



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2007 Volume I: American Voices: Listening to Fiction, Poetry, and Prose

The Search for Self: Voices of Adolescence in Literature

Curriculum Unit 07.01.01
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Introduction

In her novel *Bronx Masquerade*, Nikki Grimes explores the struggle of adolescence through a fictional "open mic" project set up by the classroom English teacher, Mr. Ward. One by one students enter the novel, explaining their struggles and conflicts first in narrative and then in poetry which they share with the class. All of the characters seem to benefit from the program as each student tries to work through his or her problem through the "open mic" sessions and the sharing of their ideas through poetry. This unit will attempt to do in real life what Grimes has attempted to do in fiction with her characters: explore and sift through the inner conflict and confusion that many students feel when they reach the middle school years. Something magical happens to all of us when we reach the confusing and often traumatic teen years. I am not referring to the physical change or the hormonal explosion that teachers and adults continuously use as an explanation for behavior that is often deemed as less than civil. There are also changes going on mentally that reveal a natural search for an identity that makes each of us so unique and individual. This struggle that goes on in adolescence signals the beginnings of the shaping of an adult personality. The adolescent years are transitional ones in which children either consciously or unconsciously struggle to grasp at what or who they will be for the rest of their lives. This search for self, a search for an identity in literature is nothing new. Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade* is exploring themes that have been explored in literature for ages. Shakespeare's young Prince Hal in *Henry the IV, Part One*, loves to play the prankster, but at the same time he begins to realize that he will soon be leaving behind his pranks, and some of his closest friends, as he grows into his role as a prince and a leader. Yet herein will I imitate the son, Who doth permit the base contagious clouds To smother up his beauty from the world, That, when he please again to be himself, Being wanted, he may be more wondered at By breaking through the foul and ugly mists Of vapors that did seem to strangle him. (Act I, sc.iii, 220-226) The young prince knows that he will be king, that he will have to leave his youth behind. But for now he relishes his youth and will play and play. There is maturity in his voice as he seems to simply repress or put off the strains of adulthood that will later come with his coronation. In Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck, not unlike Prince Hal, is very satisfied with his youth. Huck has escaped the adult world, an abusive father, clothes that are too tight, conformity. Huck has run from his conflicts and problems and will find his way through the turbulent times at his own pace. Jim and Huck cannot avoid the hardships of life altogether, but like Hal they are very good at putting off adulthood. At times the raft is a refuge where Jim and Huck haven't a care in the world. Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to go; then we lit the pipes, and dangled

our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things-we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us- the new clothes Buck's folks made for me was too good to be comfortable, and besides I didn't go much on clothes, nohow (Twain, 131). Huck escapes the problems of his life by taking to the river. Here he is free to remain a youth, carefree in a world where even the discomfort of nice clothing can be eliminated by simply being "naked." No matter what grade level you are teaching there are examples of literature that can be used in place of the material I use in this unit. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield's trip to New York City becomes a maddening rush to find some meaning, to explore some elements of himself that he cannot find in the boarding school that he despises. His journey to the big city, his search for some sanity in his confused life just makes him more confused. The examples are endless: Doctorow's Billy Bathgate; Squeaky from Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run" and more than a dozen characters in Nikki Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade*. Adolescent voices lead us through their struggle in literature that reflects the reality of the adolescent search for self. As writers over the years have sought to discover the voices of adolescents in literature, so too will I attempt to help students discover their own voices through their own writing. This search for identity has become more desperate in the technologically advanced 21st Century American society. Children seem to be leaping into adulthood at a much earlier age. They are taking on more adult problems, getting sexually active at a younger age and being pushed into a sometimes ruthless world where time for working through adolescence seems to have shortened, leaving them with little chance to develop an identity, to find themselves. It is not unusual for me to hear stories of my eighth graders getting themselves and siblings off to school on their own due to a parent working early. How many of my eighth grade students wear buttons symbolizing loss of loved ones, family members, cousins lost to the mean streets? Some students don't really have a chance to be children as they grapple with adult problems like loss, drug abuse and pregnancy. In my opinion eighth grade is the most important grade in the psychological development of students because it is really a turning point for them. Students are not only stepping from middle school to high school; they are really going from childhood to young adulthood, from playful children to more serious students and young adults. Eighth grade gives us one of the best times in a student's development for them to latch onto some piece of their changing identity. Like Hal they are playful, like Holden confused, and like Huck, they simply want to be left alone. As eighth grade teachers we have a chance to help students discover an identity that is just aching to be heard.

