

Do You Know My Struggle?

A Writing Unit Designed to Explore the Voices of Middle School Students

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Overview

Students have a voice that they want to share, a voice that they want to be heard. Young readers and writers should be able to reflect on the many experiences they have gone through and the things that they have seen in their young lives. Students in inner city schools are apt to do better academically and learn more efficiently if they are given literature and writing assignments that they can relate to. When an adolescent recognizes the endeavors of others and how they prevailed in face of adversity, he or she may discern that they can do the same, using their struggle to work for them, rather than against them. It is this idea, the idea that students learn best in a relatable environment that is the basis of this unit.

By reading the short stories of authors such as Toni Cade Bambara and Diane Oliver, students are able to perceive the struggles of others and relate these struggles in their own lives. Although these stories are written from a fictional point of view, the conflicts and perceptions within them are very tangible. The two authors aforementioned who most exemplify this tangibility are Diane Oliver and Toni Cade Bambara. This unit focuses on two pieces by each of these authors. The short stories by Diane Oliver are “Key To The City” and “Neighbors.” “Neighbors” contains an excellent example of the historical struggle of the desegregation of schools, and both Oliver stories involve young adults with historical struggles to assimilate into American society. Additionally, the two short stories by Toni Cade Bambara, “The Lesson” and “Raymond’s Run,” exemplify the struggles faced by adolescents and include conflicts that relate to the internal and external struggles of children.

Through this unit, my intention is that students will see that they are not the only

ones going through unforeseen struggles. While it is hard for adolescents to talk about problems, issues, and conflicts that are personal in their lives, it is important for them to examine these issues and begin to reflect on how their experiences have shaped them as individuals. Oftentimes adolescents think they have the worst issues around them, unaware that there are other students who may be going through the same experiences. Likewise, understanding and reading the struggles of other children may help them with their issues and in navigating the world around them.

In the middle school classroom, students will enjoy reading these, as well as other short stories that they can relate to. Reading the short stories of Bambara and Oliver will give students a chance to analyze the life of others and relate it to themselves through discussion, writing and other creative activities. Students will learn how to become empathetic to others and decipher what they would do if they were in any of these situations or if they lived during certain time periods in the United States. The lessons outlined in the stories are lessons students can relate to and connect to their lives. Through the reflection activities outlined in this unit, students will be able to have their voices heard, so that we do in fact, hear their struggle.

Rationale

Many of the students I teach are reluctant readers and writers; therefore, their skills in these areas are deficient and oftentimes reading and writing is unexciting to them. This unit is designed to help these students become both more engaged in reading and more expressive with their ideas and struggles in writing. Many students at this age have issues that they don't know how to discuss with others. Adolescents struggle with issues ranging from dealing with family and death to navigating friends, bullying, and the opposite sex. While as a group, adolescents struggle with the same and similar issues, oftentimes at this age these problems seem isolated and very personal to one's own experiences and identity.

In reading literature that they can relate to, students are not only able to connect to the characters in the stories, but they are also able to utilize valuable reading strategies while doing so. When exposed to high interest and relatable literature, students develop an appreciation of literature instead of dismissing most things that come their way. The problem I have found with literature for inner city students is that it is not realistic and passionate enough for them. The stories turn the students off and they become bored and therefore are slated as disenfranchised. This will not cure the reluctant reader, but at least reading stories that have a "heartbeat" will pique their interest.

In reading stories about others who struggle with day to day issues they have no control over and those issues which they are passionate about, students will in turn be able to write about their own lives, families, struggles, and conflicts. The literature in this unit provides students with "mentor texts" that exemplify this genre. In these short

stories, there is a conflict to overcome and a lesson to be learned, so students can look to certain characters and say, “What would that character do in this situation?” Through writing and sharing, though it may not be easy, students can learn to face their problems “head on,” learn to accept their experiences, learn tolerance of others, and learn that things can and will change at some point in their lives.

This unit is designed for students of varying reading levels and is inherently differentiated through the activities that supplement each reading. A brief description of each of the short stories that will be used is as follows:

“Key To The City” by Diane Oliver

This short story portrays a young woman who has graduated high school in the south. Her family decides to move up north to Chicago for a better life. This story shows the struggles this family has to go through, moving from one bad situation to another. The escape into a better life seems unreachable and impervious.

