



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
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## **A.VOID: Who Are the Poor People? How Environment Impacts the Development of Character**

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### **Introduction**

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Last year, I strode around my classroom observing my students during a free write, which I assigned to get their "brains flowing" before an intensive, structured writing activity. I tell my students, "You can write about anything! Your favorite recipe, the dream you had last night, what you're doing this weekend. . . as long as you're writing." While roaming the room, seeing topics ranging from meatballs to upcoming social dates, I noticed Connor had written a rather lengthy journal and was now accompanying that journal with an illustration. The picture immediately caught my eye: fiery bombs exploding out of an enormous cannon from the United States (with a rather large illustration of our flag) toward Iraq partnered with drawings of stick people wearing large turbans. The caption underneath stated very plainly "They deserve it." I realized then that our children develop or absorb serious misconceptions about others as being completely different and disconnected from "us." I would like them to see that on the contrary, we (as humans, anywhere) share certain experiences possibly more than we differ in them.

This desire for cultural awareness and interconnectedness became my passion for the unit. In order for our children to create accurate distinctions of cultures in their minds and, consequently, informed opinions, they must also be given the facts. If they do not receive informative material either from their parents or the media sources surrounding them, it therefore rests on the shoulders of their teachers to export the knowledge to them. Given that my students only see a Social Studies teacher every other day, I want to insure that they get every possible opportunity to learn as much as they can about foreign cultures.

### **My School**

First, I would like to take a moment to acquaint you with the environment of my school. Quail Hollow Middle School, a FOCUS (Finding Opportunities; Creating Unparalleled Success) school, prides itself on building relationships and diversifying instruction. Being a FOCUS school means that according to our state's standardized test scores (End of Grade or EOG) our students do not perform at a proficient level and thus, do not meet all of the achievement goals mandated for a school of our size and/or makeup. (This is called Annual Yearly Progress, AYP, of which our school only achieved 25 out of 29 necessary progression goals in 2008.) Many of our students perform below grade level and with the high stakes of EOG pass rates, teachers feel the pressure of "making the grade." Being a 6<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts teacher, I know that the limitations of my

students do not come from them being inadequate or not being "smart," but rather that their reading level does not necessarily match where they are supposed to be. For example, in 2008 approximately 49% of our 6<sup>th</sup> graders earned a I or II (failing) on the End of Grade test, nearly 60% received a I or II in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 38% in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (1).

In direct correlation is the socio—economic breakdown of our school. Our school definitely exhibits a salad bowl of culture with its 950 students creating a pie of 36% African American, 31% White, and 25% Hispanic, with significantly lower levels of Asian, Native American, or Multi—racial students (2). Although our school nestles next to the Quail Hollow Country Club, we bus the majority of our students in from lower—income housing or apartments. The one thing the majority of my students have in common is low economic level. Sixty—three percent of our school population receives free/reduced lunch and ninety—two percent of absences get categorized as unexcused, with no parent/guardian contact. Many parents shut off their phones or cancel service when a bill cannot be paid and several move to a different apartment without notifying the school of the address or contact information changes. ges.

This correlation between minority populations, socio—economic status, and low achievement has been coined the "Achievement Gap." Nothing creates a better image of this than the separation of students into Standard (lower level), Standard Plus (proficient) and Honors (above average) classes. I teach three classes of a heterogeneously mixed Standard/Standard Plus, which allows for lively debates and discussion given the diversity in my classroom. However, my classes frequently struggle with school—wide fundraisers, while our neighboring classroom of Honors students excels. Often I find that my students lack background or prior knowledge of information or concepts we read in our stories simply because they may not have had the opportunity to learn them elsewhere: the beach, items in a museum, the experience of being at a baseball stadium during a game. You can probably imagine then that their understandings of other cultures may be severely limited. With rare circumstances to even branch out within their own society, the likelihood of my students having experienced another culture becomes nil. I want to captivate my students with the opportunity to step into other worlds, to learn about new cultures, and to build their own opinions from the information gained through the experience.e.

## Objectives

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The primary focus of my unit, as seen in the title, will be characterization. Although all of my students have worked with characterization throughout their elementary years, a significant jump happens from fifth to sixth grade in regards to the level at which they must process and evaluate the characters they encounter in reading. In the fifth grade, students must "examin[e] reasons for a character's actions, taking into account the situation and basic motivation of the character" (3). They must also "examine" the relationships the character develops with others as well as make inferences about the character. However, in sixth grade, students not only need to examine characters, their motivations, and their relationships, but also connect those to other concepts of literature. According to the Standard Course of Study for North Carolina, in sixth grade students need to interpret the effects of dialogue, sarcasm, point of view, mood, and tone as well as exploring the relationships the characters build in connection to other ideas, concepts and experiences (4). I find though that many of my students still have difficulties just explaining a character's motivation for a certain action, without even looking at other characters. The majority of my students look at me and question, "What is an

inference?" If they graduate to sixth grade missing significant knowledge base with fifth grade concepts, I must then take on the task to build this foundation before progressing forward with more challenging types of exercises with character.

I have thus decided to break this unit up into six categories of character: Tone, Mood, Actions, Point of View, Thoughts, and Inferences. I will speak about each of these in relation to characterization below.

