



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2006 Volume III: Children's Literature, Infancy to Early Adolescence

Reading as an Act of Creating Value: Character Education in a Public Montessori School

Curriculum Unit 06.03.03, published September 2006
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Introduction

As a teacher for many years in the field of language and literature, I have often been concerned with the heavy emphasis on the presentation and study of literature as a means to an academic end. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this emphasis, but I would argue that an emphasis on character development based on the presentation and study of literature is just as rewarding— if not more so— to the individual and to society as a whole. This concern that I have continues to grow because of the incongruities I face daily in trying to teach in particular curricularized ways. Given that most of my formal training has been in the developing and refining of skills which unearth the formal elements of a literary work - style, literary and linguistic elements and structures— I must admit that within the past ten years I have felt a strong pinch, a deep itch, a relentless desire; or maybe it is more fitting to identify this life movement as a "becoming." By this I mean a moving into alignment; a coming to oneness of my experiential, spiritual, and intellectual capacities. It is the growing awareness of this oneness that moves me to explore, to create and finally put into practice theories and concepts that have been traversing my mind for years.

Overview

I teach in an urban Montessori magnet school where the Montessori Method of education is collapsing in on itself. One of the previous principals noted that due to the turnover in the original Montessori trained faculty there would come a time when very few of the teachers would be Montessori trained even though the school would probably continue to operate under the guise of the Montessori philosophy. And, this is exactly what has begun to occur.

When I first started to teach at the Homewood Montessori School two years ago, I could discern with very little effort the students who had been at the school for more years than others. The clear difference lay in their academic stance and their social behavior. For example, Waddell had attended the school since preschool and was self motivated, focused and calm while Tyrone, who enrolled in October of 2005, was not an independent

learner and was constantly off task. Though from similar family circumstances, they demonstrated very different behaviors in the classroom and in the school community at large. If Waddell was talking and I asked him to stop, he would apologize and refocus immediately. Sometime later in the day he would quietly approach me, apologize again and explain that it would never happen again. He would take responsibility for his behavior. Tyrone, on the other hand, when asked to stop talking would promptly begin to deny that he was talking even though I had been looking right at him. He would also start to say that I was picking on him and then try to appear to be a victim. From this incident and many before it, I determined that the Montessori education, despite its incomplete application at the school, had a good effect on the growth and development of the whole child.

In this curriculum, I try as much as possible to focus on applying some aspects of the Montessori philosophy and method of education. One reason I do this is because I believe the Montessori philosophy of education with its practical application is one of the best ways to educate and nurture young people as whole human beings. I teach sixth, seventh and eighth grade Communications at this K-8 public Montessori school, which has two preschool and one kindergarten Montessori classrooms. However, for the rest of the grade levels there are only two Montessori trained and certified teachers, and they are at the kindergarten-first and fourth-fifth split grade levels. So currently at the middle school level there are no Montessori classes, and no Montessori trained or certified teachers; and this is another reason why I want to develop this curriculum. I want to provide some opportunity for middle level students to further or for the first time experience some aspect of the Montessori Method of education. With this being said, in calling it Montessori education, I must admit however that it meets only minimal standards of being characterized as a Montessori education. A third and more important reason for developing this curriculum is to help young people at the middle school level become more sensitive to and tolerant of "otherness", to stand up for justice, and to simply be more humane and contributive as wholesome and responsible members of society.

I approached the writing of this curriculum unit by first discussing the idea that reading is a valuable way through which character education can be taught. I elaborate on several key points. I point out that reading is the way to journey inside oneself and come to understand how one thinks and reasons; how one feels and acts in particular situations; and how one expresses his or her humanity. I introduce through brief explanation four of the Eight Principles of the Montessori educational philosophy that I use in the unit. These principles serve as guides to help give the activities shape and meaning and to ensure that how and what students are learning is based on sound educational theory, research and practice. I offer a body of pertinent information concerning how character education is compatible with the current school curriculum; objectives for what the students should do and what strategies will be implemented to guide the students to achievement.

Rationale

The fundamental criterion for value, as noted by Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1973, pp. 47-47), a Japanese educator, is whether or not something adds to or detracts from, advances or hinders the human condition. Makiguchi espoused the view that the school was the place where students should have the opportunity to think and acquire experience in real life settings. John Dewey (1998, Vol. 1, pp.22-28) derived a similar conception from the philosophy of pragmatism and as a result, reconceived experience as a fundamental holistic function of life activity. He believed that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. The child is stimulated to act

as a member of a social group and to see oneself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through responses made to his activities, he comes to know what these mean in social terms. Further, Dewey claimed that if the individual factor is eliminated from the child, all which is left is an abstraction, and if we eliminate the individual factor from society all that we are left with is an inert, lifeless mass. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the school to deepen and extend a sense of the values that make up the web of the student's home life. Both Makiguchi and Dewey endeavored to realize a holistic approach to human development. .

Currently, the state of education needs to be reoriented to the prime objective of serving the value creation process of children. The implementation of this curriculum may be one way in which the present education paradigm can be shifted and reconceived. I am specifically referring to particular problems in education that we all experience and observe. These are the continual bullying and other acts of violence, cynicism and indifference, self in absence of other, and an absence of values exhibited by students. And, these lead to absenteeism (sometimes in the form of death), the breakdown of discipline, and decline in academic achievement. Daisaku Ikeda (2001, p.50) states, "I believe that the means to encourage a flowering in the neglected inner lives of children will always be exposure to literature and arts. In short, I believe the key is to be found in reading books."

The Value of Reading

Reading is an intellectual as well as an imaginative act that takes place in the inner world of the learner. It is a journey that helps the child develop ways of seeing, knowing and experiencing the complexities of life. By reading the world through literature a child can gain knowledge of how to create value and live a fulfilling life. It is my view and experience that reading literature is a valuable way to help guide and shape students as people who can travel beyond learned boundaries consisting of stereotypes, biases, and prejudices that hinder the creation of value.

