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Jobs in our school, jobs in community : an emergent second grade study of work, justice and interdependence

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Jobs in Our School, Jobs in Community:

An Emergent Second Grade Study of Work,

Justice and Interdependence

By

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Abstract

This project documents a twelve-week study of jobs that I undertook with my class of twenty second graders at an independent school in Brooklyn in the spring of 2015. It was an emergent curriculum grounded in the immediate environment, starting with a focus on the jobs in the school then broadening to examine work in students' families, the surrounding community, and society at large. By beginning in the school and radiating outward, the study expanded week to week in its focus on how we and others rely on the people around us to get our needs met. The purpose of the curriculum was to foster thinking about how jobs and shared work contribute to interdependence and interconnectedness, and to instill curiosity about the jobs people do each day. Interviews were used to draw on the variety of work in the immediate community: the people in our school and students' families. Included in the thesis is a critical review of relevant curricula and books for children that explores the potential limits and even damaging bias in many existing resources, as well as examples of resources found and adapted to investigate topics that the students raised yet are often omitted from children's literature about jobs, such as fairness, justice, race, gender, and class. The applications section details students' discussions and reflections on these themes to illustrate the complexity of their thinking and inquiries, such as questions about who has access to certain kinds of work and why. Suggestions for future iterations of the curriculum and for use in other settings are presented, as well.

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Rationale

Background & Origin of Project

When I started teaching elementary school, one of the first and most surprising things I noticed was that my kindergartners were fascinated with work. During free time they gravitated to a dynamic, evolving assortment of "jobs" that they would act out in dramatic play. They turned our classroom house area into a restaurant, built the ingredients for an ice cream shop out of construction paper and pom-poms, and meticulously counted paper money that they would exchange for a dizzying array of goods and services on the rug. When I moved up to first grade the following year the story was much the same. "Who wants a lice check!?" one student would shout at the beginning of every choice time, dragging chairs into rows so he could inspect his classmates' heads one by one. This activity came into being the first week of school, right after all classes had gone through post-vacation lice checks in the nurse's office. There was something striking to me about seeing my first graders integrate that work experience into their play so immediately. By taking on the roles of people at work -- chefs and cashiers, ice cream vendors and lice inspectors -- it seemed to me that they were trying out new forms of industry, purpose, and the varied activities they saw adults undertaking in the world around them. Also, as one student reminded me, sometimes "it just feels good to get your head scratched."

For the last five years I've worked as an associate teacher at a private, pre-K to 12 school in Brooklyn Heights. I taught a year of kindergarten, two years of first grade, and am in my second year as a second grade associate teacher now. I first started thinking

about a study of jobs during my last year teaching first grade. As part of a curriculum on food that I had been leading, we took a field trip to a local sugar factory in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The kids were thrilled to see the different aspects of how the sugar was refined, packaged, and prepared for shipping. Our investigation of a food, however, quickly led us to the vast array of jobs that went into its production. Forklift drivers, machine operators, quality control inspectors, our tour guides; everywhere we went, we encountered more and more people involved in the creation of each box of sugar. The head of the factory -- the grandfather of one of the students in our class that year -- was up front with the children about how his business could not exist without the contributions of every worker. On the bus ride back to school I asked a student next to me what she thought of the visit. She said it must feel good to work there, because every job was so important.

A study of jobs is in part a study of interdependence, of one of the ways we rely on one another in this society to help meet each other's needs. Jobs are often thought about as a means to earn money, and that is certainly a facet that students have to understand: in this society, jobs are a way of ensuring that many of us can provide for ourselves, our families, and our communities. Beyond that, however, in creating my study of work I wanted to start a broader conversation about why jobs matter, and to encourage critical thinking about which jobs are and aren't talked about in my students' daily lives.

Pedagogical Rationale

Banks and McGee-Banks (1998) write that “a modern social studies curriculum helps students develop the ability to make reflective decisions and to successfully participate in the civic life of their communities” (p. 7). This civic-mindedness is at the heart of “community helpers” curricula, a theme of many lessons and resources for young children about jobs in society. Studies focused on work in the community explore with students the world that is right in front of them, in terms that are intelligible according to their level of development. Banks and McGee-Banks call this the “expanding environment” approach: “in the primary grades, the students study institutions with which they are most familiar and thus can understand most easily” (p. 43). For this reason, there is great value in grounding a jobs study in the idea of “helpers” in our communities. By learning about jobs that are clearly beneficial and easily understood, students can begin to make sense of the many types work we rely on in society. This notion of the expanding environment also supports a focus on jobs that are “most familiar” to children. In the case of my class, these were the jobs in their families, in our school, and in the surrounding community.

In addition to helping children explore the world right in front of them, social studies also “helps students develop the knowledge, attitudes, values, and skills needed to deal reflectively with the major social issues and problems of our nation and world” (Banks & McGee-Banks, 1998, p. 7). Silin (1995) criticizes the tendency in elementary curricula to teach to “the child outside of time,” an idealized vision of childhood that separates the learning that takes place in school from the social and historical realities outside of it (p. 50-52). To counter this phenomenon, he advocates making space in the

classroom for drawing in students' questions and knowledge about complex and difficult subjects:

> When children come to school they bring unique histories, comprised of all their prior interactions with the environment [...] While educators may not be able to change the economic and political structures that promote violence and social injustice, they can play a transformative role in the lives of individual children by helping them to formulate strong, coherent identities (p. 46).

These "strong, coherent identities" are forged through an open and inquiry-driven negotiation with subjects present in students' lives in and out of the classroom. With respect to my study of jobs, I wanted not just to look at the types of work that students might encounter in the day to day. I also wanted to surface the tensions, questions, and misconceptions student might have about what work is, why it is needed, and how it impacts people's lives. To this end, I situated my study in the immediate environment that resonated with them most -- through our investigation of jobs in school and families -- but also endeavored wherever possible to connect that investigation to its larger social, historical, and political context. As Silin puts it, "The curriculum that honors human historicity prepares students to be active participants in a democratic world" (p. 53).