Purpose

Utilizing literature of adolescent search for self, my unit will be designed to not only understand the characters' struggles, but to allow students to examine their own struggles, to open up to each other and more importantly, to themselves. How many issues do students feel they need to discuss with their peers? I believe today's students struggle with many of the same issues that characters have struggled with in literature for centuries. Friendships, search for identity, loss of life or school issues. How many students have lost parents or loved ones and not had a chance to speak to anyone about it? How many students are bullied or hurt on a daily basis at school or at home and are ashamed to talk about it? I believe that through examination of literature, writing poetry, and keeping personal journals, students will be able to get in touch with themselves and begin to work out the problems that are buried inside of them. I want our students to realize that writing is a vehicle that they can utilize to help themselves find their way. I hope to help students to understand the power of writing and poetry. My unit is meant to allow students to understand that writing and literature can be another form of communication. Middle school students today have surely latched onto the importance of communication. There is nothing my eighth graders like better to do than communicate. Whether it is in the classroom, at home on the telephone, through e-mail, or text messaging, communicating

seems to be everything to this generation. But are students making discoveries as they text message to their classmates? Are they being honest? Are their communications leading them to understand themselves better? Creative writing is actually a much more personal experience that students can engage in that helps them to communicate and be honest with themselves and work on issues that they themselves can benefit from. Writing is, after all, simply communicating on paper. Students will be introduced to the Harlem Renaissance in this unit. The connection to the Harlem Renaissance comes from the use of *Bronx Masquerade* in our study of adolescent voice. In Nikki Grimes' book, students stumble onto the "Open mic Friday" through the study of the Harlem Renaissance and one student's poem dedicated to Langston Hughes. I find that the study of the Harlem Renaissance is a nice addition to the search because students are able to see that the movement was almost a collective "search for self" as African American artists gathered in Harlem to create one massive, glorious voice. Several projects to extend the students exploration of the Harlem Renaissance will be suggested at the end of the unit. Students will participate in "Open Mic Fridays" throughout the unit. This will allow students to share their work and enjoy each other's thoughts in an open, friendly setting. This is where we hear students' voices, not just through the microphone, but through their writing and thoughts. Students open up and share during the open mic sessions. The sessions really tie the journey together for students. Students who have started out in simple discussion of their thoughts, begin to feel more comfortable in writing down their ideas. Sharing in front of the class (with a microphone) cements the experience, by allowing students to see and hear the concerns of their classmates. I find that the more students begin to share in an open mike session, the more ideas they have to write, and the more they want to discuss their ideas as a class. As more and more students are willing to share their ideas and concerns, to communicate with each other in their own specific style, the sessions become more active, taking on a momentum of their own. Students keep their work in journals so that they will be able to create a class poetry book of their own in which their most meaningful and intriguing poems will be bound in an anthology. Once again, the real purpose, the main goal of this unit is one that winds its way throughout all of the school year, helping the students to grow up, to find their way, to give them some support to make it through this confusing and difficult journey.

Journal Writing

Journal writing will be a big part of this unit. I find that journal writing is one of the most exciting and creative types of writing that my students regularly take part in. I emphasize creativity in the journals that I require my eighth graders to keep. They are never penalized for spelling or grammar in their journals because the entries are all about their ideas. I want students to feel free to express themselves in their writing. I want them to enjoy their ideas and allow themselves the freedom to not worry about form, structure, grammar and the elements that we regularly examine during other types of writing such as essay and research writing. Focusing on ideas also will help students to recognize their own voices in their writing and in their communication. Having journals in the classroom also provides students with an easy access, low maintenance record of the writing they do. Journals are diaries for the students. They are encouraged to write in them often and keep them throughout the year. Entries that are too personal for my eyes are folded as a signal to me as I go through their journals to make comments on students' writing. These journals are wonderful places for students to explore their own voices, to let out their concerns and find ways to put on paper issues that may be hidden below the surface This year I began using the back of the journals for students to take notes on literary terminology, or important points. (I picked up this idea from a Connecticut Writing Project workshop.) For example if we are reviewing alliteration, I will ask students to give me examples of what alliteration is, go through examples on the board, and then come up with a definition as a class. I then

