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## **"Lift Every Voice and Sing" An Analysis of Social Change "Hope" through Voices of Hip-Hop**

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### **Introduction/Rationale**

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"Lift Every Voice and Sing" Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us, Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us, Let us March on till Victory is won")<sup>1</sup>

James Weldon Johnson, Songwriter, poet and activist

When James Weldon Johnson wrote "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in "1900" he and his brother probably had little idea that this song would be adopted as the "Negro National Anthem." James and John worked to complete the lyrics to this song to help his elementary school celebrate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. Over a hundred years later school children are inspired by how the lyrics capture the challenges and hopes of African Americans.

As an eighth grade teacher of African American children in the Chicago Public School system my main Objective is to empower students academically through building their self-awareness and self-esteem, empowering their voice. Enhancing their knowledge of historical issues and events helps to build their sense of self. Their sense of identity is formed through voice. Examining words and themes that arise from historical speeches, articles, poetry and song lyrics provides students with opportunities to make personal connections. Forming a sense of historical identity will help them better understand and adapt in their world and the greater society. James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing" provides the foundation for this type of academic infusion to take place. One hundred years ago a young African American man wrote the lyrics "Lift Every voice and Sing, Ring with the Harmonies of Liberty", *urging* all children; struggling to achieve the American Dream to lift their voices until they are liberated from the ills of society.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing" an Analysis of Social Change "Hope" through "Voices" of "Hip-Hop" is a curriculum unit designed to explore the power and magnitude of words in a creative and engaging format to help students see the power of the written and spoken word. This unit will be used during the first and second quarter of the school year, stretched over two periods to allow plenty room for test preparation activities. Due to some "controversial language" used in some of the music: I would recommend that administrative approval

be sought prior to implementation of this unit.

Hip Hop has expanded worldwide from an American phenomenon to an international genre of music. Millions of hip-hop CD's are sold in foreign countries and has influenced people in many different forms of vernacular, fashion terms and mannerisms. Most oppressed people in various countries recognize hip hop's importance due to the music's response to social, political and economic injustices. "An example of Hip Hop's global reach can be found in South Africa and it is identified there as Kwaito which is a direct reflection of post apartheid and is considered a voice for the voiceless."<sup>2</sup>

As a Nationally Board Certified Teacher in the field of Middle Childhood Generalist, I have the richness of integrating curriculum across content areas. This current unit provides me with the opportunity to introduce voice interpretation in the classroom in a powerful and creative format. "Have the Voices of African American children fallen upon deaf ears?" My class is a self-contained eighth grade room of thirty-two students whose reading abilities rang from low third grade to a smaller percentage of students actually reading at grade level. Learning styles and intelligence types range from linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal to intrapersonal. Our school is focused on inclusion therefore about ten of my students are considered special needs and receive resources from speech assistance to one on one tutoring. As most pre and teen age children my students are enthusiastic and eager to learn. Many of my students come from families that struggle financially but most parents I encounter want the best education for their children.

Guiding students to hold up the mirror of hope and view themselves through the challenges and sacrifices of "poetic voices" will be illustrated throughout this unit. The Englewood (affectionately known as the Wood) section of Chicago was established during the 1920's a thriving community of German, Scottish and Irish immigrants. Sears developed a 1.5 million dollar store establishing Englewood as the second busiest shopping district in the city. The 1940's real-estate values began to decline with the increase of blacks moving into the area. The practice of redlining and disinvestment sealed Englewood's future as a low-income community. In 2008 most families are single parent households and many parents have less than a college education. Factory, steel mill and meatpacking houses have relocated from this community leaving joblessness and dependency on government assistance at an "all time" high.

Are children trying to send society a message? Today throughout the inner city of Chicago, within the Englewood community where my students live, voices revolve daily around issues of violence, homelessness, joblessness, lack of quality health care and family resources, increased high school drop out rates, gang activity and police brutality which leaves alarming echoes of bitterness in their lives. They cannot hear the fireworks or see the stars of hope because they are disembodied, rather disconnected from mainstream America

The objectives of this unit will provide students a venue to explore social and moral forms of protest through contemporary voices. The majority of inner city youth feel that they are left behind the closed door and that society has cut off their words. Hip Hop provides this sense of collective voices, lyrics involve a call and the listener gives his or her response. The audience usually submits to the call verbally and non-verbally through body movement including dance. Students will examine these voices of contemporary protest by engaging in "class discussions about recent events such as school and teen violence". The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, presidential candidates, the use of the N-word and how these topics are addressed in popular music and media will be explored. Students will write creative essays and poetry that they will share and discuss during class presentations.

