



Reading and Writing the Impact of Violence on Students' Lives

Curriculum Unit 12.02.09

by Tara Stevens

Introduction

Last year I wrote an YNHTI curriculum unit for my 8th grade classes centering on an account of the murder of Emmett Till. This text was a lens for looking at narrative non-fiction and the Civil Rights movement. One of the activities I mentioned briefly in the curriculum unit was to follow up this whole class text with a focus on human rights. Over winter break, students read one of several book-length accounts of a modern day human rights injustice (including *A Long Walk to Water*, *Prisoner of Tehran*, *A Long Way Gone*, *Words in the Dust*, and *I am Nujood*, *Age 10 and Divorced*). Most of these texts would be considered memoir, although two are fictionalized. Students then wrote an essay arguing for societal action/change.

After teaching the unit this year, I believe we have had some significant successes (students are more aware of ongoing human rights abuses around the world), but their essay writing has left me dissatisfied. Perhaps I am asking too much of 8th graders when I require them to translate one account of a difficult life half a world away into a meaningful and persuasive essay on a broader issue. Or perhaps, as is often the case in teaching, my own thinking is a bit muddy, which is translating into muddy work for my students.

Some of the most successful essays have come from those students who ignored my assignment entirely and wrote about gun violence in New Haven and the impact it has had on them personally (many of my students were close to a 13 year old boy who died violently in October). I spent a great deal of time with a student who was intuitively employing the skills of a biographer; she was writing down her account of her friend's murder, then watching News Channel 8 clips online to cross check her facts and add more details.

This made me think that I had missed a real opportunity for the rest of the class to utilize their own experiences, in addition to outside resources, to craft more meaningful essays. For while it is important for students to be aware of human rights abuses around the world, many of my own students have experienced violence in their own lives here in New Haven. Some have seen shootings in their neighborhood, while others are victims of domestic and family violence. Those who haven't come into direct conflict with these situations are attending school every day with students whose lives are filled with difficult circumstances. Whether they know it or not, each and every one of my students is living with the consequences of the violence that pervades our society. There isn't always the opportunity to have a conversation about what this means, and how witnessing distress can change our lives.

One of the major effects that I often see is that students will resort to violence themselves to solve their conflicts. They do this almost casually, with very little reflection upon their actions. Part of this is their age, and is a well-known part of adolescence. But there is also a real acceptance of violence as a necessary, rather than last, resort. It might be beneficial to begin a class dialogue about the connection between what we experience and how it influences our behavior, as well as why this behavior is problematic, especially in a classroom setting. But rather than address this topic directly, which may be uncomfortable for some students and may, in fact, shut down conversation, I propose to use biography and memoir as an entryway to such a discussion.

Context

I teach 7th and 8th grade Language Arts in an inter-district arts magnet school. This means that many of my students come from New Haven, but some do not. They may commute to school from Milford, Orange, Hamden, Ansonia or surrounding suburban towns. Davis Street is a Tier One school in New Haven's system, meaning there is high academic achievement among students and the school gets good reviews overall from parents, students and/or teachers. We are a pre-K to 8th grade school with nearly 500 students.

My students are diverse, not only ethnically, but socioeconomically as well. This can result in student populations who have had very different life experiences. It will be necessary to take this into account when teaching this unit and to create differentiated approaches to the material. In the end, the assignments will have to be fairly open-ended and interpretative in order to be relevant to all students.

I also have students with a wide range of academic ability. Although the school scores well on the Connecticut State Mastery test as a rule, there is also a sizable population of Special Education students as well as students of all reading and writing abilities. For this reason, instruction has to be varied and differentiated for each student's individual needs.

Rationale

Asking students to write about violence could be a risky proposition. There are several ways in which such an assignment could go wrong. Students may see this as an opportunity to release their inner video game avatars, indulging in graphic descriptions of gory scenes. They may also choose to share very personal stories, to the chagrin of parents or even school officials. Luckily, several teachers and scholars have written about their own experience asking students to undertake such a task, and can provide a valuable guide for anyone interested in teaching this unit.