Themes and Limitations in Children's Literature About Jobs

An initial survey of nonfiction books for children about work showed me that while there was much out there about how jobs are helpful and important, the range of jobs represented was often quite narrow. The Bank Street library has 131 books in its catalog under the topic "Occupations." Many of these are written for children and focus on the characteristics of particular jobs. The largest sub-category, with 14 books listed, is

"Community Helpers," a topic that appears in many elementary school curricula as well. Books in this section such as *I Want to be a Nurse* (Liebman, 2001), *I'm Going to Be a Police Officer* (Kunhardt, 1995*)*, and *Letter Carriers* (Flanagan, 2000) focus on jobs in the fields of community health, safety, food preparation, and other services. The largest number of books on specific jobs tended to feature these "helping" occupations: firefighters (9), police officers (6), teachers (5), veterinarians (5), and the like. Books that provided a more general survey of jobs also tended to focus on the same sets of professions: teachers, farmers, and bus drivers (Levin, 2004); firefighters, teachers, and construction workers (Conrad, 2002); teachers, pilots, and athletes (Rice, M., Rice, C., & Smith, 1990).

While these jobs are all important, they only represent a slice of the jobs people can do, and the jobs we rely on for meeting people's needs in society. The repetition of the same "helping" jobs from book to book, moreover, made it seem like they comprised the bulk of employment options in our economy, while the perspective of many books skated over the complexities of the jobs they did describe. For instance, one book I chose for my classroom was helpful in its presentation of the tools and supplies people need to do their jobs (Heling, Henbrook, & Davies, 2012), but after reading a page about a farmer's overalls, bandana, and straw hat, a student protested: "These all seem like… what's that word? Stereotypes." Another book (Conrad, 2002) described workers in the restaurant industry as "people who serve you," revealing the troubling assumption that readers of the book would go on to join a class of their own above that of the service economy. The topic of police raised particularly complex questions, especially in light of

the national protests about police violence in the winter of 2014/2015, when I was preparing my study. It is important for children to understand the positive mission of the role police play in society, but in their focus on “helpfulness” many books about police for children -- such as *Officer Brown Keeps Neighborhoods Safe* (Flanagan & Osinski, 1998) -- tell a one-dimensional story that elides the ways in which the presence of police in many communities erodes feelings of safety rather than fostering them.

Many of the curricula about jobs that I found in my research were also focused on the idea of community helpers. A Google search for “community helpers curricula elementary school” yielded over 500,000 results. (This proved a much more direct channel to teaching materials than searching for “jobs curricula” more broadly, since those criteria turned up mostly curriculum design jobs for educators). As I found in my review of children’s books, the range of jobs represented in many curricula was still quite limited. One unit for preschool/kindergarten (Lemons, 2010) described the “helpers” theme as “a wonderful way to broaden your children’s horizons and help them learn about the world beyond home,” defining community helpers as “special people who help and protect us: Policemen, firemen, doctors, nurses, carpenters, postal carrier, grocer, baker, librarians, etc.” In another (TeacherVision, n.d.), I found exercises that asked children to think about the jobs a community needs, and what services they would want to provide in their own lives; choices included a “doctor, librarian, firefighter, garbage collector [...].” For preschoolers and kindergarteners, learning about community jobs like firefighter and postal carrier does provide a valuable inroad into “the world beyond home,” but as I thought about my curriculum for second grade I began to question how

much the repetition of the same professions from one helpers curriculum to another could really serve to "broaden" children's horizons in the way the studies aimed to do.

Looking around at the families in my class and at the neighborhood around my school, I was also struck by the fact that few of the jobs in my students' families appeared in the books about work. In curricula about community helpers I noticed a focus on jobs that can be easily "typed," represented visually to children in terms that are simple to digest and understand. One online resource for teachers (Nelson, n.d.) outlined a list of possible "helpers" to focus on (nurses, dentists, chefs, astronauts, soldiers) and recommended reading a story about each one, then doing an activity like "dramatizing" or "making a hat" to fit the kind of work. There is certainly use in dramatizing or representing jobs students study -- like making a doctor's bag or a chef's hat, or looking at the tools certain jobs require -- but how are students then to make sense of the many other jobs we rely on that cannot be so easily visualized or typed? Many of the jobs in families from my class tended to be white collar, higher status forms of work: doctors and lawyers, yes, which were represented in books, but also writers, editors, journalists, and financial service professionals. Following Banks and McGee-Banks' (1998) notion of the expanding environment, I wanted to include a focus on jobs that were "most familiar" to children in my class: both in terms of traditional "helpers" jobs they were aware of from their experience in the world, and in an examination of jobs in their families that were not as commonly depicted in nonfiction literature.

Finally, I wanted to make sure my curriculum addressed the role of jobs in society at large. As Banks and McGee-Banks (1998) argue, teaching in social studies is

inextricably linked to teaching about issues of justice. From the outset, I knew looking at jobs in the families from my school -- an independent school situated in an affluent neighborhood in Brooklyn -- raised questions about where those jobs fit into society at large. Jobs are in the simplest sense means of meeting people's needs, but needs and resources are not distributed equitably. The *Teaching Tolerance* blog offers many resources for teaching social justice topics in early elementary grades through high school. A search in their "Wealth and Poverty" category yielded over 40 lessons, but only 3 of them were written for students younger than third grade (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). To surface some of the issues necessary for understanding these complexities, I incorporated poetry and nonfiction resources that dealt with the concept of labor broadly, in a way that allowed students to think about how work was connected to justice. Some of these were written with young students in mind -- like *Lado a Lado* (Brown, 2010), a story of the farm worker movements organized by Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez -- while others were not. Poems written for adults like "Mi Historia" (Dominguez, 2003) described the difficulty of manual labor in California's cotton fields, which prompted discussions in our class about what workers would have to be compensated in order for the job to feel fair. I describe these investigations into jobs and justice in more detail in the thematic overview below.

For all these reasons, a central goal throughout my study was widening the set of activities students thought about when asked "What is a job?" The traditional "helpers" form a crucial part of that list, but so do many other jobs that students see in their homes, school, and community. How could my curriculum draw on the many jobs students were

seeing in and outside of school every day? How could it shine a light on the many jobs that were not visible in the families of our school community, but that nonetheless made up the social systems upon which we all depend?