ask students to turn their journals over and upside-down so that the binding is still on the left side. In the back of their journals students will add their definition of alliteration and put in several examples. From that point on any time a student is not sure what alliteration means, they simply go right to the back of their journal. Similarly in this unit, students will need to identify several terms. What is voice? What is a narrator? What is point-of-view? These terms should be discussed and defined through classroom discussion. I will lead the class in a discussion of the terms and help them create a definition that is their own. I will have a student write down the definitions on the board as they develop and allow students to write them in their journals. I enjoy participating in all writing activities. After explaining assignments I sit down and write with the students. Like the students, sometimes I share my writing, and sometimes I don't. Students notice my participation and it seems to give more credence to the activities. Journal writing combined with literature is meant to lead students to the type of higher-order thinking that the latest changes in educational curriculum aim to enhance. Students make connections, take critical stances and are able to think past the literal interpretation that so often characterizes traditional assessment. Journal writing will be especially important in this unit. As students examine literary figures' search for self they will discover that the journal can become a safe place for them to explore and confide their thoughts and feelings. As students make their way through the weeks of "open mic Fridays," the poems they accumulate in their journals will serve as something they can share and possibly use in the final project. I will encourage students to write as much poetry as they like during this unit and they will not be required to share it if they do not want to do so. But I have found over the years that aspect of journal-writing that is especially helpful is that it is an easy way to get students to share their work. I always ask students to share what they have written with classmates when they are done writing. It is not mandatory to share, but it is encouraged, and I find that most students enjoy reading their work out loud. The more they share, the more they enjoy the writing and the more their individual voices come out. In this unit journal writing will help to extend the conversation that we have about literature and the search for identity. Sharing is equally important in this unit, as the "Open Mic Fridays" just won't work without it. Some Possible Journal Topics

- 1 Write a poem about your home town
- 2 Write a paragraph in which you are a famous poet, explaining one of your poems
- 3 Write a dialogue between two Harlem Renaissance poets
- 4 Write a song (blues/rap)
- 5 Write a poem about what really makes you mad
- 6 Write a poem about issues faced by teens today
- 7 Compare two poems
- 8 Analyze an aspect of a poem (mood, form, rhythm, etc.)
- 9 Describe your inner conflicts/dreams/worries in a poem
- 10 How might your poetry make others feel? How does a poem make you feel?
- 11 Illustrate a poem

Art

As my school is an arts magnet school, whenever I do an extensive unit I try to incorporate art into the unit. In an arts magnet school, the arts and academics are linked in a way that promotes learning that is often overlooked in a regular school setting. In our school, students study math, social studies, science, and languages, [and math], but are also invited to explore the arts for half of their day. The students study drawing and painting, photography, video, dance, pottery, drama, sculpture, and music. It is through this vehicle, this arts magnet atmosphere, that students are allowed to explore and find their strengths and weaknesses. Virtually every student in the school finds his or her niche, his or her interest, and his or her means to succeed in an arts magnet school. In an arts magnet school students use the arts as a way to further explore and understand the academics simultaneously exploring new ways to communicate with the world around them. I find that infusing art into my academic classroom is one way to help students succeed while tapping into their interests and finding routes to higher order thinking. Students can use art to enhance their search for their own voices. Decorate the walls with students art work. How would their voices look in visual art? What colors, shapes, textures do they see or hear in their own or in their classmates' voices? I will often ask students to illustrate their poetry in ways that their voices can shine through. I put up the students' artwork on the wall. I also ask students to illustrate music as they listen to music that came out of the Harlem Renaissance. Again the journals can be used for some of the artwork. Finally, on the final book project students will be asked to submit illustrations for the book.

The Unit

An Overview

We will begin the unit with discussion. What are the issues/problems with the students at this age? How do they deal with them, how do they find solutions? What is it that keeps students on the phone with each other until two in the morning after they have spent the entire day together in school? What is it they are talking about and how does it help them get through life? We will go on to examine adolescent voices in literature, noting how their struggles are similar to ours and in what ways telling the story helps the characters to get through their problems. Holden Caulfield, Huck Finn, and Tyrone Bittings are a few characters that will lead us into their lives and into their struggles through their narratives. One character that students love to relate to is Squeaky in Toni Cade Bambara's "Raymond's Run." Students hear in Squeaky a voice they can relate to as she seeks to find herself, simultaneously trying to protect her handicapped brother and be the best that she can be. But now, if anyone has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. And I don't play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and a squeaky voice, which is how I got the name Squeaky. And if things get too rough, I run and as anyone can tell you, I'm the fastest thing on two feet. (Applebee, 34) Squeaky's voice tells us so much about her without directly saying it. We know about her conflicts, her attitude towards problem solving, her physical stature, her responsibilities and her hobbies. Squeaky is a great lead in to the search for our own voices. Finally we will focus on Nikki Grimes' *Bronx Masquerade*. This book is full of students trying to find their way, and struggling with who they are. Chankara's sister is beaten by her boyfriend and is determined not to let the same thing happen to her. Tyrone Bittings has a very pessimistic outlook on life, his father is dead, he hates school and sees little reason to try any harder in life than he already does. Students will model their writing on