In her study "Talking back to the masters: girls' writing about experiences of violence," Relebohile Moletsane analyzed the discourse created when 100 South African girls in a diverse environment wrote about their experiences with violence. She also "examined the different ways in which emotions are complexly and powerfully present in teaching and learning, and how these can be utilized to address the needs of learners

with diverse autobiographies." ¹ While this study took place in South Africa, I find it relevant to my work, as Moletsane is interested in exploring how autobiographical writing might empower typically silent voices. In her case, she is looking at black girls in a society that prioritizes white male power. In my instance, I believe the experiences of urban youth can often be suppressed or even commodified by our public narrative.

Moletsane posits that "writing, as opposed to talking about one's experiences to teachers and fellow students, may provide distance and relative safety that reduce the discomfort they normally experience in face-to-face communication in classrooms" ². She concludes that the opportunity to write about violence provides students with an invaluable outlet for the violence that may otherwise negatively impact teaching and learning. She suggests that the opportunity to communicate through writing may help build relationships with teachers and peers for students who may otherwise have been marginalized.

The relationship building that would occur as a result of this autobiographical writing is an important underpinning to my curriculum unit. Whereas many students find it difficult to talk about their own lives, the opportunity to write about their experiences can be an important community building activity. This can only work, however, if a teacher is prepared to respond to students who do reveal autobiographical information and has already created a classroom environment that prioritizes trust.

Teacher and college professor Douglas Fisher advocates a purposeful approach in responding to students who disclose violence. He humorously summarizes the five approaches teachers generally take when students write about violence. I believe I have taken each approach at a different point in my own career, and so they are worth reproducing here:

The "Ostrich Approach"-ignoring the disclosure and not addressing it

The "Rush Limbaugh Approach"-focusing on grammar or spelling errors but ignoring the difficult content

The "Sally Jessy Raphael Approach"-asking for more information but not addressing the pain (e.g., writing, "Thank you for sharing this with me.")

The "Dr. Quinn Approach"-overreacting to the information when the writer was simply looking for a listener (e.g., writing, "Oh, my God, I'll call the social worker and get someone over to your house this afternoon.")

The "Professional Approach"-recognizing the disclosure (e.g., "This must have been a terrible experience.") while offering help and asking the writer what he or she would like the listener to do, if anything. ³

Fisher suggests the professional approach, and studied both middle and high school contexts in order to see how such a strategy would work. His work at the middle school level is particularly relevant to this unit, because he observed several teachers who were reading and writing biographies with their students. He concludes that trust is essential to doing this sort of writing. He encourages teachers to ensure their students know that they are mandated reporters, and that instructors explain what this means (if students reveal they are in danger in person OR in writing, teachers are mandated to act), but that they also avoid overreacting to recollections of past experiences. Most importantly, he stresses that teachers cannot expect students to disclose personal information if there is an unhealthy classroom environment or if there is not trust between a teacher and students. For this reason, it is critical that this unit take place in the second half of the school year, rather than early in September when students are just getting to know their instructors.

Middle school is an ideal age to have these conversations and begin such an exploration. Some administrators or parents may have reservations about asking 8th graders to write about the role of violence in their lives, and so it is important to ground this work in the reality of adolescent development. As students prepare to depart the middle grades, they are full of questions. They wonder who they truly are and what kind of person they'll become. They start to wonder what has made them into the student, friend, son or daughter that they are. They are looking for stability in what feels like a very unstable world.

Anyone who has ever taught middle school, or perhaps even interacted with a middle school age child knows that there is nothing more important to these students than fairness. For them, the greatest affront to their sensibility is to be unfair; to favor one student over another or even differ your treatment of similar situations. I have to think this is grounded in the adolescent's ultimate desire for some sort of understanding and inclusion. Every time a student is treated unfairly, he or she is made to feel more isolated than he or she already is. In a world where social groupings change from one day to another, and behavior is guided by impulse, children want to know that they're not alone; that someone understands what they are going through and perhaps has been through something similar.

