

Philly Proud: Researching the Cultural History of Philadelphia and How Children See Themselves

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Abstract

What does it mean to be from Philly? Philadelphia has witnessed the stories of some of the most famous people in the history of the United States: William Penn, Benjamin Franklin, Harriet Tubman, and of course, Rocky Balboa. This extensive history gives the City of Brotherly Love many reasons to feel proud. So, when we ask young people to define their pride for Philadelphia, what is it that they are proud of? Who are their Philly heroes and why did they choose them? My goal for this unit is to give students an opportunity to reflect about their role in their community and explore how culture and identity can be used to instill pride and a sense of belonging in their neighborhood. Students will also reflect on the purpose and responsibilities of public art and how it can be used to reevaluate history and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Philadelphia, South Philadelphia, Cultural Heritage, Frank Rizzo, Southwark

Unit content

Objectives

Students will complete three main tasks: first, they will research the demographics shifts that have shaped South Philadelphia. Then, they will reflect about their identity and their relationship with what they see while they walk around their neighborhood. Last, they will present their ideas about how their heritage and pride for their city should be shared or represented in a tangible way.

I want students to redefine what it means to be “Philly proud” by defining their own cultural pride even if that is not part of the “traditional” story we hear when we talk about Philadelphia. I want to create a space where children from this particular community in South Philadelphia can see themselves as active citizens and not as outsiders who just happened to live here. I will focus on the history and needs of the Southwark School community; an ethnically diverse K-8th school of over 900 students located in South Philadelphia. Throughout the activities designed, students will have an opportunity to discuss their perceptions about heritage and how it is represented throughout their community. Many students at Southwark come from a first- or second-generation family of immigrants whose parents speak a language other than English. The difference in language and cultural practices can make it difficult for students to feel connected to the collective experiences and public art that are highlighted as points of pride throughout the city. Because many students mostly adhere to their parents’ cultural norms and practices they tend not to integrate into other social/cultural groups. The complexity of creating a bicultural

identity can feel overwhelming at times, especially when the host city doesn't feel inclusive or welcoming. As children walk from their homes to our school building you mostly see rowhomes, the usual bodega in the corner, a park here or there and lots of pizza spots and taquerias. If this was your first-time walking around Southwark, you would see that on 8th Street, there are a lot of signs in Spanish, on 6th Street however, Khmer and Vietnamese language dominate the streets. Most of what you see is written on a restaurant's banner or an occasional mural, there are no large monuments or statues highlighting the contributions of the minority-ethnic groups presently living in these zip codes. The only stories told are found on the people's faces as they walk by or in the school hallways where children have put up their work. As children walk through these spaces, their sense of identity and pride is constantly being challenged. The lack of representation makes you wonder, how does it feel to belong and not belong at the same time?

Southwark School has worked with partners in the neighborhood to give students the opportunity to explore their sense of heritage and identity. Fleisher Art Memorial, a non-profit organization who is committed to make art accessible to everyone, regardless of economic means, background or artistic experience participated in a collaboration with the school in 2009. Fleisher Exhibitions worked alongside a group of Southwark students to create a mural; they named it History of Southwark - The Neighborhood and School. The mural, inspired by the stories and other works of art in the community, highlights the diversity of this neighborhood. "A smile is the same in every language" is the message this piece of art attempts to promote. In 2020, Southwark School partnered with Mural Arts Philadelphia, to collaborate in a project titled Southwark: Our park. This project brought together students and community members to explore evolving landscapes in South Philadelphia and to explore the question, what is our role in the global waste stream, and how can we positively shape the spaces around us? The final project was a school yard, a play space and a colorful intergenerational space with planters and repurposed school desks. The project also included a mural installation inspired by the conversations of weaving together the neighborhood's diverse cultures. It is imperative that students explore their role in their communities and how their surroundings can help them find ways to highlight the people and things who they feel proud of.