## **Tone**

For the purpose of examining and evaluating characters, my working definition of tone will be the sound of the character's voice. This is different from the normal use of tone in the study of literature, which usually refers to the author's tone (for example, being satirical, sympathetic, or sarcastic). Rather, I want my students to decipher the tone each character uses. Does he or she speak quickly? Do they slur or articulate their words? What if the person speaking sounds dull or excited or enraged? All of these particular questions and their relative answers will describe some element of the character to us. I have found in the past that my students have very little trouble identifying the tone in someone else's voice; for example, one afternoon Christian said to me, "Wow Ms. DeLeeuw, you sound really excited today." They also have little trouble interpreting tone when watching or viewing something such as a TV show or movie. However, when it comes to their reading, tone takes on an entirely different dimension. Because tone deals with the sound of a character's voice (or thoughts, if an inner monologue happens), it is essential that the reader of the text be able to modulate his/her voice in relation to the type of tone being described in the reading. Due to my students' lower reading levels, they often mispronounce words, cannot define the meaning of certain words, and read in a monotone, somewhat stilted voice until they complete their turn of reading. Authors assist you with tone by using descriptive adjectives or action verbs or by using the correct punctuation; however, my students' interpretation of "Oh NO!" becomes "oh no." Because the tone a character uses in the text often shows a great deal of personality or motivation of a character, this will be one of the six concerns in our characterization unit.

## **Mood**

My students often confuse tone and mood and inevitably mix them together. Mood differs from tone in that it deals with emotions and the elements of body language connected to that. Whereas tone simply refers to the sound of the voice, mood pulls together facial expressions, body language, and what the character says. I often relate this to the different moods a person can feel during the day. In practicing mood before we identify it in the text, I typically perform different moods for my students by changing my facial expression and the way I walk around the classroom. For example, I may drag my feet with downturned lips to imitate sadness or lethargy. My kids can always define the moods of their peers and themselves but have difficulty deciphering the mood of a particular character in a story. Similar to tone, mood is simply a matter of looking at the details. Did the character smile? And if so, does that mean he/she is happy or maybe nervous? Finding the mood of a character helps the reader to determine the character's overall personality and then draw conclusions about future episodes or events. If the character is always cranky when he/she first wakes up, then we can most likely assume he/she will be cranky tomorrow morning at 6 AM. Mood is about personality and the personality of a character will help my students analyze them in greater detail.

## **Actions**

This is by far the easiest of the six elements involved with character. My students have little trouble determining or, for that matter, reciting the actions of a character in a text. The trouble comes when the

students must predict what a character's actions may be in the future. For this I want my students, once again, to pay attention to the details. The actions of a character can tell you a great deal about their values, wants, and motivations. If a character throws a tantrum in the middle of a grocery store, we as the reader can infer several conclusions: that character wants something or needs something that he/she is not getting. Why does he/she want/need it? What makes him/her believe it is okay to throw a tantrum in a public place?

Actions also suggest the relationship characters have to other characters. Using the same example as before: the 5 year old throwing a tantrum in the store may not listen to his mother. Maybe the mother ignores him. What does that imply about the relationship they have with each other? Frequently, my students do not relate these minor details as exemplifying a character's personality and giving the reader clues into their relationships with other characters.

### **Point of View**

Here is the Language Arts teacher's age—old question: From whose perspective is this story told? Whose point of view do we see here? Students tend to answer these questions correctly and quickly, but I want to take this task a step further. I want my students to explain why the author chose to put the story in that character's point of view. (In some stories, the point of view may be from an omniscient narrator, in which case my students would need to assess why the author chose a narrator rather than a character from the story.) Is their significance in having the story told in this perspective? Can you imagine how the story would be different if told from another character's point of view? My students should not only be able to explain what point of view is (the perspective from which the story is told), but also why this narration influences the story and how the story might change if written in a different perspective.

### **Thoughts**

Many stories unfold from the character's perspective, allowing his or her thoughts to be quite noticeable. One can immediately "get into character" in such circumstances because the narrator allows you into his/her mind. However, when analyzing characters other than the narrator, the task challenges my students. I might ask "What do you think Sarah is thinking about when she did that?" and my students will give me blank expressions. Some will even look back in the book for evidence and when they do not find an immediate answer, they say casually, "I don't know." With thoughts, I do not want the "I don't know." I want my students to constantly think as if they ARE the character. If you cannot get into the characters of your story, how will you be able to understand who they are or why they act the way they do? My students may at first challenge me on the character "mind—reading," but I think the end result will pay off when my students always have the ability to predict a character's thoughts based on his/her mood, actions, and relationship to other characters in the story.

### **Inferences**

An inference draws a conclusion based on evidence explained in a text. Perhaps the best example of "inferencing" can be seen in shows such as CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) where agents use the clues of the crime scene to weave together facts about the case at hand. They use evidence in order to assume certain actions or reactions took place. The ability to make an inference requires some abstract thinking. In this regard, my students suffer greatly in making inferences. Renowned psychologist, Jean Piaget, described the levels of cognitive development into four groups. Research on his methods state, "at approximately twelve years, stage 4 of cognitive development termed formal operational thinking begins to develop . . . around age twelve [adolescents] could develop abstract thinking, and this ability developed faster in some teens

especially those who were more intelligent" (5). Piaget describes formal operational thinking as being able to think in the abstract, form hypotheses, determining all the possibilities of a given choice or situation, conceptual thinking, and understand problems in a more systematic way.

The difficulty, then, for my students lies in their cognitive development. To make an inference requires reading "in between the lines" or taking the words and phrases the author gives you to draw your own conclusions about a character. Many of my students are still in Level 3 of Piaget's development, meaning they see the world in a very concrete way. Being 11 or 12 years old, some of my students have the ability to automatically make generalizations and some do not. This aligns with the level of understanding in the North Carolina State Standards between fifth and sixth grade. While fifth graders only need "examine" characters and their actions, sixth graders must interpret the reasons behind their actions and the connections they have with other characters and experiences. Many of my students continue to develop this skill and level of cognitive development over the course of the school year, but it usually does not take effect until later in the year.

