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*Essay*

# Past Stories, Present Voices: Exploring Identity and Community Through Museum-School Partnerships

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# Past Stories, Present Voices: Exploring Identity and Community Through Museum-School Partnerships

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**Abstract**

Exploring local history and sharing contemporary narratives through a museum-school curriculum and partnership might offer a path toward more relational, identity-affirming, and culturally relevant education for middle schoolers. This essay offers a review of literature on museum-school partnerships, highlighting key themes such as the ways relevant and authentic curriculum can positively impact student engagement and content knowledge. It also draws on ongoing curriculum development at a local New England history museum, where students analyze the archives of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake, two women who lived openly as a same-sex couple in the early nineteenth century. This case illustrates how such partnerships can surface lesser-known histories and prompt students to engage with present-day questions of identity, inclusion, and community. Finally, the essay examines how other intersecting identities may be understood using Ladson-Billings' theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.

## Introduction

Throughout time, and across cultures, humans have formed deep connections to both the land and to one another. These relationships can prevent isolation and loneliness, help us learn and grow, and ideally aid us in understanding other perspectives. Indeed, Gruenewald (2003) observed that "the shared experience of everyday places promotes the critical dialogue and reflection that is essential to identifying and creating community well-being" (p. 10). Yet in the push to meet academic goals and daily teaching demands, schools too often neglect the power of place to deepen student engagement and support meaningful learning. In response, Sobel (2020) called for a broader vision of schooling, claiming that today's curriculum emphasizes the head at the expense of the hand and heart.

Attention to the heart honors the intricate threads of relationships — including relationships to the land and the people who once lived here — and centers our shared humanity. Stories invite us to imagine how connections across time can shape the communities we are building today. Adolescence is certainly a time when the need for connection and belonging intensifies and is an important indicator for healthy social and academic well-being (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Allen et al., 2024; Foster et al., 2017; Green et al., 2016). When adolescents have strong, supportive relationships with family and friends, they feel more secure in exploring who they are, and as their sense of identity becomes clearer, they are also more likely to build positive connections with others (Branje, 2022). If healthy identity development and belonging are deeply relational (and heart-driven) processes, how might middle school curriculum leverage the power of stories to provide relevancy and a sense of belonging at this pivotal stage of development?

Rethinking curriculum through the lens of local stories and community engagement might offer a path toward more relational, identity-affirming, and culturally relevant education. In fact, Muhammad (2023) implored educators to contemplate "curriculum defined as stories and storytelling" and how that "relates to the worthwhile narratives of humanity" (p. 123). Museum-school partnerships hold the potential to expand how students build content expertise while engaging with themes of identity and community. As students encounter artifacts, stories, and voices often absent from traditional curricula, these partnerships can advance equity and inclusivity. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to explore how local museum-school partnerships and curriculum that leverage archives and stories can support

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middle schoolers' connections to history, to one another, and to their community.

This essay draws on a literature review of existing studies of museum-school partnerships to identify relevant themes and provides an examination of both Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995/2021a) and intersectionality to support this purpose. Additionally, this essay draws on the author's ongoing curriculum development work with the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, where the story of Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake — two women who lived openly as a same-sex couple in the early nineteenth century — serves as a case for examining how museum-school partnerships can surface untold histories and invite students to reflect on contemporary questions of identity, inclusion, and community.

## Literature Review: Museum-School Partnerships

Museums continue to strive to meet their educational impact goals in a public-school climate rife with the pressures of standardized testing, the stress of "covering" content, as well as prescriptive curriculum. Many museums have flexed into this era, creating curriculum that is standards-aligned and considering innovative ways to connect students with their collections. Over the years, community-based museums themselves have undergone their own equity audits, striving to create spaces that not only welcome everyone, but as Weiglhofer et al. (2023) stated, "often challenge mainstream historical positions by introducing knowledge that they know to be emotive and uncomfortable" (p. 368). Amid this climate, and through the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, studies have continued to emerge analyzing the impact of museum-to-school curriculum and partnerships. Although the studies presented in this essay vary in purpose, content focus, demographics, and location, they collectively suggest positive impacts for both students and museums. For example, all but one study drew upon the power of stories to build empathy, and every study reported increased engagement and deeper understanding of content.

