



BROOKLYN CASTLE

CLASSROOM GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

This study guide is intended to flexibly support educators in preparing for and following up a class screening of **Brooklyn Castle**, a feature documentary about the struggles and achievements of I.S. 318, a public New York middle school with the country's most successful chess program. Support materials are intended to facilitate group discussion, individual and collaborative creative exercise, subject-based learning and access to resources for further investigation of material. Educators are encouraged to adapt and abridge the content as necessary to meet their unique learning objectives and circumstances.

All SFFS Youth Education materials are developed in alignment with California educational standards for media literacy. SFFS Youth Education welcomes feedback and questions on all printed study materials.

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USING THIS GUIDE

Group screening of **Brooklyn Castle** can be a useful tool for inspiring group discussion on a wide range of

topical issues. This study guide may be used flexibly within a classroom environment to stimulate these discussions, and to supplement the educational value of the viewing experience. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the questions and exercises herein to fit their own objectives and methods.

ABOUT THE FILM

Intermediate School 318 in Brooklyn, New York, is housed in a squat concrete building on a dingy inner-city block. The school's exterior offers little to impress but, in room 319, something extraordinary is happening. Over the last decade, hundreds of Ms. Vicary's students have learned to play chess, one of the world's oldest and most complex games. The school has a powerhouse chess team that has won 26 national chess titles — more than any other junior high school in the country. It's a particularly notable achievement for I.S. 318, a Title I school, where more than 65 percent of students are from homes with incomes well below the federal poverty line.

Brooklyn Castle follows five of the school's chess team members for one year, and documents their challenges and triumphs both on and off the chessboard. Justus is a prodigiously talented 10-year-old trying to navigate the unfamiliar pressures that come with newfound success and adulation. Eleven year old Patrick struggles with ADHD, and uses chess to improve his concentration. Alexis, 12, already views chess as a means to attain a higher education and support his immigrant family. Rochelle – an ambitious 13-year-old – strives to become the first African-American female to reach the level of chess

master. And the team's emotional and outspoken leader, 12-year-old Pobo, rallies his fellow students against the school budget cuts that have put the program in jeopardy while running for student body president. Through each of these young teens, we witness the profound ways that learning and playing chess can impact the lives of young people.

Directed by Katie Dellamaggiore (USA 2012)
101 min, Color, in English
Recommended for ages 11 and up

Recommended Subject Areas:

Arts/Media Literacy
School/Campus Enrichment
Social Studies (Government, Economy, Civics, Current Events)
Youth Issues

Key concepts / buzzwords:

Ambition / Dedication	Feature Film
Budgeting	Leadership
Chess	Public School
Documentary	Student Advocacy
Ensemble	Time Management



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STORY & CHARACTERS

1. Which of the five central characters did you most relate to? Which one reminded you most of yourself? Who did you like the most? Who did you like the least? Why?
2. How would you describe Pobo? How does he relate with his peers? How does he feel about the I.S. 318 chess program? In what ways does he assume a leadership role over the group?
3. How would you describe Rochelle? What is her long-term goal? What steps does she take to progress towards her long-term goal? To what extent is she successful?
4. How would you describe Alexis? What is his relationship with his family like? What does he want for his future?
5. How would you describe Patrick? In what ways does the chess program help Patrick in his academic life? What about his social life? What goal does Patrick set for himself in the film? To what extent is he successful?
6. While this film follows the five separate storylines of the central characters, it also focuses on a situation that impacts them all – namely, the unprecedented budget cuts that threaten the program (and others like it all over the United States). What moments in the story called attention to this struggle? What steps did the characters take to fight the threats to their program?
8. What was the happiest moment in this movie for you? The saddest? The most thought-provoking?

CONTEXT

1. Non-fiction films sometimes portray historical or biographical information in an objective, impartial way. Many documentaries however, including **Brooklyn Castle**, are made to raise awareness of certain issues or controversies. Can you think of any other films or

TV programs you've seen that were made for a similar purpose? What issue(s) were raised? What viewpoints or values were conveyed? To what extent did the film or program empower the viewer to get involved?