What do we do about this then? Once again, everything lies in the details. My students are definitely able to pick out concrete, stated details from the text in regard to a character's actions or thoughts or description. What then? Then comes the inferencing question: what does that really mean? If we know that Bobby lives in the country on a farm, what can we also infer about his character based on prior knowledge we have about farms or the country? Maybe we could infer that he wears clothes he does not mind getting dirty or that he probably handles animals well. The art of inferences rests in the connections between what you already know (activation of prior knowledge) and the facts the author gives you in the text.

## Background Information

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I would like to unite the study of the cultures and the characters we see in those settings with one factor with which my students can possibly relate: poverty. In fact, this has become the essential title of the unit, A.VOID: Who are the poor people? How does the environment of a character influence who that character becomes as he/she grows? Is poverty different in other regions and how do the upper classes relate to it? Does a void exist between the classes within our community, our country, and other cultures? While the conditions of poverty differ in each region (as shown in the statistics given below), perhaps the relationships and personality tendencies offer some similarities in spite of cultural differences. I would like my students to truly investigate these similarities and differences among those in poverty through the study of characters living in that state.

I have decided to study three cultures during the course of this unit: Latin America, Middle East, and United States. My students already have some perception of poverty in the United States, although it might be limited to what they have seen either around them or on TV. For this reason, I will not spend much time on the culture of the United States, but rather the issue of poverty and its statistics. Looking worldwide, one in four people live in areas with insufficient water to support them. Three billion people live in cities and one of those billions live in urban slum conditions. I want my students to examine how environments such as these, including the culture of the region, will directly influence the behavior and personality of the characters we study. As Lewis says, "we know little about the psychology of the people, particularly of the lower classes, their problems, how they think and feel, what they worry about, argue over, anticipate, or enjoy" (6). Through this unit, my students will open that window into the minds and hearts of those in poverty.

Below you will find the information needed to create an informative unit on these three cultures including their respective customs as well as statistics and material on the poverty level and its implications on children in these various regions.

## **Latin America**

My study of Latin America will stay particularly in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Brazil, limited due to the size of the area and also the background of my students. (I have many students who still have family living in Mexico, primarily.) First I will share statistics I have found in order to come to some conclusions about the state of poverty in these countries.

In most areas of Latin America, the life expectancy (evaluated with health services, water supplies, and nutrition in mind) is between 70—79 years old which indicates moderate services available. However, in the countries of Guatemala and Honduras, the average life span is only 50—69 years, drastically different from that of other countries within a reasonable vicinity. These countries also showed that 30—49% of their poor live in urban slums, in comparison to 70—89% in most other regions of Latin America. One could conclude that those living in poverty in Guatemala and Honduras live in rural areas, with limited access to health services and sufficient water supplies, lowering their life expectancy. Also in Guatemala and Honduras, communication services are limited. Out of 1000 people, only 100—499, fewer than half, have access to a telephone line or cell phone. While we typically generalize the poor to not having any access to telephones and cell phones, we must understand that in the context of the United States, a majority of those considered living "in poverty" own a TV, cell phone, and air conditioning. In this way, poverty looks quite different depending on the region we study (which I would like my students to examine as well.) 20—39% of people in Guatemala and Honduras are undernourished, in large contrast to Mexico and Brazil's 3—9%. The distribution of wealth throughout much of Latin America is unequal, such is the case in Mexico and severe inequalities in Brazil, with the quality of living rated at medium throughout (7). Back in the 1960's, the defining factor of socioeconomic level proved to be the use of tableware (fork and knife) with the poorest almost always using their hands to eat (8). While this has changed over time, other things remain the same: people in rural areas still living in adobe huts and those in urban dwellings cramming family members into small insufficient housing. How do these factors influence the lives of those living in such conditions? Do those without access to communication feel its effects or develop other efficient means? How do the traits of the poor living in rural villages differ from those in urban apartments, who although poor, still have access to microwaves, stoves, and dishwashers? These are just a sample of questions I would like my students to explore while we study Latin America.

According to customs in the familial unit, the father holds the authoritative role with women typically playing a fairly submissive role. In the case of the poverty—stricken family, all members must help support the family as soon as physically able (9), which correlates to the two million children not attending school (10). Strong family ties remain incredibly important. It is not unusual for the family unit to consist of the "nuclear" family as well as extended family living locally. Parents emphasize good manners and respect for authority with their children.

Religion also plays an important role within the Latin American community. Ninety percent of Spanish—speaking countries are Roman Catholic and many of the holidays and celebrations take root in religious origins (11). My students may easily compare this to the United States in which some holidays may take root in religious tradition, but have become commercialized over time.

In regards to relationships, the Spanish language includes both a formal and informal address for the pronoun "you" and also differentiates between polite and familiar commands. When speaking it is not unlikely to hear

loud, animated voices with hand gestures to match.

## **Middle East**

For the sake of the length of my unit, I plan to only focus on three countries for our study of the Middle East: Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These three countries have many similarities and differences which I will try to convey without confusion. The films being used in my unit come from Iran; however, the novel takes place in Afghanistan.