Drawing on Studies of Jobs in Community

Several curricula developed by Bank Street College graduate students were helpful to me in grounding my jobs study more immediately in the community. Jacy Gerhardt (2003) focused on jobs as part of a year-long community study. By situating the study in the neighborhood of the school -- through jobs walks, interviews with local business owners, and a culminating "job fair" where the class presented its findings -- she introduced her students to jobs in a concrete way, directly informed by their own experience. Kathryn Spirer (2007) also relied on a trips-based community-centered approach for her second grade job study, but instead of starting with the world outside the school she began with the school itself.

I found the approaches of both of these teachers helpful in thinking about my own study. Like Gerhardt I wanted to rely on tours of the building and neighborhood to build out students' first-hand observations of work. As Spirer did I decided to begin with jobs in the school, since that comprised such a large part of children's day to day experiences with work. In that vein, I also thought it would be helpful to bring in parents and caregivers as sources of information for my students; the first "workers" they encounter are often in their own families, and I wanted to ground our explorations in the worlds students knew most directly. In Spirer's study, the investigation of "school" was limited

to three jobs in different areas of administration -- the principal, the custodian, and the security aide -- so I wanted to widen my lens a bit according to what other jobs students might be wondering about.

By starting with our classroom and school and radiating outward, I hoped to foster a sense of how much we rely on the people around us to get our needs met. I wanted to instill a feeling of curiosity about other people's lives, and empathy for what it feels like to be someone engaged in a particular kind of work. I wanted to raise awareness of jobs that aren't always visible but are crucially important, from the person who takes care of our school building at night to the workers that grow and transport the food prepared in our cafeteria.

Developmental Rationale

Seven-year-olds, situated right on the fuzzy line that separates early and middle childhood, are in an interesting spot: inward-focused yet with a burgeoning sense of social awareness, they are constantly integrating their experiences in the world around them to help them make meaning. Eccles (1999) notes that around the age seven children become more invested in having "successful experiences," both because of their growing cognitive capacities and due to their expanding awareness of themselves as part of their surrounding social context. In this way, we can see second graders as standing at a developmental crossroad, poised for rapid growth that is driven both from within themselves and in collaboration with a widening constellation of adults, peers, and other influencers.

Cognitively, the seven-year-old is right on the cusp of a major shift, from what Piaget calls “preoperational” to the “concrete operational” period. In this phase, the child’s thinking becomes “more complete, differentiated, quantitative, and stable” (Miller, 2011, p. 52). Concepts can be explored with more consistency as the child makes connections and inferences about her observable world. Children in this period also display thinking that is more flexible and less fixed. As Miller (2011) explains, “thought now is decentered rather than centered, dynamic rather than static, and reversible rather than irreversible” (p. 56). As the child’s capacity for logic, spatial reasoning, and number sense grows, so does the complexity of her understanding of -- and questions about -- the environment around her.

According to Vygotsky (1978), this cognitive growth of children is inseparable from their participation with others in a distinct cultural context. In the Vygotskian frame, “thinking is inherently social” (Miller, 2011, p. 218). The seven-year-old, through expanding interactions with adults, classmates, and peers, undergoes external negotiations that bring about internal growth and change. “As children engage in activities with others, intermental activities, particularly dialogue, become intramental. In this way individual mental function has sociocultural origins” (p. 219).

The study of jobs is inherently social, building on children’s emerging sense of and curiosity about the world around them. For second graders, increasingly flexible thinking allows for new and more varied perspective taking, an investigation into the daily lives of the people around them. Through interviews, books, and visits to different places of work, I sought in my curriculum to build on the students’ expanding roster of

intermental activities and capacities. Looking at jobs is a social study in the most basic sense. By looking at the work of the people around us, we asked again and again: What is it like to be another person, and what can we learn from their experience?

Erikson (1963) notes that the age of six marks an emotional turning point, as the child enters into a crisis (and negotiation) of industry vs. inferiority. In this stage, children are “learning to do meaningful work and are developing the ego strengths of ‘steady attention and persevering diligence.’ They are also learning to work and play with their peers. The danger of this stage is an excessive feeling of inadequacy and inferiority” (Crain, 2000, p. 255). According to Erikson, children in this stage of development exhibit a tension between their burgeoning desire to undertake meaningful work and their anxiety that these new efforts might fall short or fail to measure up to external standards.

The study of jobs builds on children's burgeoning interest in the theme of “meaningful work.” At this stage in development, as children are exploring a growing sense of their own industry and capacities, questions of what activities produce a feeling of fulfillment and satisfaction are especially resonant. As I had observed going into the year, even at play my students were investigating what it felt like to try out different “jobs” from running an ice cream business to checking their fellow classmates heads. By turning our attention to jobs in our school and larger community, I hoped to tap into and widen that interest in what people do to provide for themselves and to give meaning and purpose to their everyday lives.

Sociocultural Context

I teach at an independent preK-12 school in Brooklyn Heights. The lower school is comprised of grades 1 through 3, with 4 classes of about 20 kids at each grade level. Every lower school class has two teachers -- a lead instructor and an associate -- and there are a host of specialty teachers for art, music, dance, gym, and library time. The school has a 50/50 gender split. On the whole, the students come from families that are relatively affluent, and the majority of children (and teachers) are white. In my class the year I taught this curriculum, 16 out of 20 students were white and four were students of color; both I and my lead teacher are white as well.

The lower school philosophy is grounded in an open curriculum structure. Instructors are encouraged to teach to their interests and passions, so in a given a year a student may learn about storytelling, Italy, Egypt, or modern art. The main value of the school is fostering the innate curiosity of children. In the middle and upper grades, this value is reinforced by a lack of formal grades, which supports the idea that students should love learning for learning's sake.

In undertaking a study of jobs in the school and the families that are a part of it, I was aware of several tensions from the outset. First, the types of work that students would have encountered in their families likely comprised a particular set of jobs in the society at large. All parents in my class that year were college educated, and many had advanced degrees. While scholarships are available to some families for reduced or free tuition, the high cost of attending a New York City private school results in certain classes of jobs being represented much more strongly than others. In my class that year, the jobs in families included: doctors, lawyers, investment bankers and finance

professionals, writers and editors, artists, and teachers in the school. I wanted to focus on jobs in families to ground the curriculum in the world students knew, but was also aware that the curriculum would have to broaden that focus if I wanted to foster an awareness of all the kinds of work we need and value in our community and society.

