

## Using Playful Strategies to Create a Fun and Meaningful Literacy Program in Middle School

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### Overview

I remember two books that I was supposed to read in elementary school that I never read. One, *Strawberry Girl* by Lois Lowry, was a book report assignment in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. I passed with flying colors. How? I dressed up like the picture on the cover and spoke in a mountain accent and basically gave the synopsis found on the inside cover. The teacher loved it! The other was, I think, *Around the World in 80 Days*; this was a reading group novel. I remember it looking so boring—an ugly hot air balloon on the cover, yellowed pages with small print—and sounding so boring that I just couldn't bring myself to read it. Great beginning for someone who later became a language arts teacher, right? I have no positive memories of reading from my elementary school years, which is strange because I was considered an advanced reader. I was even grouped with students in a grade above for reading starting in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. But perhaps that was the problem.

My first positive school memory related to reading was actually in middle school, so maybe that is why I now teach middle school language arts—I found my love of reading in middle school. The teacher did not group us by ability—there were no red birds or yellow birds. There was no low group or high group. The entire class, which was only about 15 students, read the same book together. In some ways it was like a book club. There were no boring worksheets or specific questions to answer at the end of each chapter. We read it in class together, discussed it together, and enjoyed it together. It was fun! And, most importantly, it was not a “teacher book.”

I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade and our teacher allowed the class to choose a book from the monthly Scholastic Book Club order form. What a novel idea—we students chose the book we wanted to read instead of being assigned one by the teacher. We chose a mystery with two teenage characters—one boy and one girl—who end up living in a creepy house—*Briarwood* is how I remember it. There was a really creepy scene where someone was walking up the stairs and a scene where they drove a Land Rover through the woods in a frantic mood. I remember talking about foreshadowing and mood and setting and character and suspense—all these language arts terms that I teach today were brought to life for me in a book chosen by a bunch of 8<sup>th</sup> graders out of a Scholastic book club. Here it is almost 30 years later, and I still want to read that book. I have tried to find the book on Amazon but have had no luck, since I do not remember the title or author. I'd love to read it again to see if it really is any good. This experience has definitely shaped the way I choose books in my own classroom. In fact, I have allowed my students to choose a

class novel from the Scholastic TAB Book Club order form. They chose *The Barcode Tattoo* by Suzanne Weyn, which was a great book and only \$1 a piece so a bargain at that!

However, not all students are like me—many of them come to middle school having had great reading experiences in early elementary school which is then dying (or being killed) by the time they reach my class in 6<sup>th</sup> grade. What about this type of reader? What is it that motivates them? What about reading do they enjoy?

Carpet time, circle time, story time. Sitting on the big, colorful carpet and being read a story by the teacher who sits in the rocking chair above. When students are young, reading is fun. There colorful pictures to look at and the teacher uses different voices for the different characters. Some students, as they grow older and begin to read for themselves, can carry on this engaging reading in their minds, while others cannot. What is the difference? We, as teachers, are missing something. What can we do to ensure the transfer of reading engagement from read aloud time to independent reading?

Now, don't get me wrong, there are students who grow up loving to read and become avid readers themselves. This is great for those students, but how do we use their love of books to foster a love of reading in other students? As students progress through the grades, some students' love of literature grows while others' dies an agonizingly painful death. What happens? If some children love stories when they are young, why doesn't that translate automatically to a love of reading in middle school? What are we, as teachers, doing wrong? How are we killing the love of literature, and what can we do to revive it? Is it our choice of books? Is it our classroom climate? Is it how we engage students in the text?

The goal of any language arts teacher is to have an entire class full of avid readers, no matter how they come to us, right? So how can we take a heterogeneously mixed group of readers in middle school with varied past reading experiences and engage and challenge them all? Tough order. It requires strategies with benefits for all types of readers.