The life expectancies of the three countries range from 35 to 79 years. In Afghanistan, a child would expect to live to only 49 years at the most, which correlates to the fact of this country being the only of the three to receive food aid (40 million tons in 2007—2009) from the World Food Program. The state of education differs also: for every 10 boys enrolled in school, only 8 or fewer girls enroll. In the Middle East (all countries) and North Africa, 9 million children do not attend school, but work to help support their families. 10—29% of Afghanistan's poor live in urban slum conditions, usually homes deemed "overnight" housing, meaning construction was made from flimsy materials to last for that particular evening. Out of 1000 people, fewer than 100 in Afghanistan and Iraq will have access to a telephone line or cell phone, compared to 100—499 in Iran (12). In consideration of all of these facts, we must also think about the prevalence of the United States military in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Even though significant awareness for the poverty of these nations arose out of our encampment, can we not also assume that some disruption of customs or ways of life has perhaps also been influenced? In relaying this information to my students, I would like them to get the feeling of being in some "Middle Eastern" shoes - how would you feel if your country were occupied? How would it influence your actions or the way you look at yourself in relation to your country?ry?

Iran and Iraq differ slightly in relation to poverty with that of Afghanistan. In Iraq, the average person lives to 50—69 years old and 50—69% of the poor live in urban slums. 70—90% of children enroll in primary school; however only 30—49% remain for secondary education. Iran on the other hand enrolls 90% or more in primary school and 70—90% in secondary education, similar to their adult literacy rate. However, Iran struggles in areas the other countries do not (13). For example, based on the wealth of the nation, the medium quality of life ranks significantly lower than expected. 10% of the entire population is unemployed and 3—9% are undernourished (with iodine deficiency being a serious concern). ern).

All three countries follow the Islamic religion in some form. Sunnis still rival Shi'as in this region which causes unbelievable conflict. The people of this region live by strict religious expectations. Women, while regarded as equal to men according to Islam, also must submit to their husbands and care primarily for the home and children. Men provide for the families (although according to Islam women are allowed to work) and fulfill the role of financial responsibility and stability (14). However, women in Afghanistan still feel the repression of the now destroyed Taliban regime. Many wear the head to toe burqa simply for fear for physical violence, including sexual assault or rape (15).

The customs in Middle Eastern culture differ from that of the United States. Interaction proximity, or the closeness of two people when communicating, is often closer in Middle Eastern countries, unless the two people are of the opposite sex. People usually greet with a handshake and depart the same way. Also when speaking with another in a sitting position, your partner will take offense if you sit with crossed legs that positing the sole of your foot in their direction. Punctuality is incredibly important and one should never look anxious and impatient when conversing as it is considered rude (16).

## United States

While the traditional customs and culture of the United States should be familiar to our students, the level of poverty may not. My students live in lower-income housing, but the majority still receives basic medical care and nutrition (largely due to the free/reduced lunch system at school). But what about those poor among us living on the streets? In 2008, the United States boasted 469 billionaires. Simultaneously, we also had 51 million people living in poverty. 41% of the world's billionaires live in the United States, yet we ranked "mostly unequal" in terms of our wealth distribution according to the Gini Index (17). This means that the gap between our country's rich and poor continues to increase. As Smith says, "despite poverty reduction, inequality persists and the gap between the richest and the poorest . . . shows little sign of narrowing" (18). Los Angeles boasts the third highest city wealth in the world (in 2008), yet 20% of its population lives in poverty. The Census Bureau declared 37 million Americans "poor" in 2005. Nearly two-thirds of poor children reside in single-parent homes (19).

In this unit, I would like my students to be familiar with these statistics, but also recognize that our poverty still looks quite different from that of the other two regions. Many of our poor still own a TV or cell phone. How does this shape the characteristics of our poor? Are we still similar to those in the Middle East and Latin America? While this just barely illuminates some of the struggles of poverty in the United States today, it offers a little insight to share with students, especially those living in lower-income situations themselves.

## Strategies

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I think one of the best ways to reveal culture to students with limited prior knowledge on the subject lives in film. Films reveal characters with whom we can laugh, cry, empathize, or fear. Films allow us to look at characters critically in a shortened period of time. They also include fashion, setting, customs, actions, traits, etc. that might take hours of research and teaching to give to my kids. However, considering the lower achievement level of my students and their lower reading levels (some come to me at a third grade reading level), film cannot be the only outlet for our learning. In order to build their reading skills, they need to practice. The more my students practice, the more comfortable they will feel reading not only to themselves, but also aloud to others. With all this in mind, I intend to mix both films and literature to adequately facilitate the learning and academic growth of my students during this unit.

## Organization

I plan to teach the unit in culture sections. I would like to travel first to China with my students (as I feel this culture is the most foreign to them), then Middle East, Latin America and ending in our "backyard," the United States. With each new culture, we will begin with an informational scavenger hunt day (or culture awareness day) for facts on cultural customs, important holidays and phrases, clothing, setting, and statistics on poverty as it influences children my students' age. This scavenger hunt can be done in a number of ways, in all of which I plan to incorporate cooperative learning (or working together rather than independently). One excellent way of introducing students to important information for a unit that will act as "prior knowledge" later includes center activities. In centers, students get into groups of 3–4 people and travel around the room to various tables, each with a different goal in mind. This is how I plan to initiate the culture awareness day. One center may ask students to research fashion by looking through informative texts (see appendix for



materials) while another may ask students to interpret a graph about the types of jobs popular in China. In this way, my students not only will learn a significant amount of information on the region in one day by moving through the centers, but will also receive practice on interpreting and analyzing informational texts and their structure (glossary, headings, graphics, captions, graphic aids, etc.). For each new region a "culture awareness day" will take place in which students will actively seek knowledge about the specific region we will study and then be able to keep these notes for future reference (while we work through the character activities). While I may not always use the center activity for each region (doing the same exact activity bores students after a while), the day will always include forms of cooperative learning to maximize teamwork and communication skills.

