Regina Banks: Story of the Question

I teach African American history to eleventh graders at Samuel Fels High School, and this was only my second year in the classroom. So when I sat down with our research questions for Building a Living Archive, I brought something specific with me: intergenerational podcasts about schooling experiences, told from the perspective of ESL students.

Here's how it worked. Students interviewed themselves first, writing a reflection and then recording themselves speaking about their own schooling experiences. Then they interviewed someone older, usually a parent or a grandparent, and someone younger, often a sibling, a cousin, a neighbor, mostly elementary or early middle schoolers. I gave them a base of about six questions, then let them run with it, add their own, take it in whatever direction felt true to them. The whole thing became a comparative look across generations and across countries: what school discipline looked like, what the policies were, how school systems differ from country to country, and how these kids navigate all of that once they land in the United States.

Because I teach African American history, my classroom's dominant narrative was never going to be Eurocentric. But even inside that, this project was still about decentering, about making sure the most marginalized voices in my room, the Black and brown immigrant kids in Philadelphia, were the ones being heard. Nobody else is really listening to them right now, and that felt like the whole point.

Along the way we talked about important Black women who shaped the School District of Philadelphia, women like Constance Clayton and Shirley Chisholm, so the students left with a deeper understanding of Black civic engagement here specifically.

What I wanted most out of this, honestly, was for my students to connect with their parents in a new way, to learn something about their own family they hadn't known before, and to understand that their story counts as history too, that it's archivable. We spent real time just talking about what it means to be a historian, what archiving even is. I didn't bring in outside speakers or organizations for this one. What I did do was pull in excerpts, about six of them, from books outside our regular curriculum, stories of immigrant children experiencing school for the first time in the U.S. or the U.K. Kids picked whichever excerpt they felt most connected to: some from Asia, several from Latin America, one Haitian student, one from elsewhere in Africa. They read for connection, then drew the line from that character's experience to their own.

I don't think this project shifted my understanding of U.S. history so much as it reinforced what I already centered. I've always taught the story I teach. But it did change how I opened the year. This was the very first thing we did, before anything else, and it set the tone that history in my classroom starts with them, not with me handing something down. By the time they came back from spring break, something had clearly moved. Early on, kids were like, I'm not a historian, Miss, but fine, I'll write my history down for the grade. By the time we did the same exercise after break, they were the ones saying, I have to tell you everything that happened, this belongs in a history book, this belongs on a timeline. They wanted their lives to count as history.

Everything about this work feels urgent right now, and I want to be honest about why. My students at Fels are in Northeast Philly, where there has been raid after raid after raid. I've had students simply disappear from school. I've had students whose parents, siblings, uncles, disappeared. I've had a student who was taken into ICE custody and came back a completely different person because of what happened to them. None of these kids are criminals. The narrative painting them that way is fear mongering, plain and simple, and it exists to keep people divided. My students are afraid to visit family a few states away because they're afraid of what could happen to them, not from law enforcement, but from people posing as it. So when I say every one of these stories is urgent, I mean that literally. No one else is making room to listen to what these kids actually have to say.

At the same time, this work brought me closer to their parents. Parents who assumed I was just some random teacher were surprised, moved even, that I wanted to hear their story. We share something real: a deep care for their child's education. And it was hard to sit with how many of them hold degrees, bachelor's, master's, doctorates, from other countries that simply don't count here, how many had to leave school to work, to join the military, to flee. And still, alongside all of that, so many of them are living vicariously through their kids crossing that high school stage and heading to university. That's devastating and beautiful at once.

The themes that surfaced again and again were newness and displacement. What does it mean to be new, not as a five-year-old starting kindergarten where everyone is new together, but as a teenager who suddenly has to hold onto who they are inside a completely different country, a completely different system. And running underneath all of it, the promise, in air quotes, of what an American education is supposed to deliver. Families pin so much hope on that diploma, that degree. My students may not love the American school system, and honestly none of us should, but they still believe in what education can do for them. That matters, because the narrative that our kids don't care, that they're not trying, is

a lie. They care. They want to go. They want the good job. They know exactly what's at stake.

Working with archival material does get complicated for my students in one specific way. Because our black history curriculum here is genuinely Philly-focused and Black-focused, it's when they've had other history classes, the standard kind, that the confusion creeps in. They start to wonder if what we're doing counts as real history, because they've been taught that history is what's official, what's in the textbook, what happened to white people hundreds of years ago. Meeting Philadelphia Black history head-on sometimes makes them question whether the present, whether their own lives, can be history too. I also work hard, and it is heavy lifting because it's certainly not baked into the curriculum, to connect Black Philadelphia history across the whole diaspora. When we study the civil rights movement, we're also looking at freedom movements in Cuba and Puerto Rico. When we talk about enslavement, we're not staying inside U.S. borders, we're looking at the Caribbean, at Brazil, at the rest of South America, so students see the fuller, global picture.

What came out of all this work were three podcasts per student: the self-interview, the older-generation interview, the younger-generation interview, plus written reflections comparing what an ideal school system might look like. Not every one made the final cut, some were simply stronger than others, but there's real range in what exists now: interviews in English, French, Creole, Spanish.

My advice to any educator thinking about doing this kind of work is simple: just do it. Archive what happens in your classroom, archive your students' experiences, write it down and submit it somewhere, because nothing is stopping you, and if we don't write this history down, who else is going to?