If you add to this general description of middle school life the unending violence and instability that can accompany life in our modern inner cities, it's possible to imagine this feeling of injustice and isolation being magnified until a student starts to lose sense of who he or she is and what he or she believes. Sometimes, it's possible to watch this happen through the course of a year. A violent event or a disruption in family life will dislodge a student from his course. He will withdraw, or act out. He will skip school, or disengage from the work of the class. I can sympathize with that student, but I can never totally empathize. That is, I can't pretend to stand where he is standing and face the challenges he will face. So even as I give advice or consolation, it rings hollow knowing that my experiences will never mirror his.

The power I do have, though, is to introduce that student to other lives, especially real lives. I can show him that he is, indeed, not alone. I can hand him a text that says, "Look, here is a man who suffered greatly, who questioned his own identity and values, who struggled yet survived. Here is a man who understands you and wants to speak to you." And then I can ask that same student to question how violence has already shaped him, and more importantly, how will he let it shape him moving forward. Eighth graders are just starting to feel the power of autonomy, of making their own decisions and choosing their own course. It's a perfect moment to step in and ask them to do so critically, and with the advice and evidence of those who have come before.

So then the question remains, what about those students who come from warm families and stable communities? Is there value in asking those students to consider the role of violence in their lives? I believe

there is, although the question may have to be reframed. I live in New Haven, and have never heard a gunshot on my block. I have never witnessed a crime. Yet, a body was once found not three blocks from my house. The truth is, we all live in communities that in one way or another border the kind of domestic and societal violence that some students encounter every day. And all of us will encounter colleagues and peers that will have endured an abusive home. This unit will help all students understand the forces that shape the people around them.

General Objectives

Essential Questions: What role does violence play in our lives? How do we cope with violence?

As a result of this unit, I hope my students will feel empowered to write about their own lives and the lives of others in their school community. I hope that they will be able to use short texts as models for addressing both the reality and the impact of different forms of violence in a variety of contexts.

We will explore the following categories of violence: state or wartime violence, domestic or family violence, school violence, and urban/gang violence. We will read an excerpt from a memoir or biography that directly speaks to an experience with each of these forms of violence. We will also explore the impact that the experience had on the author's life. The connection between an author's life and his/her work is an essential enduring understanding for middle school students, and this unit will also help reinforce that concept.

The passages we read will have to be chosen carefully to avoid exploiting gripping accounts that may be too explicit for an 8th grade audience. Instead, we will focus on the author's reaction to his or her circumstances. I will have to avoid potentially objectionable materials. In addition, classroom activities and discussions must be carefully structured to create a safe and open environment to students, rather than a free-wheeling "share session." My emphasis must always be on the work-- the reading and writing of accounts of violence-- as much of the material that comes from students may be very sensitive. I might enlist the guidance counselor or social worker to co-teach as necessary and I will be careful to re-norm the class with our ground rules at the start of this unit.

Teaching Strategies

The basic premise for this unit is that short texts and excerpts can serve as a model for student writing, as well as a springboard for discussion and analysis. Author Kimberley Hill Campbell provides an excellent argument for this approach in her text *Less is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts, Grades 6-12*. She devotes a chapter of her book to the genre of memoir. (Although I of course recognize that memoir, autobiography and biography are distinct genres with their own guiding principles, for the purpose of this unit, I will not emphasize those distinctions, with the larger aim of encouraging students to read about other lives in order to write about their own.) Hill Campbell advocates for the use of memoir in that "memoir excerpts are the perfect short text genre since any great memoir has small, stand-alone moments so vivid and compelling they don't require much, if any, contextual explanation." ⁴ I believe the same argument could be made for

some biography and autobiography, as well as historical fiction.