After the students have had a taste of the culture and understand the extent of poverty in that region (also done on cultural awareness day), we will then begin whichever element of characterization the students need. As in most districts, Charlotte—Mecklenburg Schools always advises its teachers to give some sort of pretest in order to determine the level of understanding for each of the students. This helps to best modify for each student depending on who needs the most assistance with the concept of characters. The data I receive based on the pretest of character will determine the amount of time necessary for each of the six above mentioned functions of characterization. Some may only require one day of study, while others may require a bit more. In any case, I will model the element using film. For example, if my class focuses on character actions, then we will watch a film clip from our designated region in which we specifically pinpoint character actions and what they tell us about the character. In many ways, regardless of what element we work on, the students will need to infer some personality traits based on what they see in the films. As we watch the clip of the film, the students will have a specific task or set of questions in front of them in which they must take notes during the clip. I plan to also play the clip at least twice considering 1) my students will need two viewings to see all the details and 2) many of the films use subtitles and my students do not read incredibly fast. After we watch the clip at least twice, I will then model an example of characterization for the students. If we work on tone one day, I will give an example of tone I witnessed during the viewing of the film. Then together (guided practice) the entire class will find further examples of tone in the film and discuss what that tone suggests about the character. If the tone sounds grumpy, why is the character grumpy? What might cause that character to use that tone with that person? Therefore, with each region, the teacher modeling and guided practice of characterization will be done using film where students can easily identify and examine the traits of the characters through what they see. However, independent practice will require reading, which will be described below.

### **Lexile Level Literature Circles**

Lexile levels are a scientific way of determining a person's reading ability. It takes into account the level of vocabulary, sentence construction, and phrasing. As the Lexile Framework states, "A higher Lexile reader measure represents a higher level of reading ability on the Lexile scale" (20). By the time students reach sixth grade, they should already read at a Lexile level of 900. However, many of my students come to me with the Lexile level of your average fourth grader (700L) (21). Why is this significant? If a student comes into your classroom at a given reading ability, having them read text significantly above their Lexile or reading ability will be incredibly frustrating. The vocabulary will be too difficult; the sentences may be confusing. In order for my students to grow, I think it is important to give them instructional reading (for independent practice) that is at or slightly above their Lexile level. The reading will not frustrate them, but instead, may challenge them enough to promote progress at a comfortable pace. Keeping this in mind, I have designed this unit to accommodate my various readers by offering independent practice with each lesson at a Lexile level appropriate for the student by creating Literature Circles.

For my low level readers, *The Breadwinner*, by Deborah Ellis, will be used. This story depicts the life of a girl in Afghanistan forced to dress as a boy to get food for her family when they begin to sink into poverty after the military takes her father. At 630L, this would be the perfect novel for my low readers that will give them practice finding the characterization element we modeled in class at level that will not frustrate them. They will also be able to contribute knowledge of Middle Eastern culture and poverty based on this realistic fiction book.

For my middle or proficient readers, *Esperanza Rising*, by Pam Munoz Ryan, will be used. This story follows Esperanza and her mother as enter a Californian work camp from their forced evacuation of home in Mexico. At 750L, this novel will allow students to determine and analyze elements of characterization while also contributing to their knowledge of Hispanic culture and poverty.

For my higher readers, *Maniac Magee*, by Jerry Spinelli, will be used. This story travels along with Jeffrey Lionel Magee, who runs away from a hostile home life in search of something better. Living on the streets, he find a whole new world and learns a little about the confrontations of race along the way. At 820L, this book will allow my higher readers to not only investigate the characters and their motivations, but also think abstractly about the themes in the story such as racism, sharing, selflessness, and poverty.

As my unit continues, I will always model the objective for my student through film as mentioned above. However, they must be able to pull out this strategy in their reading as well as their viewing. Therefore, in my guided practice, after I we have discussed as a class the element of characterization in the film, I will then give them strategies to convert this to their reading. If we investigate tone, then while they read their assigned chapters in their Literature Circles, they should look at detailed adjectives and active nouns. If the author describes a character as 'shrieking' rather than 'exclaiming' it will impact the tone. Each day the students will know how to search out their character elements in their assigned Literature Circle chapters and then will be given an assignment correlating to that element. In some cases, the assignment for the end of class (or exit ticket) may be collaborative with their circle group. In other cases, I may want this practice to be strictly independent to check for understanding and gathering growth data. At the end of class, students will be able to share what they found with one another as a whole class because although each group will research different characters, they all unite in the theme of poverty and the character element the students sought. This also will allow my students to learn about characters in other novels which will, perhaps, intrigue them enough to read it on their own! Regardless, the exercise of practicing the objective using a text at or slightly above the students' Lexile level will not only moderately and comfortably challenge them, but will also give them increased knowledge in the culture they read and the way in which poverty influences their characters.

## **Final Assessment**

My school advocates diversifying instruction and for that reason emphasized allowing students to choose their final product as a means of assessment at the end of a unit. To allow for this type of differentiation, I have created three types of assessment which all reveal the student's understand of character and the implications of environment and the elements of characterization on the person's personality, motivations, and actions. The students will use the main character from the novel studied in their Literature Circle to complete the final product, which will be due at the end of the unit, but introduced at the beginning to give the student ample time for completion.

The first is a Character Diary in which the student must write from the character's point of view. The narrative must display the character's tone and mood through using accurate and descriptive adjectives as well as

explain elements of the character's culture in relation to events in the text. The student will be required to write one journal entry per chapter of the book which will describe the character's thoughts during the events of that particular chapter.

The second is an Author Interview Podcast where the students will be able to work with a partner to complete the final product. In this assessment, two students will create and hand in a final, typed script of the recorded Podcast where one acts as an interviewer and the other takes the position of the author of the novel. The interview should contain information related to decisions of the author on character development and why the setting influences the actions and personality of the main character. The recorded Podcast will also be uploaded to the classroom website for others to hear.