Second, the array of jobs within the school reflected dynamics of race, class, and the visibility of certain kinds of work that were troubling but important to surface. The faculty of the school was predominantly white. In the lower school, the lead administrator was a white woman, as were both administrators in her office. Of the 24 lead and associate teachers, only two were educators of color, and just one in the role of master teacher. However, people of color filled roles in the lower school that were critically important, from maintenance of our buildings and grounds, to school security, to the preparation of daily meals. These positions were often highly visible to students but were also lower status positions, a phenomenon that is reflected in society at large but that often goes undiscussed with younger children, or children in general. I went into the curriculum unsure of how patterns of inequity would come up for my students (if at all), but I did know that I wanted the study to highlight the vast assortment of jobs the school depends on outside of the “academic” power structure that is most visible to students and their families.

Curriculum

Outline & Overview

At the outset, I planned a 12-week curriculum that examined jobs starting in our school and classroom and radiating outward into our families, community, and society at large. My school uses an integrated approach to curriculum, without a designated slot for social studies, so over the three months I was teaching this unit the study of jobs was woven into class meetings, weekly homework, writing and art activities, and class trips.

In my initial outline, which I have included in its original form below, I planned to spend a set amount of time on the three focal points of our study: the school, families and community, and society. I quickly realized that each area of inquiry would have to be expanded to follow my students' interests. For instance, in my first conception of the study the "Families" section would take about three weeks. Following Rogovin (1998) I grounded that study in interviews with parents and caregivers, learning about different kinds of work from guests we brought in from the school community.

This process completely captivated my students. For every interview they took detailed notes, asked questions, and created a book about our guests. One interview led to several more, as families got in touch volunteering times to come in. As a result, I expanded this section of the study as it went, adding interviews and visits to places of work to follow the class's interests. I had conceived the final section of the curriculum as a history study, looking at 20th century labor movements and connecting them to movements for workers' rights today. In the end, I scaled down that section considerably. Instead of looking "outside" and back in time for the last weeks of the unit, I wove in

discussions of figures like Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta to our study of families and the community in response to students' questions, like "What do you do if a job doesn't make enough money?" or "Where does the food in our cafeteria come from?" A fuller discussion of those changes is in my Applications section below, as are my reflections on themes that came up throughout the unit.

Along with my curriculum outline, I have included a week in detail with lessons, activities, and homework assignments for that part of the study. I chose Week 2 because it featured an arc that typified much of the approach I ended up using: questions that emerged from our discussions during class meeting, an examination of the jobs we encountered every day in our school and community, writing and art activities as means of inquiry exploration, and a classroom interview that launched our many interviews that followed.

Unit Outline

INTRODUCTION (1 week)

- What is a job?
    - Surface initial conceptions about what jobs are, how people get them, why they exist.
- What kinds of jobs are there?
    - Brainstorm a list: what jobs can students think of?
        - KWL
- What kinds of jobs do you want to learn more about*?*

SCHOOL (~~2 weeks~~ 4 weeks)

- What jobs do students and teachers do in the classroom? What jobs have to happen for us to go about our day?
    - Think about the kinds of "work" that are done in our room on a day to day basis; students interview teachers about the facets of their job, and vice versa

- What jobs are in our school?
  - Have the students brainstorm an initial list of what jobs can be found at our school. Starting with what they know, build out to do some research.
    - KWL; Jobs walk (what jobs do you notice? any you can't see?)
- What are the jobs in our school like?
  - Get a sense of what it's like to be a lead teacher, an associate, an after-school coordinator, a maintenance person, a chef, the head of school
    - Job walk
    - Interviews; job books
- What jobs do we need for our school to run?
  - Consolidate and review.
    - Map: what jobs do we need?
    - Start collecting jobs on cards, sorting and organizing into a "What This Place Needs" map in the form of a classroom mural

FAMILIES IN OUR CLASSROOM COMMUNITY (~~3 weeks~~ 6+ weeks)

- What jobs are in our community?
  - Again, start with a brainstorm. What kinds of jobs do you know exist in school families?
    - KWL; letter home
- What are these jobs like?
  - Repeat the interview process
  - Visits to places of work: an art studio, a classroom, an office
- What jobs *aren't* in the families?
  - Compare/contrast first KWL ("What kinds of jobs?") with our families list. What do you notice?

SOCIETY (~~6 weeks~~ throughout)

- What happens when people can't get jobs that they need? What happens when jobs don't provide, or are set up unfairly?
  - Workers Movements
    - Industrial Workers (minimum wage, 8-hour workday)
      - Introduce the concept of fair work for fair pay; a time when companies could set any hours or conditions they wanted; organized resistance to make work safe, with regulations that set up the system we have today
    - United Farm Workers

        - A half century later, unfairness still widespread; look at a movement and the actors that organized/resisted again (Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, others)
    - Fast Food
        - Compare to movements that are happening right now; look at issues that are the same and different; emphasize how collective action is used again to make change
        - Connection to other protests we have discussed as a class, like the 2014 Climate March

Lesson & Activity Plan

Week 2, Jobs in Our School

Monday

- Meeting: What jobs/work happen in our school?

In our morning meeting, I asked students what kinds of jobs they could think of that were in our school. We started a list (Appendix 1). One thing that was noticeable from the outset was that the class was thinking about jobs that they saw every day ("teacher, head of school") and those that they didn't see but knew were necessary ("classroom cleaner"). Through this discussion we introduced the idea that there were many jobs our school depended on, setting up our effort to learn about as many as we could. For homework that night, I asked students to choose a job in the school they wanted to learn more about, draw a picture of what it looked like, and ask a question to help them learn more (Appendix 2).

Tuesday

- Activity: Memory Maps

In this activity I asked students to think about the school from top to bottom; our lower school is a 7-story building, and over the course of the day students traverse many of the floors. To prepare for a Jobs Walk later in the day, the class took some time to think and sketch about what kinds of jobs happened on each floor.

- Activity: Jobs Walk

In half groups -- while the class was split during a specialty time -- we took a field trip to explore the building from the rooftop playground to the basement cafeteria. On each floor students stopped and sketched the jobs they saw using a building observation sheet (Appendix 3).