2. Chess and school funding issues aside, what differences were most noticeable between I.S. 318 and your school? How does I.S. 318 compare to a typical Bay Area public school? How do the buildings and classrooms differ? How are they similar? What about the way Brooklyn students talk relative to Bay Area students? The way they dress? How does the NY high school application process compare to that of the Bay Area?
3. This film thoroughly endorses the value of extracurricular pursuits and after-school enrichment programs. What types of activities and extracurricular options are available at your school? How do you think these programs are funded at your school? Are there any programs that you wish were available?
4. What after-school programs have you tried during your academic career? What have your experiences been like? Did/do you find participation in these programs to be fun or worthwhile? How have these experiences impacted your academic life? What about your home life? What about your social life?
5. Which afterschool programs do you think are most valuable for American students? How valuable do you think competitive programs are relative to non-competitive programs? Do you think students should be encouraged (or even required) to participate in extracurricular activities?
6. What are some benefits (or downsides) of the following types of extracurricular activity:
 - a. After-school competitive sports (soccer, basketball, football, baseball, volleyball, tennis, track & field)
 - b. After-school non-competitive exercise (yoga, strength training, cheerleading, dance, martial arts)
 - c. After-school arts (drama, music, filmmaking, crafts)
 - d. After-school competitive activities (chess, debate, model UN)
 - e. After-school clubs/projects (student publications, student government, film clubs, book clubs)



► MESSAGE & THEMES

1. How would you describe the “moral” of this story? If you had to summarize the message that the filmmaker was trying to convey in one sentence, what would it be?
2. Did watching the film change how you feel about your own experience as a middle school student? What similarities can you find between your own situation and that of the students portrayed in this film?
3. Did watching this film make you want to get involved? What impact do you think cancellation of the chess program at I.S. 318 would have on the students and adults who are involved?

MEDIA LITERACY

1. How was this film made? Was it shot on film or video?
2. Is this film better suited to a theatrical presentation (screening in a theater) or a broadcast presentation (screening on TV)? Why? (e.g., Who is more likely to take action after viewing this film, a person sitting in a theater or a person sitting in front of their TV?)
3. What questions came to your mind as you watched this film? Is there anything you would ask the filmmaker? Is there anything you'd like to ask any of the chess students? If so, what?
4. How would you describe the structure of the story? Why do you think the filmmaker chose to focus on an ensemble of main characters, as opposed to just one?
5. Who do you think this film was made for? Who is the intended audience?
6. Why was this film made? What was the filmmaker's primary purpose in your opinion? What other goals do you think the filmmaker had? To what extent do you think those goals were achieved? How can you help these goals to be realized?

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITY

1. Discuss, Learn & Practice Chess

With the group as a whole, discuss the characteristics of the game relative to other puzzles, games and sports. Why do you think, among all games, chess is so culturally revered and esteemed? What technical characteristics make chess unique from other games? How much did you know about chess before seeing this film? Its history? Its strategy? What did you learn about chess through watching this film? What would you still like to know?

Following a discussion, divide the class into chess novices and students who know the rules. To the novices, give a visual presentation, thoroughly explaining the rules of chess, the movement of each piece, basic strategies, etc. As chess is notoriously “easy to learn, arduous to master”, a rundown of the rules shouldn't take more than a few minutes. See the chess education and online chess links below for additional resources. Students can compete with each other on classroom chessboards, online, or using one of several downloadable chess applications.

2. Start an Afterschool Club

Challenge the class to conceive of some afterschool clubs or activities that they wish were offered at your school or in your community. Select one (or more) and determine the steps you'd need to take as a class to independently realize the goal of introducing that club to your school community. This hypothetical exercise alone can be a useful discussion catalyst for students thinking about the value of extracurricular commitments; of course, some classrooms (or groups of students) may see fit to actualize some of these plans, in which case considerable resources designed to enable just such a project can be found via the provided links. Enthusiastic students who are empowered by **Brooklyn Castle's** message are encouraged to educate themselves further.



ARTICLES & REVIEWS

HOME ALONE

(excerpted from The New York Times Opinion section, October 19, 2009)

After-school programs are a cost-effective way to boost student achievement, reduce juvenile crime and help overstressed working parents. Yet a new study finds that the number of after-school slots continues to lag far behind parents' demand. Even in these hard economic times, it should be possible to narrow the gap.