the writing that they study. They will attempt to mimic the characters with their own voices, which hopefully will become more and more clear as they work through the unit. The Harlem Renaissance will also be included during this section of the unit. Through journal-writing, poetry-writing and the creation of a book not unlike the book written in *Bronx Masquerade*, students will find that writing and sometimes sharing their writing will become a simple way to give voice to their own woes or happiness. The page will become a sounding board, a friendly ear, a place to turn when there seems nowhere else to go. Finally, adding artwork and the spoken word performances to the students' revelations will give life and personality to each classroom and will surely be an experience that we will all remember. Utilizing the varied texts and working closely with students as they record their own feelings and thoughts in their journals, I will help students attempt to unlock the power of the written word and in the struggle try to explore and discover their own adolescent voices. What begins as a conversation will continue as a search for answers that will take us deep inside of some of the greatest literature ever written as well as deep inside our own selves and to answers that students as well as teachers may find enlightening.

A word about Assessment

As mentioned before, generally I don't grade journal entries as I would an essay or other types of projects. Usually I will simply comment in the journals and give them a reminder that I am checking on their work. In this unit I need to make sure students are participating in the writing assignments, especially as we get closer to the final project in which they will be looking for their own pieces to put in a collection. So journal writing, although basically graded based on participation, does become a form of assessment. Second, students will be asked to participate in the "Open Mic Fridays." This can also serve as a point of assessment, but due to the nature of the activity (Who doesn't remember being terrified when asked to come up in front of the class at least once in their educational career?) I will give extra credit to those who choose to participate in the activity. Finally the third larger part of the project and the one that everyone will be graded on for their participation is the collection of work that culminates this project. Besides these areas, there are several other opportunities along the way where students can be quizzed or tested on the literature they are reading.

Section One-Listening for voices in the classroom

I will begin work in this unit with discussion. It is important that students begin to feel comfortable discussing issues and problems with each other openly. I am certain that students know how to communicate with each other on a certain level, but I am not certain that they are willing or comfortable communicating with each other on a more meaningful and thoughtful level. How many eighth graders are willing to discuss their problems and concerns with each other? Are the issues that students face regarded as secrets that they are unable to share or are they willing to discuss what is on their minds? I think the initial discussion section in this unit can begin the steps needed for students to get to the point where they are willing to talk about their problems in poetry and prose as easily as the eighteen characters are able to in *Bronx Masquerade*. The discussion session must be a chance for students not only to begin telling or sharing their thoughts and concerns, but a chance for students to begin listening to each other. As students sit in a large circle facing each other in the classroom, I give them an object, a ball, a "talking stick," something (later to become a microphone) which will indicate that they "have the floor." For the initial discussion, students come up with topics on their own. I ask students to write down issues and concerns that bother them and tell students to write down their concerns on a slip of paper and then put them in a hat. Once someone has chosen a concern from the hat, I see who wants to begin the discussion. Sometimes I, the teacher, have to start and I have to decide if a topic is too much for your class at any point in the exercises. As students discuss, I remind them to listen to not only the issues being discussed, but to all of the individual voices that are participating in the

discussion. Many of the issues concern all of us, but how do we voice them differently, how do we react differently? Discussions should take place weekly. The literature that is explored in the unit will enter the discussions as the characters we read about have many of the same concerns that students in the classroom have. Finally the weekly discussions will become the "Open Mic Fridays" that will take place on a weekly basis along with the reading of *Bronx Masquerade*. Students should reflect in their journals on their feelings about the discussions. Teachers can provide different writing topics if needed. (How did listening to others make you feel? How were two or more voices different in the classroom? How would might someone else in the class respond to your biggest concern?)