Wednesday

- Activity: Jobs Walk Sharing + Building Map

In our morning meeting, we shared the list of jobs students encountered on their exploration of the school the previous day. On large piece of poster paper, we started a class list of every job we could observe in our school, mapped out floor by floor.

Once we had a rough diagram in place, I asked the class: What different kinds of jobs did they see? Did the jobs on the walk match the ones from our initial list? Are there any jobs we *didn't* see but think are still necessary? Students noted that there were "teaching jobs" on each floor but also "fixing jobs" (maintenance workers) and "helping jobs" (office workers, cafeteria staff) that were essential to the school day. In addition, they discussed the ways that the school itself relied on jobs outside its walls: builders

who constructed the school in the first place, manufacturers of our classroom materials and playground equipment, suppliers of food for the cafeteria, etc.

Afterward, the class worked in pairs and chose a floor to sketch in detail, trying to capture all the jobs on our list. These sketches became the basis for a mural of the building that we would start working on the following week.

- Discussion: Homework Sharing

As a group, we read through students' homework from earlier in the week: "Ask a Question About a School Job." Their interests spanned the building and the school as a whole: our building's maintenance person and security guard at the front desk, the school nurse, the librarians, me and my lead teacher, the cafeteria staff, and more. We talked about how our questions could help us learn more about each job and the people who did them. Students were curious about technical issues ("How do you work the air conditioning in the building?"), daily schedules ("How long do you stay at school every day?"), and career decisions and trajectories ("Why did you choose to be the head of the whole school?").

We again noted the range of jobs that students were curious about, remarking on how many kinds of jobs went into the daily operation of a place like a school. With a list of questions in mind, we talked about how starting the next day we would have a chance to explore them in our class interviews.

Thursday

- Discussion: Interviewing

We started the day by talking about what an interview is, and what questions we ask to find more about someone. Students recalled seeing interviews on television or hearing them after sporting events. We discussed how interviews could be helpful in finding out about a person and the work that they do. I told them that our first interview would be later that morning with our lead classroom teacher, Sarah. We started working on a list of questions we could ask to find out more about her job and the other jobs in our school (Appendix 4).

- Activity: Interview, Sarah's Job

Our interview process began in the classroom, with our lead teacher Sarah as the class's first subject. I reminded students of some of the questions they had thought of as ways to learn more about a person's job. During the interview, students asked questions by going around the circle on the rug, giving a thumbs-up if they had something they wanted to ask. Students were invited to take notes or sketch in their "jobs notebooks," which we had introduced at the beginning of the unit. I also recorded students' questions and Sarah's responses for review later.

- Activity: Job Books

This was our first interview, and in the afternoon I introduced the writing activity that followed it. As a class we reviewed the questions we asked and Sarah's answers, then students each wrote a page for a book about what we learned from our interview. I asked students to draw a picture and write at least a sentence about something they remembered. Once we had pages from everyone in the class, we bound them into a book

for display on our classroom wall. At the end of the school year, we gave the books as gifts to each interview subject, about 20 in all.

- Game: “What Is Your Job?”

At the end of the day I introduced an acting game to add to our list of games we play during meetings. Students think of a job and the physical actions needed to perform it, then have 30 seconds to act out (without making a sound) what the job looks like. The group has 3 chances to guess, then another student is given a turn. After the game we revisited the idea that certain jobs require particular tools and equipment, and that different kinds of work involve different kinds of physical action.

Friday

- Discussion: Interview Planning

After reflecting on our interview from the previous morning, I asked the class to think about who else in our school we might invite to interview. The list of subjects from our homework assignment provided a starting point, and the class was quick to generate a host of other options: other classroom teachers, associate teachers, the chefs in the cafeteria, the school security guard, the maintenance person, the nurse, the head of school, the office manager, the gym teacher, and so on. From that list we begin to invite guests to the classroom for the next two weeks of our investigation.

Applications

In teaching this unit to my second grade class, I observed a number of themes and areas for future investigation that would be relevant to educators undertaking a study of jobs in elementary school. My reflections on what it was like to explore the curriculum in my teaching setting are below, as are thoughts on how it could be adapted in other schools and communities.

Thematic Overview & Reflections

Jobs in literature. One area I wanted to explore with my students was how jobs were represented in books about work for children. As noted above, an issue I encountered in my first survey of books about "community helpers" was that certain jobs were represented over and over again -- teachers, firefighters, doctors and nurses -- while others were left out entirely. To surface the issue of the visibility of certain jobs in books for children, I found it helpful the first week of the curriculum to read the book *Night Shift* (Hartland, 2007) aloud to the class. *Night Shift* focuses on jobs that you wouldn't see if you were only looking in the day time: street cleaners and overnight delivery drivers, waitstaff at 24-hour diners, bakers who start their work in the early morning hours, and the like. It is a concrete and beautifully illustrated story, and when I read it my students immediately began to connect to the material. The delivery jobs *have* to happen at night, one observed, because otherwise the streets would get too crowded. The diner is probably open at night, another noted, because the workers on the night shift need somewhere to eat too. Reading this book introduced students to a range of jobs that had

not come up in their initial brainstorm of jobs they knew about, and it highlighted early on in the curriculum the idea that we rely on a whole host of jobs that may not be visible to everyone in their day to day experience.

We investigated that theme of how and what jobs are represented in books through another activity the first week of the curriculum. Near the end of the week I brought a collection of books for children I had found about jobs and work. I divided the class into pairs, and asked each group to explore a book and make note of what they thought was useful or not so useful on a recording sheet on the back. In our group discussion afterward, a common criticism had to do with the variety of jobs depicted. "I couldn't find any books about the jobs in *Night Shift!*" one student exclaimed. Another noted that the book she studied was helpful if you wanted to know about teachers, but that it didn't say anything about how you *became* a teacher. We made a list of jobs depicted in the books from this activity, and students noted how little overlap there was with our first brainstorm of all the jobs we knew about. One exception to this trend was the book *Pest Control Worker* (Cohn, 2011), which at the end of the book study time was full of notes in the positive column of the recording sheet. "I didn't know anything about this job before I read this book," one student shared, "and there are so many things to learn." For the weeks to come students checked out this book from our classroom library over and over again. Its high level of detail and focus on a job that was less familiar to them captivated students' interest, which reinforced the message that there was much to be gained from exploring jobs outside their immediate experience, and outside the scope of many other jobs books.