Moore et al.'s (2023) study, conducted between a community museum and a local school in rural Montana during COVID-19, involved a collaboration between educators and museum staff to create a museum exhibit and a K-12 curriculum exploring the pandemic and vaccines. Guided by a place-conscious approach, their curriculum design included the melding of local historical narratives alongside the science of vaccine development. Moore used a mixed-methods research approach that included teacher reflections, a demographic survey, a semi-structured interview with nine teachers and museum stakeholders, and document analysis of student-produced work. Moore and colleagues' article also highlighted co-author Weikert's dissertation, which delved into the underlying motivations of stakeholders to sustain a partnership for collaboratively designing curriculum aligned with a museum exhibit. Moore and Weikert's findings "revealed that through a focus on local history and knowledge, both museum and K-12 audiences found common ground, learned about the subject through a local lens, and strengthened school and community connections" (p. 74). The teachers "reported that the curriculum helped increase student engagement and broadened their pedagogical approach" (Moore, p. 76). Notably, both teachers and museum stakeholders described their partnership as a relationship between individuals rather than a transactional exchange between a school and an institution.

Savenije and de Bruijn's (2017) case study looked at high schoolers' historical empathy from an exhibit "War Children in Conversation" and an accompanying 90-minute workshop at *Museon* in the Hague, the Netherlands, on children of WWII. The researchers defined historical empathy as a person's reconstruction of their perspective based on interactions with historical accounts and their interpretation of multiple perspectives. In the workshop, students used the exhibits to acquire information to write and perform an imaginary interaction between two children featured in the collection. The exhibits featured objects, stories, and first-person audio recordings recounting events. The study included 22 students aged 15 to 19 from various social, religious, and cultural backgrounds. After completing a questionnaire, a 12-student sample was selected based on diversity and WWII background knowledge. Those students participated in interviews and were observed during the workshop. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the qualitative data to determine background knowledge of WWII, student engagement with the exhibition, emotional engagement, non-verbal behaviors, and students' contextualization of past knowledge and

present values in their interpretation of multiple perspectives.

Savenije and de Bruijn (2017) discovered, "As most students did not feel emotionally attached to WWII, it is interesting to note that many of them were triggered by the exhibition's focus on personal stories" (p. 837). In particular, "half of the interviewed students highlighted the fact that these children were like themselves, showing that they could more easily relate to the experiences of those of their own age" (p. 837). In addition, the researchers discovered that objects in the exhibition that had a story attached to them (versus being in an isolated display) led to an increase in engagement. Savenije and de Bruijn also found that engaging with multiple perspectives and building background knowledge led to stronger contextualization. They described four Moroccan students who felt connected to the story of a Moroccan soldier because they could identify with his immigrant status. This seems to underscore the significance of presenting historical people and stories in which students can see themselves.

In Lisbon, Portugal, Faria et al. (2015) conducted a study between an elementary school and two science museums that incorporated a unifying story theme. This study took place in a public school classroom of 25 students, who were eight and nine years old, over two weeks. For the curriculum intervention, students listened to a fictional story developed for the study. Then students examined the museum's exhibits to identify elements mentioned in the story, which they used to compose a diary for King Carlos I of Portugal, an early pioneer in oceanography. Faria and colleagues' results indicated an increase in students' motivation and engagement, which they attested to collaborative group interactions and the use of stories to anchor science education. In fact, they suggested:

> The outcomes of this study indicate that the engagement of young students in an activity involving a visit to science museums, and extending it by adding an historical dimension, is an important and successful strategy for creating a compelling context for learning about scientific practices and to develop a deep understanding about the scientific activity. (p. 994