As reading is an interaction with characters, students can come to know themselves more deeply as active and participating members in a living dynamic. They will have the opportunity to constantly evaluate thoughts, words and actions of characters and compare and contrast these with their own. This will enable the students to gain through virtual experience and in a sense create a buffer for their own growth and development as intelligent, imaginative and emotional beings.

Reading is the ideal vehicle for reviving dialogue where human values are concerned. Especially during this time when communication boundaries are blurred, it is only fitting to infuse the written word with meaning and purpose through an exchange of ideas. In fact, it is paramount that reading as a subject in school be viewed as an invaluable source of lessons in character development. Reading should be viewed, as well, as a way to navigate the complexities of living in a global society.

I aim to use literature as a means for developing in young people various qualities that, when applied with care, can enhance their lives. I bring to bear, as one of the overarching thoughts running through this curriculum, Louise Rosenblatt's (1983, p. 7) statement that explores and gives credence to the ways in which "the reader seeks to participate in another's vision - to reap knowledge of the world, to fathom the resources of the human spirit, to gain insights that will make his own life more comprehensible." (p.7)

There are three educators whose theories of education I have drawn on to help inform and explicate particular Montessorian beliefs and methodologies that I apply in this curriculum unit. The three educators whom I speak of are John Dewey of the United States, Paulo Freire of Brazil and Tsunesaburo Makiguchi of Japan. Although

these three educators lived around the same time as Dr. Maria Montessori but in different countries, all four espoused educational philosophies which are very similar in nature. The most common similarity of the four philosophies is the understanding that each student is a unique human being and, regardless of age, should be shown some measure of respect; at least as much as one would want shown to him/herself. The second similarity is the acknowledgement that each student learns in a unique way, within different time spans and from various frames of reference. The most important similarity, however, is that each believed that the student is not an empty vessel and consequently should experience learning as discovery of intellect and awakening as a human being in interaction with the immediate environment.

Montessori Educational Philosophy

Maria Montessori's view of the child is that each child is an individual, has individual needs and is a miniature adult. Briefly, Dr. Montessori's (1995, p. 13-20) educational philosophy holds that the learning process of children is based on the concept of an absorbent mind— the mind's ability to absorb or take in impressions from the world notably in the early stages of life (0-6 years). She also noted that children develop at their own rate by engaging in self selected activities that are hands-on and purposeful. The role of the child is to interact with the environment. The teacher's role is to observe the children as they work, and see what their needs are in order to prepare an environment for their learning. The environment functions for each child as a prepared place with materials organized from the most simple to the most complex.

I work with students whose ages range from eleven to fourteen years old. Some of the characteristics of this age group are described in Planes 2 and 3 of Maria Montessori's concept of Four Planes of Development. In a lecture, (2002) Gigi Hunter identified student behaviors which support the need for a unit on character education in the middle school. One pertinent characteristic that describes the sixth grade students, who are eleven years old and fall into Plane 2 of the Four Planes of Development, is the desire to do research activities. They want to look up information and find out about things. They are able to reason and think abstractly and their imaginations are piqued.

Also at this stage the children are developing as social beings and seeking answers to such questions as, "Who am I in relation to my peers?" and "Why is it this way?" These are great questions which indicate a curiosity, a wanting to know, but often it is the manner in which students act out these two questions and the way in which the teacher responds that are the very behaviors which cause the teacher-student dynamic to move into a less than meaningful dimension. Nevertheless, the questions in themselves are characteristic of this plane of development, and when they are both enacted and responded to in a caring and respectful fashion, positive growth is sure to occur for both the teacher and the student. Another important dynamic for this age group is the "herd instinct." This is the idea of gathering and moving together as an identified group that includes and excludes. The dynamic created here has the potential to be a positively powerful and creative force, but most often it becomes exclusionary, and someone usually gets hurt emotionally or physically.

Plane 3 of Dr. Montessori's Four Planes of Development overlaps with Plane 2 and describes the seventh and eighth grade children whom I teach and whose ages range from twelve to fourteen years old. One of the characteristics of this group is the emphasis on independence and interdependence, which appears to be contradictory but is more of an expression of doubt or a questioning of the self. Children on this plane function according to relationships. The community is important to them, as their learning is based on a larger society and it is the service to others that helps shape their social personality. The child at this stage is very sensitive and can demonstrate violent emotions. Children at this stage also revolt against authority and express the

"Let me be myself" attitude. The primary question asked by children on this plane is, "How can I fit in?"

Four of Eight Principles of Montessori Education

Lillard (2005) credits Dr. Montessori with pioneering several ideas which are referred to as the Eight Principles of Montessori Education. These principles continue to be validated by research in psychology and education being carried out today. Of the Eight Principles, I employ four in this curriculum unit. One caveat is that although these principles may be implemented in traditional classrooms as an occasional or casual focus that is quite different from a principle which is already embedded in its system as part of its design.

The first is: Movement and cognition are closely entwined, and movement can enhance thinking and learning. Dr. Montessori noted that thinking seems to be expressed by the hands before it can be put into words. As a result of this insight she developed a system of learning which includes a great deal of object manipulation. In this curriculum, I have adapted this manipulation of objects as manipulation of the body, particularly for creative dramatics exercises. Recent research is uncovering connections between movement and cognition which validate Dr. Montessori's ideas and suggest that, perhaps, more movement should be included as a regular part of instructional strategies. In the traditional model, most classrooms are arranged with individual desks where students sit without the freedom to move and do things. They sit and consider abstractions whereas the Montessori Method offers a variety of ways of thinking based on movement. "When one moves with a purpose, there is a sense in which one's body is aligned with one's thought." (Lillard, 2005, pp.38-79).

Research confirms Dr. Montessori's insights on movement and thought. It has been shown that when people move themselves through space they are better able to represent and negotiate that space. Studies show that movement improves judgment, memory, and social cognition when movements are aligned with what people are thinking or learning about. Traditional classrooms are not ordinarily set up to accommodate movement to enhance cognition. With the highly energetic middle school children whom I teach, this principle appears to be a method that can capture and direct the students' energy and redirect it to meaningful activity, not only to enhance their learning opportunity but also to help them focus, calm down and merge mentally and physically with a learning task.

