



Lesson Plan

The Boys of Baraka: The Influence of Environment on Education

FILM: This lesson plan is designed to be used with the film *The Boys of Baraka*, a 90-minute documentary by filmmakers Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady. The film tells the story of a group of middle school boys from inner city Baltimore who are selected to attend a boarding school in rural Kenya, East Africa. As part of an educational experiment sponsored by the Baltimore City Public School System and a local educational foundation, a group of 20 frequently disruptive middle school boys were given the opportunity to attend 7th and 8th grades at the Baraka School. The film documents their experiences in Baltimore and at Baraka. Viewers hear directly from the boys and their families about how the experience inspires their hopes and dreams.

The boys are shown during their first year at the Baraka School in Kenya, where they make significant academic progress while also grappling with behavioral and disciplinary issues. After a year in Africa the boys return to Baltimore for summer vacation. The story takes an unexpected twist when political unrest in Kenya and questions about funding leads to the closure of the program and force the boys back into the troubled Baltimore public schools.

OBJECTIVES:

This lesson will help students:

- Reflect on and develop an understanding of the role of environment and individual motivation on academic achievement and future life plans;
- Reflect on and express their own educational goals and aspirations;
- Write about and discuss their personal experiences;
- Develop critical thinking skills;
- Practice listening and speaking skills;
- Create original pieces of writing.

GRADE LEVEL: 7-12

SUBJECT AREAS: English, Language Arts, Social Studies.

MATERIALS:

- VHS/DVD of *The Boys of Baraka* and VCR/DVD player & monitor. P.O.V. documentaries can be taped off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from the initial broadcast.
- Handout: Viewing Guide Questions
- Black board, white board or large paper
- Chalk and/or markers

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED: 4-5 Class Periods

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Baraka School

The creation of The Baraka School was spearheaded by Baltimore's Abell Foundation with the notion that if one removes the most disruptive, inner city students to a residential learning situation, it would help those students. The site in Kenya was chosen because land was inexpensive and teachers, half of whom were Kenyan, were willing to work for salaries as low as \$5,000 a year. The total cost per year – approximately \$14,000-\$15,000 per pupil – was nearly double what the City of Baltimore typically spends (approximately \$7,000 per pupil). The school was developed for boys because studies show that boys pose disciplinary problems more often than girls.

The school's structure was designed to foster academic success. With a teacher to student ratio of 1 to 5, no student could “slip through the cracks.” Individual attention was coupled with high expectations, strict discipline, and an absence of distractions (e.g., no TV, electricity only 6 hours per day, a single satellite phone controlled by staff).

Three out of four boys who attended The Baraka School in its first years of operation went on to graduate from high school.

[Source: Goldstein, Andrew. *Time Magazine*. “The Africa Experiment,” February 15, 2001.]

Baltimore Statistics

Once the film has screened, hand out this background information about Baltimore, Maryland, and have students research the demographics of their town or city. This will build their ability to read graphs and analyze data.

- In 1950, Baltimore had nearly 1 million residents; by 2004 the number had declined to 636,000.¹
- 2004 Baltimore demographics: 65.4% African American, 30.8% White. 19.3% of all Baltimore families were living below the poverty line, compared to 10.1% nationwide.²
- In 2003, 61% of African American boys in Baltimore public schools did not receive high school diplomas.³
- According to the 2005 Maryland State Report Card, the comprehensive dropout rate for grades nine through twelve in Baltimore was 11.69%. African American males accounted for 14.17% of the dropouts.⁴

¹ U.S. Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0027/tab23.txt>; http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPopulation?_event=ChangeGeoContext&geo_id=05000US24510&_geoContext=&_street=&_county=baltimore&_cityTown=baltimore&_state=04000US24&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_submenuId=population_0&ds_name=null&_ci_nbr=null&q_r_name=null®=null%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry=)

² U.S. Census Bureau (http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFFacts?_event=&geo_id=05000US24510&_geoContext=01000US%7C04000US24%7C05000US24510&_street=&_county=baltimore&_cityTown=baltimore&_state=04000US24&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=050&_submenuId=population_0&ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=null&q_r_name=null®=null%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry=)

