quilts—reclaimed fabric pieces stitched together for a renewed purpose—owe layers of personal and community history into designs. A traditional art form that provides insights into the artists’ lives,quilts involve math skills of measurement, symmetry, and geometric patterns, as well as cross-curricular studies in resourcefulness, recycling, and fabric art.

At Dana Elementary School in Hendersonville, North Carolina, students participated in a year-long study that wove together seemingly disparate subjects—geography, history, human rights, economics, migration, agriculture, landforms, voting rights, transportation, isolation, international recognition, and artistic beauty—into deep lessons that transcended any established curriculum. They accomplished this by delving beneath the surface of the little-known Gee’s Bend community and their quilts.

Background

Today’s Gee’s Bend quilters are descendants of a community of slaves who were forced to walk from a plantation in North Carolina to Alabama when they were sold. Yet, amidst the excruciating hardships experienced by many generations, this community survived. Their quilts—originally born of necessity from living in unheated shacks with timbers open to wind and rain—have a unique aesthetic that has been taught to each generation.

The incredible beauty of their art is now recognized by museum curators and collectors (who pay incredible prices today for an authentic Gee’s Bend quilt). Although this artistic recognition and source of livelihood are new in their history, the perseverance that brought Gee’s Bend quilters strength today has guided these tenacious people ever since their brutal journey.

When principal Kelly Schofield and art teacher Kristen Walter learned the history of the Gee’s Bend quilters, they knew their students needed to further examine their story. Pieces of worn-out jeans and burlap feed sacks woven into quilts pulled the school’s fifth graders into the year-long journey, tracing the migration of the Gee’s Bend community.

“We started the discussion building on what [students] knew about our state and that people migrate in and out of regions based on economic conditions and livelihoods,” explains Schofield. “It is our philosophy to coach children so they develop good questions. We don’t give students answers. The challenge we help them fine-tune is to generate meaningful questions that lead to deeper insights.”

Dig Deeper

As students were introduced to the Gee’s Bend quilters’ story, their curiosity was piqued. They engaged in increasingly deep research to answer their questions: “How did they get to Alabama? How long did the walk take? What route? What about the mountains? And how did they carry their belongings?”

“Iimages of children no older than themselves, carrying siblings for hundreds of miles through rough terrain and harsh weather made the injustice of slavery much more real to our students,” says Schofield. Dana Elementary students explored how this community survived every era, including the Depression, and examined what bound the community together during hard economic years. Deeper questions emerged as students reflected on the ways internal character strength shapes how people see beauty in an impoverished world.

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Quilts Connect School With Community

Another school that used quilts in its journey toward arts integration is Harwich Elementary School in Massachusetts. It chose quilts as the metaphor for stitching together a more connected school by helping teachers and parents understand the Common Core State Standards. Principal Sam Hein and art teacher Franchesca Jorgensen chose quilts as the cross-disciplinary theme to address the Common Core and build a creative, collegial school culture.

"Common Core gives us a central focal point and helps tease out best practices," Hein says. "Art-integrated projects speak to these new standards. We saw quilts as fitting perfectly with both the math and language arts standards."

Quilts were handcrafted by Dana Elementary students based on their understanding of North Carolina's natural resources and basic economic principles of supply and demand. The new visual art standards were applied as game players drew cards that challenged them to create miniature Model Magic clay sculptures. "We learned about the economy—you either purchase or create. If the players don't have enough money saved, they need to create. Actually, that is the fun part," McConnell explained.

Schofield and Walter helped White House Art Fair attendees understand Dana Elementary's emphasis on student-directed creative thinking that is the foundation of their entire curriculum. "Art integration is at the root of everything we do. It enables children to connect what they're learning in math, social studies, and science. Translating all of that into a robust art-integration project enables students to convey meaning visually and connect their ideas with the societal and cultural context that deepens their understanding," Schofield explained.

Deep understanding was evident as adults played the games and remarked, "These fourth graders know more about the economy than I do." The students graciously replied, "When you plan and create a complex game like this, you learn every step of the way. I'm sure you'd learn about the economy if you built your own board game."

During the art fair, First Lady Michelle Obama made a surprise appearance. In his remarks he said, "The arts are central to who we are as a people and central to the success of our kids. Art is not an afterthought—not just something you do because it's nice to do. Art is necessary for these young people to succeed. We hope events like this help send a message to school districts, to parents, to governors and leaders across our country, to support the arts in school."