

*Learning Through Storytelling: Supporting Teachers With SDG2 Resources in
a Time for Building Resilience and Hope*

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Abstract

What can curriculum do? When faced with a global pandemic, lockdowns, and virtual learning, I began working with Roger Thurow and the Hunger Solutions Institute to create an ELA curriculum focused on hunger in 2020 called Learning Through Storytelling. Through the narratives of hunger that Thurow tells in his books and in the Wall Street Journal, I wanted to explore more about the story of hunger and how the use of stories could influence the work of teachers in a tumultuous moment in history. Not only this exchange of stories, but also the stories that teachers and students might put together after participating in the curriculum as well as how could we collectively meet the needs of our students. To do this, I implemented narrative inquiry methods to answer the questions, in what ways do 9-12, public school teachers describe their community's story surrounding hunger? and how do 9-12, public school teachers report the experience of teaching curriculum within the current context? I conducted semi-structured interviews as well as guided, weekly journal prompts to collect data on how teacher participants used LTS as a curriculum to address hunger.

Keywords: Curriculum, Hunger, Sustainable Development Goals, English Language Arts

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic crossed all borders of countries, financial means, socio-economic levels, race and ethnicities, and any other distinguishing factor, interrupting much of what often characterizes the ways in which we live our lives as well within education how teachers often label students. The effects of COVID-19 on education and hunger have been devastating and far reaching, and teachers and students have been at the forefront of many of the social issues associated with the pandemic. Students have been rotated between in person and virtual learning, many students who once relied on free and reduced priced lunch have had to adjust to school closings, and in an instant many students lost meal options which they previously relied on as their main source of nutrition. Teachers have also taken on many more responsibilities while also balancing their own needs with home and family. Along with rising costs of food as well as specific shortages, hunger has skyrocketed in developed nations, along with famine levels in conflict torn areas around the world such as Ukraine, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Haiti, and Syria. Food systems are being tested worldwide, particularly in the United States where hunger is not often prioritized as a pressing issue. However, according to the World Food Programme, 370 million children missed school meals because of school closures related to the pandemic, and 73 million vulnerable primary school aged children need school meals (World Food Programme, 2020). A seemingly mass exodus from the teaching profession itself has occurred, in fact, recent studies report that there are “36,500 teacher vacancies in the nation... and more than 163,500 positions filled by teachers who aren’t fully certified or are not certified in the subject area they are teaching” (Will 2022). Furthermore, nearly 110,000 restaurants closed in 2020, losing 2.5 million jobs, and sales fell by \$240 billion (King 2021). Shortages at once abundant grocery stores became a common scenario in which necessities were limited per family, shelves of toilet paper and cleaning supplies remained empty, and prices of food, particularly meat increased. Lines at food banks and food pantries continue to grow as what seemed to be a system of abundance and security is crumbling before our eyes. One might ask, is this necessarily a good or bad thing? Some say, “if we get this right, the world will never be the same” and I hope that is what we will do in response.

At the center of this context are students and teachers in the classroom around the world who are now faced with quite a few problems. While also confronting the challenges of adolescence, the education community is now faced with the problem of what will we eat and how best to follow guidelines for social distancing, masking, and quarantining. As difficult as the pandemic has been for all walks of life, teachers and students have been presented with a context that is unlike anything many of us have experienced and continues to impact a world that will forever be changed. Teachers have adjusted between online, in-person, and blended learning options losing quality time resulting in an overwhelmingly bleak Nation’s Report Card suggesting no gains, some states stayed the same, but most states declined in both Reading and Mathematics (Nation’s Report Card 2022). While many controversies pervade schools currently, hunger is a constant and underlying problem for almost all students as well as many correlating issues. However, hunger is not particularly dominating the discourse within educational contexts, even while several studies document this increase (Asfaw, et al. 2020; Bauer, et al. 2021) as well as credible research organizations such as the World Food Program and Feeding America. Hunger within the context of English education remains a gap with the potential to influence the English education field and the current narrative that dominates discussions of the “new American norm.” The question then emerges, what type of new American norm do we want to create, and what sort of literacy practices might students

need? What might we do differently to directly address hunger? And how do we move on to a better world for our students?