Visibility and interconnection. As noted earlier, one critique I had of many "community helpers" curricula was their focus on a narrow window of jobs in our community and society that are represented as ones we need. When jobs in different tiers of the labor force were mentioned, the language and representation could be distancing, as in "service industry" jobs being described as jobs "that serve *you*," the reader, as if the reader was not meant to occupy positions in that field.

To counter that narrative, I spent the first week of the unit talking about the ways that all jobs in our society are connected, and that for all our needs to get met we actually rely on every kind of work. Gary Soto's poem "How Things Work" (1995) -- in which the reader sees a purchase in a restaurant enabling a chain of exchanges from groceries to violin rosin to movie tickets -- was a helpful introduction to this concept, as were several activities we did around mapping the connections between kinds of work the students were curious about. After a homework assignment where students drew a job they could recognize in "How Things Work" (Appendix 5), we had a class discussion about the different kinds of work those jobs also relied on. Students noted that a waitress in the poem would have to rely on a chef to make the food, someone to collect the money for the meals, someone at a bank to keep that money at the end of the workday, and the like. A violin described in the poem would need someone to build it, a stringmaker for the strings, a music teacher for its lessons. In this kind of analysis the students spun off connection after connection beyond the confines of the poem, and it prepared them to think about the ways jobs they encountered in their daily lives were connected, as well.

When we began to look at the jobs in our school, they continued to search for these connections between the activities that happen in the school day and the kinds of work that made them possible. They asked faculty, staff, and administrators about the different parts of their jobs, especially the aspects that were challenging or unfamiliar to them. “How do you decide how much food to order?” one student asked the head chef in the cafeteria. “Do you ever get a break?” another asked our security guard, who spends much of his day at the front desk. “What is your least favorite part of your job?” one student asked every interviewee, albeit in different forms. For homework during the school section of our study, I asked students to choose a job they had learned about and write a paragraph about why that job is needed (Appendix 6). Their reflections revealed their awareness of how every job contributed to the daily experience of students, teachers, and anyone who passed through the school doors. “This place needs [our maintenance person] because without him we wouldn’t have an elevator when it broke.” “This place needs [our cafeteria staff] because we need food for lunch every day.” “This place needs [our head of lower school] because she makes sure all the teachers do their work.”

Finally, I noticed that as they had done in our poetry reading, students began connecting things they noticed in the school day to jobs that weren’t immediately visible. When I asked what kinds of jobs happened our classrooms, they put together a list of the ones they saw day to day -- homeroom and visiting teachers, visitors who read stories or played music -- but also reflected on jobs that had to happen out of sight or beyond the school walls: manufacturers of our classroom materials and furniture, workers who must

have installed the lighting and blackboards, someone at a power company controlling those lights, and the janitorial staff who swept and vacuumed each night. I was struck by how readily students made these connections, and how the starting point of jobs they could see launched new avenues of curiosity about the many kinds of work that were just as important but just beyond their immediate experience. In this way, I felt the curriculum built an awareness of the multifaceted nature of the interdependence of work, and an appreciation for the diverse forms of labor we all depend on to go about our days.

Jobs and justice. A big question for me at the beginning of the study was how deeply students would connect the concept of work in our society to themes of social justice. Issues of fairness and justice are inherently embedded in the concept of work: how and whether people's needs are met; whose needs are met and whose aren't; what kinds of work are available in our society, and to whom. Following Silin (1995) I knew it was important to talk about issues of unfairness and injustice in the workforce directly, but I also knew I wanted to balance that charge with responding to students' questions and inquiries organically. I found that if I was patient, and really listening, students surfaced many issues about jobs and justice on their own; the challenge was making space for their questions, and finding ways to follow through on their inquiries.

One of our early classroom interviews was with the maintenance person in our building. Students were curious about all facets of his job: how he learned to fix things like our heating and air conditioning system, what happened when the elevator stopped working, and how long he had to stay at school after students left. In response to that last

question, he replied that he was one of the few employees of the school that was a member of the union, and that the union set the hours of his workday to ensure that he had ample breaks and couldn't be made to stay beyond a certain point without additional pay. This seemed to make a lot of sense to the student who asked the question, but afterward he asked: "Why did the union have to say how much he could work? Why doesn't the school just decide?" This led to a conversation about how unions came to be and what purpose they served. I had a book in our classroom called *Which Side Are You On?* (Lyon & Cardinale, 2011) which tells the story of a folk song about unions that arose from a coal miners' strike in the 1930s. A student retrieved the book from the shelf and we looked at a few sections together. I asked a group of students who were curious what might happen if a boss were allowed to make any rules they wanted in terms of employees' schedules, wages, and working conditions. They thought for a moment, then one posited that if the boss cared more about the company than the people who worked there, they might force employees to work too hard, or not pay them enough in order to save money. This assessment was so clear and compelling; my only regret was that it wasn't a conversation with the full group so all could hear it. In future iterations of this curriculum, I'm going to think about ways to bring that conversation to the class as a whole, possibly with a read-aloud after questions about terms of labor come up.

Students continued to think about the difficulty of certain kinds of jobs, and what it would feel like to perform them. As a class we read the poem "Mi Historia" by David Dominguez (2003), in which the poet reflects on the work his mother did picking cotton in California when he was a child. The workdays are described as long as physical. For

homework I asked students to write 3 questions about that description (Appendix 7). Many of them wondered how much she was paid for that kind of work, if she chose that job or if she had to take it, if she ever got a break or had to work until sunset. These questions led to a brief study of California agricultural jobs. We looked at photos of workers picking cotton, fruits, and vegetables, and talked about what the workday would be like and how much workers were likely paid. I asked students to design a schedule they thought would be fair for workers doing physical labor (Appendix 8). In their responses, students agreed ample breaks would be necessary, plenty of time in the shade to balance time picking crops, a morning to afternoon schedule that mirrored their experience in the school day (which of course was the schedule with which they were most familiar). Together we read several books about farm workers' movements including *Lado a Lado* (Brown, 2010), which details the organizing campaigns Cesar Chavez undertook with Dolores Huerta. Students were dismayed to hear about the conditions they were protesting, but were also encouraged to see examples of advocacy in the face of unjust work practices.