Another collaboration was Weaving Culture, a mural designed by James Dunn and Furness High School students, which greets Southwark's School front yard with its blue background and different weaving patterns. The patterns intertwine all of the beautiful colors as if they were representing the interactions of the people in the neighborhood. Students see this mural every day when they enter the school, but I wonder, do they stop to think about it? Do they interact with it? Would they know the meaning behind it? As part of this unit, students will study this mural as part of reflecting on the spaces around them. The mural is an opportunity to discuss how the students feel in regards to their school community and the school climate when it comes to celebrating inclusivity and diversity. Schools are places where students come together to create and share collective experiences. If these experiences are positive, students are more likely to feel pride for their school and community.

In our seminar, *Social Justice, Monuments, Museum, and Heritage*, we discussed how heritage is "an important political and cultural tool in defining and legitimizing the identity, experiences and social and cultural standing of a range of substantial groups." (Smith, 2006) What defines our collective heritage in Philadelphia? Philadelphia has many monuments throughout the city, there's a large monument of George Washington on the Parkway and Christopher Columbus one

in Marconi Plaza just to name a few. The city has chosen to highlight the accomplishments of these men who have left a mark on history. When driving around the city, you can see who has been deemed as, most important and most worthy of acknowledgement based on the location and stature of these impressive masterpieces. But if we are creating our heritage in real time, where is it being recorded? Who is choosing how to represent Philadelphia's history and heritage today? A great number of children who attend Southwark School, do not think of the Washingtons' and Columbus' as part of their heritage and this lack of representation makes it challenging for these young people to feel included as a part of the city's collective culture and history. This disconnect between the tangible culture and the intangible one, perpetuates a multigenerational cycle of families who continue to have a hard time seeing themselves as proud members of their communities and therefore, have a hard time identifying themselves as proud Philadelphians.

South Philadelphia has a rich and complex history of migrations. Dating back to Italian groups during the 18th century, followed by the Irish, Free Blacks and more recently families from various Spanish speaking countries as well as Cambodia, China and Vietnam. Historically the land of the Lenni Lenape, today South Philly, which extends from South Street to the I-76 expressway and from the Delaware to the Schuylkill Rivers, is a neighborhood of approximately more than 156,000 people with different cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds. The U.S census claims that approximately 80% of the population in South Philadelphia are U.S. born, with the remainder 20% divided between non-US born citizens and non-US citizens. Right across from Southwark School stands one of Philadelphia's newer hot spots, the former Bok Vocational school, now simply known as Bok. Built in 1936 and named after Edward W. Bok, the school was built to accommodate approximately 3,000 pupils. The former institution was once the city's most successful school for providing African American students with vocational training. The student body was 95% black but the school was located in a primarily all-white Italian American neighborhood. This caused tensions between Bok's students and South Philly residents, leading to physical altercations and eventually a petition from the predominately white neighbors, to change the school's admission policy. The clash and riots were a result of this neighborhood's response to the demographic changes that it was experiencing. Today, all of my students walk by Bok on their way to school. The building is impossible to miss, it has stood the test of time but its history has been painted over by a collection of beautiful art studios, a restaurant, and clinic amongst other uses for the space. What does this transformation mean for this community? How can Bok's neighbors preserve everything the building offers today while remembering its history and all of those who benefited from it?

In 1972, former police commissioner Frank Rizzo was elected as the 93rd mayor of Philadelphia. Born and raised in South Philadelphia, Rizzo has been criticized due to his controversial politics and practices. Rizzo used his role as mayor to shape the ideas of belonging and identity for residents in Philadelphia. He was very vocal about his dislike for civil rights' activists and minorities who didn't fit the mold of the white, catholic, blue-collar working class. In 1968, when racially motivated incidents were happening between the South Philadelphia neighborhood's youth and Bok students, Rizzo blamed Richard Dilworth, former Philadelphia mayor and Mark Shedd, superintendent of schools in Philadelphia, by saying that their progressive ideas were keeping them from enforcing more discipline in schools. Rizzo and Shedd first clashed during a demonstration on November 17th, 1967 when 3,500 students staged a black power rally outside of the school administration building in response to injustices in the education system. Frank Rizzo was accused of leading the police officers who used unnecessary

