

Empathy 101
TRANSCRIPT

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JEFFREY BROWN: Now, bringing the realities of war and life as a refugee to the classroom.

Our story comes from special correspondent John Tulenko of Learning Matters Television, which produces reports on education for the NewsHour.

LAUREN FARDIG, Banana Kelly High School: Everyone, your eyes and your attention, please.

JOHN TULENKO: Banana Kelly High School in the Bronx, N.Y.

LAUREN FARDIG: So, today, what we are going to be do is, we're going to kind of trying to start thinking about this concept of what -- what is a refugee? What is, you know...

JOHN TULENKO: Here, a few months back, ninth grade English teacher Lauren Fardig decided to set aside the usual curriculum and instead take her students on a virtual five-week journey to the Middle East, to bring them as close as she possibly could, without leaving the classroom, to the millions of people who have fled the war in Iraq and become refugees.

LAUREN FARDIG: It's the people that are really suffering from the war. It's the everyday people that are trying to go to work and go to school and do the same things that we're doing here who are really, really being impacted by this.

And it's also, like, the world is so interconnected. And I think the things that are happening in the Middle East really do affect things that are happening over here in ways that they don't necessarily see. And so I want to try to illuminate some of that for them.

So, start coloring in the countries that you think are Middle Eastern countries, and I will come back and help you, OK?

JOHN TULENKO: Guided by a curriculum designed by the Morningside Center, an education nonprofit, Fardig began her course just as waves of protests were spreading across the Arab world.

We wanted to find out how much these ninth graders knew about people, places and recent events there. So, at the outset, I gave them a little quiz.

Name four countries in the Middle East.

STUDENT: India.

JOHN TULENKO: Big protests in the Middle East, do you know where they are happening?

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STUDENT: I'm not sure.

JOHN TULENKO: Who is Gadhafi?

STUDENT: Gadhafi?

LAUREN FARDIG: They just don't have the exposure that a lot of kids get. They don't read the way that other kids necessarily do. They aren't read to at home.

I would also like you to take a look at where in the world refugees exist currently.

They grow up with such a limited world view, that I think it's really important to expose them to what's happening in the rest of the world.

Where else?

JOHN TULENKO: Fardig's students live in a poor community, burdened by all the social problems of the inner city.

LAUREN FARDIG: Part of growing up on the streets and growing up in the neighborhoods that they grow up in is that they have a really hard kind of like shell to crack. So they believe that they need to be incredibly tough. And what -- what often happens is that they become desensitized to everything. They don't understand that it's important to care about people. It's even important to care about people that you don't know.

JOHN TULENKO: To help them care, Ms. Fardig began the class with some basics. Students looked at maps of the Middle East and went online to do research.

STUDENT: Eight million and four hundred thousands refugees worldwide at the beginning...

JOHN TULENKO: By week two, they were prepped and ready for the second leg of their journey.

LAUREN FARDIG: One of the major things we are going to be doing in this discussion today is looking at our packing list.

The lesson is called "Packing Your Bag." The scenario is it's 2:00 in the morning. Your parents wake you up. They say, we have five minutes.

We have got to go. We have got to go. We have got to go right now. Pack your stuff. We're leaving in five minutes.

And what are the 10 things that you would take with you?

KASON COLEMAN, student: I had some funny stuff on my list. I put pencil sharpener, flashlight, money, my cat.

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BOHDANA MORSON, student: I put on there cell phone. I put on there laptop and computer, magazines.

DERIK HARRY, student: IPod, laptop, luggage full of clothes.

RUDY PAULINO, student: My sneakers, my game system, my phone.

JOHN TULENKO: Looking over their lists, the students identified each item as something they wanted or something they needed. From there, the lesson continued.

LAUREN FARDIG: You guys are trying to drive to a place where it's going to be safe. All of a sudden, the car breaks down. There's other things that you have to carry as well. So, they brought some water. They brought some bedding for you guys, some food, things like that.

They have to get rid of five of the things on their list of 10, because they need to leave them behind so that they can help their family carry some of the other things that are really necessary.

RUDY PAULINO: I would leave, OK, my game system, my laptop, my phone, my charger.

KASON COLEMAN: I would grab my sister, my other sister, and my mom, my cat and me.

BOHDANA MORSON: A passport, I.D. card, also my keys.

RUDY PAULINO: And the last thing I probably would take would be my mom.

LAUREN FARDIG: What you start to find happening when you have to cut down that list is that you start really kind of reprioritizing. Is having, you know, that chain and these shoes and that phone or whatever, is that so important? Is that what life is really about?

One table at a time, you're going to come over. Find your photo, please.

JOHN TULENKO: In weeks three and four of the class, Ms. Fardig's students learned about real refugees.

LAUREN FARDIG: The photos tell the stories of five families on their journey leaving Iraq to different countries. Most of them are actually in Jordan. There's a series of three or four or five photos that are about a particular family. The kids are actually doing the biographies, then matching it with the photo, and being like, oh, this is the person.

MARIA CHANEZ, student: The background is the home of the refugee family. They're watching the news of Iraq. And from what I can see is that the -- the person that is being interviewed is saying that the Iraq war is lost already.

RUDY PAULINO: These look like refugee kids, because barefooted, not a very lot of furniture. They seem like they don't really go to school or have anything, because they are always traveling around.

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RAMON RALDIRIS, student: In the pictures, they see all these people crying. Some of them are injured. They are waking up, sad, alone, scared. When it comes to that, they don't really understand.

STUDENT: Imagine having to leave and not know where you are going, everything happening so fast, and you feel like your life is about to crash. Smoke, ash and darkness.

JOHN TULENKO: In poems, they tried to capture the experience.

STUDENT: Night falls, and I'm running in circles, and all I have is hope.

STUDENT: I'm a refugee, a person who must leave their home. I have no food on me to eat, no water to drink. (INAUDIBLE)

STUDENT: I'm packing my stuff, thinking, where do I go? It's just me alone not having a home. If you see my story and feel my pain, I need a family, a home. I need help today.

(APPLAUSE)

JOHN TULENKO: These students could relate, because, for many of them, the refugee experience is painfully close to home.

LAUREN FARDIG: We have a lot of students who are homeless. A lot of my kids live in shelters right now. A lot of them are in the foster care system. They understand more than a lot of high school students what it feels like to be displaced, to not know where their next meal going to come from, to not necessarily feel safe in their home environments, and having to get yourself through a big crisis.

Write the word refugee down.

JOHN TULENKO: The course lasted only five weeks. But, by the end, many students had gained a new perspective on their lives.

RAMON RALDIRIS: I'm lucky to be here. I'm lucky to be in my country, in my home, with my family.

MARIA CHANEZ: Oh, I think I live in luxury, because they might -- because there's a picture I saw that there's 10 people living in one room, like the size of this classroom, maybe even smaller. And I live in a room with three sisters.

RUDY PAULINO: I'm better off because I have teachers here that actually come. So, if I am having trouble with something, they will help me to get something -- to get it done, like Lauren does.

RAMON RALDIRIS: There's no war outside my door. I'm fortunate for that, I'm fortunate to have my family with me, to have support, have a roof over my head, be able to sleep at night.

JOHN TULENKO: Next year, Ms. Fardig says, she will do it again.

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