Below, I have included a preliminary list of texts that might be used to illustrate each category of violence. I have included Lexile numbers for the books as they are widely available. These numbers represent the difficulty level of a text. A typical 8th grader might read at a level between 805 and 1100. I have tried to include books in this range, as well as slightly below this range for developing readers. This list is in no way comprehensive, but might provide a starting point for teachers of students at many different levels:

Category	Book	Author	Reading Level (Lexile)
State or Wartime Violence	<i>The Iliad</i>	Homer	1160
	<i>A Long Walk to Water</i>	Linda Sue Park	720
	<i>A Long Way Gone</i>	Ishmael Beah	920
	<i>Prisoner of Tehran</i>	Marina Nemat	Not available
	<i>Broken Memory: A Novel of Rwanda</i>	Elisabeth Combres	890
Domestic or family violence	<i>Words in the Dust</i>	Trent Reedy	670
	<i>I am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced</i>	Nujood Ali	1190
School Violence	<i>Angela's Ashes</i>	Frank McCourt	1110
	<i>Bad Boy: A Memoir</i>	Walter Dean Myers	970
	<i>Living Up the Street</i>	Gary Soto	1140
Urban/Gang Violence	<i>The Other Wes Moore</i>	Wes Moore	990
	<i>We Beat the Street</i>	Sampson Davis, George Jenkins, Rameck Hunt with Sharon M. Draper	860
	<i>Hole in My Life</i>	Jack Gantos	840

Through pre-reading, reading, discussion, and writing activities, students can begin to explore violence on several different levels. While non-fiction (and some historical fiction) texts will be the foundation of our work, the ultimate focus will be on a student-created product that analyzes the role of violence in adolescent lives. This unit would work best in a classroom that employs some variation of the reading/writing workshop model, in which teachers present mini-lessons before allowing students time to work independently. That independent work time will be vital for teacher/student conferences. The reading/writing workshop model also subscribes to the notion of "gradual release" (I do, we do, you do). Using mentor texts and models fits nicely with this instructional mode.

Classroom Activities:

The following is a collection of potential activities that might accomplish the unit objective. It is unrealistic to attempt each and every one of these activities, but they can be implemented based on the makeup of a particular class. In addition, some may be appropriate for middle school, while others may lend themselves more to high school level students.

Pre-Reading:

It's important to note that this unit is not solely a writing unit, but is a reading/writing experience. At the middle school level, teachers are often encouraged to aid children in making "connections." Some of the hardest connections for kids to make are between their own lives and texts. In his comprehensive study on the connection between autobiographical writing and reading, Brian White stresses the importance of students making these connections explicit through writing. He suggests pre-writing to teacher-generated prompts in order to "prime" students to read texts with connections in mind, in addition to writing after analyzing a text⁵. By employing this methodology, I can help structure our reading.

Prompts- In order to help students connect our model or mentor texts to their own lives, we can complete pre-reading writing activities that will prime students to see these connections. For example, if we are going to read an excerpt from *A Long Walk to Water* in which the protagonist is assaulted while trying to find his way to a refugee camp, the pre-writing prompt can ask students to consider where they feel most vulnerable. I would model that when I was in middle school, I always felt vulnerable on the school bus, as it was the wild west of our town. There was little adult supervision and anything, including alcohol consumption and bullying, could happen on a daily basis.

Reading:

Reading rarely looks the same in my classroom from one day to another. My students come to me with such diverse reading abilities, that it is important to provide reading experiences that are accessible to all, without forgetting to challenge those students who are avid readers. On any given day, I might be reading a text aloud, reading a text while students follow along, students may be reading texts to each other, or students may be reading silently and independently. Each mode has a rationale behind it.

Read-alouds- Generally speaking, I tend to employ read-alouds for short, provocative texts. Therefore, read aloud texts would be excerpts that students can easily access simply by hearing them and can immediately discuss without reflection or re-reading. Good read-alouds include particularly evocative paragraphs, short articles that elucidate another reading, or poetry that invites discussion.