Lastly, Ziebell and Suda's (2020) qualitative case study took place in Melbourne, Australia, with 100 fifth graders and a museum partnership that included four teachers, museum staff, and university staff. They created a 10-week, inquiry based unit around economics and business that included connected pre-lessons, a museum excursion, follow-up lessons, a second museum excursion, and post-activities. They collected data using planning documents, student work samples, several student surveys, and a semi-structured post-teacher interview. From their data, Ziebell and Suda found students to be overwhelmingly engaged and interested in learning. Students and teachers ranked the simulation component the highest for helping students learn. Ziebell and Suda (2020) noted the importance of early accessibility to museum artifacts: "Information, research and learning experiences regarding particularly significant artifacts that can be investigated prior to coming into the museum was suggested for creating strong links back to the classroom" (p. 551). Furthermore, teachers felt the curriculum's development and cultivation of creative and critical thinking skills were extremely valuable for their students (Ziebell & Suda).

Moore et al. (2023) and Savenije and de Bruijn (2017) present examples where museum-school partnerships offered students an opportunity to investigate and interact with local histories. The positive effects of relevant and authentic curriculum on learning outcomes were observed in Faria et al. (2015) and Ziebell and Suda's (2020) research. Furthermore, the curriculum and partnership in each case heightened student engagement and deepened content understanding.

## Case Illustration: The Charity and Sylvia Unit

Founded in 1884, the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History is the oldest community-based museum in the country (Henry Sheldon, 2024). An adjoining research center provides access to archives for scholars, college students, and genealogists. Due to budget cuts and later interruptions resulting from COVID-19, the museum was forced to discontinue hosting field trips and school outreach programs. In 2023, the museum director engaged me, as an educational consultant, to design curriculum and help reestablish connections with local schools. Ultimately, the museum hoped to leverage its

unique collections, such as its Charity Bryant and Sylvia Drake collection, to provide educational experiences that resonated with students and fostered critical thinking and discussion around complex social issues. I present here a case illustration of the evolving unit for seventh through ninth grade students, "Charity and Sylvia: Identity, Community, & Love," as an example for how museum-school partnerships can amplify untold histories, engage students with an exploration of identity and community, and support teachers in culturally relevant teaching. Figure 1 shows an overview of this museum-school curricular unit, which is available for free on the museum's webpage: https://www.henrysheldonmuseum.org/charity-and-sylvia.

The curriculum design process began in 2024 when I co-developed the initial Charity and Sylvia unit with middle school social studies teacher, Alex Morgan (pseudonym used). Morgan and I sought to design a curriculum to develop students' cultural understanding and build an inclusive class community. As Muhammad (2023) asserted, "Curriculum must not only connect to the world, but must also disrupt hurt, harm, and pain in the

**Figure 1**
*Overview of the Charity & Sylvia Unit (Henry Sheldon, 2024a)*

## UNIT Overview

| Charity & Sylvia: Identity, Community, & Love | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Description** | Celebrate your identity and your classmates' through the power of stories! Become a curious historian and explore the Henry Sheldon Museum archives, where the captivating story of Charity and Sylvia unfolds. Residents of Vermont, they are one of the earliest documented queer couples in the nation. Their story reveals the open acceptance of same-sex couples within their communities. Their lives in the mid-1800s offer a window into the evolving roles of women in society, shedding light on family diversity and gender roles, both then and now. By understanding local histories and one another, we can create communities where everyone feels a sense of belonging and that their story matters. | | | |
| **Key Topics** | Identity, Community, LGBTQIA+, Gender, Inquiry, Localized Histories, Museum, Civics | | | |
| **Compelling Question** | ***How can people's stories help us understand ourselves and one another?*** | | | |
| **Choose your inquiry!** | Inquiry 1<br>1-2 Weeks | Inquiry 2<br>1 Week | Inquiry 3<br>1 Week | Inquiry 4<br>1-2 Weeks |
| **Supporting Inquiry Questions** | How can local histories and our own stories deepen our understanding of ourselves and our connections to people and places? | In what ways do Charity and Sylvia challenge traditional ideas of family and gender? How does the past compare to the present? | How can Charity and Sylvia's experiences help us understand what makes a community inclusive? | What action can we take to create more inclusive communities? Should history inform our efforts? |
| **Artifact Focus from the Henry Sheldon Museum** |  |  |  | Culminating Project<br>  |