Section Two- The literature

In this section of the unit, I will introduce several stories that I believe will be useful for helping students see the struggle of adolescence in literature. In this section of the unit teachers may want to substitute their own favorites and utilize the activities that I have suggested to their own liking. Toni Cade Bambara's story "Raymond's Run" is one that my eighth graders love to read every year. It is the story of a girl named Squeaky who is growing up in modern day Harlem. Squeaky is a tough girl who really has two loves at this point in her life; one is taking care of her handicapped brother Raymond, the other is running. Like all children at her age, Squeaky has challenges and rivalries which she faces daily and it quickly becomes clear in the story that Squeaky is very much shaped by her environment. Living in New York, she is a tough girl with tough language and a tough attitude. She has a powerful voice that barely cracks under the rivalries and responsibilities that she faces in the story. Students love Squeaky because of her voice. They love how she deals with her problems and feel that she is a leader who they can look up to. Another story middle school children love to read is Robert Cormier's "The Moustache." The main character in this story, seventeen-year-old Mike, is anxious to grow up at the beginning of the story. He likes to drive his father's Le Mans, he has a girlfriend and he has grown a moustache. Mike is a middle class kid growing up in the suburbs. His attitude about his conflicts, his having to visit his grandmother in the nursing home, is that he just wants to get it done and move on. As you introduce these characters into the classroom, they become a part of the discussion. These characters join your students in the "search for self" and they provide you and the students with someone that you can freely talk about and incorporate into the search. Instead of saying "How do you think Billy Smith would handle this problem?" (Billy Smith being a student in your class) you say "How do you think Squeaky would handle this problem?" Or "What would Huck say about this issue?" The characters really provide a sort of safe zone for the students and you to discuss and write about how different people handle different issues, what those responses sound and look like and what they say about the characters and us.

Section Three- Bronx Masquerade and "Open Mic Fridays"

This section is the culmination of the unit. Nikki Grimes has put the characters in her book *Bronx Masquerade* exactly where I want my students to be; in a place where they feel comfortable sharing their concerns and listening to each other through poetry and writing. Basically what we try to do in this section of the class is imitate the students in Grimes' book. I am constantly reminding students that I am "Mr. Ward," the teacher, and that they are the Tyrones, the Wesleys, the Chankaras and the Rauls from *Bronx Masquerade*. Just as Mr Ward's class has "open mic Fridays," so does our class. Just as Mr. Ward's students write poems in their journals, so does our class. Just as Mr. Ward's students confide in their journals, so do we. And finally as Grimes has compiled the poetry and feelings in one collection, so will we. There are several ingredients of this section which should be discussed here.

Bronx Masquerade

In the beginning of *Bronx Masquerade* a student writes a poem to Langston Hughes instead of an essay as his English teacher has asked him to do. Although the teacher does not accept the poem as a replacement for the essay, he does allow the student to read his poem to the class. The reading is such a hit that other students want to share their work and eventually the teacher provides for everyone through "Open Mic Fridays." One at a time Grimes introduces characters as they provide a journal entry and a poem in the text. As the readings unfold a host of problems including alcoholism, abuse, obesity, and dyslexia come out. Throughout the story, one character named Tyrone provides a commentary as students get up to share their work.

The Spoken Word and the Poetry Slam

The development of spoken word can be traced to the Beat poets who regularly read their poetry in New York bars, as well as the protest music of the sixties; it entered a more public forum with the introduction of the open microphone in the late seventies and eighties. In the eighties "performance" was added to the poetry readings and in the mid eighties Marc Smith organized the first poetry slams which are basically spoken word competitions in which the audience scores the performers. Spoken word performance poetry is really poetry reading combined with performance. It is poetry and emotion put out there for the audience and for the poet. The "Open Mic Fridays" that I have enjoyed with my classes so far are just naturally full of performance. Students love to share their work and by this point in the unit they should be fairly comfortable speaking in front of each other. It may take a little prodding, but once the "Open mic Friday" begins in your class, it will take off.