Shared reading- Shared reading means that I will read a piece aloud while students follow along on their own copy. This is best for our most challenging reading material in middle school, as students will often need guidance in first decoding, and then comprehending the work. Shared reading does not work well for textbook style writing, but is effective for high interest pieces. I would use shared reading for an excerpt that I want all my students read and for excerpts I plan on referring back to in whole class situations.

Guided reading- Guided reading is when a teacher is able to sit with a small group and help them work through comprehending a text. This is essential to primary classrooms, and ideal for secondary classrooms,

though often difficult to enact. Guided reading might be appropriate for a small group of students who are either struggling with a piece of reading, or would like to explore a text in greater depth.

Lit Circles- Students may also guide each other through reading. These groups are generally called literature circles or book clubs. This mode of reading might be appropriate for times when students are responsible for comparing multiple texts on a single theme. It often works well to have each group read and become expert on one text, before presenting it to the class. Then, each group can take turns presenting and discussing what it is they've read.

Case studies- In addition to the narrative non-fiction we'll be reading, we might also be able to look at case studies of high profile incidents in New Haven. Cases like the Trayvon Martin incident might also be relevant. We can use these case studies to make more direct connections to students' lives without having to rely on personal revelations.

Discussion:

While this unit focuses on the connection between reading and writing, I've often found that discussion can be an essential bridge between these two areas of the language arts classroom. Given the sensitive nature of much of the reading material, as well as the particular needs of the middle school age, discussions should be structured to avoid conflict and misunderstanding.

Socratic Seminars- One of my favorite middle school activities is the Socratic Seminar. This is a highly structured discussion for small groups of students (up to ten). The discussion is based on a text and a series of related questions. Usually for a longer text (like an excerpt from a biography or memoir), I would assign the reading to the entire class ahead of time and then ask the seminar group to come in prepared to discuss. Alternatively, a seminar could discuss a text after a read-aloud or shared read. These are also sometimes called fishbowl discussions.

Writing:

Poetry- Middle school students love poetry. It is a chance for them to release their minds from their attempts to remember rules of convention, supporting evidence, building a thesis, or even the structure of a plot. Instead, they can focus on capturing an emotion or a moment. I am always amazed at the poetry they produce. Reluctant writers who usually struggle to produce a single paragraph suddenly become prolific poets.

I believe there is a place for poetry in this unit. It may be a way to initially write about an incident in their lives without the pressure of composing a narrative or expository piece. Poetry can also be a good opening to class, or conversation starter. One might ask students to write a poem based on a picture related to one of the mentor texts, for example. One way to differentiate for lower level students would be to give students sentence starters in the form of a poem for them to complete. For example: *Yesterday I was _____/Today I am _____/Tomorrow I will be _____*

Pairing students/Interviews- As it is possible that some students may not be comfortable writing about their own experiences, or may not have a direct connection to our material, one option might be to structure interviews between students. This would encourage students to write as biographers of another's life. Potential pitfalls might be comfort level between students, as well as uneven pairings of intellectual ability. Some students may not be satisfied with the work of their peers. This methodology will have to be employed selectively.

Essay Assignment– Perhaps the most challenging part of this unit will be to structure the written assessment, or product, to emerge at the end. The district curriculum asks for a persuasive essay as this is the genre of writing assessed on the Connecticut State Mastery test in the 8th grade. As the new Common Core standards are rolled out, the terminology will change to an argument based essay, but the basic assignment will remain the same.

How then, can I make a clear connection and structure a progression from the reading of narratives to the writing of an argument? I believe this will require a broad, yet relevant question for the students to answer. Perhaps it is worth returning to the essential questions of the unit—what effect does violence have on our lives? This can be wide open for students to write about personal experiences or, more broadly, about societal violence and its impact on adolescents. Students can utilize a combination of their personal experience and our class readings to structure their arguments.

