

Project Week (Grade 7)

Freedom: Overcoming Walls – Real and Symbolic

Following up the feedback from students during their distance learning, reflecting the needs and expectations, a project for 7th grade students was realized in summer term 2021 (firstly online and later onsite).

The absence of social contacts and the failure of activities that children have been accustomed to perform so far has had a negative effect on their personal well-being. Some children seemed to have lost motivation to learn, to communicate, or actively participate.

The project was focused on active participation of students, and it presented a parallel between Covid-19 epidemic and some historical events. Both can be understood as walls/obstacles that people must face and overcome.

The first phase of the project was focused on discussion and brainstorming of what the students' notion of freedom was. They presented their definitions, analysed documentaries, or songs about the topic. They categorized rights and freedoms and became familiar with some official documents that ensure people's rights and freedoms. They gradually concluded that freedom is something that is not obvious, its understanding differs in countries and over the history and that it is a value that must be nurtured.

The students analysed in detail a book by Petr Sís, *The Wall*, describing the author's life in communist Czechoslovakia and his decision to leave the country because of not feeling free. The author focused on the everyday life and brought the evidence of oppression he experienced.

As Petr Sís mentions in his book: *There have been many walls in our lives – some are real, and some are symbolic. But some memories need to be kept. Like a report on the past. As a warning for the future. Although one wall has fallen, others remain, and others are built.*

The students were confronted with the real wall (border) in Mikulov – the South – Moravian city on the Czech-Austrian border. The place presents a symbolic “Freedom trail” commemorating those who searched for freedom. Some of these people escaped from Czechoslovakia successfully, the others were killed when crossing the borders.

During their online learning, the students were encouraged to interview their parents, grandparents, or friends about their real or symbolic walls. They also presented their understanding of walls/obstacles they were facing then. The students presented a parallel between the real walls/borders of their parents and grandparents which made it impossible to travel freely in communist times with their situation in 2021 when they were facing many restrictions making them (feel) isolated. The interviews proved an influence of lockdown on children's understanding of obstacles, on their understanding of imaginary or real walls in their lives, and also the effect lockdown had had on their emotions.

The students appreciated the fact that they could talk to their families about the issues mentioned above, and in some cases, the students mentioned that it was for the first time they talked to their parents and grandparents about such topics.

These are some of the reports that the students wrote:

“Zoe’s mum had a lot more walls than me. I think that she still has some walls to overcome now. I don’t think that I can overcome my wall. Because the wall that I can’t overcome is a covid wall. This year we had to stay at home for a long time and I didn’t really feel free. I think that I’m not the only one who doesn’t feel free the whole world has to go through this. I am happy that we can go to school now and I hope that covid will end soon.” (Student Ngoc Chu)

“I found out that there are several walls that are still standing all around the world. But we do not even notice them anymore and we should, because they are something that stands and will stand and will prevent a lot of people from doing things that can be good for all mankind, until we destroy these walls. When my parents were small there were walls. And there are even walls right now stopping me and a lot of other people from doing stuff we like and are important to us. Walls that were here when my parents were smaller and are here right now are similar in a way because they are stopping us from doing stuff we like. I don’t see many options on how to overcome these problems. I think that we should talk about them more and even if we won’t be very comfortable, change them in a way that will make them disappear.” (Student Vilém Heger)

In the final phase of the project, students were encouraged to to present their own ideas about their participation. They became familiar with different formats of active participation (e.g., organizing cultural event, flash mob, happening, public gathering, screening etc.). Finally, the students agreed on turning one of the stories of escapes from Czechoslovakia into a piece of drama that would be recorded and presented to other classes together with a discussion on freedom and walls – real and symbolic organized by students themselves. The discussion on walls - real or symbolic - can be used as an instrument for opening discussion about problematic issues and for suggesting solutions.

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