This unit does not suggest that academic goals and objectives established by districts be ignored nor does it minimize their importance. Teaching in some of Chicago's roughest neighborhoods such as Cabrini Green, Robert Taylor, Henry Horner Housing Developments and now the Englewood community, has helped me realize the importance of providing outlets and platforms for student expression. This unit is an example of how creative teaching is directly linked to academic progress particularly for those students struggling and coping with major issues like gun violence. This year alone in the Chicago Public School system over twenty students have lost their lives to gun violence. Each life taken, including the child pulling the trigger, has become voiceless.

One goal is to model for students how to organize words in writing that will show purpose in their voice and will help them deliver a message in a more powerful and productive manner. Identifying the voice in others, "such as Hip Hop artist" will spark their personal interest and self-awareness and motivate them to express their own voices. What type of message do we want our words to send? Listening to artists like Lil Wayne, Kanye West, Ludacris and Mos Def can be controversial to adults but entertaining and motivational to students. These artist have a strong influence on how students use and/or abuse words. Most recently rap artist Ludacris was just under public scrutiny for lyrics he used in a song designed to support Presidential candidate Barak Obama.

The voice of the writers, authors and artist in this unit reflect personal and global experiences that my students can "connect and relate." However, in order for students to grasp the overarching theme--getting the "Big Idea" the purpose for learning that voice is between speaker and audience"-- particular analytical skills have to be acquired. Excerpts from various poems, songs, news articles, written and oral interviews will be used to emphasize various themes and ideas that will help students formulate their own voices in a constructive and productive manner towards social change. As we examine the voices of established writers you will also get a glimpse of life from my students' perspective so that you will better understand the significance of the format and structure of this unit.

Excerpt from *The good die young* by Tupac Shakur

Does anybody have the answer why?

It seems the good die young

Can anybody tell me why

Can anybody tell me why

I know my life ain't promised

That's why the wise move in silence

Analyze these scandalous times

It's hard dog but we manage

schools turn to war zones

Even homes unsafe

Leavin children to play caged and raged  
They hate how come  
Someone explain why the good die young  
Why the bad die slow and outlive everyone  
It's time something is done  
For our young kids  
They growin' hopeless  
That ain't the way to live  
Tell me why  
Day's go past and as they pass  
Time move quicker  
No time for wastin  
Tupac Shakur excerpt from Good Die Young<sup>3</sup>

## Objectives

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The objectives in this unit are:

1. Students will access their prior knowledge by completing a KWL chart which demonstrates what current knowledge they have regarding the voice of the speaker pertaining to the presented topic or subject. For example the above excerpt from Tupac's lyrics that addresses the issue of violence or a interview selection from filmmaker Spike Lee, regarding the government's delayed response to Hurricane Katrina.
2. Students will learn about mood and tone through writer's workshop "journaling" about the tone or mood expressed by the speakers. Through journaling and note taking students will compare and contrast "their voices" to that of the identified speaker.
3. Students will role play through reader's theater by identifying the point of view of the speaker or narrator relating the events of a story. The example provided is a short story told by Richard Wright who is the main character and therefore uses first person.

## African American Identity

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Let's take a glimpse of what it means to have an "American Voice" as an African American. It's important to understand how African Americans have defined themselves based on the comparative experiences they have had with other Americans. Being separated from Africa and becoming a slave meant there was no important person to which he/she could turn except the slave-master. Under the American form of slavery the family did not function according to traditional modes. The biological father was denied his position as head of the family. The only provider for the slave was the master, the master being the source of all opportunity and consequence. From birth the slave was in a dependent relationship and faced grave consequences if ever he attempted to alter his situation. Therefore the slave had to accept his status as subservient. Protest under slavery was also less possible because the slave had no institutional foundation on which to build. Blacks were voiceless under the institution of slavery. The 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment abolished slavery in 1865; the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, adopted in 1868, affirmed black citizenship under the constitution and in 1870, the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment guaranteed blacks the right to vote.

In this poem Langston Hughes speaks of this voiceless people in this distant unresponsive, subdued land called America. The voices of power sing at a snail's pace; progress for African Americans is at a stalemate. Students can relate to the voices of Langston Hughes as he exclaims, "Afro American Fragments": "So long, so far away is Africa's Dark Face." I do not understand this song of atavistic land."<sup>4</sup>

### Langston Speaks (excerpt)

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Subdued and time-lost  
Are the drums-and yet  
Through some vast mist of race  
There comes this song  
I do not understand  
This song of atavistic land  
Of bitter yearnings lost  
Without a place  
So long  
So far away  
Is Africa's

Dark Face.