Sample Lesson Plans

I've included two lesson plans that outline how you might use a mentor text to explore the essential question of the unit (how does violence affect our lives?). These both utilize short excerpts to investigate components of this question. Ultimately, the hope would be that students can then use these excerpts as resources when writing an essay to this essential question.

Pre-Reading The Other Wes Moore:

This book tells the true story of two Wes Moores who grew up in the same era. Both are black men who lived in the inner city of Baltimore and New York, but one ended up in jail for murder while the other is highly successful. The book explores the reasons why their paths diverged so wildly. I would recommend using this lesson/text in the context of discussing how the negative behavior of friends can shape one's actions.

Objective: Students will be able to identify thematic connections with a mentor text by free writing to a prompt and discussion prior to reading. Through this pre-writing and discussion, students will begin to empathize with characters in the text and make connections between the text and their own lives.

Materials:

- Pre-reading prompt
- Scenarios

Procedure:

1. As students enter class, have the following prompt written on the board, or on a prompt sheet. Ask students to spend 5-10 minutes responding in writing to the question:

What
role do
your
choices
have in
shaping
who you
are?

What
choices
have you
made
that have
changed
your life?

- a. Think
about
schools
you've
attended,
those
who
you've
chosen
to be
friends
with, and
activities
you've
chosen
to be a
part of.

2. After students have had sufficient time to respond to the prompt, ask 2–3 students to share their writing. Alternatively, you can have students turn and talk to each other to share what they've written. Then tell students that today we'll be considering not only the effect of our choices, but the reasons **why** we make decisions. We'll explore what factors influence the decisions we make.

3. Divide students into groups of four, if they do not already sit in groups. Give each group a scenario that involves a decision making process. You can write these yourself to relate specifically to the lives of your students, or find a variety of these types of scenarios online (example here: <http://wa.westfordk12.us/pages/FOV1-00042FB9/gr9health/documents/MicrosoftWord-DECIDEScenarios.pdf>)

4. Ask students to decide how they would react individually to their given scenario. Then, ask the groups to discuss to see how their reactions and decisions are alike or different.

5. After about 5 minutes of discussion, regroup and ask the students to discuss again, this time focusing on trying to figure out WHY their decisions are different. In other words, what experience in their own life lead them to make a certain choice? The goal is to introduce to students the idea that our choices are based on the life experiences we've had. Depending on your group, you may need to model this. For example, you may ask for two volunteers that made a different choice and talk through why they differ, focusing on their

experiences.

6. Introduce that you'll be reading sections of a text which explores how two men with the same name and similar backgrounds ended up with very different fates. You'll be exploring what experiences lead them to make the decisions they did.

7. Assign pages 79–84 from **The Other Wes Moore** for homework or in class reading.

Assessment:

Ask students to respond in writing to the following question: Why does the narrator of this section decide to join Shea? Why do you think his experience with the police wasn't enough to stop him from tagging?

This reading should be followed up with excerpts from Wes's time at military school, as well as two similar readings from the story of the other Wes Moore and his descent into gang life. Students can then compare how one Wes's increasingly better decisions compare to the other Wes's increasingly poor decisions and how family life and violence contribute to these choices.

Reading The Iliad :

This lesson explores the theme of revenge and its effects. Similar lessons could be created using different scenes from *The Iliad* for discussions of wartime violence, rivalry, or loss.

Objective: Through a close reading of a classic text, students will begin to identify the universal theme of revenge. Students will discuss how this particular form plays a role in their lives.

Procedure:

1. Show students an image of the battle between Hector and Achilles. You can choose a classic image, or a more modern cartoon depending on your class. Many are available online.
2. Ask students what they think is happening in the image. Ask them what they notice about the two fighters.
3. Tell them that today, you are going to learn about these two ancient figures and use their story to talk about revenge and what happens when someone takes revenge.
Have them listen as you summarize the story of Hector and Achilles. I've written a brief
4. summary below as an example. Then read together the excerpt from the Iliad that tells the story of Hector's death:

Today we are going to learn about the story of these two ancient heroes. One was Greek, the other was Trojan. Their countries were at war and they were the best fighters on either side. The Greek hero was named Achilles and the Trojan hero was named Hector.

