the following space, we explain the project, describe how it is an exemplar of democracy in action in the context of middle grades, and conclude with reflections from two of the middle grades teachers who facilitated the project (also authors on this paper).

The Project

The project emerged from John Jeremiah Sullivan (author with the *New York Times Magazine*) and his team from the non-profit *The Third Person Project*, initially in collaboration with the Williston alumni group. Williston Middle School was formerly Williston High School and later, Williston Primary Industrial School, a segregated school for African Americans in Wilmington. The Williston Alumni group were graduates of Williston Industrial High School hoping to preserve the history of the school and the surrounding community. John Sullivan also had a desire to work with middle grades students at D.C. Virgo Preparatory Academy School, since many of the events surrounding the coup took place around the D.C. Virgo school site. Finally, John Sullivan also invited Friends School of Wilmington because of its Quaker history and deep commitment to peace and equality. The project provided an opportunity to have students from different educational settings, two schools with direct connections to the geographic area of the 1898 coup and one external to the conflict, learn

about how their own community was historically affected by the coup.

The overall goal of the project was to have middle school students recover articles from *The Daily Record* and learn about how the coup affected the people of Wilmington, historically and contemporarily. The first-year goal of the project was to research, catalog, and digitize stories published in *The Daily Record*. In year two and year three, students focused on locating *The Daily Record* articles that had been reprinted in other newspapers, since the archives had also been destroyed. Furthermore, the students researched African Americans who were displaced because of the coup. The second and third years included weekly meetings for approximately 12 weeks. Through online "classrooms," students were able to share their notes and findings from research and connect relevant research skills. In addition to skill acquisition, students gained a conceptual understanding of how one local historical event forever altered the city in which they currently live.

Digging through newspapers.com and ancestry.com, students learned how to search newspapers for names and determine those names matched the identities of African Americans who fled Wilmington. For example, students researched Augusta Gause who was one of two women who worked for *The Daily Record* and Charles Chesnutt, who was from Ohio, but his parents were both free Blacks from Fayetteville, North Carolina. During the project, students discovered that one of his stories had been reprinted without permission in *The Daily Record* and he wrote a letter in which he expressed sorrow over what was happening in Wilmington. Students also researched many others, including Carrie Sadgwar Manly (Alex Manly's wife). They discovered how *The Daily Record* was referenced in other publications throughout the US. They learned how to read and analyze articles written at the turn of the century and connect those stories to contemporary events. In particular, they found many stories that described horrific crimes against African Americans in which, more times than not, there was no justice for victims. Finally, they made connections between how these published stories demonstrated a genealogy of displacement by witnessing the migratory movement of Black Wilmingtonians who sought refuge in other cities.

The Daily Record Project: Democracy in Action

The Daily Record project is an exemplar of democracy in action in the context of middle grades education for multiple reasons. First, although this was a co-curricular activity rather than a social studies activity, the project engaged students in multiple civic actions. For instance, National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2008) vision of powerful social studies includes five elements that were designed to prepare students for civic life. This project engaged students in two of those in particular: challenging and active. The project is challenging because students conducted analyses of various types of documents, engaged in reflective discussion and responded to each other's ideas. It is active because students worked collaboratively in a learning community. Students investigated and responded to a contemporary need (recovering *The Daily Record*) and engaged in community service (digitizing *The Daily Record* for community use). As well, students and adult stakeholders were perceived by each other as fellow inquirers. Rather than a hierarchical model of teachers and adults controlling student actions, this project flattened the hierarchy in a more democratic approach to learning and community service.

Second, although it was not intended to follow the social studies college, career, and civic life inquiry arc (NCSS, n.d.), this project did so, as students asked big questions, completed tasks based on primary sources, and took informed action. Taking informed action is a key element of democracy in action. By understanding the historical context of the coup, assessing the relevance and impact of the coup on their community, and taking action by digitizing articles from *The Daily Record*, students were modeling democratic practices.

Third, the meetings of interested students at three middle schools could be conceptualized as a "third space" for middle grades democracy in action. Proponents of third spaces in education reject traditional binaries, such as curricular *or* extracurricular activities. Instead, they promote "the integration of what are often seen as competing discourses in new ways—an either/or perspective is transformed into a both/also point of view" (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92). For *The Daily Record* project, students volunteered to participate and they attended meetings at a local school during their elective time. Functioning

outside the official school curriculum, yet attached to school spaces, the project engaged students in co-curricular activity with democratic engagement as a primary feature. As Gutiérrez (2008) has argued, "Third space is a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened" (p. 152). Other studies have highlighted co-curricular activities as exemplars of democratic third spaces, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (Mayo, 2013), Junior Historical Societies (Morris, 2017), and the Doors to Diplomacy program (Waterson & Brigandi, 2017), to name just a few. *The Daily Record* project extends this tradition of third spaces as sites of democratic action.

Finally, the project helped students conceptualize power, racism, and democracy, and, more importantly, work against anti-democratic actions. Students learned that the leaders of the coup explicitly sought to remove a duly elected bi-racial government in the name of white supremacy. They sought to destroy *The Daily Record* for the same reason. In retrieving and digitizing *The Daily Record*, the students worked against the goal of white supremacists and their racist, anti-democratic actions.