There is good news in the study — “America After 3” — by the Afterschool Alliance, a nonprofit advocacy group. It reports a big increase in the number of schoolchildren participating in after-school programs: 8.4 million youngsters compared with 6.5 million in

2004. Parents say they are generally satisfied with the programs their children attend.

But the most striking and disturbing finding is the large number of latchkey children — children left alone and unsupervised at the end of the regular school day: 15.1 million — more than a quarter of America's schoolchildren and an 800,000 increase from 2004. That number includes 4 percent of elementary school students and 30 percent of middle school students who are on their own until their parents return home.

Parents of 18.5 million students say they would enroll their children in an after-school program if one were available. These numbers represent a huge missed opportunity. A majority of publicly financed after-school programs serve low-income students. They offer help with schoolwork, sports activities and other enrichment known to translate into improved school attendance, higher graduation rates and lower rates of teenage pregnancy, drinking, delinquency and drug use.

AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS IMPROVE ATTENDANCE, BEHAVIOR AND COURSEWORK

(excerpted from PRNewswire-USNewswire, Washington, March 27, 2012)

Every child deserves a great education and afterschool programs are helping turn that goal into reality. An exhaustive review of more than 60 research studies concludes that high quality afterschool programs accelerate student achievement. The report comes at a critical time amid budget shortfalls and a changing policy landscape. States and educators are increasingly finding that taking advantage of the time beyond school is an effective and sustainable way to improve educational outcomes. In fact, nationally, more than one million children participate in afterschool programs funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers federal program.

The new report from Joseph Durlak of Loyola University Chicago and Roger Weissberg of the University of Illinois -

Chicago ties high quality afterschool programs to a twelve percentage point reduction in problem behaviors and a seven percentage point reduction in drug use. It also ties the programs to a six percentage point gain in attendance, an eight percentage point gain in standardized test scores and a nine percentage point gain in grades.

“This research proves what parents and educators have understood for years: when students participate in high quality afterschool programs, they go to school more often, behave better, get better grades and do better on tests,” said Joe Davis, a former Bureau Chief in the Florida Department of Education, who is a spokesperson for the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project and the current Chief Operating Officer of the Florida Afterschool Network. “The best part for schools and districts considering ways to leverage the time beyond school is that these programs are affordable and community-driven, and now there's research to show they also accelerate student achievement.”



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MEDIA LITERACY RESOURCES

SCREENING WITH MEANING

The vast majority of interpersonal human interactions taking place at any given moment are taking place via some type of medium. Every image projected on a screen, every word published on a page, every sound produced from a speaker – each comprises a piece of media content, a media message of some sort. The ability to discern between and understand the vast array of media messages by which we are continually surrounded is an essential skill for young people to develop, particularly in a mainstream commercial culture that targets youth as a vulnerable, impressionable segment of the American marketplace. Most teenage students already have a keen understanding of the languages different media use and the techniques

they employ to inspire particular emotions or reactions.

Analysis of a media message – or any piece of mass media content – can best be accomplished by first identifying its principal characteristics: (1) the physical means by which it is contained and/or delivered, (2) the person(s) responsible for its creation and dissemination, (3) the information, emotions, values or ideas it conveys, (4) the audience to whom it is delivered, and (5) the objectives of its authors and effects of its dissemination.

Students who can readily identify these five core characteristics (abbreviated in this section with the keywords Medium, Author, Content, Audience and Purpose) when faced with mass messages will be equipped to understand the incentives at work behind them, as well as their potential consequences. Media literacy education incentivizes students to become responsible consumers, active citizens and free, critical thinkers. ▶

CORE CONCEPTS OF MEDIA ANALYSIS

- MEDIUM** **All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed.**
 How is the message delivered? In what format?
 What technologies are used to perpetuate the message?
 What expectations do you have of the media content, given its medium and format?
- AUTHOR** **All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed by Someone.**
 Who delivers the message?
 Who originally constructed the message?
 What expectations do you have of the media content, given its author(s)?
- CONTENT** **All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed Using a Language.**
 What information, values, emotions or ideas are conveyed by the media content?
 What visual elements comprise the media content?
 What auditory elements comprise the media content?
 To what extent did the content meet your expectations, given the format/author?
- AUDIENCE** **All Mass Media Messages Reach an Audience.**
 Who receives the message?
 For whom is the message intended?
 What is the public reaction to the media content and/or its message?
 What is your reaction to the media content and/or its message?
 How might others perceive this message differently? Why?
- PURPOSE** **All Mass Media Messages Are Constructed for a Reason.**
 Why was the message constructed?
 Who benefits from dissemination of the message? How?
 To what extent does the message achieve its purpose?
 What effect does the message have on the audience it reaches, if any?