"Afro American Fragment"<sup>5</sup>

by Langston Hughes:

Teaching voice through Poetry: Mary McLeod Bethune (educator and civil rights leader) says in a poem titled "My last Will and Testament": "I leave you hope! Yesterday our ancestors endured the degradation of slavery, yet they retained their dignity. I leave you thirst for education, knowledge is the prime need of the hour. I leave you racial dignity, I want all Negroes to maintain their human dignity at all cost."<sup>6</sup>

Bethune leaves a legacy of hope and demands that negroes maintain human human dignity at all cost. When faced with adversity how do we express our voice and maintain human dignity? In "How to Get Power through voice" Peter Elbow's states that "real" Voice requires practiced safe methods of writing and experimenting with untried styles."<sup>7</sup> He recommends free writing on a regular basis in an atmosphere of total freedom. Essentially, the best way to discover real "voice" is by writing into it. Elbow goes on to state that "when students can explore and draft in whatever language is most comfortable and inviting they stand a better chance of finding writing itself more comfortable and inviting. In contrast, the traditional approach makes speakers of African American language continually interrupt their drafting to stop and figure out 'correct grammar' throughout the entire writing process."<sup>8</sup>

Allowing speakers of African American dialect to draft in their most comfortable language may postpone any worries about standardized, edited, written English. Throughout this unit examples of writings will be illustrated that will model for students styles in which they can show purpose in their voice and hopefully, guide them into delivering a message in a more powerful and productive manner.

## Stop the Violence/Teaching Tolerance

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In Chicago and many other cities in the United States teen violence has increased in alarming numbers. These teenagers are students and/or friends of students that remain in the classroom mourning death. Teachers and school officials are held accountable for increasing student test scores and academic growth. Students find it challenging to concentrate during class when they are afraid for their lives. Encouraging students to utilize their voice in a productive structured environment is one major component of this unit.

Helping students develop both a positive sense of their personal identity and respect for other people whose experiences or viewpoints may be different from their own. Listening to students discuss the causes of violence and discovering that it stems from self hatred. Some students speak of how hate is infiltrated within the African American community due to poverty and other social factors that even temp teenagers to join gangs and sell drugs, which escalates the violence.

Daily, I attempt to provide a nurturing, structured environment in which students experience a sense of competence, an environment in which they feel valued. There is power and influence in their individual voice, therefore they have the ability to engage in productive discourse about issues impacting their lives. It is my

greatest hope to inspire students to be pro social change and extend their knowledge of voice across other disciplines and content areas academically and socially. Tupac Shakur a favorite and popular and talented rap artist whose life was lost in gun violence writes....

Excerpts Good Die Young by Tupac Shakur

Put your hustle down my young dealers

Cause the end is nearer

But at least that's what they tellin' me

Hell, all I know brothers

Ain't ridin' 4 3 felonies

It's time to plan, plot and strategize

Capitalize, mobilize

We in the war ya'll

My family to the ones that stand me

Little bit mo love is what's recommended

Yeah, and its plain to see

The seeds from you and me

Gonna be the ones to lead us towards unity

That's if we treat them right

Man, teach them right

Raise your kids better than you was

And see what it does

But if you don't

Man we sho' to be done

And we'll all see exactly why the good die young

Artist Tu Pac Shakur

Tupac recommends a little more love and understanding is what needed to bring about unity within our families and communities. He also suggests to his audience that it's time to capitalize, mobilize and strategize,

so put your hustle down young people. It is the hustle that has perpetuated this violent mentality. Examining the voice of Tupac Shakur in the lyrics here by asking the question; "Why do the Good Die Young?" He suggests that living the fast life, money and greed breeds a false and temporary sense of freedom. Providing students an opportunity to find their voice in a tolerance centered environment validates their voices of change and hope which will enhance their sense of collective awareness and responsibility. The warnings in Tupac's lyrics connect with the foundation and principles of positive forms of protest for social change.

Good Die Young by Tupac; (**continues**):

How do we keep the music playing

How do we get ahead

Too many young black brothers are dying

Living fast, too fast

God bless the child that can hold his own

Indeed

Let these words be to last to my unborn seeds

Hope to raise my young nation

In this world of greed

Currency means nothing if you still ain't free

Money breeds jealousy

Take the game from me

I hope for better days

Trouble comes naturally

Running from the authorities

Till they capture me

And my aim is to spread more smiles than tears

Utilize lessons learned from my childhood years.