“Neighbors” by Diane Oliver

This story takes place during the time period in America when schools were desegregated. A black family decided to send their small son to a white school. The story is told through the eyes of the boy’s older sister, Ellie, who is scared for her brother. This story shows the struggle of this family in Chicago during a historic time in the United States.

“The Lesson” by Toni Cade Bambara

This is a wonderful story of how a young girl, Sylvia, takes a trip to Times Square in New York City. Her sophisticated neighbor, Miss Moore, decides to take Sylvia and her friends to a toy store. In this story, Sylvia realizes how economically disadvantaged she is because she cannot understand how a person can pay so much for things so little. This is a story of adventure and discovery for a young child who once thought she had all the answers.

“Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara

This story is also about a young girl named Squeaky. Squeaky is a girl who prides herself on her skills of being able to outrun anyone, including her nemesis Gretchen, who is also good at running. This story depicts the conflicts between these two young girls all while they are both trying to protect their image. Squeaky also must protect her older brother, Raymond, who is mentally disabled. This is a great story for Middle School students because they can relate to not getting along with children their age and the passion of competitiveness that drives them to appear tenacious.

Finally, these short stories will be used in differentiated instruction on multiple levels and the different learning styles of students. The lessons will align with the School District of Philadelphia and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania standards of Reading and Writing.

Objectives

This unit is intended for students in the 6th Grade at Wagner Middle School. I will have the pleasure of teaching three 6th Grade classes this lesson. The classes are 90-minute literature classes. Writing will be incorporated into the lesson everyday. Published writing will take one week to complete. That will take place at the end of reading several pieces of literature. Teaching the lesson through short stories, films and music is the objective of this unit.

The objectives of this unit will include the following:

- Read and analyze short stories and be able to connect struggles with real life situations.
- Interpret internal and external conflicts that may either inhibit or drive the character.
- Define, understand and interpret the elements of literature through the use of short stories (character traits, setting, conflict, plot, climax, resolution and theme.)
- Connect between texts, films and songs to analyze how character traits and struggles are comparable.
- Create an original essay, song or poem with the use of literary devices such as figurative language that reflects the students' personal struggles. Share literature and respond to literature.
- Gain an appreciation for works of literature and empathy towards others and their struggles in life.

In achieving these objectives, students will understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction through the short stories and their own writing, understand conflict and resolution as evidenced in both the works of Bambara and Oliver and their own writings, as well as make connections between characters and their own lives.

Strategies

This unit will incorporate several strategies to make sure students comprehend the text, remain engaged in the stories, and conceptualize the characters' internal and external conflicts. These strategies will be used to differentiate to the learning styles of students and to help them internalize the information they need for reading and writing skills

outlined in the SDP curriculum.

Strategies that will be incorporated into each lesson component include the Do Now, Before Reading, Mini-lessons, During Reading, After Reading, and Differentiated Instruction. These strategies are important to maintain a norm that is used for instruction throughout the year. A description of each of these components is as follows:

1. *Do Now*: A Do Now is a brief assignment that should take between 5-10 minutes each. Students read, write or listen to literature that connects with the lesson objective. These activities should be relatable and engaging. The assignments in a Do Now are a review of the lesson objective from the day before or will preview the lesson forthcoming.

2. *Mini-lesson*: Mini-lessons give students either an introduction to new material or a review of reading strategies that will be used during the lesson's reading to achieve the lesson objective.

3. *Before Reading*: Before Reading strategies are "preview" strategies that encourage students to preview a text and make predictions about the text based on components such as title, author, headings, subheadings, and illustrations.

4. *During Reading*: The class has a shared reading portion of the lesson during this time. A Shared Reading is a reading that everyone has and can read from as a whole class. The shared reading lasts between 20-30 minutes during class-time. During the shared reading, students make connections between themselves and the text, make connections between texts, and they answer comprehension questions. Students also have vocabulary words and complete vocabulary etymology during this time.