THE NON-FICTION FILM

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DOCUMENTARY

- 1895 Lumiere Brothers develop the first motion picture film reels, capturing brief, unedited clips of life around them called “actualities” (e.g., *Train Arriving at the Station*)
- 1922 Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* is the first feature-length film to be called a “documentary,” employing the “creative interpretation of reality” to tell a factual story
- 1936 John Grierson releases *Night Mail*, an example of the more poetic, experimental approach to documentary that his movement embodied
- 1963 The cinema vérité movement begins in Europe, shortly followed by “direct cinema” in the U.S. Films of these movements attempt to present factual information objectively and observationally, though many were produced with political or ideological motivations.
- 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* is released, becoming the highest grossing film of all time (relative to its production cost). Marketed and styled as a documentary, the suspense/horror film used the genre to unprecedented effect, fooling millions of filmgoers into believing it was a non-fiction film (obviously enhancing the fear factor). The “mockumentary” has since caught on as a comedic sub-genre.

TYPES OF DOCUMENTARY

All documentaries may be measured along a spectrum of impartiality. Some documentaries attempt to record and present information in as objective and unbiased a manner possible, as if the film were made by a fly on the wall. Other documentaries present real-world information, but do so in a highly obtrusive, manufactured, often biased manner. Arguably no documentary can be 100% unobtrusive to the events it seeks to record (subjects are almost always aware of the presence of a camera, for example), and no documentary can be 100% objective (a single edit represents a subjective filmmaking decision). Media literate students should be able to discern the plausibility and purpose of documentary programs based on their authorship, the nature of their content, the extent to which bias is expressed, etc. Generally, all documentary films and programs occupy one (and sometimes more) of the following categories:

1. **Poetic:** The most abstract type of documentary. The earliest documentaries were essentially poetic; images were organized based on associations and patterns, creating a fragmented, impressionist, lyrical record of actual places, objects and people. Poetic documentaries do not include characters or plots, and were largely made by early filmmakers looking to subvert the coherence and standardization of early narrative films. Some modern music videos can be considered poetic documentaries. Notable examples: *Rain* (Ivens, 1928), *City Symphonies: NY, NY* (Thompson, 1957)

2. **Expository:** Documentaries that speak directly to the viewer (via titles and/or voiceover) in an effort to persuade, convince or educate. Most modern documentary films and

TV programs are primarily expository. Expository docs may be further categorized as follows:

– Persuasive:

- Commercial: Docs that advocate a particular product, service or brand
- Political: Docs that advocate a certain position on political contests/issues
- Theological/Ethical: Docs that advocate a certain position on religious/moral issues
- Topical: Docs that advocate a certain ideological position on social issues ▶



THE NON-FICTION FILM

- ▶ – Educational:
 - Scientific: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on science topics
 - Historical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information on historical topics/periods
 - Biographical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about individuals
 - Topical: Docs that attempt to convey factual information about social issues

Both persuasive and educational documentaries present information in traditionally efficient ways. Impartial, “omniscient” voice-over narration, on-screen text and insert shots of supporting charts, illustrations, maps, etc. are stylistic techniques common to most expository documentaries. The combination of interview audio and “b-roll” footage of associated visuals is another classic convention of non-fiction filmmaking. It is not uncommon for filmmakers or television producers to take advantage of the credibility that this format lends, and to present fictional (or, at best, debatable) information as factual. Thus, the distinction between a persuasive doc and an educational doc is largely based upon purpose and audience; a film made to argue a point of view or perpetuate a myth may appear no less fictional than an educational doc about photosynthesis.

Expository documentaries are inherently more impactful on the people and environments they attempt to capture than observational docs; but inherently less impactful than participatory docs. The presence of the filmmaker is usually acknowledged and/or obvious (audible interviewer in conversation, voice-over narration, on-screen titles/diagrams/maps/schematics, character interaction with crew, etc.) under the pretense that the filmmaker(s) are only involved peripherally. Some filmmakers include dramatic re-enactments of story content in their

“documentaries”. While this can be as emotionally compelling as a heart-wrenching Hollywood tragedy, it fully removes any pretense of factual impartiality.