force on these students, resulting in 57 arrests and 22 injured people. Despite all of this, in 1999, the city of Philadelphia allowed to erected a monument in his honor, a bronze sculpture, paid by Rizzo's supporters. It was situated in front of the Municipal Services Building until it became a target for vandalism. For many Philadelphians, the statue was a symbol of law and order, a sense of pride and integrity, but for others, Frank Rizzo's monument was a symbol of police brutality, oppression and racism. In 2020, after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police officers, protesters and demonstrators surrounded the statue demanding for its immediate removal. Philadelphia mayor Jim Kenney expedited an order to remove it citing how the presence of the monument presented risks to the Municipal Building itself. The statue came down leaving an empty space as if it were never there. But for more than 20 years, the city of Philadelphia upheld Rizzo with his bronze, waving hand, in a prime location in the city, visited by many locals and tourists.

As students interact with their surroundings on their way to school, they walk on the former path of people who have directly and indirectly shaped the demographics and the cultural landscape of this neighborhood. Southwark, a school where 89% of the students are part of a minority ethnic group, need a way to share their voices and identities with each other. This unit will give students an opportunity to reflect on their living heritage and create a space where their values, traditions and complexities are celebrated and upheld at the same level as Rizzo was once.

Teaching strategies

Skill: Critical Thinking

Students will record detailed observations of how they interact with their surrounding community. They will have an opportunity to share what they notice while walking to school every day and how it makes them feel. Students will use this information to have a better understanding of how they interact with their surroundings and how what they see or what they don't see shapes their perspective. I will provide a Think-Pair-Share handout. Students will use it to record the answers to their guiding questions.

Skill: Map reading

Students will use their spatial thinking and spatial awareness to identify landmarks using a map of South Philadelphia. They will find intersections to mark the landmarks and frequently visited places highlighted in their classmates' presentations. The final product will be a collective map of their neighborhood; this map will show the places that stand out the most to students as they walk to school. Students will have the opportunity to share their experiences and relate them to their classmates.

Skill: Student-centered discussions

Students will analyze the mural Weaving Culture and explore the connection between the mural and Southwark students. Students will participate in a discussion about the significance and relevance of this mural to the students. They will analyze a work of art closely in order to recognize the choices the artist and the students involved made in regards to their heritage.

Students will share their answers while taking ownership of their learning and engaging with each other. I will provide the guiding questions and sentence starters for how to answer them.

Skill: Research

Part 1

Students will research the history of their neighborhood, South Philadelphia. They will read about how desegregation, activism and a shifting job market forced Philadelphia neighborhoods to change during the 19th century. They will explore how cultural shifts transformed this community to what it is today and the legacies of leaders who fought for civil rights and better living conditions. As part of this section, students will name who they think should be a part of Philly pride today.

Part 2

Students will research the rise and fall of the Frank Rizzo monument and his former mural in the Italian Market section of South Philly. Students will analyze how Frank Rizzo was seen as powerful and important yet his polarizing ideas and “tough cop” mentality made him a symbol of police brutality and discrimination in the city. Students will interpret the reasons why the monument and mural were initially resurrected and how the changing climate in the city has led to the removal of both.

Skill: Presentation

This presentation will give students the opportunity to share their ideas and work on their persuasion skills. Students will have to present their rationale for why their monument and/or mural should be highlighted in the city of Philadelphia. In order to do this successfully, students will have to design their presentation with persuasive language and accurate facts. This strategy asks students to bring all of their learning together and share it eloquently.

Classroom activities

Activity #1 - Think -Pair -Share - On your way to school

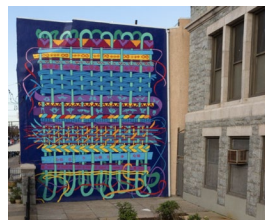
CC. L.5.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibility from a range of strategies.