Additionally, during reading and film activities, students complete a variety of activities from the list below:

- Use graphic organizers to demonstrate comprehension and interpretation
- Respond to text and analyze literary elements and historical facts
- Distinguish the difference between internal and external conflicts and fiction and non-fiction
- Answer constructed response questions as well as multiple-choice questions that will be summative and/or formal assessments.

5. *After Reading*: After Reading strategies allow students to, first, discuss what they have read. Then, they complete independent and group activities, tiered activities, or choice board activities depending on the lesson objective. Students either work independently or cooperatively on these activities. They answer questions and then make greater connections to the literature through writing and other creative activities. Students will have homework every night based off of reading and activities performed in the

class.

Additionally, after reading short stories and/or watching a film, students will complete a choice board of how to analyze what they have just read by completing a variety of activities:

- Creating a play that depicts the timeline in the story
- Creating poetry, using templates as a guide
- End of book activities, which include: comic strips, changing the ending, and a variety of other activities.

Classroom Activities/Sample Lesson Plans

A Five-Day Sample Lesson Plan

Learning Goal: Students will read and analyze two short stories, “Key To The City” and “Neighbors” by Diane Oliver. Students will use these historical fiction short stories to gain insight on this era in American history. They will analyze the literature to learn about the rationale behind the northern migration of blacks, who were looking for better jobs and education. They will also be introduced to the education system after Brown vs. The Board of Education ruling in 1954. In learning about this time period, students will also interact with the text using a variety of Literacy strategies. Reading strategies that will be used in this lesson include: compare and contrast, inference, generalizations, and sequence of events. Literary skills will include: character traits, conflict (internal and external), theme, and point of view.

Objectives: By the end of the five-day lesson, students will be able to...

- Read short stories and connect the two stories to their own experiences of having conflict.
- Analyze the reading and literary skills of internal and external conflict, point of view, character traits, theme, sequence of events and generalizations using both stories. Create an original poem, essay or song that incorporates student’s thoughts about struggle using figurative language and details.
- Students will use computers in order to research the migration of blacks from the south to the north and to research Brown vs. The Board of Education.

Materials Needed:

- Class sets of the short stories “Neighbors” and “Key To The City” by Diane Oliver
- Promethean board
- Writing journals

- Computers (optional)
- Poetry template
- Copy of the song “What’s Going On?” (both audio and lyrics)
- Copy of the song “Get it Together” (both audio and lyrics)

Learning Plan (five-day lesson):

Day One

Do Now

Listen to the song *What’s Going On?* by Marvin Gaye. Students will write down 3 issues that are discussed in the song. Class will discuss these issues.

Students will write about an issue that needs to change in their lives: what is the issue, how does it affect them and how should the changes occur?

Mini-Lesson

Students will have a mini-lesson on internal and external conflict and review point of view. Teacher will have notes on the Promethean Board for students to copy. Students will be giving several variations of internal or external conflict. They will, with a partner, analyze each scenario and choose whether it is an internal or external conflict. With the same partner, students will give examples of internal and external conflict to share with the class.

During Reading

Class will read “Key to The City” over the next two days. Comprehension questions will include any previous and current literary and reading skills.

After Reading

Students will begin working on What’s Going On Poems. They will continue working on these poems for homework.

Day Two

Do Now

Students should be able to view several situations: either by picture or reading several scenarios. Students will focus on the conflict, writing whether the conflict of each is internal or external, and explain why. Students will share their thoughts.

Mini-Lesson

Students will have a mini-lesson on point of view: first person and second person (limited and omniscient). Teacher will have notes on the Promethean Board for students to copy. Teacher will read several short paragraphs. Students will use white boards to write which

point of view the passage was in and the key words that let them know, such as: I, me, we, my, she, he, they, etc.

During Reading

Class will continue reading “Key to The City,” this should be the last day. Comprehension questions will include any previous and current literary and reading skills.

After Reading

Students will write reflection papers (two paragraphs) about the story they have just read. Students will also continue working on What’s Going On Poems.