The second principle that is employed here is: Learning and well-being are improved when people have a sense of control over their lives. Dr. Montessori considered part of the child's development as being increasingly able to make choices and decisions within a prepared environment. Studies show that having choice creates a sense of control over one's environment and consequently a sense of well being. When students have a sense of voice in what happens in the classroom, research says that they develop a greater sense of responsibility and tend to be more self motivated. Also, when students have some degree -perceive themselves as having some degree- of control, they see themselves as more competent learners (Lillard, 2005, pp. 80-113).

In this curriculum students are able to participate in some of the decision making in the classroom. Most of the activities in which students exercise choice have to do with selecting a particular assignment to work on (or developing one's own assignment in collaboration with the teacher), setting a goal of how long to work on something and to work individually or with a partner or small group. This is unlike the traditional model of school learning in that in most cases students have no voice in what they want to work on. In addition, in traditional settings there is little consideration given to whether or not the students are ready to learn a particular concept. And, on most occasions, there is a strict time frame in which subject matter must be taught.

It is becoming more frequent that students are arranged according to what is termed "flexible grouping." This is the placement of students in ability groups based on their test scores. The layout of the furniture to facilitate movement in the classroom is another feature that supports the child's sense of choice and control. But simply because desks and chairs and tables can be moved does not automatically mean that a Montessori environment is functioning. It does not at all mean that the student had some choice or control over the configuration of furniture. It may well be the traditional method in which the teacher has decided what will be taught, and the best configuration for interaction is one that is convenient for the teacher.

The third of the eight principles being used here is: Collaborative arrangements can be very conducive to learning. This principle is particularly suitable at this point in the children's lives because of their plane of development, which indicates that middle school students are very socially inclined.

Social learning arrangements are being used more and more in traditional schools because they can be easily integrated into the traditional system. However, learning from peers is important because different ideas are presented, creating an off balance effect that leads the child to incorporate new ideas. The Montessori Method has this feature embedded in its structure. In the traditional system, cooperative learning groups are a close surface look alike; but here again the teacher forms the groups based on criteria that have been developed for a particular class of students.

In the Montessori classrooms, students learn through observation and imitation. Dr. Montessori claimed that people learn by observing and doing. So, in the Montessori classroom the teacher or older student shows students how to engage the work with as few words as needed. This is quite different from the giving of information in a traditional classroom in which the teacher transmits through talking rather than showing. In the Montessori classroom teaching social behavior explicitly through observation and imitation is part of Montessori education. This part of the curriculum is called lessons of Grace and Courtesy. The goal is to educate the whole child. These lessons are usually shown to the class as a whole because in order to show social behaviors there must be a community in which to enact them (Lillard, 2005, pp.192-223).

Some of the behaviors taught are how to quietly push in a chair, how to walk next to someone without disturbing them and their work, how to make a polite request and some other very basic behaviors that many children do not demonstrate in the traditional classroom today, although they are not unusual behaviors. In fact, on many occasions children in a traditional setting may negatively act out these behaviors unknowingly or on purpose. In addition to this, in the Montessori classroom older students might act out social scenarios for the class, and stories of children behaving well are told to the younger students. In this way the Montessori Method uses modeling and stories to teach social behavior.

The fourth principle that I use in this unit is: Learning situated in meaningful contexts is often deeper and richer than learning in abstract contexts. Dr. Montessori developed a system of learning in which the application and meaning of what one was learning could be made relevant for every child. An environment was created in which learning was situated in the context of objects and actions. This is often referred to as situated cognition. Rather than sitting and listening to the teacher or simply listening and writing, the student learns through participation. If a group of children become interested in graphic arts, they may arrange to travel to a graphic arts studio and meet with someone who could explain the techniques of that craft. In this sense the student can better understand how their learning applies to something other than school tests (Lillard, 2005, pp. 224-256).

Character Education

In our school district, I am in the unique position of being able to teach the same students over a period of three consecutive, impressionable years. As a result, I am able to not only know how each student has progressed from year to year but also to know how they have improved in their academic work. Also, and more importantly, I am able to know each student more deeply as a human being. And, as I have come to know each student more deeply, I see their need for information, lessons, and practices which are aimed directly at character development. I refer to the deliberate fostering of ethical, responsible and caring young people through modeling and teaching qualities and beliefs that are universal and imbued in all cultures as part of their system of human values. In this curriculum, the emphasis falls on the intentional effort to help students define, identify instances of and to act out in reality or fantasy the core ethical values of respect, justice, and courage as each is reflected in one or more of the four Montessori Principles explained above.

Character education is not a new concept in education. It is simply reemerging as a natural consequence of what the conditions in society are calling for. What used to be done in the home concerning the ethical and moral development of children is now, in many cases, up to the schools to envision and carry out. With the number of school shootings and other acts of violence committed by young people on the education landscape, it is no wonder that teachers are making efforts to stop the forward motion of violence in all its forms and complexities. There is no doubt that teachers, as a result, have dared to create a peaceful learning environment through lessons and activities that require a reconfiguration of the physical organization of the classroom, lesson design and dynamics of roles and relationships in the classroom. More and more teachers are taking back their classrooms in order that school may become a safe haven where children are able to express likes and dislikes, fears, pains, hopes and dreams. School then is becoming the place where teachers are open and continually ready to rethink what has been thought and to revise position(s) as a result. In this sense the teacher can learn from the students' curiosity and the paths and streams it takes them through. Based on these observations, teachers can create suitable activities that rigorously engage both the intellect and emotion so as not to dichotomize the cognitive and affective domains (Freire, 2003, pp.71-86)). And, at the same time, the teacher is creating the conditions in which a full development of the child can take place.