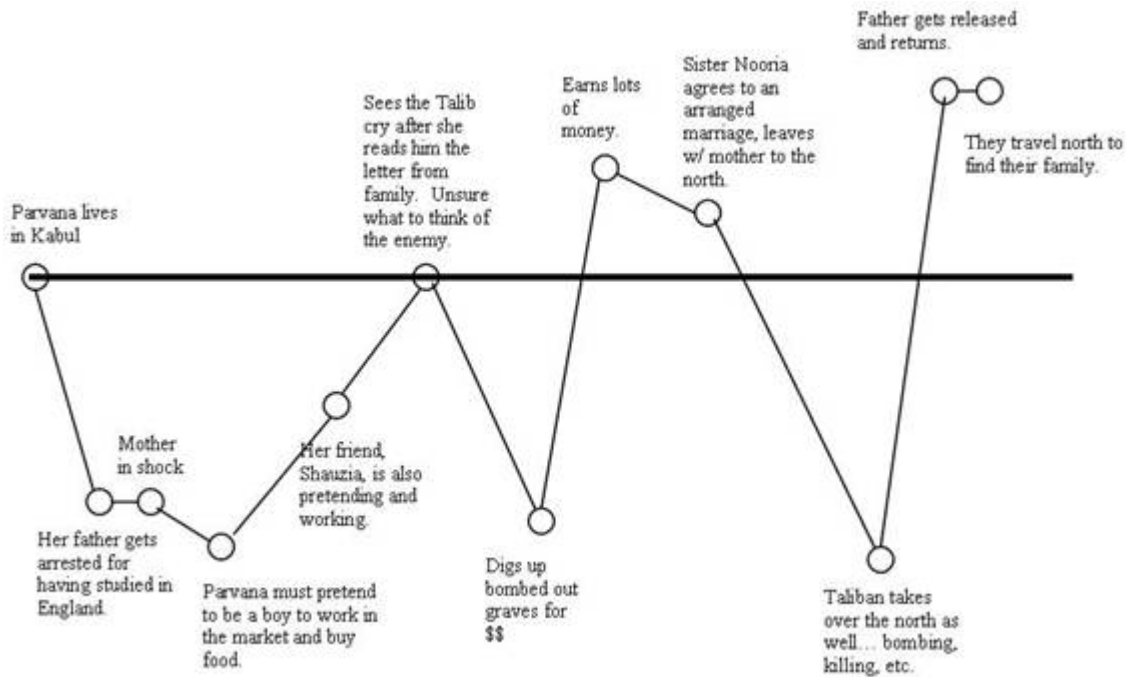
The third product is a Pathway Board Game in which the student must create a board game which takes us along the journey of the character in her/his novel. This assessment must include the game board, trivia cards (for moving forward, for example), playing pieces and rules. The design of the game board should be representative of aspects within the novel (the setting, the character's interests, etc.). The trivia cards must indicate the student's understanding of the character and his/her actions throughout the novel.

### **Classroom Activities**

In this section of the curriculum unit, I would like to share three activities which will help my students achieve academic success in this character and culture unit. My hope is for these activities to be easily modified and manipulated to fit any Language Arts classroom regardless of grade level.

### **Character Highs and Lows Timeline**

As a part of any Language Arts curriculum standards, students must recognize and use chronological order. For many students this is a fairly simple concept, however others find it frustrating. For that reason, the Character Highs and Lows Timeline allows students to not only practice their chronological ordering skills, but also evaluate events in relation to the character's emotions or feelings about the event. In its original form, the timeline is meant to start from the character's birth at the start point; however, most novels do not begin with the character's birth. Therefore, for the sake of my unit, I will have students begin wherever the novel starts in the life of that particular person. As important events occur for the character in the novel, students must plot that event on the timeline, adjusting the spaces between the points on the timeline accordingly. The student must also simultaneously rank the events in relation to how the character felt about them. I illustrated the character of Parvana from *Breadwinner* below:



As you can see, this type of timeline requires student justification. You will notice I placed points two and three relatively close to one another because I did not think much time passed in between those two events in the story. However, between points four and five more time has passed and thus the line lengthens. The student must also justify the placement of the points vertically. I assumed Parvana having to dress as a boy and work in the marketplace to be her lowest point because it was so incredibly dangerous for her to do so. Students must interpret events in the story based on the character's point of view in evaluating where on the vertical axis the points should go. This can get tricky when you have several "happy" events or "sad" events and must decide "Which has more joy for the character?" or "Which one of these was worse for the character?" I plan to have students do this timeline simultaneously with the reading of the novel, but you could also do it at the end in relation to a plot map (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution).

**Film Clip Analysis**

The second activity crucial to my students incorporates film and character terminology and the student's assessments of these elements used in a specified film clip. Before watching any film clips, I plan to work with the students on the film and character vocabulary, probably through the use of matching words and definitions and having students create their own examples of each, with a visual to help them remember what each term means.

Then the fun begins! When watching the film clip, I will give each student an index card with a specific vocabulary term written on top. This will be the element the student will focus on in the clip. The reason for only giving the students one term is twofold: 1) my students have a hard time watching for two things at once and 2) it allows them to share their ideas and findings with a partner. I will tell my students just to watch the first time through, and then take notes during the second viewing (in case they see someone differently). My students should still have the notes from the vocabulary lesson to use if still unsure of a vocabulary term; this instills the importance of proper note taking and allows them to feel able to participate even if slightly unsure of a word's meaning. Afterwards, my students will turn to a partner in their collaborative groups (my students sit in groups of four usually) and share their responses for two minutes. Then, we will open the class to a discussion of the information, with the students sharing their partner's information. This is essential. I want my

students to grasp their own concept, but also build on that knowledge with what they learned from their partner - remembering that new information and sharing it with the class will help aid this effort.