CC.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 5th topics and texts, building on other’s ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Vocabulary:

Heritage - valued objects and qualities such as cultural traditions, unspoiled countryside, and historic buildings that have been passed down from previous generations.

Cultural heritage - Cultural heritage is the heritage of tangible and intangible heritage assets of a group or society that is inherited from past generations.



Landmark - an object or feature of a landscape or town that is easily seen and recognized from a distance, especially one that enables someone to establish their location.

Perspective - a particular attitude toward or way of regarding something; a point of view.

Cultural lenses - A myopic view of how one perceives their environment based on knowledge, values, attitudes, and tradition of the group with which one most identifies.

Public art - Art in any media whose form, function and meaning are created for the general public through a public process. It is a specific art genre with its own professional and critical discourse.

Students will begin by reflecting on their journey throughout their neighborhood. Using a T-P-S chart, students will use the T section to think about and describe the places, landmarks and public art that stands out to them on their way to school. The T-P-S strategy will foster discussion in the classroom and will introduce the idea of using public art to represent important contributions of ethnic groups to this community. Students will answer guiding questions such as:

How would you describe your neighborhood?

What is your favorite part of coming to school?

Where do you spend your free time when you aren't home?

What language do you speak when you interact with people in your neighborhood?

What places in your neighborhood highlight your heritage?

The TPS graphic organizer will guide students by providing a space where they can write their answers after brainstorming. They will have an opportunity to include things they notice or places they interact with on their way to school. Students will then share their thoughts with a partner and look for differences and similarities on how their neighborhood is perceived by one of their peers. Students will record their responses on the P section of the handout. Lastly, with their partner, students will present their findings to the rest of the class. Each pair of students will discuss differences and similarities amongst them. After the presentations, we will discuss the following questions:

How do our cultural lenses shape our perspective about our neighborhood?

How can our cultural heritage influence the way we interact with the spaces around us?

What responsibilities should come with creating a public art display?

The class will listen to their classmates' presentations and take notes on the spaces or landmarks mentioned. Using a map of South Philadelphia, students will locate the different parts of their neighborhood they mentioned and interact with. The final product will be a collective map to represent the journey students share when interacting with their community and it will serve as a point of reflection after activity three when students do a tour of the neighborhood.

Students will also include questions they will like answers to regarding the history of their neighborhood.

Activity #2 - Weaving Culture mural - Understanding Southwark

CC.SL.5.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade 5th topics and texts, building on other's ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Students will discuss the different ways in which cultural heritage is expressed in their school. The main focus will be in analyzing the Weaving Culture mural, a mural in one of the largest walls in Southwark's front yard. We will begin by observing the mural and doing an independent writing activity where students will reflect on the mural and answer the following guiding questions.

Describe the mural. What do you see?

How is the location of this piece significant?

How do you or other students at Southwark interact with this mural?

How do you think this mural represents the cultures in Southwark?

How does Southwark celebrate cultural diversity?

What is something you would like to see in your school that can improve the school culture between students?

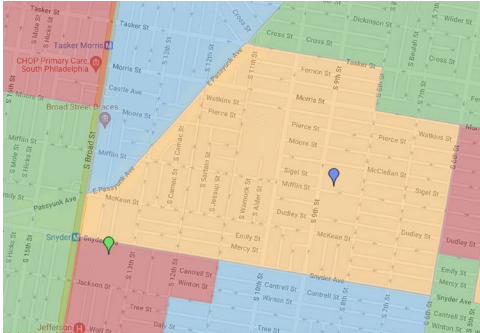
This activity will guide students to think about the purpose of this piece of art in their community. By describing the mural, students will have to observe in detail and reflect about their school community and surroundings. The guiding questions will help students brainstorm about the cultural diversity of their school and how it is connected to who they are. Students will also explore the culture of their school in regards to their own representation. Outside of Southwark School, how does your community value or celebrate diversity?