Tupac Shakur<sup>9</sup>

Tupac says that too many young black men are dying and when this song was released in 1995 he probably had an idea that the violence would continue into the next generation of young people if some negative



behaviors did not change. He says "take my lessons and learn from them, don't exercise the same poor judgment that cost me my life. Unfortunately, in 2008 this generation has not taken heed to his voice of correcting the negative behavior and nonviolence. Demonstrated in the media clips produced by ABC news Chicago, the violence among city teens has increased. Descriptions of the media segments are provided below: We will view clips and engage in 20 minute discussions focused on solutions.

## **Technology Integration/Media clips: According to ABCnews7Chicago.com**

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The first news clip produced by ABCnews7Chicago.com is titled "Stop the Violence: Lessons & Alternatives" with Cheryl Burton and ron Magers moderating. Magers and Burton lead a panel discussion about solutions to stem the growing tide of violence against the children of Chicago in the half-hour special segment.

During this segment, Magers and Burton initiated a dialogue with community leaders and social activist focusing on education as a key component to helping curtail violence, the impact of active parents on students' education and the key roles community members can play in creating compelling alternatives to gang activity. <sup>10</sup> Reporter Leah Hope

The second news clip produced by ABCnews7Chicago.com is titled Officials, Students in Anti-Violence Rally." April 1, 2008, Hundreds of Chicago public school students, elected officials and community leaders rallied in downtown Chicago Tuesday in hopes of stopping the violence. Frustrated with the number of students killed by gunfire, community leaders are calling for the passage of new gun legislation. Hundreds of students joined in the movement to reverse a deadly pattern of young people being shot and killed. To date, twenty Chicago Public School students have been killed by gunfire this school year. Students from Simeon Career Academy, 8147 S. Vincennes, exited school early with the superintendent's approval. Students took part in an anti-violence rally at the Thompson Center. Empty desks and pairs of shoes symbolized the young men and women who lost their lives in this cycle of violence.<sup>11</sup>

My students will view these new clips and discuss the media's point of view. The value in student protest and student participation in anti-violence rallies across the city of Chicago and it's impact on social change. The empty desk and shoes served as symbols of those students remaining voiceless as a result of the increasing violence.

### **Setting Mood and Tone: Hurricane Katrina**

Teaching students how their words and actions can transform and enhance the quality of society. "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world"<sup>12</sup>

Paulo Freire: educational theorist.



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The tone of the picture with Director Spike Lee may suggest that New Orleans citizens will not lie on their backs and allow this devastation to destroy their spirits. They will overcome this crisis. Those that lost material possessions will not lose their determination and hope for rebuilding their lives and New Orleans. A resident scrawled the word BAGHDAD on the side of this home, how does that help us determine the tone or mood of this photo?

"It was a very painful experience  
to see my fellow American citizens,  
the majority of them African Americans,  
in the dire situation they were in.

And I was outraged with  
The slow response of the  
Federal Government."<sup>14</sup> Spike Lee

"When Hurricane Katrina went through New Orleans or around it, I was in Venice Italy at a film

festival. It was a very painful experience to see my fellow America citizens, the majority of them African-Americans, in the dire situation they were in. And I was outraged with the slow response of the federal government. And every time I'm in Europe, any time something happens in the world involving African Americans, journalist jump on me, like I'm the spokesperson for 45 million African-Americans, which I'm not. Many Europeans expressed their outrage too and one interesting thing is that these European journalists were saying the images they were seeing looked like they were from a third world country, not the almighty United States of America."<sup>15</sup>

Spike Lee

Tone deals with the emotional quality of words that an individual chooses and it also illustrates attitude and point of view towards a subject. Students will examine how specific words and details are used to evoke emotions. In this section we will look at how celebrities can affect or impact an emotional response from the public through the mood and tone of their voice. As we read their words in class we will examine the words they have chosen and how the words are arranged in order to gain emotional appeal. Spike claims that he is expected to be the voice for 45 million African American.

Hurricane Katrina was the most costly hurricane in American history. 80% of New Orleans was flooded, with some parts under 15 ft of water. The most severe loss of life and property damage occurred in New Orleans, Louisiana, which flooded as the levee system catastrophically failed, hours after the storm moved inland "The majority of the city's levees designed and built by the United States Army Corps of Engineers were damaged. According to a report by the American Society of Civil Engineers, these breaches were responsible for most of the flooding. Many residents that remained in their homes had to swim for their lives, wade through deep water or remained trapped in their attics or rooftops. Many of the remaining residents were evacuated to the Louisiana Superdome or Convention Center where they hoped to find food, water, shelter and transport out of New Orleans."<sup>16</sup> As conditions worsened and flood waters continued to rise the conditions in these temporary shelters became unsafe and unsanitary. There was widespread public concern and criticism of the federal, state and local government including President Bush's delayed response, which resulted in an investigation by the US congress.