Independent Activity

Students will write down the five vocabulary words from the story. Students will use the first word to explain how word etymology is completed (definition, synonym, antonym, sentence, and (optional) drawing a picture). They will continue working on this for homework.

Day Three

Do Now

Students will answer comprehension questions pertaining to the shared reading of “Key To The City.” These questions will be discussed and later used for a formal assessment.

Mini-Lesson

Students will have a review of the literary skills, conflict and point of view. Students will have a mini-lesson on theme, the lesson learned. Students will listen to stories using storytelling read-a-loud on Gullah Net (<http://www.knowitall.org/gullahtales.html>). These stories are traditional Gullah stories that use animals to enforce messages to people. Students will discover theme after listening to one of the stories.

During Reading

Class will read the story “Neighbors” by Diane Oliver for two days. Comprehension questions will include any previous and current literary and reading skills.

After Reading

Class will discuss what they have read and infer what may or may not happen to characters in the story. Teacher should review historical fiction with students. Students will use poetry that was written for homework and begin to proofread it, adding descriptive details and figurative language.

Day Four

Do Now

Students will read a small the abridged version of the court ruling Brown vs. The Board of Education. Students will answer the question: “How would you feel, on this day, if all of a sudden you were denied a good education because of the color of your skin?”

Students will read their answers out loud.

Mini-Lesson

Class will discuss the court ruling and they will view pictures of the famous Little Rock Nine, Ruby Bridges, and James Meredith, who broke barriers in the schools they wanted to attend during that time. With this lesson students will see the historical connection with the shared reading “Neighbors.” Class will also quickly review this week’s reading strategies before reading the story.

During Reading

Class will continue reading the story “Neighbors.” Comprehension questions will include any previous and current literary and reading skills.

After Reading

Students will begin to share their poems or songs that they have been working on. Some students should begin to type their work. Please note that not all students will create poetry, as some students prefer to write essays. In that case, they are required to write at least three paragraphs on the same topic.

Day Five

Do Now

Students will answer comprehension questions to complete a short assessment for reading strategies focused on this week and based off of the two shared readings.

After Assessment/During Reading

Students will listen to the song *Get It Together* by India Arie. Students will read the lyrics and highlight examples of problems that people have that they must change in their lives. Class will discuss these issues.

After Reading

Class time will be used for students to type up poems and some students will share poems with the rest of the class. Students will also have a chance to include pictures and artwork to go with their work.

In the weeks following students can continue with the lessons of internal and external conflicts by reading the short stories by Toni Cade Bambara. I will also have students view the movie *Freedom Writers* and excerpts from the documentary *Eyes on the Prize*.

Freedom Writers is an inspirational movie that is based off of a true story about a teacher, Erin Gruwell, who teaches at an inner city school. She helps her students, who have many conflicts, by giving them a voice to write it out and the courage to speak it out and handle their conflicts in a positive way.

Eyes on the Prize is a documentary that shows actual accounts and video footage of events that happened during the Civil Rights Movement. The first video shows footage of Little Rock Nine and James Meredith.

Bibliography/Resources

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Moody, Tyora. *Gullah Tales: Listen to Aunt Pearl Sue's Folktales in English and Gullah*. Storytelling & Songs. ETV Commission, 2001.
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Student Resources:

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Oliver, Diane. *African American Literature: Neighbors*. Orlando, Florida: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1998.

Oliver, Diane. *Calling the Wind: The Lesson*. Perennial Publishing, 1965.

Standards/Appendices

Appendix A – Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking

This unit is aligned with the School District of Philadelphia’s and the State of Pennsylvania’s Academic Standards in reading and writing. These standards will include, but are not limited to:

1.1. Reading Independently

- 1.1.6.A. Apply appropriate strategies to describe author’s purpose, using grade level text.
- 1.1.6.D. Demonstrate comprehension/understanding before reading, during reading, and after reading on grade level texts through strategies such as summarizing, note taking, extending ideas from text, comparing and contrasting texts, determining fact from opinion, and supporting assertions about text with evidence from text.

1.2. Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Text

- 1.2.6.A. Evaluate text organization and content to determine the author’s purpose, point of view, and effectiveness.