*Note:* Image courtesy of the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, VT

world" (p. 124). Disrupting metanarratives that marginalize and oppress are critical for telling a different story. For example, the dominant narrative for "family" has historically been used to promote heterosexuality and traditional gender roles (Bourdieu, 2001; Middletown, 2022). Middletown, a museum educator and curator, implored museums to challenge harmful narratives by creating queer-inclusive and affirming conten aimed at families with children that prioritizes the well-being and visibility of queer individuals. Similarly, Harrison and colleagues (2019) urged middle level educators to consider practices that support the needs of marginalized adolescents versus catering to dominant cultural groups.

Stories, especially counternarratives, serve as a humanizing force, fostering connections that can move us from understanding to empathy and action. This type of positive counter-narrative can be affirming for students who see themselve represented, help each student understand another culture, and support the thoughtful construction of a different story (Middletown, 2022). Moreover, "Uncovering counternarratives through storytelling is a way that all voices are heard and is the force that shifts apathy to empathy and passivity to action, creating the profound belief that we can make the world a better place" (Evans et al., 2024, p. 52). The unit design was grounded in our belief that storytelling can foster empathy and human connection. Indeed, critical race theorists, Solórzano and Yasso (2002) claimed that when people tell their stories and share different ways of seeing things, it can help their communities become stronger, make their efforts for change more powerful, and keep their unique cultures alive even when facing difficulties. Likewise, when people examine histor critically, they uncover truths and "challenge the ways in which their stories are told (and not told)" (Ladson-Billings, 1997/2021b, p. 96).

Drawing on her background in museum education and middle school teaching, Morgan offered insightful suggestions to enrich the storytelling element by integrating localized histories and oral narratives inspired by students' personal artifacts. In addition to learning important social studies and literacy skills, her goal was to create a brave space for students to share their identities and to grow together as a class community.

In 2024, Morgan piloted part of the unit with her students and took a field trip to the museum. During the museum field trip, students created silhouettes, reflecting on how this historical for of portraiture expresses identity — both in what is revealed and what is left out (Figure 2). As expected with any curriculum implementation, there were revisions to make, and there were also valuable successes to build upon. One success was the way Morgan's students became skilled historians, curiously approaching and analyzing artifacts, and the way they used artifacts to interpret Charity and Sylvia's story. After visiting the museum, a student commented on the post-survey: "Seeing all the artifacts in first person helped me see what life was like in the past. Especially being able to read the notes they wrote [to one another]." Curious to learn more about the ways students explored their identity and learned about their classmates, I asked A. Morgan (personal communication, November 24, 2024): In what ways, if any, do your students seem more inclined to share personal or family stories related to history, diversity, or inclusivity? Her reflections included:

> My students who are LGBTQ+ felt a lot more comfortable sharing out their stories. The open-ended final research question, those students picked those topics … . Students with disabilities leaned towards those stories. My students who fall outside of that sphere were comfortable finding objects from their lives and telling their stories. My students that are more in the marginalized realm felt more comfortable sharing their stories. It was refreshing to feel like I created a classroom space for [them] to feel comfortable.

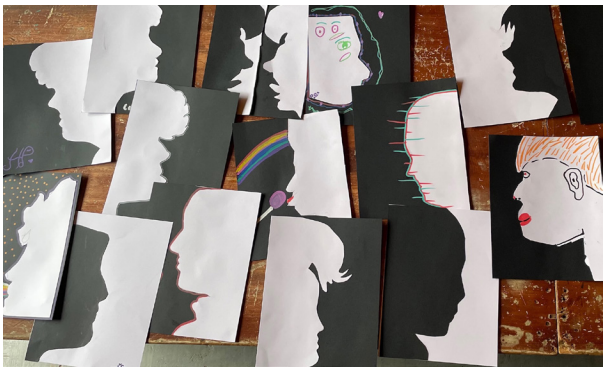
The last key takeaway from our pilot was the capability of Morgan's students to grapple with complex social justice topics from the past and the present. In our post-implementation interview, she reported:

> They were blown away when we discussed women's right to vote and how same-sex marriage didn't exist. Students were surprised by that history … surprised that there were

> those dynamics at play. Students who researched artifacts on other areas of history were surprised that this was not that long ago. The curriculum allowed us to have those discussions and make those connections.