The Harlem Renaissance

Wesley 'Bad Boy' Boone laments in the beginning of *Bronx Masquerade* , "I mean what's the point of studying poetry and then writing essays? So I wrote a bunch of poems instead. They weren't too shabby, considering I'd only done a few rap pieces before. My favorite was about Langston Hughes." (Grimes, 4) Mr. Ward asks Wesley to read his piece to the class and the "Open Mic Friday" is born. The Harlem Renaissance also fits nicely with this unit. The movement which lasted from the twenties into the early forties was really a cultural "search for self." African Americans moved to Chicago and New York in search of an identity. Figures such as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Billie Holiday and Langston Hughes were leaders in a sort of cultural revolution that resulted in fabulous music, writing and artwork. Let students listen to blues and jazz in preparation for "Open Mic Fridays." Let them look at the artwork of Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden and respond in their journals. Students should see that in this cultural search, many identities were shaped just as their own identities are being shaped now In this unit I will use the Harlem Renaissance in two ways. One way will be in preparation for "Open Mic Fridays." We will listen to the music of the Harlem Renaissance and respond in writing. We will look at artwork and poetry and also respond. I have included a section on this in the lesson plan section of this unit. The second way I will use the Harlem Renaissance in addition to the *Bronx Masquerade* unit is to have students choose a figure from the Harlem Renaissance and complete a report on that subject at the end of the unit. Many of my students will end up doing power point presentations, but others will choose to do other types.

Activities For the Third Section

The final project in this unit is simply a culmination of the work students have done so far in class. By the end of this unit students should have several pages of poetry and responses in their journals that they will be ready to contribute to a collection of prose and poetry that you as a class can decide what to call. I allow the students to take charge of this project. I put together an editorial board that will work with submissions and put the book together. I ask all the students to choose one or two poems to submit to the editorial board. A

letter that states what kind of piece that they are submitting, what was their motivation and why they think this piece would be a positive addition to the book should accompany the pieces. Once submitted, the board (with the teacher's assistance) can make suggestions to writers. Student conferencing on the work should take place and finally writers should finalize their prose and poetry. Illustrations should also be accepted. At least one piece of writing or art from each student will be included in the book. When submissions are all accounted for the teacher or the board should organize them, bind them with a cover and give a copy to each student.

Lesson Plans

I have included sample lesson plans from each of the three main sections of this unit; Listening for voices in the classroom; The literature; and "Open Mic Fridays." Each of the lessons involves journal writing and is designed to help students gather material for open mic Fridays and the culminating project. All of the lessons are also a great way for students to find a way to discover their own voice in their writing.

Sample Lesson Plan One-Listening for voices in the classroom.

Objectives

- 1 Students will reflect on "Raymond's Run" as a class
- 2 Students will respond to guiding questions on literature
- 3 Students will discuss connections with literature and their own lives
- 4 Students will create written response in relation to class discussions.

Materials

- 1 Students' journals
- 2 "Raymond's Run" by Toni Cade Bambara
- 3 Discussion questions

Initiation Ask students to choose their favorite piece of dialogue from "Raymond's Run" and read it out loud as if they were Squeaky. Allow several students to share and then initiate discussion by asking students to respond to a few response questions in their journals. Tell students they have seven minutes to respond and to just quickly jot down ideas on a few of the questions you have prepared. Procedure I find it very important to help students prepare for anything that is "impromptu." They need to sort of prime their brains for

discussion or (as you'll see later) even for open mic. Discussions will run smoother when students have had a chance to prepare response ahead of time. Have response questions written on an overhead or blackboard ready for students to answer. Among the questions you can use are: What do you hear in Squeaky's voice; What does her voice tell you about Squeaky? How does voice reveal character in the story? How can you relate to Squeaky? Have you ever had to take care of a younger sibling? Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever had to stand up for yourself? What do you love to do? What are your fears? Once students have had a chance to think about the questions, I'll have them sit in a large circle and we'll begin to talk about how they feel. Students will not really need to look at their journals, the discussion will feed off of itself. I serve as moderator and let students talk as much as possible Closure Ask students to jot down in their journal the most important or insightful point that they got out of today's discussion. Homework is to write a poem or a paragraph on something we discussed. Have the students share the next day. Have discussions on a weekly basis as you go through this unit. Intertwine journal writing and discussion and try to allow students to begin to discover their own voice.