The Daily Record Project: Aligned to Key Principles in This We Believe

The project is developmentally responsive and aligned to many of the key principles in *This We Believe* (NMSA/AMLE, 2010). For the purpose of brevity, we will highlight three principles here. First, this project engaged students and teachers in active, purposeful learning. In particular, students had to engage in fine grain research, collate a great deal of information collaboratively, and then build a larger picture based on the emerging data. Likewise, they had to analyze the cause and effect relationships among the political context at the time, the coup, and the subsequent displacement. Second, the facilitators drew upon multiple learning and teaching approaches. While there was limited didactic instruction about the coup, students primarily engaged in internet research, discussion, and inquiry approaches to digitize the stories, and figure out what happened to members of the African American community after the coup. Finally, the project drew extensively upon community and business partners. This project was a partnership between teachers and students at three local middle schools, which was an excellent

collaborative opportunity. Faculty from a local university, as well as Williston Alumni Association, were also involved. Finally, John Sullivan's non-profit, including co-collaborator, Joel Finsel, was critical to the success of the project.

In the remainder of this article, teachers share their own reflections on the project. Both were project leaders at their respective schools and were instrumental in the project's success.

Teacher Reflections

Tana Oliver: Teacher at D. C. Virgo Preparatory Academy

Watching my students learn to truly research and appreciate local history was a significant event. There was growth in each student's ability to question and analyze documents and in their ability to make past-to-present connections. Placing historical events together, as well as seeing how to "do history" increased students' conceptual ideas and understanding, as well as multiple forms of literacy and social studies skills. I saw their communication skills grow weekly as individuals, within their small groups in core classes, as well as in their personal work ethic outside of this project. Their maturity when researching difficult topics, or listening to community members discuss challenging and even upsetting situations and the courage shown during hard conversations was a lesson that could not be generated from a textbook.

The Daily Record project targets difficult history and this easily could have become an overwhelming, emotional assignment for students and made students apprehensive about participating in the project. However, these students approached this responsibility with a humbled assertiveness. They were eager to have conversations and dissect local history, especially this pivotal event in their city that profoundly affected African Americans.

What came from this project was much more than a vocabulary lesson on what a "coup de ta" is; or even the conceptual understanding of how political power exchanged hands undemocratically. This project helped produce active citizens who are able to question historical stories by digging into historical archives and to see just how complex our history is. Additionally, my students at D.C. Virgo

Preparatory Academy learned more than historical skills or concepts. They learned how to communicate with businesses, ask questions regarding services rendered, interact with elder members of the community, and how to make connections both personally and professionally.

Finally, this project was particularly effective in how it drew students together from three very different middle schools. Through the project, students were able to utilize historical records by placing the remnants of *The Daily Record* together, students from multiple schools were able to construct and then cross bridges of various communication formats. Students worked with each other to create connections, find similar interests, and ultimately learn with others that are simply different from their "normal."

Projects like *The Daily Record* require commitment and patience, along with instructional flexibility. Instructors and co-teachers must be creative with time management while also safeguarding these scheduled groups meetings. Without this protected time for authentic learning to take place, the skills that students developed would not have been practiced and, therefore, not retained. Having students transfer these newly acquired- and others perfected- inquiry, analysis and communication skills throughout the duration of the project and into their core classroom activities made for a realistic educational experience both in and out of the traditional classroom setting.

Leyna Varnum: Teacher and Instructional Coach at Williston Middle School

Over the past three years, *The Daily Record* project has offered students a chance to learn about their local history and practice important academic skills and habits in a way that is authentic and engaging. Students practice everything from taking notes, researching online databases, reading primary sources, and collaborating with peers and adults through this project. They truly become part of a learning community that is revealing the hidden history of our city that still has a profound impact today. Our students begin to build an understanding of how Wilmington has suffered as a direct result of white supremacist violence in 1898. This is not an easy history to teach or learn about, but students from three very different middle

schools are able to come together and discuss the issues with respect and grace. The opportunities for both personal and academic growth are varied and great in *The Daily Record* project.

Additionally, one of my favorite aspects of *The Daily Record* project is that it represents learning simply for the sake of learning. Students choose to take part in the project and must demonstrate their interest in learning more about local Wilmington history in order to participate. There is no grade attached to the work the students do in the project, but they choose to miss elective classes in order to participate because they want to learn more and contribute to finding, researching, and archiving *The Daily Record*. This type of authentic learning has become all too rare in schools, and we relish the opportunity to see students experience it anew each year.

The Daily Record project is also unique and exciting in that its goals change each year. In the first year, we found and archived the seven remaining issues of the paper. In the second and third years, we found and researched articles that had been reprinted in contemporary publications with *The Daily Record* and looked further into people of Wilmington who had been forced out of the city through the coup. Although our purpose for the fourth year is still taking shape, we know that there is still much to be done in terms of researching the people who were affected by the events of 1898. One direction we are considering is to create a database in which our research is linked to the existing archived issues of *The Daily Record* and the reprinted articles which is being called the "Remnants Issue." Each year of this project presents new opportunities and challenges for both the students and adults involved, and we are fortunate to be able to offer this experience to a new group of students each year.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we hope this project will inspire other democratically centered, collaborative, middle grades projects. Although the 1898 coup in Wilmington is a unique event, teachers and scholars interested in developing a similar project like this could begin by examining the history of their own community and identifying times in which events did not live up to democratic ideals.

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