³ Manhattan Institute Report “Leaving Boys Behind”

⁴ State of Maryland Report Card

(<http://www.msp.msde.state.md.us/menu.aspx?WDATA=Local+School+System&K=30AAAA>)

- The Maryland Department of Education's suspension rates report indicates that from 2004 to 2005, 20,345 students from Baltimore public schools were suspended, and 11,892 (58.5%) of those students were African American. African American students were predominantly suspended for fighting and for insubordination, disrespect, or disruption.⁵
- According to the University of Maryland's Center for Substance Abuse Research (CESAR), in 2003, 23,630 adults over the age of 18 in Baltimore were admitted for treatment for substance abuse. The over-18 population of Baltimore was 451,394 in 2004.⁶
- A 2002 National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) report, revised in 2004, showed a sharp increase in cocaine and crack usage in Baltimore.⁷
- A 2005 report issued by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services shows that Baltimore had the highest amount of juvenile intakes in the state. 56% of all intakes were African American. Most intakes were between the ages of 15 and 17.⁸

ACTIVITY:

Procedure

Review the above background information with students before screening the film. The screening of the film should take two classroom periods. The tape should be stopped when the boys go back to Baltimore for the summer and resumed the next class from that point. Students will then participate in a classroom discussion on the issues presented in the film and complete a writing assignment.

Before Viewing the Documentary

Prior to the first class screening of the film, pass out the Viewing Guide Handout. [see below] Have the class take turns in reading the questions out loud. View the film with partial lights on in the classroom, and suggest that students take notes on these questions while viewing the film.

Here are some clips that can also be used in the discussion to make pertinent points:

Clip 1: 0:00:00-0:03:33 (Shots of streets of Baltimore and public school)

How were the boys' experiences different in Baltimore and Africa?

Clip 2: 0:19:15-0:21:39 (Shots of Africa; out cue: "I didn't know it rained in Africa.")

Clip 3: 0:42:05 – 0:48:14 (: Disciplinary problem is handled in Africa. In cue: fight in dining hall; out cue: "Just think about it.")

Clip 4: 1:05:02 – 1:08:06 (Parents meeting to discuss closing of school. In cue: "I have some sad news."; out cue: "You're sending my son to jail.")

⁵ Maryland Department of Education (http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/nr/rdonlyres/a4f036d6-551e-496a-951b-99b5476a463a/8109/susp05_sch2.pdf)

⁶ University of Maryland Center for Substance Abuse Research (http://www.cesar.umd.edu/cesar/county/dcs.asp?county=balt_city)

⁷ National Institute on Drug Abuse (<http://www.drugabuse.gov/Infofacts/nationtrends.html>)

⁸ Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (http://djs.state.md.us/pdf/2005stat_report-section1.pdf)

Clip 5: 1:21:29 – 1:21:55 (Montrey at end of film. “I think people think a kid from Baltimore is supposed to be nothing. That we ain’t got no future. Because we from the ghetto. I’m gonna try to make a difference. Help Baltimore be on the map.”)

After Viewing the Film

Following the viewing, have students share their answers to the Viewing Guide questions, and collect their answers if you choose to use them as part of their grades for this assignment.

During the next period, begin a classroom discussion, using the following discussion questions. Whenever possible, encourage the students to relate what they observed of the boys’ experience to their own experiences.

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the Baltimore neighborhood like where the boys live? How is it similar or different than your neighborhood? What do you think are the causes of similarities and/or differences? (Can use the demographics data previously gathered to start the discussion)
2. What three prospects does the Baraka school recruiter tell the boys they will likely face in the future? Why do you think the recruiter reminds the boys of those prospects? What do you think your future prospects are? What/who has influenced your idea of your future prospects?
3. What are the differing ways in which the families supported/did not support the boys? How does your family support or not support you in your goals?
4. How do the boys view themselves before they go to Africa? Did their perceptions of themselves change after they returned? If so, how? Has anything ever made you feel differently about yourself?
5. How were the boys’ lives in Africa different or similar to their lives in Baltimore? Do you think one life was better than the other? Why?
6. How do you think the boys felt about school and education? How do you feel about school?
7. Did you learn anything from the film? If so, what? How did the film make you feel?
8. What do you think the greatest influences in your life are right now? How much do you think those influences determine who you will become?