Research Questions

1. In what ways do 9-12, public school teachers describe their community's story surrounding hunger?
 - a. What does hunger mean to participants?
 - b. What does hunger look like in 9-12, public school teachers' context?
2. How do 9-12, public school teachers report the experience of teaching curriculum within the current context?
 - a. How might participants imagine hunger impacting their students and communities?
 - b. How do 9-12, public school teachers believe that hunger does/doesn't relate to teaching?

What is Learning Through Storytelling?

The Learning Through Storytelling (LTS) curriculum is a secondary ELA curriculum focused on hunger. It is a curriculum that is based on the storytelling of journalist, Roger Thurow based on his books, *Enough*, *The Last Hunger Season*, and *The First 1,000 Days*. I worked on the first iteration of an online undergraduate course that is offered to students as part of my first assistantship at Auburn Online. For my dissertation, I have created a version for high school students and a CEU course on Canvas for teacher participants. In the Google Classroom, there are six units of the course, the first three units center hunger on a global level, including history and policies in *Enough*, smallholder farmers in *The Last Hunger Season*, and mothers and children in *The First 1,000 Days*. The second half of the curriculum narrows in on the local level, through lessons on planetary health, hunger in America, and student actions projects. Each unit builds on the next with stories from the books, mentor texts, and various types of writing throughout including quick writes, debate topics, poetry, photovoice, reflective essays, and more. Each unit includes an "inspiration station," which centers on a real-world hunger fighter as well as a "teacher to teacher," which shares tips from other educators who have already taught the books or similar topics.

Storytelling as an ELA Curriculum

Learning Through Storytelling is the name of the curriculum because it centers on the experience of teachers and the exchange of stories by teaching the books and creating action projects based on the curriculum. All three books are written in a narrative style, centering the history of hunger in *Enough*, smallholder farmers in *The Last Hunger Season*, and mothers in *The First 1,000 Days*. The overarching objectives are that participants will learn through storytelling, generate good outrage, incite inspiration, connect characters in the books to real emotions and faces, augment teaching about hunger, find their place in the fight against hunger, as well as enlighten and spark empathy. Standards and objectives are aligned with Common Core science literacy and language arts standards, the agriculture, food, and natural resources standards (ASFNR), and the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Students will be able to use English Language Arts and literacy skills to read and analyze multimodal texts as well as to create these themselves. Unit One is based on *Enough Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty* in which Thurow and Kilman (2009) describe stories around the world which present policies and subsidies that have led countries into

malnutrition and famine. In the next two units, students and teachers focus on the stories of people such as Leonida, Raso, Zipporah, and Frances in *The Last Hunger Season* for unit two and Shyamkali, Maria Estella, Jessica, and Brenda, in *The First 1,000 Days* for unit three. In unit four, *More than Enough: Nourishing and Saving the Planet, Our New Gordian Knot*, students will grapple with the current challenges of food shortages and food insecurity by participating in the Goals Project and Project Kakuma, as well as students will immerse themselves in data-based questions with topics such as managing water, girls leading, and agricultural innovation. In unit five, students will focus on Hunger in America (The Oxymoron of Hungry Americans), in which students will engage in exploring what factors have allowed hunger to continue within an abundant America. Lastly, students are called to action in *Lead the Way: A Call to Action* which includes six ways that students and teachers can engage in raising the clamor surrounding hunger, including gardening, poetry writing, creating a video, writing an essay like a journalist, creating a podcast, graphic novel, or comic book writing, community organizing, and developing a public service announcement. All materials are delivered to teachers through Google Classroom, along with a Padlet of additional materials, a Flipgrid of writing prompts for each lesson, a NewsELA binder of selected current events on hunger, and a TED-Ed lesson based on Thurow’s TED Talk, “My Moment of Great Disruption.” Overall, the LTS curriculum consists of the following:

Table 1. Learning Through Storytelling Curriculum Units

Unit	Name	Description	Example Assignments
One	<i>Enough</i> (History, Impact, and Current Situation of Hunger and Malnutrition — How hunger abides in the 21st century)	Students are introduced to Hagirso as well as the policies and history which have continued to increase hunger throughout the world.	Photovoice in response to Hagirso’s story, VR with places from the book, Why Care? discussion question
Two	<i>The Last Hunger Season</i> (The Importance of Smallholder Farmers in Ending Global Hunger)	Students are introduced to Leonida, Raso, Zipporah, and Frances, four smallholder farmer families in Kenya and will learn how they survive through the hunger season.	<i>The Last Hunger Season</i> Film Viewing Guide, Food Map, Food Narrative, Photovoice: take a picture of your own family meal
Three	<i>The First 1,000 Days</i> (The importance of good nutrition for Mothers, Children, and the World)	Students are introduced to Shyamkali and Anshika in India, Brenda and Aron in Uganda, Maria Estella and Jorge in Guatemala, and Jessica and Alitzel in Chicago and will learn about the challenges of motherhood across the globe.	Acrostic poem writing, Famine Place Photo Essay, and Famine Series Guided Reading, Create an informational text about the First 1,000 Days for your community
Four	<i>More Than Enough</i> (Nourishing and Saving the Planet, Our New Gordian Knot)	Students are introduced to the topic of planetary health and the challenge of both nourishing and saving the planet.	Teach SDGs, Goals Project, Project Kakuma virtual interaction, Chicago Council White Papers/ Data Based discussion questions

Five	Hunger in America (The Oxymoron: Hungry Americans)	Students are introduced to the issues of hunger in America which have existed before the pandemic. Questions such as how hunger exists in the world's richest country? And what does the oxymoron of hungry Americans mean?	Personal Wellness Plan, Food Waste Project, SNAP Budget Project, Racial Wealth Gap Simulation, George Hall's Story
Six	Lead the Way by Raising the Clamor (A Call to Action)	The last unit is a call to action in which students get guidance on how to write their own poetry, spur change via videos, inform through writing blogs, stir emotions with photo essays, and raise the clamor with podcasts.	Garden Wisdom, Create one of the following based on SDGs: Public Service Announcement (PSA), Comic or Graphic Novel, Podcast, Reflective Essay, Video for Change, Poetry

Conclusions

The more I studied this topic, the more I realized how much more could be done to combat the existence of hunger. The topic of hunger has tremendous relevance in our current environment in which hunger continues to increase. For example, The Global Hunger Index notes that 47 countries have ratings indicating “extremely alarming,” “alarming,” or “serious” levels of hunger, and forty-seven countries will fail to reach zero hunger by the UN goal of 2030 (Global Hunger Index 2021). On a local level, Feeding America reports that currently, 1 in 8 people in America face hunger or 38,300,000 people, and 1 in 6 are children or 11,700,000 children (Feeding America 2021). Hunger also seems to be a topic that few can honestly say should continue, as well as at the same time few can say they have not been influenced by hunger in some way.

The story of hunger is remarkable as well because it is something we all experience, as we all eat, and I believe we could all do better to engage with topics surrounding the food supply. I have been amazed at the work that has been done to address hunger through the World Food Prize Laureates as well as activists such as Sophie Healy-Thow and business owners such as Edezia nutrition's, Navyn Salem. Even in what I have learned so far about participants, I am completely amazed to understand what people overcome as well as I am inspired by stories of people like Jessica in *The First 1,000 Days*, who desired to be known as an achiever rather than a quitter or Shyamkali, who when faced with the immensity of her situation in India, states, “Greatness? That was a luxury not worth thinking about. How many more children can we support?” I hope as well that through this curriculum, more people will know about the impact World Food Prize Laureates such as Gebisa Ejeta and Rattan Lal have had on their communities. To me, this represents the best of what I can convey to students in a time unlike many of us have experienced. I am looking forward to continuing this study and believe the work in ending hunger and malnutrition is extremely important as well as it takes a collective community to address issues of students and teachers across the nation. Basing the curriculum on Thurow's and my own international experiences, studying various aspects of hunger, particularly the role of policy, the experiences of women, and the oxymoron of

hungry smallholder farmers, all will help to contribute to a sense of urgency as well as inspiration which will hopefully spur on more work to address hunger in our schools and communities. I hope this study will capture the experience of the teachers and the ability of the curriculum to do this work as well as to create a community across physical borders during a time of great division as well as criticism of teachers. I hope in doing this study I will be able to document our current environment in a way that demonstrates, despite all the chaos, how many teachers came together and worked through these issues with their students. I hope it will give teachers and students an opportunity to document their experience through the action projects that are centered around SDGs as well. I hope my audience will gain a deeper understanding of literacy as well as the literacy practices that are embedded in all aspects of our lives. I hope it might also inspire my audience to do the same type of work within their own communities with an online affinity space to collaborate, share ideas, and spread stories.

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