Spike Lee, a well-respected creator of films about social and moral issues, decided to create a documentary three months immediately following Hurricane Katrina. Students will watch this documentary to hear the outcry of voices from New Orleans residents. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educationalist has left a significant mark on thinking about progressive practice. His "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is currently one of the most quoted educational texts (especially in Latin America, Africa and Asia). His emphasis on the impact of dialogue in deepening understanding through respectful conversations is how I see my students being able to enhance their voice. He goes on to state that "the purpose of dialogue is to promote action that is informed and linked to certain values". This idea of building pedagogy of the oppressed' or pedagogy of hope through consciousness has the power to transform reality' (Taylor 1993:52).

"We shall Overcome, We shall Overcome, We shall overcome-someday, Deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday".....<sup>17</sup>

This Old Negro Spiritual was adopted as the anthem song of student protest during the civil rights movement. Created by an African American minister Charles Tindley, the first version was titled "I Shall Overcome"; which was then transformed by Pete Seeger and other civil Rights Era singers to "We Shall Overcome". This spiritual

although made prominent throughout the Civil Rights Era may also describe the oppressed sentiments of American residents along the gulf coast affected by Hurricane Katrina.

## Hip Hop Artist Speaks: Hurricane Katrina

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How do you read the world without words? Communication or the lack thereof, appeared to contribute to the problems presented by Hurricane Katrina. Some residence were not sure evacuating procedures, Many Americans along the Gulf Coast were left speechless and those expected to care for them could not read their unspoken pain "The act of learning to read and write has to start from a very comprehensive understanding of the act of reading the world, something which human beings do before reading the words."<sup>18</sup> Paulo Freire

When we think about teaching values there is no particular lesson plan guiding us on how to respond to situations, so here we look and analyze the impact of voice from artist Kanye West and Lil Wayne when responding to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

During a one hour special produced by NBC News Live: Chicago Rapper Kanye West states: "I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, "they're looting." You see a white family, it says, "They're looking for food." And you know it's been five days (waiting for federal help) because most of the people are black. And even for me to complain about it, I would be a hypocrite because I've tried to turn away from the TV because it's too hard to watch. I've even been shopping before even giving a donation, so now I'm calling my business manager right now to determine the largest amount I'm able to donate. Just imagine if I was down there, and those are my people down there. America is set up to help the poor, the black people, the less well-off, as slow as possible. I mean the Red Cross is doing everything they can. We already realize a lot of people that could help are at war right now, fighting another way--and they've been given the permission to go down and shoot. George bush doesn't care about black people!"<sup>19</sup>

In order to deepen students understanding of tone of both artist by asking questions centered around the tone of voice when Kanye uses words like "hate", "I hate they way they portray us in the media" or when Lil Wayne uses phrases like "My whole city's under water, some people still floating" and they wonder why black people still voting."

Lil Wayne New Orleans rapper states in a song titled "Tie My Hands"

"We are at war with the universe, the sky is falling and the only thing that can save us now is sensitivity and compassion. I, Knock on the door, hope isn't home Fate's not around the lucks all gone Don't ask me what's wrong ask me what's right and I'ma tell you what's life, and did you know? I lost everything, but I ain't the only one. First came the hurricane, then the morning sun They try telling me keep my eyes open, my whole city underwater, some people still floatin' And they wonder why black people still voting 'Cause your president still choking. Take away the football team, the basketball team And all we got is me to represent New Orleans. No governor, no help from the mayor, just a steady beating heart and a wish and a prayer"<sup>20</sup> .

Examples of identifying mood and tone are provided here through Spike, Kanye, and Lil Wayne speaking for

the voiceless in the face of adversity. Students can analyze their comments and make suggestions for constructive social change. Is it hopeful to demonstrate positive thoughts of optimism when faced with a disaster such as Katrina? With courage born of success achieved in the past "We Shall Overcome" and residents of Katrina will be able to look forward to a future filled with promise and hope.

## Point of View: Using the N-WORD!!!

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In today's Hip-Hop culture the word nigger is used frequently and many African American scholars and parents are outraged at the usage of the term.