In the middle of the war, Achilles became angry at the leader of his army and decided not to fight, which hurt the Greeks' chance to win. His best friend, Patroclus wanted to take his place, so he took his armor and dressed up like Achilles as he went into battle. Hector fought and killed Patroclus, thinking he was Achilles, and took his armor.

Achilles was devastated by the death of his friend and returned to the battlefield. He found Hector and cornered him, wanting to avenge the death of his friend. We are going to read what happened next. Keep in mind, this story was first told thousands of years ago.

With these words, he (Hector) drew his sword that hung by his side sharp and strong, gathered himself and sprang, like an eagle flying high and swooping down from the clouds upon a lamb or cowering hare. Achilles moved to meet him full of fury, covering his chest with the resplendent shield while the thick golden plumes nodded upon his flashing helmet. His right hand held poised the great spear, which gleamed like the finest of all the stars of heaven, the star of evening brilliant in the dark night; he scanned Hector with ruthless heart, to see where the white flesh gave the best opening for a blow. Hector was well covered with that splendid armour which he had stripped from Patroclus, but an opening showed where the collar-bones join the neck to the shoulder, the gullet, where a blow brings quickest death. There Achilles aimed, and the point went through the soft neck; but it did not cut the windpipe and Hector could still answer his foe. He fell in the dust and Achilles cried in triumph ⁶

While Achilles celebrated Hector's death for a small while, he eventually regretted killing Hector and even called him his brother. He realized that killing Hector would not bring Patroclus back.

5. Ask students to identify why Achilles kills Hector (revenge). Then ask students to think of a time when they felt like they needed to get revenge for something someone did to them. Ask them to think about how they felt afterwards, and to write that story for the rest of class. If they can't think of a time when they got back at someone, they can write about a friend.

6. Have 2-3 students share their story. Ask them to think about why revenge and regret are so often linked together. Lead a class discussion about these two emotions.

Assessment:

• Revenge story

Resources for Teachers:

Anderson, Carl. *How's it Going?: A Practical Guide to Confering with Student Writers* . Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000.

Anderson's text provides lessons and ideas for use with students while they write their final essay projects. These lessons allow teachers to differentiate for each student's needs.

Anderson, Jeff. *Mechanically Inclined: Building Grammar, Usage, and Style into Writer's Workshop* . Portland: Stenhouse, 2005.

For teachers interested in incorporating grammar and convention lessons into a writing unit, this book provides useful suggestions and sample lessons.

Atwell, Nancie. *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* . Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 1998.

Atwell's book is a wonderful overview of the reading and writing workshop method of teaching middle school writers. In order to teach this unit effectively, I would highly recommend using this teaching style.

Campbell, Kimberly Hill. *Less is More: Teaching Literature with Short Texts- Grades 6-12* . Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2007.

Campbell is an advocate of using short pieces rather than long texts in order to teach skills and concepts. This method works very well with middle school readers and writers as some texts require close reading (like the Iliad) due to their complexity.

Robb, Laura. *Teaching Middle School Writers: What Every English Teacher Needs to Know* . Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2010.

Robb's book is a comprehensive overview of strategies and lessons for teaching middle school writers.

Professional Resources- Articles

Fisher, Douglas. 2006. Responding to Students Who Disclose the Violence in Their Lives. *The English Journal* 95 (6):65-70.

Fisher explores the ways in which teachers respond to students who open up about violence at home or in their communities and advocates for a sensible response.

Miller, Stacy. 2005. Shattering Images of Violence in Young Adult Literature: Strategies for the Classroom. *The English Journal* 94 (5):87-93.