Finally, students raised questions about justice that were not directly connected to the content of the curriculum. In the middle of the unit I revisited a discussion we had begun at the beginning, asking them what questions they still had about jobs that they wanted to investigate. Several asked about jobs we had looked at in books or encountered in our classroom interviews. Others had questions that had been brimming on their own. One student asked, "Why do you have to be American to get certain kinds of jobs?" I asked her what she was thinking about, and she clarified: "It feels like some people only

want to hire people who look like them, or that if you're from another country you can't get certain kinds of jobs." The next student's job question picked up on this thread: "Why are some cops racist?"

At this point in the conversation I stopped and asked students what they knew about the word "racist," what it meant, and what it had to do with the police. This was not the first time the subject of race and policing had come up in our classroom. Earlier in the winter, around the time of the Eric Garner non-indictment, my lead teacher and I were wondering what the class knew, if anything, about the recent coverage of police killings in New York and around the country. I mentioned that I had been at a big march over the weekend (we had talked about marches around the time of the Climate March in the fall of 2014), and asked if they had heard anything about protests happening in the city. One white student raised his hand immediately: "Is this about Eric Garner?" Another student asked who Eric Garner was, and a second white student answered: "He was a black man killed by a white policeman. I think people are upset because he was killed for no reason, and the policeman didn't go to jail."

In that moment, too, we stopped and asked what students knew about the case or others like it. Out of 20 students in our class, about 7 had heard of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and protests that arose after their deaths. The rest of the class knew less or nothing at all, but all had something to say about how these incidents made them feel. We talked about how it wasn't a problem of police being bad people, but that many were upset (including us) because there was a pattern of violent force being used when it wasn't necessary, and that often the victims were black or brown while the police were

white. One white student connected these protests to the Civil Rights movement, noting that it “seemed like something Dr. King would have fought against.” Another white student asked if we could have a protest in our classroom. At the end of the discussion one more student, who was black, pulled me aside. He said that he had been to a protest the previous week, but hadn’t mentioned it because he wasn’t sure if it was something he could talk about in school.

This lesson and many others in my unit showed me the deep capacity that young children have for taking on topics that are complex, vexing, and often scary to talk about for educators and adults. By focusing on themes like empathy and interdependence, the curriculum created space for open and far-reaching conversations that at the end of the study I felt were just beginning to scratch the surface of how work is connected to justice. I plan to teach this curriculum again with my future second graders, and look forward to building on the conversations this first group of students began.

Further Applications

The open structure of this curriculum would make it suitable in many ways for teaching in other schools and communities for children of various ages. I believe the first three sections of the study -- the introduction, jobs in the school, and jobs in the classroom community -- could be undertaken in almost any school environment public or private, urban or suburban. With younger children, the interview-driven section of the curriculum could be utilized if adapted slightly. My second graders prepared and wrote interview questions, took notes during discussion, and prepared books afterward

cataloguing what they learned. Classes in earlier elementary grades could employ a more teacher-directed approach to these interviews, but in large part the process of learning from visitors would remain the same.

In other educational settings, an emergent study of jobs in community would likely raise issues and themes different from the ones that came up in my classroom. As mentioned earlier, a large proportion of the families of children in my class worked in high paying (and high status) white collar jobs. Challenges like joblessness and underemployment impact work across the socioeconomic spectrum -- jobs losses in the financial service industry are but one example -- but in the year I taught they did not come up in conversation with my students about work in their families. Studies in schools less sheltered by economic privilege would likely surface these issues more directly, and teachers would have to help students navigate those conversations in ways that I did not. In my setting I found that students were eager and willing to discuss difficult questions about work (e.g. What happens when people can’t get a job?) but for children in other environments these questions could present themselves from experiences that are more direct and emotionally charged. I see this as a strength of a study of jobs: its ability to surface issues that are immediately present in students’ lives yet not always discussed in school. As with any curriculum, teachers would have to prepare for what questions and challenges the study would raise, a process that starts with knowing and listening to students.

Teaching this curriculum in my particular independent school meant that I was not bound by some of the constraints of other educational settings. There was no specific

time allotted for social studies in my weekly schedule, so my study was woven into open "curriculum" times we use for all varieties of writing and art activities and classroom discussions. As part of a more discrete social studies program, interviews, trips, and discussions could be scheduled on a weekly basis, with lessons taking more or less the same form over the course of a longer unit. Another aspect of my independent school experience was that I did not have to tie the unit to state standards like the Common Core. A study of jobs in community, however, maps directly to many components of the Social Studies Scope and Sequence (NYC Department of Education, 2014). In kindergarten and first grade, a community study of jobs and families would touch on topics like "Rights and Responsibilities" (K.4a, K.4b), "Family Economic Needs and Wants" (K.9a, K.9b, K.9c) and "Community Economics (1.9a, 1.9b, 1.9b). In second grade, the shift to comparing "My Community and Other Communities" would support a study of similarities and differences between jobs on a local level to jobs in other parts of the city, state, and country. Themes like "Availability of Resources" (2.8a, 2.8b, 2.8c, 2.8d) and "Kinds of Communities" (2.1a, 2.1b, 2.1c, 2.1d) would allow students to explore features of communities around them through the lens of different kinds of work.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Jobs in Our School KWL

What Jobs Are in Our School?

Security guard
Elevator Operator
Cooks in cafeteria
Classroom cleaner
Teacher

- Classroom
- Reading
- Music
- Math
- Art
- Gym App
- Gym
- Dance
- Poetry

Principal

- Head of Lower School
- Head of Middle School
- Head of School

Librarian
Office worker
Nurse
Substitute Teacher / Floating Teacher
After School

Appendix 2. Homework, School Jobs

Ask a Question About a School Job

What is a job in our school you'd like to learn more about? Draw a picture of the job and the person who does it, then write a question you'd like to ask them:

Question:

____

____

____

____

Appendix 3: Job Walk Observation Sheet

Job Walk: What Jobs Do We See In Our School?

Roof
6th floor
5th floor
4th floor
3rd floor
2nd floor
1st floor
Basement

Appendix 4: Class List of Interview Questions

Interview Questions - Jobs in Our School

Maintenance Person

- Does it get boring when you work the elevator at the end of the day?
- How do you work the air conditioning?