While my students share their answers, I will have "graffiti walls" (chart paper) around the room where called—upon students can write their answers so that we, as a class, can see what we have interpreted in the film. Simultaneously, students will write this information in a graphic organizer. This is important for my students because if they do not have something in front of them to focus on, they tend to get off track! It also allows them to have notes to keep in their binder for review later in the unit or before their project is due.

## **Culture Wall**

As my students read their novels in Literature Circles, they will take note of any important mentions to cultural traditions of customs represented in that novel. These should be relatively easy to distinguish since my students can readily pick apart customs of their own culture from what an author describes in a novel of a different setting. (Suggestions for guidance will be on the wall including: food, holidays, greetings, family, etc.) These will go in the student's folders (created for this unit), as well as on our culture wall.

At the end of each day, I will set apart time for the class to come back together (after reading different novels) to share the information we found in our reading for that day regarding the characters. I will also encourage my students to share any information they find regarding the cultural customs. This information will be described on the culture wall - a wall decorated into three separate sections, designated as our three different regions of study. As students come up with information for these sections, I will give them shapes of paper to write the fact on and staple attach to the appropriate section. Then a student will be chosen to illustrate that fact to help us remember the information presented. I always try to incorporate some sort of visual representation of information for the various learning styles in the classroom. As we get further in our texts, the culture wall should grow until it is overflowing with information!

## **Notes**

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1. Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools: School, District, and Learning Community Profiles, 2008.

<http://apps.cms.k12.nc.us/departments/instrAccountability/schlProfile05/profiles.asp> (accessed July 11, 2009).

2. Ibid.

3. *English Language Arts: An Overview, Grade 5*. (Public Schools of North Carolina: State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, 2008) <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/elementary/elagrade5> (accessed July 11, 2009).

4. *National Standards: Grade 6*. (Public Schools of North Carolina: State Board of Education, Department of Public Instruction, 2008) <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/languagearts/middlegrades/grade6overview.pdf> (accessed July 11, 2009).

5. *Intellectual Development*. (MassGeneral Hospital for Children, 2009)

[http://www.massgeneral.org/children/adolescenthealth/articles/aa\\_intellectual\\_development.aspx](http://www.massgeneral.org/children/adolescenthealth/articles/aa_intellectual_development.aspx) (accessed July 11, 2009).

6. Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, 1.

7. Dan Smith, *The Penguin State of the World Atlas: Eighth Edition*, New York, 2008, 29.
8. Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*, 13.
9. Ann Clutter, Ruben Nieto. "Understanding the Hispanic Culture," (Ohio State University Fact Sheet, Family and Consumer Sciences) <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg—fact/5000/5237.html> (accessed July 12, 2009).
10. Smith, *The Penguin State of the World Atlas*, 20—21, 88.
11. Clutter, Nieto, "Understanding the Hispanic Culture," <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg—fact/5000/5237.html> (accessed July 12, 2009).
12. Smith, *The Penguin State of the World Atlas*, 20—21, 27, 97.
13. Ibid, 29, 49.
14. Mary Ali, Anjum Ali. "Women's Liberation through Islam," (The Institute of Islamic Information and Education) <http://www.jannah.org/sisters/womlib.html> (accessed July 12, 2009).
15. "Afghanistan: Women Still under Threat," (Human Rights Watch, 2002) <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2002/05/08/afghanistan—women—still—under—threat> (accessed July 12, 2009).09).
16. Maria Mussler, "Doing Business in the Middle East and North Africa," (*Export America*, December 2002) <http://www.export.gov/middleeast/Doing%20Business%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf> (accessed on July 12, 2009).
17. Smith, *The Penguin State of the World Atlas*, 38.
18. Ibid, 9.
19. Robert Rector, "How Poor are America's Poor? Examining the 'Plague' of Poverty in America," (The Heritage Foundation, 2007) <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg2064.cfm> (accessed July 12, 2009).
20. "What does the Lexile Measure Mean?" (The Lexile Framework for Reading) <http://www.lexile.com/DesktopDefault.aspx?view=ed&tabindex=1&tabid=49&tabpageid=545> (accessed July 11, 2009).
21. "Lexile Grade Conversion Chart," (Lexile Framework) <http://www.hsdist88.dupage.k12.il.us/aths/resources/AT%20MCweb02/TEAMS/ELLResources/LexileConversionChart.pdf> (accessed July 11, 2009).

## Teacher Resources

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"Afghanistan: Women still under Threat." Human Rights Watch.

[www.hrw.org/en/news/2002/05/08/afghanistan—women—still—under—threat](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2002/05/08/afghanistan—women—still—under—threat) (accessed July 12, 2009). While the information on this site may shock you, it most definitely informs uneducated readers about the plight of women still in Afghanistan even after the fall of the Taliban regime.ime.

Ali, Mary, and Anjum Ali. "Women's Liberation through Islam." The Institute of Islamic Information and Education.

[www.jannah.org/sisters/womlib.html](http://www.jannah.org/sisters/womlib.html) (accessed July 12, 2009). This resource gives insight into the traditions of the Islamic religion regarding gender issues. It is very informative if you are uneducated in this area.

Clutter, Ann , and Ruben Nieto. "Understanding the Hispanic Culture," Ohioline. <http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg—fact/5000/5237.html> (accessed July 12, 2009).