Students will answer the questions in their journal and they will share in groups. Students will be encouraged to compare the mural with other symbols they see throughout their community and

Activity #2 - Tour of the neighborhood

CC.5.7 Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

Students will do a walking tour of some of the streets they pass on their way to school (yellow on the map). They will look for “points of pride” or things and places that they relate to. Students will complete a handout to reflect on what they see. They will answer the questions below:



Questions:

What do you enjoy on your walk to school?

Which of these spaces/places do you have a passive relationship with vs an active relationship?

What do you learn about your neighborhood based on what you see, feel and what is missing?

What is something you would like to see in your neighborhood that would promote cultural pride?

(Yellow) Southwark School catchment

Activity #3 - Closed-read article from The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia - South Philadelphia

CC.RI.5.3 Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific or technical text based on specific information in the text.

Students will read and discuss the demographic changes in their neighborhood. They will read two selected articles from The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. First, they will read an article that features South Philadelphia by Mary Rizzo. This article discusses the demographic shifts in South Philadelphia from the 1600’s to the 2010’s. Students will complete a KWL chart in order to organize their thoughts before, during and after the reading. In the K section, students will answer the following questions:

How did Philadelphia play a role in shaping the history of the United States?

Who are the people who participated in shaping the history and culture of Philadelphia?

These questions will guide students to begin thinking about who are the historical figures who come to mind when we talk about representation. We will discuss who these people were and how they are remembered and recognized throughout our city. Then, students will begin to read the article in groups. I will divide the class into five sections; groups 1-4 will read and analyze a section of the article while group 5 will analyze the images in the gallery and compare them to what Philadelphia looks like today. As students read, they will complete a handout with guiding questions.

Group 1 - Introduction

Group 2 - A persistent reputation

Group 3 - Reign of Frank Rizzo

Group 4 - For sports go south

Group 5 - Gallery

As each group summarizes and presents the information from the article, our focus will be on the different shifts in the city's demographics and how each group adapted to the political changes of the time. Jackelyn Ward wrote that "depending on the social context, residents may define their neighborhoods in different ways—to associate space with safety and comfort, to establish social identity or group membership to attract or exclude others." In understanding this, students will analyze the reasons for these shifts in demographics and overall, the challenges that came with different ethnic groups interacting.

Activity #4 - Visual representation of the Philly pride

PA Standards 9.1.5 Recognize, know, use and demonstrate a variety of appropriate arts elements and principles to produce, review and revise original works in the arts.

Students will design a monument or mural to represent what defines Philly pride to them based on their research and discussions. They will be combining their conclusions from the previous reading, their experiences and their beliefs of how the cultural diversity of their neighborhood should be celebrated and represented. The final product may vary in styles but should answer the question: *who should be a part of Philly pride today?*

Outlines for the design:

Location: Based on their reading and discussions, tour of the neighborhood and their observations about their everyday path to and from school, students will select a prime location for their design. The location should be chosen based on the message the students are trying to promote. Students will understand that this monument will tell a story about their city, therefore, it needs to be placed somewhere where the people of the neighborhood can see it and/or interact with.

The design should be placed in a public space where people from the community would interact with it.

The design should be a representation of the diversity of their neighborhood.

The design should celebrate underrepresented groups or people who are currently living in the neighborhood.

Activity #5 - Presentation of their findings

CC. Standard SL. 5.4 Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

Students will present their proposed mural or monument to the class. They will include their justification for a location and the details that the mural or monument will include as part of their design. As part of their presentation, they will have to include how this person or ethnic group has shaped the historical or cultural structure of Philadelphia or a particular neighborhood. How does this person represent Philly pride? They will explain the legacies associated with their person or group as well as how it has shaped their own definition of what it means to be a Philadelphian.

Resources

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<https://why.org/episodes/frank-rizzo-the-unmaking-of-a-monument-and-mural/>

Appendix

CC. L.5.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 5 reading and content, choosing flexibility from a range of strategies.

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