HOMEWORK ESSAY ASSIGNMENT :

Give the students an assignment to write a 500-word essay about the impact of their neighborhood, family and personal beliefs on their academic performance and future

outlook. Stress the importance of using evidence in the essays, reminding students to back their ideas up with examples. They should include the following topics:

- Analyze the differences/similarities between your neighborhood and the Baraka boys' neighborhood. Do you think these similarities/differences only apply to Baltimore and name of home city?
- Think about the role and purpose of education. Does getting a good education seem to be an important value in your community? Why or why not?
- Does your family play a role in encouraging you to succeed in school? How does that encouragement or lack of encouragement affect your motivation?
- Keeping in mind the first three points: What are your future goals and how do you want to change them or keep them the same? What do you think will affect your ability to change them or keep them the same?

ASSESSMENT:

Consider the following opportunities for assessment:

- To ensure listening and comprehension, ask students to listen carefully during discussion and contribute when they feel comfortable. Allow for moments of silence to give more hesitant kids a chance to talk. Try not to let one student dominate the discussion. Once the discussion is over, ask students to journal their thoughts about the discussion (whether they agree or disagree, new thoughts) in-class and give them credit for turning in a one-sheet;
- Evaluate the writing assignments according to a rubric designed by the teacher;
- Grade the students for completion and content of the homework assignment.

EXTENSIONS & ADAPTATIONS:

- Social Studies: Ask students to research issues of educational policy, including inequities in public school systems and the role of educational foundations in offering supplemental programs. Students could also research growing interest in public boarding schools in the U.S. For more information see www.seedfoundation.com. Have students write a persuasive essay regarding what they believe people (educational foundations, institutions) should do, if they should do anything, to remedy the inequities in the public school system. Request they use evidence to support their ideas.
- Language Arts, Social Studies: Have students write a letter to their future selves to project what they hope to accomplish in life and what they think it will take for them to accomplish those things.
- English: Pair the film with a coming of age novel such as "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by Zora Neale Hurston. For Junior High students, do a thematic unit on the "American Dream" and read "My Antonia". For 12th graders, pair the film with "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man".

RESOURCES:

Time Magazine

www.time.com/time/education/printout/0,8816,56364,00.html

Andrew Goldstein's article, "Baraka School: An African Experiment".

Baltimore City Public School System

www.bcps.k12.md.us/Student_Performance/Program_Evaluation/Baraka.asp

An evaluation of the Baraka School

STANDARDS:

Language Arts

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media

Level III (Grades 6-8)

Language Arts - Listening & Speaking

Standard 1: Plays a variety of roles in group discussions (e.g., active listener, discussion leader, facilitator)

Standard 2: Asks questions to seek elaboration and clarification of ideas.

Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

- Benchmark 4: Listens in order to understand topic, purpose, and perspective in spoken texts (e.g., of a guest speaker, of an informational video, of a televised interview, of radio news programs.)

Knowledge/skill statements:

1. Listens to guest speaker
2. Listens to informational video
3. Listens to televised interview
4. Listens to radio news programs
5. Understands the topic of a spoken text
6. Understands the purpose of a spoken text
7. Understands the perspectives in a spoken text

Level IV (Grades 9-12)

Standard 11: Writes reflective compositions (e.g., uses personal experience as a basis for reflection on some aspect of life, draws abstract comparisons between specific incidents and abstract concepts, maintains a balance between describing incidents and relating them to more general abstract ideas that illustrate personal beliefs, moves from specific examples to generalizations about life)

Language Arts - Writing

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 4: Evaluates own and others' writing (e.g., applies criteria generated by self and others, uses self-assessment to set and achieve goals as a writer, participates in peer response groups.)

Standard 8: Writes compositions about autobiographical incidents (e.g., explores the significance and personal importance of the incident; uses details to provide a context for the incident; reveals personal attitude towards the incident; presents details in a logical manner.)