During the Charity and Sylvia unit — which pairs storytelling with civic action — students engage in conversations about identity and community while examining "how [unequal] power relations contribute toward the ongoing production of culture, and a fluidity of identity depending o context" (Sleeter, 2012, p. 47). This preliminary data highlights the potential of a school-museum partnership and curriculum to nurture adolescents' need to be seen, to belong, and to be intellectually challenged to think critically and discuss injustices. As the unit continues to be implemented in middle school classrooms, it will evolve in response to teacher practice and student experience. A forthcoming study will provide insight into the unit's effectiveness i engaging middle-level learners and supporting the development of their cultural understanding.

**Figure 2**
*Student-created Silhouettes Produced During a Lesson from the Charity and Sylvia Unit*



*Note:* Image courtesy of the Henry Sheldon Museum of Vermont History, Middlebury, VT

## Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Intersectionality

Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) informs the design of the Charity and Sylvia unit and serves as a central framework for exploring inclusive, equity-focused museum-school partnerships. Ladson-Billings (1995/2021a), concerned by deficit narratives of Black children in the late '80s and early '90s, focused her research on exceptional teachers of color to analyze what they were "doing right" to foster academic growth amongst students of color. The three components of her asset-based theory include: academic achievement, cultural competence, and critical consciousness.

Although CRP was initially designed to address the educational experiences of students of color, I argue, alongside Aronson and Laughter (2020), that CRP may provide a strong foundation for enhancing the learning experiences of students from other cultural backgrounds. This intersectionality, defined as "the idea that identity cannot be fully understood through a single lens such as gender, race, or class alone" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), offers students a way to explore their own multiple identities, as well as the intersecting identities of Charity and Sylvia. By using museum archives to examine how these two women navigated both privilege and oppression, students can discuss the implications of these experiences in contemporary society. In this way, the intersectionality of Charity and Sylvia's gender (female), sexuality (Queer), race (White), religion (Christian), class (Middle), and nativity (non-native, as they moved to Vermont from another New England state) are considered.

Exposing students to a thoughtful, multicultural curriculum supports the development of cultural competence, defined as fluency in one's ow culture and at least one additional culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995/2021a). Culturally relevant teachers, Ladson-Billings (2014/2021c) explained, support students in questioning systems of power and encourage them to draw from their own cultural backgrounds to understand both the curriculum and their personal experiences. In essence, such an educator teaches students how to read the word and the world (Freire, 1993). Therefore, I argue it is essential for students to analyze Charity and Sylvia's intersectionality alongside examining and celebrating their own cultural diversity. Indeed, cultural identity not only shapes how young adolescents perceive themselves and others but also plays a central role in their sense of belonging (Harrison et al., 2019).

If CRP proves effective across cultures, it could persuade researchers and educators that it is a theory applicable to other cultural identities, not just those defined by race. In fact, Ladson-Billings

(2014/2021c) herself suggested, "If a theory is to remain viable, it must be generative. It must be nimble enough to attend to a variety of situations and circumstances" (p. 10). Ladson-Billings also acknowledged that "scholarship, like culture, is fluid" (p. 140) and expressed appreciation for other emerging applications of her theory, such as Paris' (2012) Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy.

Building on this openness to evolution of theory and in conjunction with the importance of intersectionality, how might CRP support students' development of cultural competence in relation to LGBTQIA+ identities? Several years ago, Aronson and Laughter (2020) created a "remix" by synthesizing research on gender and sexuality equity using the Culturally Relevant Education (CRE) conceptual framework — a combination of Ladson-Billings' (1995/2021a) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Gay's (2013) Culturally Responsive Teaching — to emphasize academic skills, critical reflection, cultural competence, and social justice action. To justify this approach, Aronson and Laughter pointed out that while Gay (2013) prioritized a focus on race and ethnicity, she also "acknowledged the potential for CRE in intersecting identities of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation" (Aronson & Laughter, p. 263).