Character Education Compatible with Montessori Method

The 11 Principles of Character Education are defined by the Character Education Partnership (CEP), which is "committed to developing the moral character of children to create a more compassionate and responsible society and improve the safety of school." (Cain, 2005, pp.16-17). These principles are part of the theoretical basis of this curriculum. The eleven principles are present in and facilitated by Montessori education and have been infused into this curriculum as part of its theoretical basis. The principles are directly related to the three qualities of character development—respect, justice, and courage—that are the thematic focus around which the unit is built. In working with these issues and decisions, I have incorporated in my teaching six of the 11 Principles of Character Education as they intersect with the Montessori philosophy and method of education.

The qualities of character development that are the focus of this unit are listed below. I have chosen these particular qualities in part with urban students, their setting and their circumstances in mind; but with the way the world is today, these qualities can certainly be reinforced in all students. These definitions are taken from the Heartwood Institute ethics program taught in kindergarten and K-1 of the Homewood Montessori School. I use them to increase consistency of content and learning across grade levels. They follow by grade level as used in this curriculum.

Sixth Grade - *Respect* - esteem for, or sense of worth of a person, personal quality or trait; honor, willingness

to show consideration or appreciation.

Synonyms: regard consideration, courtesy, attention deference, admiration, tolerance, reverence, veneration (Heartwood, 1998, p.1).

Respect involves patience, open-mindedness, and deference to traditions, differences, age, race, religion, the Earth, the self, and others. It means a fair and open-minded attitude toward opinions and practices that differ from one's own. We show respect by listening carefully to others' viewpoints and acknowledging their validity (Heartwood, 1998, p.1).

Seventh Grade - *Justice* - moral rightness, equity; honor, fairness; fair handling; due reward or treatment (Heartwood, 1998 p.1).

Synonym: right

Justice is the quality of being guided by truth, reason, and fairness. It keeps a society, nation, family, or relationship functioning in an orderly, fair manner. The mind and logical thinking play paramount roles in determining justice (Heartwood, 1998, p.1).

Eighth Grade - *Courage* - the quality or state of mind that enables one to face danger with self-possession, confidence, and resolution; bravery, valor

Synonyms: fearlessness, fortitude, pluck, spirit, boldness, valor, bravery, dauntlessness (Heartwood, 1998, p.1).

Courage gives one strength, power, and endurance to overcome or surmount obstacles, weaknesses, hardships and crises. The types of courage fall in three categories: physical, mental, and spiritual. Courage is associated with bravery, valor, and heroism. Bravery implies fearlessness in the face of danger, but courage may be shown in spite of fear. Valor defies danger. Heroism signifies self-denial and self-sacrifice in the face of danger (Heartwood, 1998, p.1).

Design of the Unit

I am going to use three core novels from the school district's scope and sequence which will serve as the text-revisited (T-R). By text-revisited, I am referring to the idea that once it has been read at a given grade level, a novel (text) will be reread at the next grade level or the following year. I have two purposes in doing this. The first reading is to promote deeper comprehension of content and the second reading, which is the main focus of this curriculum unit, is to assess and chart growth and development as a human being. This second purpose will be closely observational and extremely qualitative. And, in fact, it will afford me the opportunity to put into practice the Montessori skill of observation. It entails writing anecdotal notes that highlight observable behaviors of each student daily and to take more copious notes on the days that this curriculum is implemented. For my own growth, I want to create a steady stream of observe, assess, and reflect, then reformulate and re-try. I call it the OAR +2R's process, where learning and teaching are recursive acts. And, no pun intended, one certainly needs an oar when paddling upstream and against the current push for standardized testing and quick-fix reading and learning programs.

The novels designated as T-R were selected because each contains themes and ideas that lead one to examine and question individual human behaviors and the dynamics of a group or society. Prior to the reading of each core novel for each grade level, a picture book that has corresponding or similar themes will be read

and discussed to lay some groundwork before re-introducing the core novel.

The picture storybook for the sixth grade is *Tony the Tow Truck* by Robert Kraus, and the core novel selected for sixth grade is *I Thought my Soul Would Rise and Fly* by Joyce Hansen. These two books demonstrate how one's social class often determines the way one is treated. In *Tony the Tow Truck*, is the central idea that goodwill and charity ought to be spontaneous. It is the idea that because one is a human being, one should simply be willing to help someone else without being asked. In this story Tony, who likes his job, himself gets stuck and Neato, the car with bow tie and feathered hat, can't help because he does not want to get dirty. Speedy the car cannot help because he is too busy. Now, Tony the tow truck, a hard working truck, labors everyday. Wearing a cap with its bill turned to the side (which conveys a certain social class), he is ignored by the very cars whom he appears to not only have helped in the past and but also seems to be on friendly terms with. Yet, each throws an excuse Tony's way as to why they cannot stop to help him. The illustrations of houses with window eyes and noses and doors for mouths seem to indicate surprise at Neato and Speedy's lack of consideration. One of the houses even has a sad face, and the community as expressed in the faces of the houses shows that the selfish type of behavior exhibited by Neato and Speedy is to be discouraged. This inconsiderate treatment of Tony the tow truck by those whom he thought were friends and the response of the community make the theme of respect prominent in this story. Discussions and activities that have to do with characterization and human relations can encourage students to become involved with the text through the humanizing of the tow truck, the cars, and the houses. They can infer characteristics and question behaviors that will help them explore and answer some of the questions they have about human relations. Students can further learn that the way we relate to a story is often the way we relate to people, and encountering a good story is the same as encountering a good friend. (Toda, in Ikeda, 2001, p.53).

The core T-R novel for the sixth grade, *I Though My Soul Would Rise and Fly*, depicts Patsy, a freed girl at the end of the Civil War. She is orphaned and living on a plantation in South Carolina. She learned to read and later taught other freed men and women to read and search for missing relatives in the newspaper. In order for Patsy to learn to read, though, she had to play the stereotypical dunce. Patsy wanted to name herself to help break the bond of slavery which had relegated her human status to less than human. She exercised a freedom that helped her develop the confidence to free her mind and spirit from the institution and ways of thinking that had enslaved her.