Sample Lesson Plan-Two- From the literature section; Harlem in Poetry

Objectives

- 1 Students will listen to the poem "Harlem" written by Walter Dean Meyers
- 2 Students will identify images from the poem
- 3 Students will create a web in which they will write images of their own hometown
- 4 Students will write poems named after their own hometowns
- 5 Students will share poetry

Materials

- 1 Students' journals
- 2 "Harlem" by Walter Dean Meyers (recorded version if possible)
- 3 tape recorder
- 4 web organizers

Initiation Ask students what an image is. Take a few minutes to talk about how important images are to poets. I often tell students poets paint pictures in our minds through words and images. Ask students to give you examples of images from literature or poetry that they are familiar with. Sometimes I will have students draw an image and then describe it in words on the back of the drawing. Procedure After talking about images, ask

students to listen closely as Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs reads "Harlem" to them from cassette. The Scholastic Book recording and illustrated version of this poem is wonderful for this part of the unit. Students listen very closely and you can have a student show the class the illustrations in the book as it is read. Before beginning ask students to jot down the images that really strike them. There are many images in the poem that the students love. Ask the class to share the images that they enjoyed. Reiterate how images really put a picture in our minds through some of the examples. Now give students a web organizer. Ask them to write their own hometown in the center and to think of some images that remind them of their hometown. Share some of the images they come up with. Now students are ready to write their own hometown poem. They may have to finish it for homework. Be sure to share with the class. Closure If anyone is ready, ask them to share their poem!

Sample lesson plan three; From the literature section; Troubled kids

Objectives

- 1 Students will review poetry/prose from *Bronx Masquerade*
- 2 Students will brainstorm what really bothers them
- 3 Students will write a paragraph and a poem about something that bothers them

Initiation Ask students to pick out one of their favorite pairs of work from *Bronx Masquerade* . Allow a few students to read out loud those sections. Procedure After your brief discussion on the pairs of writings from *Bronx Masquerade* , ask students to brainstorm about what bothers them. Have a student write on the board or overhead as they call out what they dislike (little brothers or sisters; parents yelling; teachers getting in your face; friends that talk too much, etc.) After a brief class share of our pet peeves and problems, ask students to choose one of the ideas just shared and to write a brief paragraph in their journal in which they talk about that problem. Closure Ask if any students are willing to share their responses. For homework ask students to write an additional poem on the subject. Sample Lesson Plan-Four- From the "Open mic Friday" section; Singing the blues In this lesson students are invited to explore the Harlem Renaissance, blues and the open mic. As mentioned before students need to be primed for open mic Fridays. They will have lots of materials as the unit roles on, but be sure to start each Friday with a mini-lesson and short writing activity.

Objectives

- 1 Students will discuss the roots of jazz
- 2 Students will brainstorm "The blues"
- 2 Students will listen to selections of music from the Harlem Renaissance
- 3 Students will write their own blues lyrics
- 4 Students will share work in open mic format

Initiation Put some jazz on the radio in your room. Grab some classic Louis Armstrong or Billie Holiday and watch the kids tune into you. Procedure Lead students in a discussion of the music. See if anyone can identify what they just heard and ask them if they know where jazz comes from. Explain to them that much of today's music has its roots in jazz and the blues. Ask students to tell you what blues is about. Brainstorm with the students. Once you have your list, ask a student to give you a blues beat. Now play some blues selections for the students to hear. Finally ask students to come up with some of their own blues lyrics. Tell them it can be serious or it can be silly. One of my students this year wrote "The Spaghetti Blues." Finally if anyone can play a harmonica or a guitar, give your students a blues beat and ask them to come up and share their lyrics with the class. Closure As students are sharing their work, ask others to respond in their journals to what they are hearing.

Conclusion

There are a lot of pieces to this unit on search for self. Students are asked to respond to literature in discussion and in writing. They are asked to explore the concerns of characters in literature while they explore their own concerns. They are asked to open up to others and to themselves while using history as a model of self-exploration. Students are asked to submit selections to the class journal like freelance writers. It is really a jigsaw puzzle of a unit with journal writing and sharing at its core. If you take your time with your students and explore their interests and concerns, you will find it rewarding as the students come closer to finding their own inner voices in their "search for self."

Other sources

I have found many helpful resources in the area that have helped me with writing projects in this and other units. I encourage teachers to inquire at universities and within their communities to find help in the classroom as I have. Two important sources are listed below

Connecticut Writing Project

The Connecticut Writing Project is a University of Connecticut writing program that is a part of the larger National Writing Project. The program is designed to help students and teachers explore writing through various creative writing strategies. Teachers in New Haven have been fortunate enough to be introduced to the program as a part of the English curriculum. Due to our inclusion in the Connecticut Writing Project, teachers in New Haven have been introduced to various ways to help our students become more comfortable with their writing as they discover new ways to express themselves. Journal writing in which content is the focus, I-search research papers, dialogical notebooks and writer conferences are all techniques that New Haven teachers have been invited to explore as they lead students through writing that emphasizes connecting literature and self, taking critical stances and focusing on higher order thinking skills in their writing. Each year I mention the Connecticut Writing Project in my unit because I feel the program has had the most profound effect on my teaching. Through working with other teachers in this program I feel I have been able to become a better teacher and really help students become better readers, writers, and thinkers. I encourage other systems to get involved with the National Writing Project and to encourage innovative

creative writing in the classroom.