1.3. Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature - Fiction and Non-Fiction:

- 1.3.6.A. Read, understand, and respond to works from various genres of literature
- 1.3.6.C. Compare the literary elements within and among texts used by an author, including characterization, setting, plot, theme, and point of view.

1.4. Types of Writing

- Students write for different purposes and audiences.

1.5. Quality of Writing

- Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

1.8. Research

- 1.8.6.B. Conduct inquiry and research on self- selected or assigned topics using a variety of appropriate media sources and strategies with teacher support.

Appendix B – Sample Sensory Detail Chart

Sensory Detail Chart

Title of Literature: _____

See	
Touch (Feeling and Texture)	
Smell	
Taste	
Hear	

Elements of Literature Chart

Title of Literature _____

Characters	
Setting: time, time of day, season, place	
Conflict Internal (conflict in characters head) External (conflict with an opposing force)	
Climax (the highest point of the conflict –	

before resolution)	
Resolution	
Theme: the lesson learned by the character	

Somebody	Wanted	But	So

Appendix C – Song Lyrics

What's Going On? By Marvin Gaye

Mother, mother
There's too many of you crying
Brother, brother, brother
There's far too many of you dying
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today - Ya

Father, father
We don't need to escalate
You see, war is not the answer
For only love can conquer hate
You know we've got to find a way
To bring some lovin' here today

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me, so you can see
Oh, what's going on
What's going on
Ya, what's going on
Ah, what's going on

In the mean time
Right on, baby
Right on
Right on

Father, father, everybody thinks we're wrong
Oh, but who are they to judge us
Simply because our hair is long
Oh, you know we've got to find a way
To bring some understanding here today
Oh

Picket lines and picket signs
Don't punish me with brutality
Talk to me
So you can see
What's going on
Ya, what's going on

Tell me what's going on
I'll tell you what's going on - Uh
Right on baby
Right on baby

"Get It Together" by India Arie

One shot to your heart without breaking your skin
No one has the power to hurt you like your kin
Kept it inside, didn't tell no one else
Didn't even wanna admit it to yourself
And now your chest burns and your back aches
From 15 years of holding the pain
And now you only have yourself to blame
If you continue to live this way

[Chorus:]

Get it together
You wanna heal your body
You have to heal your heart
Whatsoever you sow you will reap
Get it together

You can fly fly

Dark future ahead of me
That's what they say
I'd be starving if I ate all the lies they fed
Cause I've been redeemed from your anguish and pain
A miracle child I'm floating on a cloud
Cause the words that come from your mouth
You're the first to hear
Speak words of beauty and you will be there
No matter what anybody says
What matters the most is what you think of yourself

[Chorus]

The choice is yours
No matter what it is
To choose life is to choose to forgive

You don't have to try
To hurt him and break his pride
To shake that weight off
And you will be ready to fly

One shot to your heart without breaking your skin
No one has the power to hurt you like your friends
Thought it will never change but as time moved on
That ugly duckling grew up to be a swan
And now your chest burns and your back aches
Because now the years are showing up on your face
But you'll never be happy
And you'll never be whole
Until you see the beauty in growing old [Chorus]

Appendix D – Sample “What’s Goin’ On” Poem and Template

My World (Sample)

My world is full of hope and fear
The streets are buzzing like a bee
Running from the dealers and stealers
In hindsight I can only see me

The sweet smell of coconut bread
As I play outside with my auntie who’s younger than I.
I look left and I look right
We duck quick ‘cuz hear comes another drive by

Not shocking this happens a hundred times a day
People packing pistols
And BAM another kid dead on the streets
I’m just lucky it’s not me.

What’s going on in my neighborhood
Is really not good
The beast may lay dormant for a while
But will awaken with a howl

Title _____

My world is _____

simile
personification
4th Line

_____ what do you see, hear, smell
, taste, touch or feel?

As I _____

I _____

We _____

what are you doing?
sensory detail
a verb (action words)

give a hyperbole
alliteration
onomatopoeia
how does it make you feel?

What's going on in my neighborhood

Is really good/not good – describe how it is

language

metaphor
any type of figurative

add lines as you see fit