Most inner city teenagers feel that the modern use of the word is hip(cool) because hearing it in music validates its coolness. Suburban teens listen to hip-hop music and are under the impression that using the word is acceptable, therefore they repeat it and even use it when referring to each other. "I Ain't going to fight in Vietnam, no Vietnamese ever called me a "Nigger"<sup>21</sup>

Boxing legend Muhammed Ali

"Nigga, niggoo, niggu, negreaux, negrette, niggrum." According to Wikipedia sources the word "Nigger" is a derogatory term used to refer to dark-skinned people, mainly those of black African ancestry."<sup>22</sup> Contemporary usage of the term "nigga" in the Hip-Hop as a synonym, meaning my brotha or hommie(friend). In the United States the word was freely used by most whites until the Civil Rights Movement and the Black and I'm Proud Movement of the Black Panther Party of the 1960's. Globally, today the use of the term implies racism and usage in most public places is socially forbidden.

When holding a discussion about the use of the word "Nigger" in everyday language, many of my students admitted that they never paused to consider when or how they use the word. Students say they hear it being used all day long in the streets, some hear it at home and support the use of it's usage in Hip Hop Music.

I went from old school Chevy's

To drop top Porsches

Couldn't walk a mile off in my airforces

You ain't seen what I've seen

I can get 100,000 in these Sean John Jeans

Everybody already know Jeez a real street 'nigga'

Every time you see me all around street 'niggaz'<sup>23</sup>

Young Jeezy "Airforces" (2005)

Excerpt from "Incident" by Countee Cullen

Now I was eight and very small,

And he was no whit bigger

And so I smiled, but he poked out

His tongue and called me, "NIGGER" -

Countee Cullen, "Incident" (1925)<sup>24</sup>

Looking at the point of view Young Jeezy to that of Countee Cullen will help students compare and contrast perspectives of the usage of the word usage. The hip-hop artist Young Jeezy he explains how working hard in the inner city, paying his dues to society validates his claim of being a person that people in the hood should look up to as a role model. Being a street "nigga" means he has earned material wealth but he'll never turn his back on his upbringing.

Countee Cullen shares an incident he experienced being called a "nigger" in this titled poem. Cullen was eight years old and encountered a white boy around the same age and size. At eight years old most children are innocent and prejudice free and in his innocence Cullen smiles at the boy expected a similar exchange but instead he is greeted with a poked out tongue and was called a "Nigger". The word are used from varying generational perspectives and we'll discuss this factor as well as the social divergence.

Examining the point of view from which the following stories and events are told helps students understand various perspectives.

James Weldon Johnson asked his mother in 1912: "Tell me mother, am I a nigger?"

There were tears in her eyes and I could see that she was suffering for me. I could see that her skin was darker than mine and that her hair was not as soft as mine. She must have felt that I was examining her, for she hid her face in my hair and said with difficulty; "No, my darling, you are not a nigger. You are as good as anybody, if anyone calls you a nigger don't notice them." In Johnson's reflection he stated that "he never thought about the power of words such as nigger that could maim the soul and spirit of a youngster." Johnson goes on to state that the effects of abusive language are very painful and life-destroying. "Demeaning words and disparaging labels create a cancer that kills us all. We must all be mindful of the words we use to label ourselves and our people. The self-esteem of our race is at stake."<sup>25</sup>

Analyzing and comparing the point of view of both speaker and mother can help students understand how voice changes or remains the same from person to person or generation to generation. What does Johnson's mean when he states "I see that she was suffering for me"? What does Mama want Johnson to understand when she states "No, my darling you are not a nigger. You are as good as anybody else"? Who is anybody else? Today, how would your mother's voice compare to that of Johnson's?

Emily Bernard an African American professor at the University of Vermont shares a story in an article she wrote on Teaching the N-Word. Bernard's husband, a white man tells a story to Emily about his parents. "The

only time I ever heard the word 'nigger' in my home growing up was when my father's cousin was over for a visit. It was 1988 I remember Jesse Jackson was running for President. My father's cousin was sitting in the kitchen, talking to my parents about the election. "I'm going to vote for the 'nigger,' my father's cousin said. "He is the only one who cares about the working man." After sharing this story in class, she asked a question of her students "So what should we care about in this story? The fact that John's father's cousin uses a racial epithet, or the fact that his voting for Jesse Jackson conveys a sense of respect for him."<sup>26</sup> This excerpt can elicits a response from the student's point of view and delve into some very interesting discourse as it did with Bernard's university students.

Richard Wright states that "After all the cotton was divided into crops we are still entangled as deeply as ever in this hateful web of cotton culture. We are older; our bodies are weaker; our families are larger, our clothes are in rags, we are still in dept. We know that this is not right and dark thoughts take possession of our minds. We know that if we protest we will be called "Bad Niggers."<sup>27</sup>

"A naught's a naught

Five's a figger

All for the white man

None for the nigger...