As this is of the historical fiction genre, the students can potentially come away with a deeper understanding of people, events and laws that have influenced society, particularly where the treatment of people and race relations are concerned. Some of these are the conditions of the Freedmen, Black Codes, Carpetbaggers, the period of Reconstruction and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. This book offers a good opportunity for students to explore and come to some understanding of man's inhumanity to man and, with this understanding, to explore some possible behaviors and ways to demonstrate respect for all human beings. The book also offers students the opportunity to hypothesize, using facts that have shaped American history. Here again is the opportunity for students to be in the world of the book through Patsy's sense of self and her perspectives on people and events.

This text should be read at the beginning of the year and revisited toward the end of the year. With this novel, the cycle, or what I have termed a reading loop, is within the same year rather than returned to in the next year because of the nature of beginnings. In working with this novel the students have the opportunity to select particular passages (as it is written in diary form) that will serve as the basis of the learning activities that deal with core elements of moral character development, but particularly *respect*. The activities presented here are teacher developed but the students have the opportunity to develop activities, in

conjunction with the teacher at first, then later autonomously. It is the same with the seventh and eighth grade students. It is not so important, except on occasion, who develops and who teaches so long as the inquiry and the learning that go on are aimed at achieving wholesome and educationally sound goals.

The seventh grade picture book is *Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi, and the T-R is *Holes* by Louis Sachar. Both stories deal with social issues and character decisions that provide thinking models that can lead students to generate their own personal models for thinking and to move toward their own right answer. The point of *Pinocchio* is conveyed through its episodic repetitions; in one situation after another, the importance of work is emphasized by Geppetto and the rest of the helper-characters who constantly remind Pinocchio to amend his behavior. A similar approach is taken to the amendment of Stanley Yelnats in *Holes*. Stanley has numerous flashbacks that appear as adventures in which something important is learned for the next movement in the story. Students should come away from both stories with the same idea: that one's heart is basically good but one must repeat the same lesson again and again until it is learned, like Pinocchio during his search for Geppetto, his father. It is through the peril of risking his own life to save another that he becomes a real boy, and in a sense reborn. Similarly, Stanley is followed by what he believes to be a curse. This curse rules his actions and thoughts until he is able to engage in a search for one of the boys who had run away. At this point he forgets about his own problems and in searching for and helping another he becomes aware of his own strength. The curse fades or is transformed into a sense of reward. Students should come away with some understanding of the concept that the universe unfolds exactly as it should, with no curses or lucky stars involved.

The picture storybook for the eighth grade is *Babar the King* by Jean De Brunhoff. In this story of an idyllic world in which all is good everyone has a place as a valued member of society and contributes to the whole. Through two unfortunate events the society is thrown into chaos and Babar the king questions the complexities of life. He especially questions how things that begin well have to end so badly. He had forgotten that misfortune existed. By story's end, however, Babar by way of dream and spiritual awakening has been inspired to fight against negative qualities in order to reestablish joy in himself and, by extension, the community. One character even says, "Do you see how in this life one must never be discouraged," and, "Let's work hard and cheerfully and we'll continue to be happy." The story provides a simple way of observing and examining the possibilities for and the makeup of a utopian society. It also provides an opportunity to discuss happiness and unhappiness as well as the function of good and evil.

The students should come away with questions about good and evil. Here the students can discuss or do activities that demonstrate how to not get so caught up in the goodness of things that one forgets that evil exists as its natural opposite—and that without one, the other could not exist. Here strategies for how to maintain an open mind and to seek the perspectives of others are good ways to help students develop a wholesome way to view and deal straight forwardly with problems or obstacles they may face in daily life. These may well be strategies that help students deal with intense emotions that stem from bullying and other acts of violence, cynicism and indifference, self in absence of other, and an absence of values, as noted in the rationale.

The T-R for the eighth grade is *The Giver* by Lois Lowry. It is the story of a community in which everything is under control and everything is the same. In fact, sameness is the rule. Jonas, the main character, becomes The Receiver upon turning twelve. It is a huge responsibility that requires special training to be the keeper of all the memories of love, pain and pleasure. He alone inherits feeling and individual thought. As The Receiver initiate, he receives memories and learns new things, like the nature and use of lies, which cause him to have

to make difficult choices and to bring into existence a courage that at first is beyond his comprehension but becomes manifest as a result of his determination.

The students should be able to experience on some level the internal conflict that Jonas feels as a result of his freedom of thought and speech and his being given information that helps him make informed decisions. The idea that the more information one has about situations and events, the more one is able to make a decision that can be advantageous for everyone is clearly a lesson here. Another lesson that can be derived from this is identifying the pros and cons of sameness and in what ways sameness helps and detracts. This sameness on a deeper level has much to do with the Giver and Jonas, as Receiver being one and the same or two functions of the same entity. Through their union a new thought is born and that is not only the thought of individuality but also its manifestation. Other possible themes to consider for further lesson development are: family and relationships; diversity; euthanasia; and feelings.

Objectives

The objectives for this unit focus on reinforcing literary elements of characterization and personification. Skills for analysis, interpretation and evaluation of literature and writing skills are also given some space for practice and refinement in this unit. I make use of these objectives though in a supportive role because the main objective of this unit is the moral awareness and character development of the students in middle school based on diverse understandings of how people see and understand the human condition. Students will learn through vicarious experience from character choices in literature. Another objective is a call to action through which the students practice and refine their behavior. As a result, students can produce a socially useful manifestation with which to enrich their environment. The last objective is to help students grow as readers of the written text and the text of the real world through integrated language arts, literary analysis, and a critical-creative thinking approach.

Strategies

I have developed learning goals and activities which through lesson design lay open the educational field as a wide space with room enough for each student to be encouraged to develop a creative mind. These activities and lesson[s] are some of the many that I have been implementing in my classroom. The curriculum created here incorporates strategies which make use of creative dramatics, various discussion models, critical thinking (problem solving) and writing activities with topics that lay open the path for creating meaningful and purposeful encounters with a book. In this way a child can, through reading, come to see, experience, and know how to not only protect themselves from adverse influences but also be able to choose a more valuable way to live as a peace seeking and contributive human being.

Strategy 1 - Creative Dramatics

Creative dramatics is an art form which involves the whole self in experiential learning. It is a strategy that requires creative thinking and creative expression. Through movement, pantomime, sensory awareness,

verbalization, characterization and aesthetic development students can explore the meaning of respect, justice and responsibility and what each looks like in daily interactions with other living things (Cottrell, 1987, p.1). Since children have been exploring and discovering most of their lives, creative dramatics can function as an extension of a process that is already familiar to the students. Experiences in creative dramatics offer opportunities for students to grow as whole human beings able to think, feel, and express in certain ways. Participating in this art form requires that students interact socially and cooperate in order to succeed. Competition is seldom desired and winning is not a goal. Rather, drama emphasizes originality and inventiveness, flexibility and spontaneity of movement and speech, as well as emotional and intellectual risk-taking. These ideas are congruent with the Montessori philosophy of education.

Experiences in classroom drama activities can help children deal with body awareness and expression as well as provide a structure for exploring self perceptions and attitudes about others. Drama is also a healthy way for students at the middle school age to channel some of their physical energy as well as perform in a way that disciplines the body. This is also the age at which students developmentally begin to function as adult thinkers. They begin to think in terms of cause and effect, to hypothesize, and predict outcomes based on evidence at hand. Drama can provide opportunities to practice this kind of thinking as well as new modes of thought. Creative dramatics is a strategy which can draw on a breadth of functions and can be applied across a range of subject matter. Whether the activities are based in reality or fantasy, drama allows students to assimilate and accommodate knowledge in a different way than other methods do. It also allows for more possibilities for teaching in ways that reinforce learning that sticks. (Cottrell, 1987 pp.1-9).

Creative Dramatic Categories

Imaginative Thinking/Creative Problem Solving

Activity 1

Situation role-playing - This activity is sometimes referred to as socio-drama because it utilizes concepts and skills that deal with real life, particularly those that have to do with interpersonal conflict and making appropriate personal choices. It allows students to try on various perspectives, to engage in empathetic listening, to practice cause and effect thinking, hypothesizing, predicting and problem solving and to practice oral language skills. The role playing may be done in a pair format in which one person acts as a person with a problem and the other acts as a willing listener or an advice giver. Or, the two could be involved with the same problem but from different perspectives. Role playing can also be done in small groups. Some safeguards to employ are carefully verbalized guidelines and sensitivity. The kinds of topics chosen should be general and not specific to anyone in the class and no one student should repeatedly play a part that seems type-cast. Also topics should clearly have to do with the text. A caveat is to remember that socio-drama is not psycho-drama or play therapy. Then, as the environment becomes more respectful and trusting and less threatening, guidelines should be created by the students under the guidance of the teacher. As well, students should be encouraged to give ideas for topics. Of course, student suggestions should meet guidelines for appropriateness, good taste and be of general concern. Students being able to select is an aspect of the Montessori philosophy of education. Allowing students to have a voice in the decision making process gives them some sense of control and consequently a sense of well-being. The acting out of scenarios provides opportunities for students to learn from each other. Both Piaget and Vygotsky claim that peers play an important role in development. Piaget claimed that peers present different ideas and in so doing create a state of imbalance in the child. Mental development occurs when the child has to resolve the imbalance by changing her/his mind or accommodating to incorporate the new idea(s) (Lillard, 2005, p.193). Vygotsky

(1978, pp.84-91) asserted that learning occurs in a zone of proximal development (ZPD), meaning that the task(s) the student is carrying out cannot be accomplished alone but only through working in concert with a more advanced other. This reflects the Montessori principle that collaborative arrangements can be very conducive to learning.

Movement and Pantomime

Activity 2

Communicating nonverbally helps students recognize and increase their ability to communicate by employing facial expression and body movement. It also helps them become better speakers by providing an opportunity to develop congruency between words and nonverbal messages. In addition, pantomime and movement can help students become more astute readers of the nonverbal expressions of others. This is in alignment with Dr. Montessori's theory that movement can enhance thinking and learning. Here again, topics should be general and not necessarily reflect any one student's situation, and in time the students should be encouraged to suggest appropriate topics. When participating in movement and pantomime activities, students should be encouraged to use precise movements and only those that are needed. They should understand that economy of movement helps clarify meaning just as concise use of words clarifies speech. This is particularly useful at the middle school level because generally, students are experiencing a physical developmental state which can cause cumbersome movement of body parts. The students are also at the stage in which their senses are at a peak and are difficult to control. Pantomime activities in which body parts and parts of the face are used to convey actions, ideas, and feelings help the student concentrate and call on necessary internal resources that help guide the student in translating ideas and feelings into action through disciplined movement. As well, students should be aware of a previously agreed upon "pause" or "freeze" signal to be used by the teacher to quickly and efficiently gain everyone's attention. When used properly and judiciously, this strategy for stopping verbal and physical movement can be used to encourage creativity through taking time to clarify and to highlight important ideas. "Pause" or "freeze" is used in the same ways as punctuation: to separate ideas, changes of motivation or mood, or simply for emphasis, (Cottrell, 1987, p.95).

Strategy 2 - Writing to Learn

By early adolescence, students have begun to question and challenge beliefs and values that they have held. They are extremely interested in what others think and do and how they can "fit in" with others. They also are able to understand that each person is made up of a number of facets and that this is true of themselves, too. This strategy entails students writing about character as "the aggregate of mental, emotional, and social qualities that distinguish a person," (Cottrell, 1987, p.138). This strategy focuses on both the development and use of writing as a process of learning to write and as a strategy useful in making personal connections to ways of thinking and ways of behaving. In writing, as in creative dramatics, the human condition can be explored through the motivations, thoughts, dialogue, revelations and feelings of the character(s). When students are privy to these elements through first person narrative or omniscient narrator, they can more easily understand the cause and effect of actions. The writing assignments are designed to promote thinking about the core value of character education. For the eighth grade, the focus of this unit is courage, as defined previously.

Activity 3

The writing assignment is designed to help students judge characters by considering their own positive or

negative reactions, and deciding whether their judgments are based on standards used to judge their friends and people they meet or based on past experience. Some other underlying questions to consider in developing writing assignments of this nature are: Will the student identify, sympathize, or empathize with the characters? Are the characters believable, stereotyped, or both? What do we know about the characters and how do we know it? Is one character speaking for the author or vice versa? Treating characters out of the context of the story through an initial encounter may give greater insights and enable students to understand the character's thoughts, words and actions better in the world of the story. For example Jonas, the main character in *The Giver*, becomes The Receiver and immediately becomes a representative voice of youth as change agent. Looking at Jonas out of context as youth and the new generation, then, what are considered some ways of talking and behaving that exemplify the quality *courage*? And, what are the reasons for characterizing these words and acts as courageous?

Activity 4

In conjunction with or on its own, Activity 4 involves the use of personification and metaphor. It requires that the student use sensory awareness and sensory recall. Students should be encouraged to imagine and create properties, environments and events. This activity provides an opportunity for the student to generate in writing spontaneous speech and emotions to show ideas and feelings about the quality being personified. Some of the questions to draw the students' attention to in personifying the quality *courage* are: When is courage born? What does courage look like? What does courage dress like at a formal affair? At a family gathering? At school? How would you describe the voice of courage? Who does courage hang around with as a best friend and why? When does courage speak loudest and why? What would courage do with only one year to live? Once they have responded to all the given questions, have the students respond to the question - In what ways do you show courage? When and how?

By the end of this unit students will have participated in creative dramatic and writing activities as ways of understanding the quality *courage*. Intellectually, they will have had the opportunity to engage concrete stimuli with an imaginative response, increase their ability to be intellectual risk-takers, and generate optional ways to think, feel, devise and solve problems. Physically they will also have had the opportunity to use the whole and parts of the body to imitate, communicate and interpret ideas, feelings and relationships through disciplined movement, pause and concentration. The students will have developed both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills by demonstrating self-esteem through sharing ideas and feeling during drama work and listening to ideas of others, both peers and teacher.

Through writing students will have had the opportunity to identify and come to terms with some of their own feelings, perspectives and understanding of the quality *courage* by using literary devices to examine this character trait. Let me add here that the following lessons provide learning activities for the eighth grade but can be adapted for the sixth and seventh grades by changing the character trait from courage to respect or justice, respectively, and making other minor adjustments as necessary.

Lesson 1. Situation Role Playing

Topic: Resolving Conflict.

Objectives: The objective is to expose the students to different ways of solving a problem and to have them compare and contrast the approaches. Students will also demonstrate through creative drama the application of these problem-solving strategies. After participating in and observing others, students will evaluate how well different strategies work for different tasks.

Introduction: Discover how much students already know about problem-solving. Use an overhead projector, a smart board or the chalkboard to draw a brainstorming web with problem-solving in the center. As strands, have students focus on giving ideas which have to do with language, actions and sensory recall that they associate with problem-solving. Develop the idea that when individuals come together to solve a problem or carry out a task each person contributes his or her own special way of looking at things, experiences, and interests. Make a T-chart on the board with the two headings Positive and Negative. Next, have the students begin to categorize ideas as positive (adding value) or negative (taking away value) and to give explanations for their choices. Let this stand until the end of the lesson, then go back and rethink the categorizing.

Warm-up: Invite all students to close their eyes and use their imagination to do the following short guided imagery as the teacher reads slowly: Close your eyes and see yourself as the leader of your community. Think about all the good things. Focus in on one particular good person, place or thing and let your face show that you are happy. Notice how your eyes feel above your cheeks. Feel the fullness of your cheeks. Imagine now that you see a frightening incident. Look closely at what is going on. Listen to what is being said and feel your heart rate quicken. What is the sound of your heart like? Calm down now and feel a cool breeze as you imagine that everything will be fine. It will be fine because of what you do. See what it is that you do. Now put your head and arms in a position that shows you have succeeded. Be impressed with what a wonderful thing it is to be able to make a needed change in your community!

Discuss: Divide the class into four groups of equal size. Each group is to be a problem-solving group. Each will get a card with a special problem to work out. The problem, situations and solutions will be dramatized, shared, and discussed. For the sharing of scenes, each group should show who they are, when and where their situation takes place, the introduction of the problem or conflict, how the problem is solved and how the situation ends. Students should be reminded that appropriate language is to be used and no physical contact is to be employed to show conflict. Each of these situation role playing vignettes may be used with the whole group. That is, still in equal sized groups each group role plays the same card and students can compare and contrast each group's presentation of the problem and its solution. The same Debriefing and Discussion of Content Questions as explained after the situation cards should be used in the same way for whole group participation of one card.

Card 1. Some neighborhood friends have gotten together on a Saturday to play a game of softball. They find an empty playground about seven blocks away. They have brought with them everything they need. They have their own bats, balls, gloves and even their own bases. The kids are really excited and feel lucky to have found an open field just seven blocks away, especially on a Saturday afternoon. Just after they pick teams and toss a coin to see who is up first, a group of kids walk up and say that the playground belongs to them because it is in their neighborhood. They don't have any softball equipment with them, and it seems that their only purpose is to take away a good time. Decide how to best handle the situation. Plan your scene to dramatize and later share.

Card 2. Just after school is dismissed one afternoon, Charlene Brown, an eighth grade student, walks outside the building to wait for one of her parents to pick her up. As she passes the door from the cafeteria, she sees Vivian with spray paint can in hand, spraying words and designs on the wall. Vivian sees her, too. Just then Charlene's mother drives up and she hops into the car. Charlene knows that her mother has seen what Vivian is doing. Around the dinner table and in front of her father, sister and two brothers, Mrs. Brown tells Charlene that she should do something to protect the good name of the school. Her siblings chime in. Based on the group discussion, plan how Charlene will make her decision and what it is. Be prepared to dramatize the scene, including the discussions that lead to the decision. Be sure to show the family functioning as a unit.

Card 3. The geography class has decided to celebrate their academic achievement. One student goes around the classroom and lists what each person will bring to add to the potluck. They have been looking forward to this for several report periods. As the student goes around it is discovered that one member of the class cannot afford to participate but is too proud and embarrassed to say anything. The others want to help but are not sure how to go about it. Plan how the problem will be solved. Be prepared to share the situation and the solution.

Card 4. Your mother has just had a baby! Everyone in the family has been waiting because after many years a boy is born into the family. Everyone is very happy during the first two years until it is discovered that the baby boy has a rare disease that causes the limbs to become paralyzed. The family doesn't know if they can take care of a quadriplegic. They don't have the money it will take or the manpower. A decision must be made for the welfare of the child. Your parents ask for your opinion. You feel honored and trusted by your parents, but you also feel nervous. Who do you talk to and what will you decide to do? Plan to show how you will deal with and respond to this trust that your parents have in you.

Debriefing: Debriefing should follow the sharing. This is the time to ask well-chosen and well worded questions because the kinds of questions asked influence the quality of the learning that takes place and keeps the discussion focused on the positive. Questions should function to lead students to probe possibilities for improvement while reinforcing the value of what has been done. For this lesson the debriefing process has such questions as, Was it easy or hard to show how you began to solve your problem? What role did nonverbal communication or body language have in communicating your ideas? Was it hard to put some of your ideas into words?

Discussion of the Content Questions: What was the nature of the problem in each group? Which problems seemed to be most easily solved with logical step-by-step thinking? Discuss. Which problems seemed to call for use of the imagination? Did some problems lend themselves to use of intuition or empathy? Which ones? Discuss. Where, by whom and in what way(s) was courage demonstrated? Discuss.

Lesson 2. Movement and Pantomime

Topic: Using the Senses, Movement and Pause

Objectives: By participating in the following exercises, the student will have the opportunity to practice sensory recall, use of economy of movement and pause to communicate nonverbally.

Introduction: Discover how much students already know about how movement and pantomime function together to communicate actions, ideas and feelings. Ask initial questions like: Have you ever seen a mime? What made the mime good? Write down and discuss what the students offer making sure to correct misinformation and to extend pertinent information.

Warm-up: Have students do the mirror exercise. In pairs, have the students take turns mirroring the movements of their partner.

Discussion: In the two eighth grade books to be read, each person has a job that they are assigned. With the understanding that body language affects communication and is part of a communication style, the following activity is designed for precision of movement and appropriate sensory recall. Each person, working in self space (the distance of arms stretched in front, open wide to each side and the back is the same distance as the front), is a garbage collector. The goal is to consistently find in the garbage some things that reveal who

the garbage belongs to and to what kind of person it may belong. Also, the student should be guided in a paced rhythm to show a series of feelings using eyes and eyebrows to show surprise, anger, anticipation, excitement, sympathy. The nose should show delight or displeasure, arrogance or a sneeze coming on and the mouth should show horror, disappointment, anger, and hurt.

Debriefing: Did you find it easy or hard to show through body movement what you had in your mind? Discuss. Was it easy or hard to recall sensory images and show them on your face? Discuss. Which body movements were hardest? Easiest? In what way(s)?

Lesson 3. Characterization Writing Assignment

Topic: Characterization

Objectives: The student will have to look closely at a character and learn who the character is or what the character stands for based on thoughts, words and actions carried out by the character. The students have the opportunity to decide what genre of writing [] they want to use. They can choose from essay, poem, memoir, skit, or newspaper article. Here, the students are free to can develop their own topic and/or writing genre as long as it is approved for appropriateness and depth of challenge.

Introduction: For this writing assignment, the student has the opportunity to select three topics from a list of six topics that have to do with characterization. The topics follow for *The Giver*.

1. You meet Jonas for the first time at the mall. Where is it that he would likely be hanging out? Why there? Discuss each stop you would make in the mall and explain what it is about Jonas' character that helps explain why you stop there and what you do there. (This assignment should be done close to the beginning of the story in order to meet the character out of context).
2. Is the author's voice present in one of the characters? If so, in which of them? And, what does the voice symbolize as representative of that character?
3. What character do you sympathize with? Explain why by using examples from the text, from your own experience and from other texts you have read.
4. Discuss why you think Jonas is or is not a believable character. Include instances from the story that show what you mean. If he is already believable, then where can the story end for Jonas still to be a complete and dynamic character?
5. Is Jonas courageous or crazy? Discuss and explain why you believe Jonas is courageous or not. Use particular instances from the story that show what you mean. How it is that Jonas seems to be more than twelve years old and does this have anything to do with the way he behaves? Or thinks? Are you like Jonas in any way? Explain drawing on examples from the text and your life.

After choosing three of the five topics, students are to follow the writing process given below. Next, the students should develop a time frame for completion of the three writing pieces. This should be discussed and approved by the teacher. The students should then be instructed to use primary and secondary sources to broaden the information base of the topics selected.

1. The student discusses the topic with a self-selected partner or small group in order to talk about ideas for approach and content.
2. The student completes a brainstorming activity: mind map, list, groupings, drawing or just jotting down ideas extemporaneously.
3. The student begins a rough draft that includes a beginning, middle and end.

4. The student works in a peer conference to discuss what the writer has done well; to question what is going on in the paper or to clarify what is not clearly stated; and to suggest some possible ways to improve the paper.
5. At this stage the writer revises the paper based on peer observation and suggestion.
6. After completing a second draft, the writer meets with the teacher for a conference. For this conference the student must prepare three questions he or she has about his or her own paper. The student has to do a close reading of his own paper and the three questions can only have to do with content, style and structure.
7. After the teacher conference, the student writes a third or final draft depending on their own decision to do so or not.
8. The next step is proofreading and editing by self and peer.
9. The student will self evaluate their writing piece based on a rubric provided by the school district.

This curriculum unit is meant to be taught intensively over a two week period and is meant to introduce students to experiencing "others" through sensorial recall, creating scenes of situations, being a thoughtful critic or being the writer. If not taught intensely, the unit may be spread over a full nine week report period. Again, the creative dramatics lessons and the writing assignments can, with very little modifications, be used for the sixth and seventh grades.

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