To answer this question, I looked at what I do with my 5-year-old (who *loves* story time!). When I take my daughter to the book store or the library, *she* chooses the books we get for her. Whenever I pick out a book for her, I think about what *she* would enjoy—Fancy Nancy, princesses, dancing, unicorns, fairies, animals, silliness, colorful pictures. When we read, it is in close proximity, snuggled up on the couch or bed—it is a bonding experience. We talk about the story and laugh and talk about the characters and setting. I read with expression and “do” the characters' voices. I am sharing my love of books *with* her. In essence, I do everything I can to make the experience *fun* for *her* and all about *her*.

Is this the same experience we create for our students in a middle school language arts class? Is it all about the love of reading and them as an individual? Unfortunately, in middle school, many times reading is a boring, lonely and disconnected experience. Students are expected to read what we tell them to read, regardless of their interest. Many teachers use the same books or stories year after year, never changing to meet the interests of their students. They expect their students to read silently and alone and then answer questions about the story, on a separate piece of paper. The focus is on reading “literature”, not the love of reading. The objective is to analyze the setting and mood, not to become part of the story. No wonder some students learn to hate reading! That’s not what reading is meant to be.

To fix this tragic situation, we need to look at what makes reading fun for young children and for us, as adults. We also need to consider the needs of the middle school child—and yes, they are still children! They want to have fun, even though their idea of fun is changing. Middle school students are social by nature. All middle school teachers know how much their students love to talk and interact in a group. In my 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, students are always asking, “Can we work with a group/partner?” They are begging to interact with each other. Give them something constructive to talk about—literature!

If we want to revive a love of reading in middle school students—or create one if it has never been done—we need to play up the fun factor and allow interaction with the text and each other. Middle school students, especially 6<sup>th</sup> graders, love to play around in class. Many of them, if given the opportunity, will gladly pretend to be someone else, dance, put on a performance, play games, or engage in anything that seems fun rather than the traditional sitting in a seat answering questions about a story. As teachers, if we encourage students to play, like they did when they were small children, they will become more engaged in the lessons we create. Although playing in middle school looks very different than in kindergarten, the creative and interactive strategies that many middle school students respond to are still play. If we use the students’ natural tendency to socialize, talk, and generally be adolescents, we can guide them into appropriate and challenging interactions with literature that seem like play to them. Before they know it, they will be looking forward to language arts class and reading the next chapter of that class novel with excitement and engagement. Not to mention increasing their reading ability and achievement.

## **Demographics**

I teach at a suburban middle school serving students in grades 6-8. The school is located in Charlotte, North Carolina in the urban school district of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System. The school has a diverse population of international students from Europe, South America, and Asia. Our free and reduced lunch population is less than 20%, with most of these students being bussed in from other areas of Charlotte through NCLB legislation. The majority of my students are AIG certified, and one third of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade population is EC,

ESL, or has a 504 plan. The parent community is extremely supportive and has the financial capabilities to keep the school updated with the latest in technology. Most classrooms, including mine, are outfitted with Smart Boards. I also have two student computers, a mounted projector, and Smart Response remotes. The school has two computer labs as well as a media center that has a class set of computers, so access to computers is hardly ever a problem.

I am a full time sixth grade language arts teacher responsible for the instruction of 92 students. I work in an inclusive school, and I have two co-taught classes—one EC and one ESL. I am the lead language arts teacher for 6<sup>th</sup> grade, a member of the Instructional Leadership Team, as well as a member of the Middle School Cadre of Language Arts Teachers in CMS. I am responsible for working with CMS to train and conduct in-service for the teachers at my school in the Common Core. I have worked with Holt-McDougal to lead in-service for all 6<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teachers in the CMS district on the use of our new textbook adoption.

I teach language arts using the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCSCoS) while implementing a portion of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) since our state is implementing the CCSS completely next year. I create lessons that are challenging, yet fun and playful, in an attempt to meet the needs of my diverse population. My school's philosophy, and mine, is that all students can learn given the right motivation and tools to be successful.