Security Guard

- Do you ever sleep? Did you have any other jobs?
- What do you think while you watch people come in and out of the building?
- How many fist bumps do you give every day?
- How long do you stay at school every day? Do you lock the door at night? What time do you come back the next day? What is your favorite part of the job?

Head of School

- What do you do? Why did you choose to be the head of the whole school? What is your favorite thing about your job? What is your least favorite thing?

School Nurse

- Approximately how many kids get injured every day?
- Why do nurses help people? How often do you do surgery? How often do you give shots?

School Librarians

- Where do you get all the books?

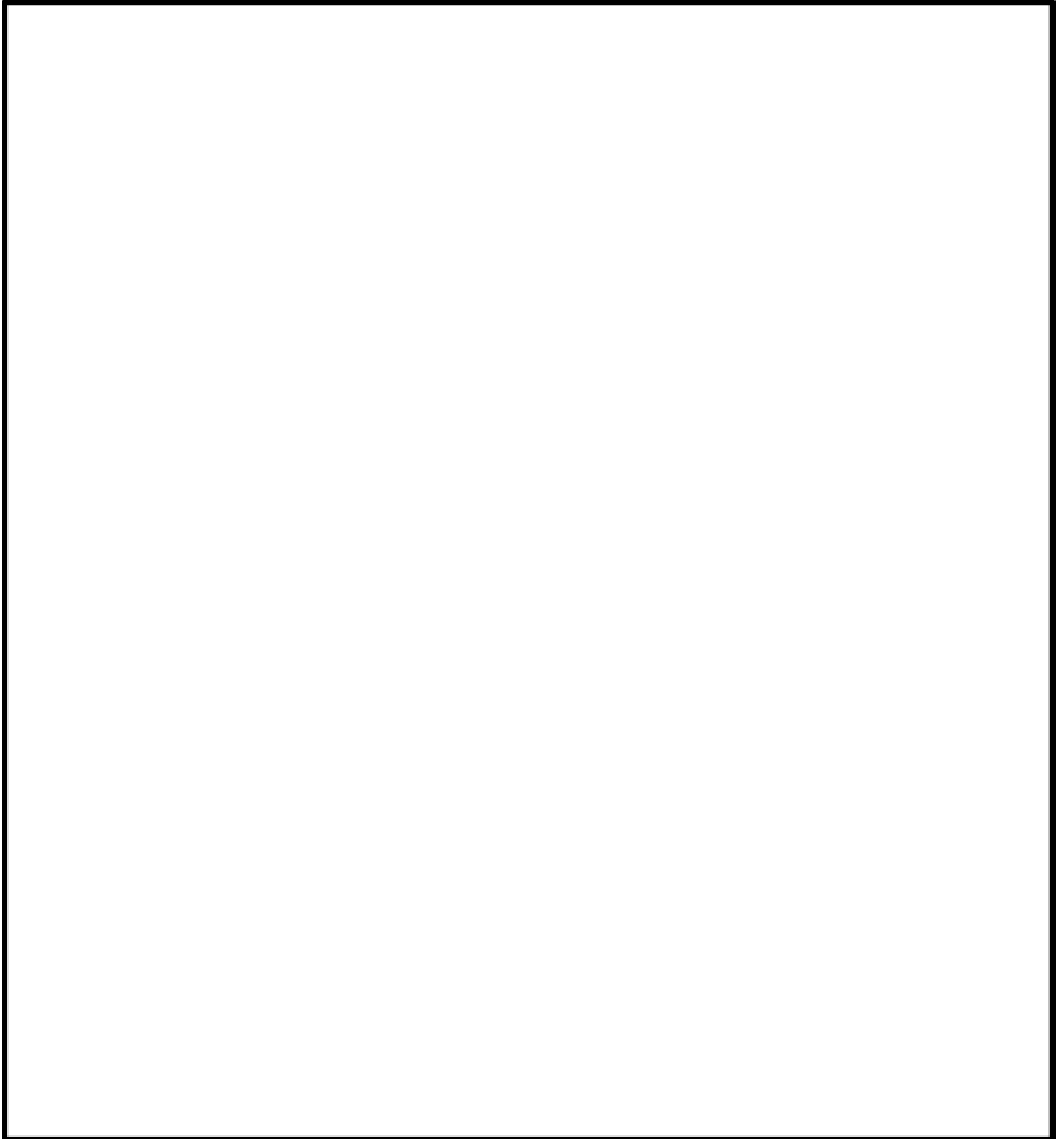
General Interview Questions:

- What is your favorite part of your job? What is your least favorite?
- When did you start doing this job?
- What time do you start your day, and what time do you leave?
- Do you choose your curriculum? (Teacher)
- What did you want to be when you grew up?
- How long did it take you to learn to do this job?
- What are the things you like to use most in your job?
- Do you pay for the materials you use?
- Why does the elevator need you? (Maintenance)
- How many kids do you teach? (Teacher)
- How does it feel / what does it feel like to do your job?
- How many years did you go to school?

Appendix 5: Draw a Job in "How Things Work"

Draw a Job in "How Things Work"

Find a job somewhere in Gary Soto's poem and draw a picture of what it might look like. Where does the job happen, and what would a person need to do it?



Appendix 6: Jobs This Place Needs

"This Place Needs" Writing

Think about the person you chose for your "Day in the Life" story yesterday. Fill their name in the blank below, and write a paragraph (3-5 sentences) about why you think we need their job at our school.

This place needs ________________________ because ________________

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

____

Appendix 7: Questions About "Mi Historia"

Write 3 questions you have about the job in the second half of "Mi Historia" ("My mother crawled through the furrows / and plucked cotton balls..."). What kind of job do you think it is? What are you wondering about it?

Question:

____

____

____

____

Question:

____

____

____

____

Question:

____

____

____

Appendix 8: Write a Schedule for a Physical Job

Imagine a job a grown-up would do that takes a lot of physical work, like picking strawberries, sweeping a chimney, picking cotton, or laying bricks for a wall or road. What do you think their schedule should be for the day? What parts of the day do you think they would need for their job to work well? Design a schedule like the one in our classroom, writing the time and activity for each part of the day (example: 8:00am - Start Work, 12pm - Lunch…)

Schedule for ___________________
(name of job)

TIME: ACTIVITY:

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____

__________ ____