3. **Observational:** Docs that attempt to simply and spontaneously observe some part of the world with minimal intervention. Observational films are less abstract than poetic documentaries and less biased or forceful than expository documentaries. Observational docs date back to the 1960s when the advent of mobile lightweight cameras and portable sound recording equipment enabled non-fiction filmmakers to capture events in an organic, unobtrusive way (new celluloid films also needed less light to achieve exposure). This mode of documentary historically avoids stylistic “add-ons” like voice-over commentary, music, titles, re-enactments, etc. These films aimed for immediacy, intimacy and revelation of individual human character in ordinary life situations. Examples: *High School* (Wiseman, 1968); *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles, 1970); *Don't Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967)

4. **Participatory:** Participatory documentarians rightly believe that it is impossible for the act of filmmaking to not influence or alter the events and characters being filmed. Much like an anthropologist studying a culture by taking part in it, a participatory filmmaker inserts him/herself into the action at hand as a means of inciting and documenting reactions and as a means of making his/her authorship transparent and spontaneous. The encounter between subject and filmmaker inherently becomes a critical component of the film. Autobiographical documentaries are 100% participatory. Examples: *Man with a Movie Camera* (Vertov, 1929), *Sherman's March* (McElwee, 1985), films by Michael Moore.

Adapted from Bill Nichols, Representing Reality (1991) and Introduction to Documentary (2001)



SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES

RECOMMENDED MOVIES

Searching for Bobby Fisher

Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine

Paper Clips

Akeelah and the Bee

Stand and Deliver

(Steve Zaillian, Mirage Entertainment, 1993)

(Vikram Jayanti, NFB Canada, 2004)

(Elliot Berlin/Joe Fab, Ergo Entertainment, 2004)

(Doug Atchison, Lions Gate Films, 2006)

(Ramón Menéndez, Warner Bros., 1988)

WEB LINKS

GET INVOLVED!

<http://www.brooklyncastle.com/take-action>
Here you can donate to the I.S. 318 chess program (and other worthy programs), sign Pobo's petition to support after-school programs, and send a direct message to Congress in support of S. 1370, a bipartisan Senate bill geared to bolster before-school, after-school and summertime extracurricular programs.

AFTERSCHOOL ALLIANCE

<http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/>
A national alliance of policymakers, advocates, community leaders and educators dedicated to enhancing the quality and quantity of afterschool programs at the national, state and local levels. A terrific resource for anyone looking for statistics or publications on afterschool programs and a useful means of networking with other afterschool enthusiasts.

EXPANDED LEARNING & AFTERSCHOOL PROJECT

<http://www.expandinglearning.org/>
A group committed to helping schools and communities partner to build affordable and sustainable afterschool programs.

CALIFORNIA AFTERSCHOOL NETWORK

<http://www.afterschoolnetwork.org/>
An online network of California educators and afterschool advocates devoted to improving and expanding afterschool options throughout the state. ►



CA REPORT ON AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

http://www.cnyd.org/afterschool_outcomes.pdf
A 2006 report on the state of afterschool programs in California with excellent references.

BAY AREA COMMUNITY RESOURCES

<http://www.bacr.org/programs/after-school>
This page includes information on Bay Area after-school programs presented by BACR.

HOW TO PLAY CHESS

<http://www.chess.com/learn-how-to-play-chess.html>
An excellent breakdown of chess basics. Learn how each piece moves, game rules and fundamental strategies.

FREE ONLINE CHESS FOR KIDS

<http://www.chesskid.com/>

FREE ONLINE CHESS FOR TEENS

http://www.learn4good.com/games/board/3d_chess.htm

CHARACTER BIOS

<http://www.brooklyncastle.com/the-film/the-players>
Here you can learn more about Justus, Rochelle, Patrick, Alexis, Pobo and the I.S. 318 chess instructors.

FILMMAKER BIOS

<http://www.brooklyncastle.com/filmmakers>
Here you can learn more about Katie Dellamaggiore and her production team.