### **Content Objectives**

This unit can be used to teach any of the objectives for language arts, whether you are using the Common Core Standards or a state curriculum. This is accomplished by tweaking the classroom activities to meet the needs of your students and the strengths of the particular text. The ability to address any objectives is due to the interrelated nature of literary elements, devices of author's craft, and grammar and mechanics. Any text can be used to teach any objective, or at least be a springboard for that objective.

Novels can obviously be used to teach the literary elements such as character and plot and author's craft objectives such as style and mechanics and grammar; however, a novel can also be used as a springboard for non-fiction goals such as tone, bias, and text structure by using news articles and argumentative texts on subjects related to the novel's topic and theme. Connecting any curricular objective to novel students love, will only increase their success.

### **Real World Objectives**

Real world objectives are just as important as curricular objectives, if not more important to the students in the long-run. A rich literacy program centered on the needs and

interests of the students will enhance their future career, their role as a citizen in society, and their personal life. For example, *Touching Spirit Bear*, the novel I use for this unit, the main character Cole deals with anger and working to fix his mistakes. Most of my students have very sheltered lives and have never really known anyone like Cole. In order to be a successful member of society, they need to be introduced to the rest of the world outside the affluent suburbia in which they have spent their lives. Novels are a fun and effective way to expose students to the other walks of life they will encounter as they mature and enter high school, college, and the work force.

Being able to read for information, present information and ideas in written format, and discuss ideas with others are important skills for any career. By analyzing novels, students will be able to look beyond what the author says and be able to discern why he says it and/or why he says it the way he does. Book discussions in class require them to form their own opinions and express them in a mature and respectful manner. These skills will help them in their future career, as these same skills will be necessary for success in the working world. No matter the career, reading and writing are critical skills required of all successful professionals.

In order to be an informed member of society, one must be able to read and analyze text and the media without being blindly influenced by the author's bias or stance. Looking at audience awareness and seeing the purpose behind novels, advertisements, and news articles is crucial to being an informed citizen. I want my students to become adults who know about the policies that affect them and their communities and how to initiate change on policies they do not like. They need to know they cannot rely on others to create to create a society they want to live in. They themselves will have to be involved. This requires critical thinking skills which are developed and enhanced through a rich literacy program.

Middle school is the perfect time to begin teaching them how to think for themselves in our complex society. In the real world, most problems are not black and white—there are many shades of gray to consider when making a decision. As they mature, they will be faced with complex issues and situations that require mature thought processes and decision-making skills. Exposure to such issues and situations in literature is a great way to assist them in facing the problem of adolescence and early adulthood. Being an adolescent is not easy, and giving them characters to relate to, see themselves in, and learn from is perhaps the most valuable benefit to a good literacy program in middle school. Not to mention that reading can be a great escape from the pressures of being a teenager. Giving students a positive way to deal with stress—curling up with a good book—is much better for them than many of the other outlets they may find to deal with peer pressure, the desire to fit in, and the need to find their identity.

Teaching students to analyze or create text comes second to motivating them to read. If they won't read, they will never be able to analyze or create text effectively. This is the

ultimate goal of all we do in the classroom. All strategies and activities in a middle school literacy program need to focus first on motivation, then on learning.

## **Strategies**

### Writing Strategies as a Means to Increase Reading Comprehension

In a meta-analysis of reading and writing research, Graham and Hebert found that writing in response to readings had a strong impact on reading comprehension, more so than writing summaries (Graham and Hebert, 2010). Therefore, even though the main goal of this unit is to increase reading comprehension, many of the strategies that follow are writing-focused to be in line with the current research.