In Aronson and Laughter's (2020) literature review, they chose intersectionality theory to view how cultural identities contribute to the ways a person experiences privilege and/or oppression, yet they intentionally chose CRE for their conceptual framework because their focus was on teaching pedagogy and education as a mode to achieve social justice. They combed through databases and identified 13 studies that met their criteria for exploring how gender and sexual identities are disrupted, promoted, or challenged. They found examples of schools and teachers disrupting gender binaries and promoting identities; however, they could not find sufficient information from the existing researc on how this work connected to student outcomes. Consequently, they called for more attention to systemic issues and more teacher preparation. Regarding CRE and intersectionality theory in existing studies, Aronson and Laughter argued:

> The tenets of CRE are grounded in investigations of race and ethnicity. As researchers explore intersections, what it means to be culturally relevant must adapt. In our synthesis, we see connections between prominent themes and tenets of CRE as researchers build new understandings on established foundations. (p. 272)

Their synthesis found examples of academic skills and engagement in critical reflection and development of cultural competence but less evidence in dismantling power structures. A year-long ethnographic study (Ennis, 1999; as cited in Aronson & Laughter, 2020) broke down the gender binary in a PE classroom and saw an increase in girls' engagement in PE and boys' perception of girls. From their literature review, Aronson and Laughter argued for educator training in queer and intersectionality theory as part of CRE because "research indicated that the more informed K-12 teachers were, the more likely they were to advocate for gender/sexuality-equitable environments and pursue a social justice approach to combating oppressive structures" (p. 273). In their review, which applied CRE to gender and sexual identity, Aronson and Laughter raised compelling points about attending to intersectionality when teaching and learning. Similarly, Hurd and colleagues (2018) emphasized that connecting curriculum to adolescents' lives by holding space for discussions around identities supports democratic and equitable classrooms.

Integrating CRP, with attention to LGBTQIA+ identities, through a museum curriculum grounded in local stories promotes cultural understanding and deeper engagement with history. In a museum-school partnership, the combination of archives and storytelling provides concrete entry points for these reflections  By situating the learning activities within the framework of CRP, educators can design curriculum that is identity-affirmin  culturally relevant, and responsive to students' intersectionality.

## Conclusion

As stewards of history, museums play a vital role in deciding which stories are preserved and shared with future generations. They hold a unique power to prevent the erasure of place-based narratives, ensuring that these stories are part of our shared knowledge. Indeed, Slattery (2013), in his call for postmodern curriculum, asserted, "It is part of the responsibility of education and museum directors to challenge hegemonic urges that

attempt to silence historical analysis" (p. 122). In this spirit, museum-school partnerships extend that responsibility to the classroom, offering students opportunities to critically consider the decisions curators make in selecting archives and determining how stories are presented.

To identify curriculum connections to local history, educators can begin by listing the rich assets within their own community. Museums, historical societies, landmarks, libraries, town offices, and nonprofit organizations all ho valuable stories and resources. A site visit may spark new ideas and inspire ways to build a partnership — whether modest and informal or more sustained and collaborative.

Weaving together localized stories of the past and present and stitching partnerships between schools and museums nurtures students' head, hands, and heart. Connecting with place and with one another through artifacts and stories provides space to build cultural understanding and foster healthy relationships. Moreover, as museum scholar Bader (2022) explained, "Storytelling and gathering with a commitment to equity redistributes power, decentralizing it from the institution by inviting and empowering people to use their voices to take an active role in shaping the narrative" (p. 73). Thus, this essay aimed to demonstrate how leveraging archives through the power of stories within a museum-school partnership supports adolescents' positive identity development and their connection to place and community. Such engagement with local narratives has the potential to strengthen students' sense of self and to encourage empathy and shared responsibility within their communities.

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