Splatter!

Splatter! Magazine is a Yale University student run literary magazine for middle school and elementary school children. Twice a year, students from Yale University come to my classroom and run writing workshops in which students submit work to a literary magazine that is published both online and in hard copy. This organization allows students to submit prose, poetry and artwork to the publication and help students get their first try at publishing their work. I mention this resource as an additional idea for teachers across the country to explore. Check your local universities for resources that you can utilize in your classroom. My students have always enjoyed the exciting Splatter workshops and there is nothing like seeing your work published to help a writer get motivated. Check out splatter at www.yale.edu/splatter/

Reading List

Applebee, Arthur N., editor. *The Language of Literature* . Evanston, IL: McDougal Little, 2001. This excellent collection of literature is the textbook we use at our school. All of the short stories and many of the poems used in this unit are in this textbook.

Eleveld, Mark, editor. Sourcebooks, Inc: Naperville, IL *The Spoken Word Revolution*. 2004. This excellent publication touches on every aspect of the development of the "Spoken word Revolution" from the Beat Generation to Hip Hop and the Poetry Slam. It also comes with a CD that will come in handy in the classroom when introducing the open mic concept.

Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, editors. *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* . Norton, New York, 1988. A nice selection of a wide variety of modern American poetry.

Grimes, Nikki. *Bronx Masquerade*. Puffin Books: New York, 2003. This fictional account of a classroom poetry slam is a wonderful introduction to what I want teachers to do in the third section of this unit.

Lathem, Edward Connery, ed. *The Poetry of Robert Frost* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975. This is a wonderful, complete collection of Frost's poems.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some instructions on Writing and Life* . New York: Anchor Books, 1994. This is my favorite all time book on writing. There are lots of good practical ideas for writing as well as advice on life. A must read for all writers.

Meyers, Walter Dean. *Harlem* . New York: Scholastic Books, 1997. This award winning picture book/poem is composed of a great number of images of Harlem. The book is illustrated by the author's son and comes with a cassette in which the poem is read by Sean Combs.

Elise Paschen and Rebekah Presson Mosby, editors. *Poetry Speaks* . Naperville, IL Source books, 2001. A concise collection of African American poetry useful for this unit.

Smith, Marc Kelly, and Joe Kraynak. *Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry* , 2004. The famous "Idiot's Guides" takes on Poetry Slams with the help of two leaders in the field.

Sullivan, Charles, editor. *Children of Promise: African American Literature and Arts for Young People*. New York: Abradale Press, 1991. This book contains a variety of art and literature done by and about African Americans, including paintings by Jacob Lawrence and literature by Langston Hughes and others.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (Penguin Classics Edition) New York: Penguin, 2003. A classic Twain tale in which voice is explored through several characters.

Appendix A: Standards

Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Program Goals

Having completed this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning program goals for language arts:

- 1 Create works using the language arts in visual, oral and written texts;
- 2 Read, write, speak, listen and view to construct meaning of written, visual and oral texts;
- 3 Choose and apply strategies that enhance the fluent and proficient use of the language arts; (brainstorming, use of graphic organizers)
- 4 Read with understanding and respond thoughtfully to a variety of texts

When done with this unit, students will have achieved the following Connecticut's Common Core of Learning program goals for the arts;

- 1 Create (imagine, experiment, plan, make, evaluate, refine and present/exhibit) art works that express concepts, ideas and feelings in each art form
- 2 Respond (select, experience, describe, analyze, interpret and evaluate) with understanding to diverse art works and performances in each art form
- 3 Understand the connections among the arts, other disciplines and daily life.

New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance Standards

Students will also achieve the following goals from the New Haven Public Schools Academic Performance standards for eighth grade Language Arts:

- 1 Students will demonstrate strategic reading skills before, during and after reading
- 2 Students will demonstrate strategic writing behaviors
- 3 Students will participate in a wide variety of writing experiences

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