### Independent Reading

Research supports the need for independent reading daily, at least 20 minutes. The amount of independent reading time has been linked to reading achievement time and time again in research studies (Robb, 2004). Independent reading improves fluency and reading rate, increases vocabulary and reading stamina, and provides them with more prior knowledge in a variety of subjects. All of these skills will lead to being a better reader. Independent reading is also a place for students to explore various genres and authors, looking for their own niche of literature, thus increasing the likelihood they will become a lifelong reader. Independent reading is usually a task for after school, at home. The problem with this is that those students who like to read will read, and those who don't won't. So if reading independently every day is the best way to increase a student's reading ability, we should be utilizing this strategy in class! The use of independent reading in any language arts class should be a given, but how do we structure it to get its full benefits? How do we hold the students accountable? We need specific activities that utilize independent reading, yet require some sort of accountability and monitoring so the reading actually happens.

### Share the Love

One of the reasons I teach language arts is because I love books. In order to create a love of reading in my students, I need to share my personal love of reading with them. Motivation is the key to increasing students' reading comprehension and time spent reading independently (Guthrie, 2001). I need to be knowledgeable and enthusiastic about books. When we go to the library, I need to recommend my favorites to my students. If I do not have a vast knowledge of adolescent literature—all genres, all levels—I am unable to assist my students in choosing a “good” book for them. I spend a great deal of my summer catching up on the current “hot” books in adolescent literature. I read the summaries online and read ones that sound particularly interesting to the

population I teach. When I recommend a book to a student, I talk it up, I *sell* it to them. I make my tone excited and my face lights up because I am so excited about this book. I make them think I might check it out for myself so they better grab it quick or they will miss out. If I am dealing with a student who knows they are nothing like me, I tell them about the tons of kids who read it last year and loved it who were just like them. Attitude is everything when dealing with reluctant readers. They need to feel like they are missing out on something by not being a reader. Use their desire to fit in to your advantage.

Being knowledgeable about a plethora of genres and levels also makes it impossible for students to trick me about a book because, chances are, I am familiar with the author's style, themes, and character types even if I haven't read that particular title. I often will read the first book in a series so I am familiar with the characters, settings, and the basic plot lines the author will use throughout the series.

### Read Aloud/Think Aloud

The teacher is the expert reader in the classroom. Modeling how to read is essential to building fluent readers (Blau, 2011). When reading aloud, a teacher models voice expression and dialect, as well as how to read complex sentence structures. I use teacher read-aloud almost daily in my classroom and I truly believe it improves students' fluency and their self-efficacy in reading. However, this is only effective if the students are following along with the text. Teachers need to be their students' treadmill for reading. The students mentally read along, mimicking the teacher's reading. Stopping periodically to comment and question as you read aloud—known as a think aloud—will also add benefit to the reading. Modeling what happens in the mind of a good reader will enable students to begin engaging with the text in a new way, a way that is enjoyable, makes the characters and setting come alive for them. The experience of reading needs to be made visible to students and this is accomplished best through a read aloud/think aloud on a regular basis. For class novels, especially in heterogeneously grouped classes, teacher read aloud is essential.

### Text Me!

In the age of technology, adolescents love their cell phones and computers. Why not use that to our advantage? In Text Me! the students put themselves into the role of a character and email or text another character, or the maybe the author. By assuming the role of a character, they can pretend to be someone else so the pressure is lessened—they do not have to express their personal feelings about a topic. Whatever they say in their piece is coming from the character, not them personally. By playing the role of a character, the students must really understand that character's beliefs, but they also need to be able to mimic vocabulary and speech style. They can practice these essential skills from the perspective of someone else which makes it more fun and playful than a traditional writing assignment.

## Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

I use this strategy to teach various writing modes. In groups, or even as a whole class, the students create a newspaper from the book's setting. Some will write a news article, while others write an editorial or a letter of complaint to a government official. This is a playful way to work on their non-fiction text structures or argumentative style. Since many types of writing are used in a newspaper, you can assign students pieces that will best meet their needs at that time in the year. Political cartoons and advertisements related to the story can also be included. This can be a one night assignment where everyone works on their piece individually, or you could publish an actual newspaper using many students' pieces.