## My Student's Respond

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" I think the N-word shouldn't be used because during slavery, slave owners called us "niggas" instead of using our birth names." A response received from one of my students regarding the use of the N-word. This student goes on to ask his classmates during a passionate discussion "if whites respected us wouldn't they have given us our fair share of earnings for the cotton we picked?" since they didn't respect us they called us "niggers" just like Richard Wright explains in this text, so I do not respect this term.

"I think the "N" word is bad because that's what whites called blacks when they were slaves and years after. The first time I was called the N-word is when I was around some other guys in my neighborhood and I said something funny, they all laughed and said that little "Nigga" is crazy. When I heard the big guys say it, I thought that it was a cool word to say but now that I know a little more about history I don't!" DH

I think that the "N" word is "nigger" or "nigga". I think its used in a bad way because that's what whites used to refer to us when they thought we didn't deserve the same rights as them. It was their way of saying that we weren't good enough. AA

My parents told me that the N-word stands for ignorance so I really don't think it's good to use even though some of us use it as slang when talking to one another. MF

## Lessons in Voice

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Helping students identify major themes within "The Speakers Voice" will help them develop a sense of comprehension for text analysis. Learning how to question and take notes should lead to more discussion and more questions. What does Langston mean when he suggest that America should be America again? He claims that the land called America has not reached it full potential as a free land but ask didn't my ancestor's sweat and blood make America? The answers provided below will only be used for model responses. Students will be encouraged to give their personal responses and provide textual evidence of what they think the voice is conveying.

For example: Excerpt from "Let America be America Again" by Langston Hughes:

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed

O, let America be America again

The land that never has been yet

And yet must be-the land where every man is free

The land that's mine-the poor man's Indian Negro, ME

Who made America

Whose sweat and blood, who's plow in the rain

Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure call me an ugly name you choose

The steel of freedom does not stain.

From those who live like leeches on the peoples lives.

We must take back our land again:

America! <sup>28</sup>

### Comprehension Questions:

- Who is the central speaker?

Some students may identify the speaker as Langston Hughes. Does the central speaker change its voice from stanza to stanza?

- Why does the speaker seem to expect to be called an ugly name? Who is he referring to? He is expecting whites to call him ugly names for being optimistic and some blacks may call him ugly names



for expecting whites to embrace his optimism.

- Who is it that must take back the land again?

African Americans toiled and plowed the land in America but never received the 40 acres and the mule promised during reconstruction.

- What is meant by the steel of freedom? The line steel of freedom does not stain could refer to the chains of slavery that should not rob anyone of mental freedom.
- What kind of values does the poem wish you to value or criticize, and why?

It appears that the poem wants the reader to criticize America for failing in its promises of equality.

- If there is not a coherent message or theme?

The coherent message in the poem is that America has prevented Americans from feeling proud of their own country.

- How does the poem make you feel at the end? Happy? Sad? Upset? Proud

Depressed? Confused? Why?

The poem may inspire or motivate the reader to bring back those mighty dreams again through self-actualization.

- Have students select lines from this poem that suggest that someone is trying to achieve a goal or a dream and then have them analyze those lines using the poem's title "Let America be America Again".

**"Voice Slam 4 Justice"** is also a poetry strategy or forum that students enjoy, providing students an opportunity to create their own poetry around a central theme or topic. The poetry can address topics ranging from family, politics, romance, gender, race, societal and cultural issues.

I mentioned that one of the objectives of this unit is to model for students how to organize words in writing that will show purpose in their voice and will help them deliver a message in a more powerful and productive manner. The self-created poems are to serve as an example to students as they create their own poetry and share voices about what they have learned and experienced throughout this unit. These poems were created with the spirit of inner-city dreams; innocence is snatched from our children by gun violence, drugs, and neglect. Growing up myself on the South Side of Chicago being aware of the social ills and witnessing some pretty disturbing actions, there was still a greater sense of community and programs available to help struggling families become more self-sufficient and dependent. This is where I derived my sense and desire to give back to the community. Watching a great deal of the youth programs vanish and poorer families without the access my family was provided are the inspiration for my poems. Like Steve Biko a former South African activist; I write what I like and feel and attempt to voice what I see as real.

## Dr. King

---

Wake up my people

We don't have time to dream

It's action time

Our countries at war

Did the Dow-Jones soar?