"English Language Arts: An Overview Grade 5." Public Schools of North Carolina. [www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/elementary/elagrade5](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/curriculum/languagearts/elementary/elagrade5) (accessed July 11, 2009). I used this site to get the exact wording of Grade 5 standards since I am a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.

"Intellectual Development." Massachusetts General Hospital Home Page. [http://www.massgeneral.org/children/adolescenthealth/articles/aa\\_intellectual\\_development.aspx](http://www.massgeneral.org/children/adolescenthealth/articles/aa_intellectual_development.aspx) (accessed July 11, 2009). This site offers excellent general information about Piaget's stages of cognitive development for those with minimal psychology experience.

Lewis, Oscar. *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1959. This book is older, so some of the statistics were not useful. However, it provides excellent narratives about the lives of Mexican families in different situations of poverty.

"Lexile Grade Conversion Chart." Lexile Framework. [www.hsdist88.dupage.k12.il.us/aths/resources/AT%20MCweb02/TEAMS/ELLResources/LexileConversionChart.pdf](http://www.hsdist88.dupage.k12.il.us/aths/resources/AT%20MCweb02/TEAMS/ELLResources/LexileConversionChart.pdf) (accessed July 11, 2009). This pdf file allows you to see where you students fit according to their Lexile Level in comparison with their grade level.

Mussler, Maria. "Doing Business in the Middle East and North Africa." Export America. [www.export.gov/middleeast/Doing%20Business%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf](http://www.export.gov/middleeast/Doing%20Business%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.pdf) (accessed July 12, 2009). This site was excellent in reviewing basic etiquette and greeting customs in Middle Eastern countries. I would like to use this information when teaching my students about differences in our cultures.

"National Standards: Grade 6." Public Schools of North Carolina. [www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/languagearts/middlegrades/grade6overview.pdf](http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/curriculum/languagearts/middlegrades/grade6overview.pdf) (accessed July 11, 2009). This gave me a specific look at the Grade 6 Language Arts standards for North Carolina Public Schools.

Rector, Robert. "How Poor Are America's Poor? Examining the "Plague" of Poverty in America." The Heritage Foundation — Conservative Policy Research and Analysis. <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg2064.cfm> (accessed July 12, 2009).

"School Profile." Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools: School, District, and Learning Community Profiles. [apps.cms.k12.nc.us/departments/instrAccountability/schlProfile05/profiles.asp](http://apps.cms.k12.nc.us/departments/instrAccountability/schlProfile05/profiles.asp) (accessed July 11, 2009). This site I used for getting accurate, detailed information about my particular school.

Smith, Dan. *The Penguin State of the World Atlas: Eighth Edition*. New York: The Penguin Group, 2008. This was by far the best resource. It includes updated, recent world statistics about poverty, government, education, health, and more.

"The Lexile Framework for Reading." The Lexile Framework for Reading. <http://www.lexile.com/DesktopDefault.aspx?view=ed&tabindex=1&tabid=49&tabpageid=545> (accessed July 11, 2009). Language Arts teachers should definitely browse through this website. It offers detailed information about how Lexile Levels can be used in the classroom as well as a Lexile Finder for any books or articles you may be interested in doing with your students.

## Student Resources

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Ellis, Deborah. *Breadwinner*. New York: Groundwood Books, 2001. This novel will be used to the lowest level readers in my classroom.

Ryan, Pam Munoz. *Esperanza Rising*. Sterling Heights: Blue Sky Press, 2002. With emphasis on Mexican culture, this novel will be used for my middle level readers in literature circles.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Maniac Magee*. New York: Little, Brown Young Readers, 1999. At a higher Lexile, this novel will be used for my highest level readers in literature circles.

*Homecoming*. DVD. Directed by Mark Jean. 1996; null: Platinum Disc. This film will be used when we study poverty in the United States. It illustrates the bonds formed among siblings who must learn how to survive when abandoned by their mother.

*The Children of Heaven*. DVD. Directed by Majid Majidi. 1999; Tehran: Miramax. This heartwarming film will be used when studying the Middle East. I plan to show scenes between the brother and sister at the fountain.

*The War*. DVD. Directed by Jon Avnet. 1994; Washington DC: Universal Studios. This film will be used at the end of the unit when studying poverty in the United States. It includes excellent themes of generosity amidst poverty and offers deep character analysis.

*Turtles Can Fly*. DVD. Directed by Bahman Ghobadi. 2004; Manaus: Mgm (Video & Dvd). I plan to use this film when studying the Middle East. This is another Iranian film which shows the resilience of children in difficult situations.

*Viva Cuba*. DVD. Directed by Juan Carlos Cremata Malberti. 2005; Paris: Film Movement. This will introduce our Latin American region; a touching film about two kids in poor families trying to make a living.

## Appendix

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### State Standards

Below is a bulleted list of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study objective which will be covered (some partially) through this unit:

#### 2.01

- studying the characteristics of informational works.
- making connections between works, self and related topics/information.
- comparing and/or contrasting information.
- drawing inferences and/or conclusions.

#### 5.01

- using effective reading strategies to match type of text.
- discussing literature in teacher—student conferences and small group discussions.



- discussing and analyzing the effects on texts of such literary devices as figurative language, dialogue, flashback and sarcasm.
- interpreting text by explaining elements such as plot, theme, point of view, characterization, mood, and style.
- recognizing underlying messages in order to identify theme(s) within and across works.
- exploring relationships between and among characters, ideas, concepts and/or experiences.

## 5.02

- exploring what impact literary elements have on the meaning of the text such as the influence of setting on the problem and its resolution.

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