## Character Book Talks

Sometimes students do not read because they do not know what books are "good." Students who do not read on a regular basis have no favorite author, genre, or type of book. Book talks completed by other students will give them the opportunity to hear about a variety of books that might interest them. Hearing about it from a peer increases the cool factor exponentially, especially if you can get the popular kids in front of the room recommending their personal favorites. A great way to play up the fun of a book talk is to have the student dress up and pretend to be a character from the book. Have the character speak to the class, convincing them to read his/her story. In a character book talk, the student acts as if he/she is that character—it doesn't always have to be the main character. Have them become the villain.

## Postcard from Characters

Coming up with playful writing strategies can be challenging when you still need the assignment to meet a serious writing objective. Postcards from Characters is a strategy that can be used to meet a challenging objective, such as audience awareness or author's tone. This strategy incorporates drawing (or visual technology) and writing skills in a fun way. Students choose or are assigned a scene from the book that is important or challenging. On one side of an index card, they draw the scene, focusing on the setting details. For the non-artistic students, the Internet or magazine pictures or even digital photos choreographed by them can be used. On the other side of the index card, students write a short, but thought-out note from one character to another. This is difficult since the space is so limited. Each word must be chosen carefully. This provides the opportunity for a specific and precise vocabulary lesson as well as the characterization of the chosen (or assigned) character.

## Writing a Reader's Theater Script



Reader's Theater is a commonly-used strategy in elementary school, but in middle school it is rarely used. The benefits of reader's theater, including fluency and public speaking, are still important skills to focus on during the middle years. Students with fluency issues or fears of speaking in front of their peers can play around with text in a less frightening way than traditional public speaking situations such as presenting a report on Abraham Lincoln or some other historical figure the entire class already knows about and couldn't care less about. However, by allowing the students to take a favorite book, short story, or even an event from that historical figure's life, and create a reader's theater script to perform, the activity becomes playful and beneficial for the entire class. Taking a larger work, the students must determine the gist of a scene by creating a conversation between two or more characters. This requires them to determine what each character would say and with what tone the lines would be delivered. This activity is now much higher level than the traditional reader's theater. Add some props and you have a mini-play. If you want to work in perspective as a goal, give each group a different character from whose perspective to write the scene. Let them play around with the characters to see whose version is the most interesting, plausible, or realistic.

### Museum Exhibits

Students either love non-fiction or hate it. A playful way to motivate students to research topics related to their novels or stories is to create museum exhibits. Before researching, have students brainstorm the various types of exhibits they have seen at hands-on museums and festivals. As they research, have them focus their ideas for a playful exhibit of their own. It could be a diorama, a dance, a performance, a painting, a model, or even a game. The object is to somehow involve the museum goers in the exhibit. When their exhibits are complete, other classes, or even parents, can tour the museum. This strategy creates an authentic audience and a real-world experience for the students and the visitors.

### Split Character Drawing

This strategy requires students to think about the changes a character has undergone from the beginning to the end of the book. Take a large sheet of paper and divide it vertically with a line down the center. The left side of the paper is for the beginning of the story; the right half is for the end of the story. Students draw an outline of a character's body on the paper and decorate the background and the character with symbols and objects that represent the character at the appropriate time of the story. Encourage creative and symbolic thinking to increase the rigor of this strategy.

## **Classroom Activities**

Lesson One: Chapter 1-3

Yesterday we began a novel called *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson. Our main character, Cole is a violent 15 year old that has injured another student, Peter, and is now facing criminal charges. His probation officer, Garvey, has given him the chance to avoid jail by participating in a system called Circle Justice, a Native American tradition that works to heal the offender and the victim. Cole has chosen this route, and is banished to a remote Alaskan island for a year with the help of a Tlingit Indian, Edwin, who prepares the island by building Cole a shelter. On his first day alone on the island, Cole burns down his shelter and attempts to escape.