Unemployment at an all time high

The bush administration will deny

Weapons of mass destruction

We don't have time to dream

Time for reconstruction

Al Sharpton, Barak Obama, Jesse Jackson

Why are we waiting for their reaction?

I repeat

Deployment

Unemployment

Regentrification

Discrimination

No child is to be left behind

Miseducation of the Negro

Is America blind?

Who's keeping the dream alive?

Did it die in 1968 After Watergate?

Knock on the door of Dreams

Maybe reality will Answer and say

Dr. King did not intend for us to limit ourselves only to a DREAM

Wake up, Wake up, Wake up!

Written by Sharon M. Ponder in response to a once a year dedication to learning about Dr. King's dreams for a better America. Most children walk around in a comatose state not realizing that Dr. Kings dreams were about taking responsibility and ownership of improving the world, the environment in which we live.

## **Dreams Deep-Fried**

---

Children playing

90-degree sun

The ice cream truck hums

A tune

Kool-Aid freezes into an ice cup by noon

Momma's praying

Daddy's saying

"Children get out of the streets"

Juking to the beats

Running through the alley

Jumping double dutch

Shooting hoops

Completing homework on the stoops

Shuffled cards for bid wis

An argument ensues

A drug dealer was dissed

Shoots ring out

The intended target, missed

Dreams are scattered  
Grandma shouts  
Who raped my baby?  
Ryan Harris had a dream  
Starkeisha Reed  
Our children continue to bleed  
Grown Folks filled with selfish greed  
Nobody knows Vincent Gordon  
He took a shot  
Not like Jordon  
His was in the back  
Are the Bradley sisters somewhere dreaming?  
Hopes are shattered  
Boarded windows and doors  
Who comes out for laughter anymore?

Written by Sharon M. Ponder in response to inner city children losing their innocence during the crossfire of gang and gun violence. Several of the children in this poem sat in my classroom as eighth grade students, the Bradley sisters Tionda and Diamond are still missing after seven years and their mother holds a candlelight prayer vigil each year in my childhood community.

## Appendix A: Assessment Rubric "Lift Every Voice"

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Voice Elements: Themes (identifying tone and mood in voice)

**4**

- Addresses all important aspects of the text
- Demonstrates in-depth understanding of important information
- Relates information to prior knowledge in a relevant manner
- Offers interpretations, evaluations, or extensions (generalizations, applications, analogies, drawings)
- **Modifications made for special needs students**

3

- Addresses most important aspects of the text
- Demonstrates understanding of important information; less important ideas or details may be overlooked or misunderstood
- **Modifications made for special needs students**

2

- Addresses some aspects of the text
- Understands some important information, gaps are evident
- **Modifications made for special needs students**

1

- Totally irrelevant or totally off topic
- **Modifications made for special needs students**

0

- Blank/No response
- **Modifications made for special needs students**

## Appendix B :Goals/Illinois Standards

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### Illinois Learning Standard for Language Arts

#### Read with understanding and fluency SG1

Analyze and evaluate information from text including public and functional documents.

1. Engage in critical analysis to identify and assess
  2. Examine and analyze the arguments and positions advanced in public documents.
  3. Make and support warranted assertions with elaborated and convincing evidence drawn from the documents(s)
    - Author's purpose and stance
    - Appeal of a document to audiences both friendly and hostile to the position presented
    - Social context of the document or media clip
- Use the language arts for inquiry and research to acquire, organize, evaluate and communicate information.
  - CAS A. Conduct research individually and cooperatively, analyzing and applying the acquired information to produce presentations.
    - Generate written reports from key information obtained from two or more primary and or secondary sources that develop and support ideas clearly to convey a perspective on the subject.
    - Research and report on the impact of media upon the formulations of trends and opinions in

contemporary life.

- Use a variety of visual

**Illinois State Goal 3 Write to communicate for a variety of purposes:** Write with focus, organization, coherence and unity in relation to purpose and audience, using a variety of supporting evidence and detail.

- Choose the appropriate form for ones writing, (e.g., reviews, poems narratives) the voice and style appropriate to audience and purpose.
- Using a variety of effective and coherent organizational patterns including: comparison and contrast
  - Similarity and difference
  - Posing and answering a question
  - Students will share their voice through a series of writing

**Illinois State Goal 5** Use the language arts for inquiry and research to acquire, organize, analyze, evaluate and communicate information: contain a consistent voice, tone and focus throughout the piece of writing and use appropriate transitional words, phrases, and devices to connect and unify key ideas and claims.

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ABC7Chicago.com

ABC7Chicago.com: Student Chavez shot to death near Simeon High School 3/29/08

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## Notes

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