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Examining War through a Child's Perspective

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Overview of Unit

Just after Hurricane Katrina, our school began collecting canned foods to send to New Orleans. As I discussed the project with the class, one of my students, Alayna, jumped out of her seat and shouted, "I ain't bringing no cans for them people!" Immediately, I questioned her refusal to help and she replied, "I don't know those people. They ain't gonna help me none." My encounter with Alayna is just one of the many examples of student apathy I have experienced. Although I am not much older than my freshmen students, our ideas regarding human compassion are vastly different. For this reason, I intend to introduce them to the atrocities faced by children during war. My hope is that as we study the experiences of children trapped in adult wars, my students will connect with the characters in the readings and in turn develop empathy for humans outside of their immediate realm. A secondary motive for teaching this unit is to improve reading comprehension and critical thinking skills through the analysis of fiction and nonfiction texts, artwork, and film.

It is important to note that Ed White High School is located on the Westside of Jacksonville, Florida. Jacksonville is the largest city (land mass) in the United States. In spite of this, it is not divided into separate townships, with the result that students from various socio-economic classes attend the same school. However, the diversity of the Westside is a fairly new development. At one time, the Westside consisted mostly of middle-class residents. Due to such factors as the closure of a major naval base, Cecil Field, and the construction of two income-restricted housing developments, the Westside has evolved into a mixture of rural middle-class homeowners and lower middle-class families who do not see the importance of an education. Typically, students who come from lower income families lack opportunity and inducement to learn about the world around them. They are overwrought with worry regarding issues such as making it to school, taking care of younger siblings, and meeting financial needs. The last thing on their mind is the struggles that other children endure. My unit motivates students with these backgrounds to learn about how wars outside of the United States impact them. After all, it is important to be aware of the struggles in the world regardless of one's socio-economic status.

This unit is designed to meet the needs of a ninth grade standard Language Arts class. However, it can be modified to be used in all high school Language Arts classes by increasing the difficulty of classroom texts, focusing the class discussions on more abstract ideas, and increasing the difficulty of the assignments. It can even be adapted to a Social Studies curriculum by focusing more on the historical context surrounding the

unit.

To understand the make-up of the unit, one must first know the logistics of my class. The workshop model is a current trend in education and though it may be just another educational fad, I find that it works with my students. The 90-minute block is broken up into four segments:

- Independent Reading
- Read Aloud/Think Aloud & Class Discussion
- Work Period
- Closing

Each segment of class is devoted to a continuous unit of study for a period of nine weeks. During Independent Reading, students read a piece of young adult literature of their choice that focuses on the theme of war. Throughout these initial twenty minutes, I circulate around the room and make informal observations about their progress comprehending the text. Sections of the two books chosen for this unit are then read aloud and discussed during the read aloud portion of class. The majority of the time in class is dedicated to the work period during which the students complete assignments that assess their understanding of the strategies taught or of comprehension of the text. Some of the activities from this unit include literary letters, journals, artwork, essay writing, compare/contrast charts, etc. In the last five minutes of class, we review the concepts that we have learned and I give the students a glimpse of the next day's lesson.

Rationale

In the past few decades, civilian casualties in wars have increased. Half of those casualties are children. It is important for high school students to understand that over 2 million kids have died from wars; that over 8,000 of them are killed by landmines each year; that those who aren't killed, but are directly affected, are either severely wounded, recruited as child soldiers, raped, and/or orphaned (UNICEF). If they can watch primetime television, then reading about these atrocities should not be too explicit. Nonfiction texts such as Deborah Ellis' *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* and *Shattered: Stories of Children and War* by Jennifer Armstrong can be used to teach students about the horrors children of war face. Because texts such as these are first-hand accounts of their experiences, they are truthful and not swayed in any way by adults (Ricchiardi, 18).

At one point in high school, my students will take a survey course in World History. Rather than wait for my students to learn half-truths about the damage war can do to civilians, in particular children, I would rather expose them to this topic by way of children's literature. In many ways, using children's literature to teach students about the effects of war on humans is more logical than using the usual public school texts. Most school texts are adult-centered, portraying the events of war in a vague and biased matter, thereby failing to make connections with students (Brown, 39). Contrary to school texts, children's war stories are written from the perspective of a child, making it easier for students to relate to the characters. The child characters in these stories share their reactions and experiences of war with readers in an engaging, non-analytic manner. Critics may question whether students actually learn from these fictional texts. However, students can learn from any text as long as the instruction is focused and supplemental nonfiction texts are used to support fictional accounts.

By exposing my students to these experiences via children's fiction and nonfiction literature, I hope that they will achieve a broader view of the world. I expect that my students will develop sympathy for the plight of others as they learn about the horrors some children face. Along the way, I intend to teach my students to develop a critical eye for texts; improving their ability to make decisions about the validity and purpose of literature.

Objectives

At the end of the unit, my students will be able to:

- Analyze literature for elements of a story.
- Gain an understanding and tolerance of other cultures.
- Evaluate literature and media for accurateness and bias.
- Exhibit an awareness of the impact of war on all people.
- Make comparisons between genres.

Standards

In conjunction with the NCEE performance standards, my students will read a multitude of books about war both individually and as a class. They will maintain a log of the books read to meet the 25 book reading standard. Throughout the unit, the students will learn to create responses to literature that indicate mastery of interpretation, critical thinking, and evaluation of texts. Some of the responses will also be reflective in nature. In the reflective responses, the students will be expected to consider the experiences of the children and write about how they feel about their experiences. In the culminating project, students will learn how to write a narrative account of war in the form of a children's picture book. Mini-lessons addressing the elements of a story and peer revision will support the development of their narratives.

(For a complete list of standards addressed, please see appendix A)

Strategies

Book Selection

For class reading and discussion, I chose two books that are accessible to all of my students. *Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak* by Deborah Ellis is a nonfiction text that interviews Palestinian and Israeli children about their experiences throughout the territorial conflict. The second text is by the same author, but is a fictional tale about the Afghani war. *The Breadwinner* is the first book in a series that follows the story of a twelve year-old girl dealing with the responsibility of providing for her family when her father is

imprisoned by the Taliban. I chose Deborah Ellis as the only author studied during whole class instruction for two reasons. First of all, it is important for students to explore the reasons why writers write (author's purpose - an important comprehension skill). Ellis is a longtime anti-war activist. She has spent many years in Pakistan working with Afghani refugees. She uses her observations about the experiences of war and represents them in her literature. Her experience with war victims is a great example to my students because it shows them how compassion can be transferred into action. In fact, all of the proceeds from Ellis' book *Parvana's Journey* are donated to Women for Women in Afghanistan, an agency devoted to the education of Afghan girls in refugee camps (Deborah Ellis Profile, 2006). Another reason for choosing to study one author's work is because Ellis has published two sequels to *The Breadwinner*. Once students get to know an author and become comfortable with their writing style, they are more apt to read another book by them thus instilling author loyalty. Evidence of author loyalty among adolescents can be seen from the following of young adult writers like Walter Dean Myers and Jerry Spinelli. I will supply my classroom library with several copies of Ellis' series of books so that students may continue reading about the main character's experiences during independent reading. Although these texts are excellent resources for the unit, they are not essential to the unit's success. Teachers may replace these books at their own discretion. Two points to consider, if you choose to replace the texts, are the reading level and the genre.

Since the books will be used for guided reading, it is important to select a text that is at a higher reading level than your students' independent reading level. According to the Northwest Regional Educational Library, "It [a more difficult book] exposes less able readers to the same rich and engaging books that fluent readers read on their own, and entices them to become better readers." Choosing a more challenging read aloud text will also expose your students to unfamiliar vocabulary that isn't part of everyday speech. The distinction between the two genres is also very significant in this unit because it allows students to make comparisons between real experiences and invented experiences that emulate reality.

The independent reading segment of class is essential to the unit's success. During this time, students get a chance to read a book of their choice and practice reading comprehension skills taught during the lessons. Throughout the unit, students will read books that center on the theme of war. Students may select books from my classroom library, the school library, or from home. Before students select a book, it is important to teach them how to find a book that they will like well enough to finish. The strategy of book interviewing is an effective way of showing students how to evaluate a book for interest. After students choose their independent reading books, they will meet with me individually to determine whether the book is appropriate for their reading level. By using the student's FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test) scores and giving informal assessments during individual conferences, the student and I will establish the appropriateness of their book for independent reading.

Anticipation Guide

One of my favorite strategies to use when introducing a new topic is the anticipation guide. Completing a survey such as an anticipation guide at the beginning of a unit is a great way to engage students and to assess their background knowledge. As the University of Central Florida's For-PD website states, "It can be used in any subject area when students have some background and preconceived notions relating to the concepts to be presented. Statements are created which support and contrast author ideas with student belief systems. The purpose of the guide is to prepare students to read with specific purposes." Since my students come from varying backgrounds (some have military parents and know more about military conflicts), using this strategy will help me determine how much clarification about the history of specific wars I need to give before the class is prepared to evaluate children's war literature.

First of all, creating an anticipation guide is not very difficult. There are various websites that show you how to create one or you can use the template provided in this unit. I plan to pass out the guide as an introduction to the unit. Students will complete the survey by agreeing or disagreeing with the listed statements during the first ten minutes of class. Because anticipation guides are meant to spark discourse, a teacher may want to use controversial statements that provoke opposing responses. The following are a few that would be useful for this unit:

- War is chaotic.
- Soldiers undergo change during war.
- Americans should be prepared to make great sacrifices to preserve their freedom and protect the freedom and rights of other countries.
- The United States should not engage in acts of war unless they are directly attacked.
- There are many innocent victims during a war.

Remind students that everyone is entitled to their own opinion and in fact, there is no right answer. Throughout discussion of these statements, have students give examples to support both sides of the statement. Why would a person agree with the statement? Why would they disagree? The purpose of this exercise, for your students, is to gauge their knowledge of war topics and to gain an initial understanding of their opinion. It also engages students with the topic, making it easy to introduce. You will find that throughout the unit, students will search for evidence supporting or opposing the statements. Eventually, you and the class will revisit them and discuss whether anyone has changed their mind about them.

Read Aloud/Think Aloud

Even though this is a ninth grade English class, I feel that it is important to read aloud to students on a daily basis. The practice of read aloud/think aloud is based on the premise that as an experienced, proficient reader a teacher models good reading habits such as fluency, prosody, and metacognition. Students become aware of the thinking process during reading and begin to practice these skills on their own during independent reading and at home. Some of the benefits of using this strategy are listed below:

- Listeners build listening and comprehension skills through discussion during and after reading.
- Listeners increase their vocabulary foundation by hearing words in context.
- Listeners improve their memory and language skills as they hear a variety of writing styles and paraphrase their understanding.
- Listeners gain information about the world around them.
- Listeners develop individual interests in a broad variety of subjects and they develop imagination and creativity.

(Elementary Science Integration Project)

Of course, this strategy is not an arbitrary endeavor. It does take preparation in advance of the lesson. A teacher must pre-read the text and purposefully place comments/questions to ensure that students understand how the mind works during reading. The teacher stops throughout the day's reading and vocalizes his/her thoughts regarding a specific skill. For example, if a lesson's focus is on making text-to-self connections, a teacher may stop after a passage and suggest a connection. The read aloud/think aloud not

only takes preparation on the teacher's part, but also requires direct instruction on how the student should behave during this segment of class.

As stated earlier, the two texts chosen for the read aloud segment of class are the Deborah Ellis books. A teacher may choose to focus on the genre of fiction first by reading *The Breadwinner* and then move on to the characteristics of nonfiction with *Three Wishes*. Another option is to alternate between the two books throughout the unit. Doing this will be beneficial in that students can see similarities between Parvana, the main character in *The Breadwinner*, and the interviewed children in the nonfiction text. They may also find some inconsistencies in Parvana's character when compared to real victims of war. This type of discovery is facilitated through class discussion and is initially modeled by the teacher through various read aloud sessions. Once students reach this level of class conversation, successfully making distinctions between genres, they have mastered an integral part of critical thinking.

The following dialogue presents an example of how a read-aloud may proceed:

- Teacher: Today we are going to read pages 104-113 of *The Breadwinner*. Can anyone give us a brief summary of what happened in yesterday's reading?
- Student #1: Yesterday, we read that Parvana found an old classmate who is also dressed as a boy and sells tea.
- Teacher: Very good. Is there anything else to add?
- Student #2: Parvana's friend found a new way to make money, but we don't know what it is.
- Teacher: You're right. That's a great addition to the summary. So as we read, we will be trying to find out what the new way to make money is and we will also be looking for images in the text that stand out. I will stop at times when I think that there is something vivid about an image. You may take notes about images that you noticed to discuss later.
- Passage: The explosion had shaken up the graves in the ground. Here and there, white bones of the long-dead stuck up out of the rusty-brown earth. Flocks of large black and gray crows cawed and pecked at the ground around the ruined graves of the newer section of the graveyard.
- Teacher: The images in this passage are very colorful. The bones of dead people are white, while the ground is a rusty-brown. Because the author uses such contrasting colors and vivid images, I can picture this scene and it makes me cringe to imagine the birds picking at dead bodies.

Dialogue Journals

Since I expect my students to undergo a dynamic journey, I realize that it cannot be done without some self-reflection. For this purpose, I decided that the students need some type of medium to vent, to share, to mull over the precarious subject of war. This type of reflection can only be expressed with the age-old strategy of journaling:

Learning logs provide students with a safe place to speculate, see, discover, and figure things out. This is more about thinking than polished writing. Writing also prepares students for discussions. When they write about their thinking before they talk in their groups or with the whole class community, discussions become richer and more interactive (CRISS Strategies, 155).

Dialogue journals are not traditional forms of expression. Rather, a dialogue journal communicates one's feelings to others, whether to a classmate or to the teacher. Students in my class will keep a dialogue journal from the beginning of the unit. You may request that students bring in a composition book specifically for this strategy; or they can simply keep the logs in their class notebook. Sometimes students will write freely in their

journal, asking other students questions or making comments about the day's reading and/or discussions. Other times, I may use writing prompts to focus the writing. At all times, the journal entries will be addressed to another and the addressee must respond to them. That is also the case for the teacher. When journals are addressed to the teacher, it is his/her responsibility to respond. This is the perfect time to informally assess the students' comprehension of the readings and to evaluate any changes in their opinions about children's involvement in wars.

Using Art Therapy to Invoke Empathy

The University of Michigan Patient and Family Support Services believes that there are many benefits to using art as therapy. Some of the benefits are listed below:

- Provides an outlet for feelings
- Explores feelings that are difficult to put into words
- Aids in communication
- Addresses personal concerns at an individual's own pace
- Increases self-awareness and self-discovery
- Reduces stress
- Assists in pain management
- Helps build positive coping skills

"Art Therapy is a non-threatening, non-intrusive vehicle that helps these children to symbolically fulfill their impulses, and to externalize the difficult and overwhelming feelings that they are forced to deal with (Costi Immigrant Services)."

Many volunteer agencies such as Costi Immigrant Services and World Vision use artwork as an outlet for post-war children. A good strategy to help my students make connections to children affected by war is through the study of art as therapy and through the analysis of sample art therapy illustrations created by Sudanese children.

The online magazine *Slate* (www.slate.com) has a great slide show of various illustrations to use with your students. The illustrations are accompanied by transcripts of interviews about the child's drawing. After a brief mini-lesson on the topic of art therapy, I plan to show these illustrations to my students. During the slideshow, the students and I will discuss what these illustrations depict and how drawing these pictures may help the children through traumatic events. By making personal connections to the feelings associated with the pictures, students will become sympathetic to the creator. Through visual journaling, a strategy used to express painful feelings through writing and drawing, I hope to show students that stressful emotions are within all of us even if we are not victims of war. "Visual journaling is without a doubt one of the best ways to release stress-producing emotions, while at the same time enabling you to delve into the innermost depths of your soul (Ganim; Fox, 54)."

Students may use a page in their dialogue journal, as they will not only draw, but also write about their drawing. Before the students begin, I will ask them to write about what stresses them out. Once they finish writing about their stressors, the students will then create a drawing that reflects their feelings. They may use pencil, markers, or crayons to illustrate their feelings. I will allow them to work on their pictures for most of the work period. At the end of the lesson, I will ask them to write about the experience and to decide whether or not this can be a helpful experience for children traumatized by war. My hope is that the students will discover similarities between their feelings and the feelings some of the Sudanese children expressed.

Cross-Age Tutoring

The Cross-age tutoring component of my course is the most important strategy in the growth of student knowledge. This type of tutoring involves monthly interaction between high school and elementary students. Ed White High School has already established a tutoring program with nearby Crystal Springs Elementary School. I spend time helping students devise creative ways of sharing their new knowledge with their tutees. In the past, students have shared picture books to help teach strategies that proficient readers use. Although the tutoring sessions only last thirty minutes, students are able to cultivate relationships with their tutees that develop throughout the year. These tutoring sessions facilitate the sharing of information and aid in the development of several larger goals such as increasing self-esteem, developing a more positive attitude toward school, and developing social skills.

The students will demonstrate their understanding of the unit by creating a picture book that depicts a child's experience during a war. They will then devise lesson plans to teach their children's book. The culminating project will be graded based on a 5-point rubric (see appendix B). This overall experience will cement the material so that students can carry it beyond the course.

Lesson Plan: Anticipation Guide

Procedure

At the beginning of class, pass out the anticipation guide handout to the students. The students will complete the handout as a warm-up activity. Allow approximately ten minutes for students to finish. When students are finished, begin a discussion about the statements from the handout. A good way to spark conversation is to take a poll of how many students agree with the first statement and how many disagree. Keep track of the majority vote on the overhead or by using chart paper. During class discussion, have students support their opinions about each statement. As the discussion wraps up, review the majority opinion of the class. As a culminating activity, have students choose one statement from the handout and write a reflective paragraph about the statement in their journal. They should use supporting details to explain why they agree or disagree with the statement.

Materials

Students will need the anticipation guide handout to complete in the beginning of class. They will also need a composition book to reflect on the statements at the end of the lesson. Teachers may want to make a transparency of the handout or use chart paper to keep track of student opinions.

Handout

Instruction: Respond to each statement twice: once before the lesson and again at the end of the unit.

- Write **A** if you agree with the statement
- Write **B** if you disagree with the statement

(table 06.03.04.01 available in print form)

Lesson Plan: Dialogue Journal

Procedure

After reading aloud a section of *The Breadwinner*, ask students to write a reflective response about today's reading. Advise students that the response can be about anything in the book. Allow approximately ten minutes for students to complete their entry. Once they finish, model an appropriate response to the entry. Give specific instructions on what is appropriate. You may also give some starters for responses (i.e. I agree..., I disagree..., In my opinion..., I think...). Next, have students select a dialogue partner. Remind students that as they read they will pass their logs back and forth. Student should avoid talking about their entries. Instead they should have a conversation about the text through written correspondence. At the end of the session, you may want to check off the journal to informally assess the students' understanding of the text and their understanding of the activity.

Materials

Students will need a copy of the read aloud text, *The Breadwinner*. They will also need a composition book to use as a dialogue journal.

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