As students enter the room, they hear Native American music playing and are instructed to begin on the warm up activity based on yesterday's reading: Text Me! Pretend you are a character involved in yesterday's reading of chapter 1-3 in *Touching Spirit Bear* by Ben Mikaelson. Write a text as one character from the following list to another character on the list about the events that happened in yesterday's chapters. Be sure to be true to the character and use texting language. Think about how the character would sound if they were reading this aloud.

Character List:

Garvey  
Edwin  
Cole  
Peter  
Mom  
Dad

After a few minutes, I announce that we will play Musical Pairs (Solner and Kluth, 2008). In this game, students dance around the room and stop to share their responses with their classmates. I will again play Native American music to help set the mood of the novel we are currently reading. When the music plays, they dance. When the music stops, they turn to the closest person and share their response to the warm up in the voice of the chosen character.

Students complete three or four rounds and then dance back to their seats where we will debrief the activity with a short whole class discussion. Which character was most popular? Who was the easiest character to do and why? Who was the most difficult? Who had the funniest text? Who had the most realistic sounding text? Whose text sounded most like themselves? How did the music enhance the activity?

Next, I give a short lesson on the characterization methods, discussing how an author can make his characters come alive for the reader in various ways—direct description, physical appearance, what they say/think, their actions and behaviors, and how others react to them. We review the setting and mood of the story from the previous lesson and discuss how that might impact the characters and their traits at this point in the story. As a

class, we complete a bubble map for Cole. Independently, or with a partner, they complete a bubble map for Garvey, which is a little more challenging. Using large paper and colorful markers makes this activity more fun for the students.

As an independent practice, students complete a Postcard from a Character on an unlined 5 x 7 index card. They may either choose to be Garvey or Cole. First they must draw a picture of the setting, capturing the mood of the place and time. Then on the other side, they write a short, postcard-type note to the other character, expressing how they feel about the situation and using the appropriate vocabulary and tone of the chosen character. Then they must assume the role of the other character and respond—again drawing the setting where that character is.

### Lesson Two: Chapters 4-6

As the students enter the room, the warm up is posted on the board and they are instructed to share their postcard with their novel team (a group of six students they sit with during the novel study). The team chooses one postcard that stands out in some way and that one is shared with the whole class.

Next, I conduct a read aloud/ think aloud of chapters 4-6, focusing on character behaviors, motivations, and other pertinent character information as I read. In these chapters we learn about community members who are involved in deciding the sentencing of a juvenile delinquent, Cole, through a system call Circle Justice. They hold meetings called Healing Circles to determine the best route for Cole to help him heal and not become a repeat offender. Only the main characters are given dialogue in this scene of the book, but over 24 people are in the meeting.

After reading these chapters we will discuss what would compel a stranger to participate in such an activity. What might be the motivations of a person who does not know Cole, but would give up their time to participate in his Healing Circle meetings? After a short discussion, the novel teams are given the task of writing a Reader's Theater script for a Healing Circle which must include Cole and his parents, Peter and his parents, both attorneys, and at least three community members. They will write and practice these scripts for the remainder of class and perform their mini play tomorrow. They are encouraged to create masks for their different characters. In the novel, a feather is used as a symbol of respect and only the person with the feather may speak. Having a feather for the presentations will add some fun.

### Lesson Three: Performances

After the performances, we will read chapters 7-10, where Cole is attacked by the Spirit Bear. The reading of these chapters is very intense, so I purposefully read it as a large chunk. This really grabs their interest and makes them eager to read more. For

homework, they are to finish Part One, which goes through chapter 13 in which Cole is found, half dead and is eventually taken to the hospital in his hometown of Minneapolis, Minnesota. Today is all about motivating them to read on their own.

#### Lesson Four: End of Part One Split Character Drawing

As a warm up activity for today, they will describe one change in Cole from the beginning of Part One to the end of Part One, using textual evidence to support the change.

We will share their warm up responses and then they will be instructed to create a split character drawing of Cole showing the before and after sides of him using symbols and colors to play up the changes. They will work with one member of their novel team, so three drawings per team will be created. Once completed, they will share their drawings with their team and each drawing will be posted around the room or on a bulletin board for all students to see. Again, using large poster paper and colorful markers enhances the fun for the students.

Next, we will predict what changes we might see in Part Two. Then we will read and discuss chapters 14-16 to see if there is any indication our predictions were correct.

#### Lesson Five: Extra! Extra! Read All About It! and Part Two

As students enter the room, the warm up activity is posted on the board: What do you think a spirit bear is like? Do you think this is a real or fictional animal? Explain.

After we discuss their ideas about spirit bears, I project the Google homepage on the screen. I play like I have no idea if spirit bears are real or not and tell them we should Google it to see if they are fictional or not. Of course, they are real, and next we will go to the computer lab so they can research and learn about spirit bears, which we learned are also called Kermode Bears. For this assignment students will read from a website (<http://www.bearlife.org/kermode-bear.html>) and an online magazine article from *National Geographic* (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/08/kermode-bear/barcott-text>). They will complete a mini research assignment on spirit bears where they answer the following questions:

1. What kind of bear is a spirit bear/Kermode Bear?
2. What is their habitat?
3. What do they eat—carnivore, herbivore, omnivore?
4. Are they common, protected, or endangered?
5. List one interesting or important fact about Kermode Bears.

After the research we will also discuss how this type of writing is very different from narrative writing.

After our trip to the computer lab, we read and discuss chapters 17-18 in class. For homework they will begin researching a topic for a newspaper article to be written later. Each team member will have a different topic: Cole (pull textual evidence about his crimes and recovery), spirit bears (for the strugglers), Circle Justice, juvenile delinquency, detention centers, and medical procedures (those likely to be used to fix Cole's injuries). The topics differ in difficulty and should be assigned accordingly to the appropriate team member.

In day two of this lesson, we read and discuss chapters 19-20 in class. Then I give a short lesson on newspaper article, projecting "Scary and Ineffective" (Robinson and Slowikowski, 2011) on the projector screen to analyze for vocabulary and style. ([http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-31/news/bs-ed-scared-straight-20110131\\_1\\_straight-type-programs-straight-program-youths](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-31/news/bs-ed-scared-straight-20110131_1_straight-type-programs-straight-program-youths)) Using this information, they will pretend they work for local paper as a columnist and write an article for the local paper on their assigned topic from yesterday. Each student will be instructed to save their article to a flash drive for use in class tomorrow.

In day three of the lesson, students are placed back into their teams, where each student had a different topic. Today their team will take all the articles from their members and put them together into a newspaper using Microsoft publisher. They will also add appropriate advertisements (psychological counseling services, camps for "bad" kids, etc.) and an editorial for and against Cole. If students have not been exposed to these types of writing, they can be omitted or the lesson can be extended to include propaganda, persuasive, and argumentative writing. For homework, they will read chapters 21-24 where the reader learns that Peter has attempted suicide twice and his parents are desperate to help him. In the end of the reading, Cole suggests Peter come to the island with him to allow Cole to help him heal emotionally from his experience.

#### Lesson Six: Character Book Talks

As a warm up activity today, the students will pretend they are Peter, the boy who was beaten up by Cole earlier in the book, and write a list of demands if he is to agree to come to the island. I want their mind to focus on Peter for this portion of the text, because his motivation and behavior will be lost if they are still focusing on Cole alone.

Today we will begin by discussing the warm up and the reading from last night. Do you think Peter will come? What will happen when Cole sees Peter? What will happen if Peter doesn't come to the island? What impact will this have on Cole and Peter? What would make Peter agree to come to the island? Do you think Peter needs Cole's help?

After a brief discussion, the students will be eager to read, so we will read and discuss the ending of the book. Peter eventually gets his revenge on Cole and Cole takes it without fighting back, indicating he has truly changed. Cole helps Peter to see that

change is possible and they see the spirit bear. For homework, they will pretend to be a character from the book—anyone they want—and write a short paragraph from that character’s perspective, recommending that other students read the book.

## Lesson Seven: Museum Exhibits

In this multi-day lesson students create their own museum exhibits to share with other students, parents, and administration. One of the exhibits will be a running tape of their character book talks which will be taped today. This will be played in a continuous stream at the “museum”. Their newspapers will also be on display. Each student will be responsible for one other exhibit. It can be anything they learned about from the book—spirit bears, Circle Justice, Alaska, juvenile delinquency, anger management, bear attacks—the list is endless. They can create a diorama, a model, a painting, a totem pole, a blanket, a dance, a song, a food from the novel—again, the list is endless. I purposely keep it open to allow for creativity and encourage them to think outside the box. This will make the museum more authentic and enjoyable. Once the exhibits are ready, open your museum for visitors. The students have a blast with this!

## Resources

### For the Teacher

Barcott, Bruce. "Kermode Bear." *National Geographic*, August 2011.  
<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2011/08/kermode-bear/barcott-text> (accessed November 8, 2011).

This article not only has great information, but the pictures are fantastic! There is even a link to a graph about the genetics of the bear.

Blau, Lisa. "5 Surefire Strategies for Developing Reading Fluency | Scholastic.com." Scholastic | Children's Books and Book Club | Scholastic.com.  
<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/5-surefire-strategies-developing-reading-fluency> (accessed November 19, 2011).

This is a one-page article that outlines five basic reading instruction strategies and their benefits.

Guthrie, John T.. "Contexts for engagement and motivation in reading." *Reading online*, March 2011.  
[http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art\\_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html](http://www.readingonline.org/articles/art_index.asp?HREF=/articles/handbook/guthrie/index.html) (accessed November 19, 2011).

In this chapter summary from the Handbook of Reading Research: Volume III Guthrie discusses engaged reading and how students' motivation plays a key role. Instructional contexts that foster reading engagement and motivation are presented.

"Kermode Spirit Bear: facts, information." Bear! Polar bears, Panda, Koala, Black, Grizzly, Red, Brown, & More!. <http://www.bearlife.org/kermode-bear.html> (accessed November 20, 2011).

This site offers information about Kermode Bears in a very organized and student-friendly fashion.

Robinson, Laurie, and Jeff Slowikowski. "Scary and Ineffective." *The Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 2011. [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-31/news/bs-ed-scared-straight-20110131\\_1\\_straight-type-programs-straight-program-youths](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-01-31/news/bs-ed-scared-straight-20110131_1_straight-type-programs-straight-program-youths) (accessed November 17, 2011).

This article is a great example of a newspaper article. I chose this article because it is related to the book's main character and the author's perspective of how to effectively help troubled teens not become future offenders.

Solner, Alice, and Paula Kluth. *Joyful learning: active and collaborative learning in inclusive classrooms*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2008.

I received this book at an in-service for inclusion practices. It has a plethora of interactive strategies that my students love, EC or not.

Graham, S., and Hebert, M.A. *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010.

A fabulous resource for any teacher. It outlines the effect of various writing strategies and activities on reading comprehension both in literature selections and content readings.

### Reading List for Students

Abbott, Tony, and Alex Lawn. *City of the dead*. New York: Scholastic, 2009.

This is an easy read for middle school students. It is a science fiction book that deals with the idea that the dead could return and inhabit the bodies of people who are dying. Derek, the main character, finds this has happened to his brother.

Clayton, Emma. *The roar*. New York: Chicken House, 2009.

This futuristic science fiction book has a female protagonist that boys and girls will both relate to. It is a long book, so it may be better as an independent read or book club selection rather than a class novel.

Collins, