

Teacher makes indigenous people the focus of alternative missions project

Susan Killebrew, a 4th grade teacher in the Oakland Unified School District, says she never really had her students do the traditional project to create models of various California missions.

“I do have my students learn about the Californio era because it’s important,” she says. “But I don’t focus on the missions because it’s kind of glorifying what was practically the Holocaust of native people.”

Instead, Killebrew has her students learn about the various indigenous tribes present during the era. She’s collected a library of grade-level-appropriate books about different tribes, which the students use in their research. This year they focused on Miwok, Pomo, Chumash and Mojave tribes.

“I’ve integrated these studies into the Lucy Calkins writing curriculum, where they have to learn about different kinds of informational writing, including comparative writing, sequence writing, and descriptive writing,” she says.

The class is divided into groups that are assigned a particular tribe. Then pairs of students research one aspect of the tribe’s culture, such as clothing, housing, hunting or food. Each team writes a chapter for a book about the tribe being researched, and contributes exhibits to a classroom museum reflecting the culture of their assigned tribe. The kids take turns being docents for visiting students who tour the museum.

Killebrew makes sure the students know they’re not studying a dead culture.

“We repeatedly and explicitly state that even though we’re doing museums on their traditional culture, these people are still amongst us,” she says. “Even though their way of life was devastated by the missions, Ohlone people, Mojave people, etc. are still among our California societies.”

The school where Killebrew teaches is an arts anchor school, so the book project and the museum artifacts are ways of integrating maker-style art into the curriculum. “We had kids making models of traditional houses or a facsimile of a woven basket. These are really simple things, as they’re made by 10-year-olds. But they get an appreciation.”

The projects range from the always popular bow and arrow or spear, to clay pots and headdresses. Killebrew stresses the importance of researching the artifact to make sure it is as authentic as possible. “Nobody’s making a teepee out of leather,” since no California Indians used those building materials, she says. “They’re making models of houses made out of tule reed or redwood bark and those kinds of things.”

Ultimately, the students end up with a fair knowledge of the indigenous people and a more nuanced understanding of the role of the Spanish missions in California history.

“Obviously, when they learn about these rich, rich cultures, and then they learn that these ways were decimated by the Spanish people when they came, of course it’s disturbing to them,” says Killebrew, explaining that some teachers shy away from discussing such sensitive issues at all.

“It’s part of California history, so we need to talk about it,” she says, “but we need to contextualize it and really honor the culture of the people who were here before the Spanish came.”

It’s also important to Killebrew that students put the events of the Mission era into context and that they try to understand the Spaniards’ point of view. “They’ll say, that’s a really ignorant point of view. And I say yeah, it was. But I want you to understand that’s where they were coming from. It was out of ignorance, but that’s where they were coming from. They thought they could better the lives of these people who, of course, didn’t need their lives to be bettered.”

Killebrew thinks it would be a great help to teachers if they could easily access curriculum and teaching tools that add more complexity and cultural sensitivity to their lessons about the mission era.

“It would be great if there could be resources to learn from, say, Chumash people if you’re down in Southern California, and Miwok people if you’re up in the Sierras, and Ohlone along the Northern California coast,” she said. “It would be a lot of work, but it would be awesome.”