Miller's article is an overview of a similar unit in a high school AP class, focused on one violent young adult novel. While many of the activities are elevated for a middle school classroom, I highly recommend her article for high school teachers who may be looking to teach a similar, but more complex unit.

Moletsane, Relebohile. 2000. Talking Back to the Masters: Girls' Writing about Experiences of Violence. *Agenda* (46):59-70.

Molestane's case study is an interesting exploration of one situation in which young girls wrote about the violence in their lives for catharsis and growth. Although her study is based in South Africa, I think it is a useful model for the benefits of this unit.

Paye, Rita E. (1994) "Adults React When Students Write About Violence," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 3.

White, Brian F. 1995. Effects of Autobiographical Writing before Reading on Students' Responses to Short Stories. *The Journal of Educational Research* 88 (3):173-184.

White's article is helpful in rationalizing how writing, especially pre-writing, can help students connect to the texts they read.

Selected Sources for Student Reading

Ali, Nujood. *I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced* . New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2010.

Nujood tells the story of her forced marriage and subsequent battle for divorce from her adult husband in Yemen. An excerpt from this text would be useful teaching about family violence as well as the importance of self-advocacy.

Beah, Ishmael. *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007.

Beah is a former child soldier from Sierra Leone. His memoir is a harrowing tale about his abduction and soldiering days, as well as his rehabilitation. Excerpts from this book should be selected carefully as some scenes detail extreme violence and drug use.

Gantos, Jack. *Hole in My Life* . New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.

Gantos, a popular children's author, wrote this memoir about a time in his life when he became involved with drug smugglers and eventually was captured and sent to prison. His story is incredible and honest. His memoir would be useful in discussing consequences and decision making.

Homer, *The Iliad* . New York, Penguin, 1950.

This original epic poem tells the story of the Trojan War. I recommend its use for discussing classic themes and emphasizing the universality of violence.

Moore, Wes. *The Other Wes Moore* . New York: Spiegel and Grau Trade Paperback, 2010.

Wes Moore compares his own biography to that of a man serving life in prison who is of a comparable background. He investigates the choices and lessons that led him to excel and his counterpart to sink into a life of violence. A popular choice for high schoolers and college freshmen, excerpts of this book are appropriate for exploring the effect of friends and family on shaping identity.

Park, Linda Sue. *A Long Walk to Water* . Boston : Clarion Books, 2010.

Based on the true story of a lost boy of Sudan, Park explores the effect of war on young children in a format accessible and appropriate for middle schoolers.

Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

Common Core Standards addressed in this unit:

Reading Literature

RL.8.1. Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.8.5. Compare and contrast the structure of two or more texts and analyze how the differing structure of each text contributes to its meaning and style.

RL.8.6. Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

Reading Informational Texts

RI.8.3. Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

RI.8.6. Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author acknowledges and responds to conflicting evidence or viewpoints.

Writing

W.8.1. Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

Introduce claim(s), acknowledge and distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and organize the reasons and evidence logically.

Support claim(s) with logical reasoning and relevant evidence, using accurate, credible sources and demonstrating an understanding of the topic or text.

Use words, phrases, and clauses to create cohesion and clarify the relationships among claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

Establish and maintain a formal style.

Provide a concluding statement or section that follows from and supports the argument presented.

W.8.4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

W.8.5. With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on how well purpose and audience have been addressed.

W.8.6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and present the relationships between information and ideas efficiently as well as to interact and collaborate with others.

W.8.7. Conduct short research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question), drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

W.8.8. Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.

Endnotes

1. Moletsane, "Talking Back to the Masters: Girls' Writing about Experiences of Violence," 61.
2. Ibid
3. Fisher, "Responding to Students Who Disclose the Violence in Their Lives," 65.
4. Hill Campbell, 117
5. White, Brian. "Effects of Autobiographical Writing before Reading on Students' Responses to Short Stories," 177.
6. Homer, *The Iliad* , 261.

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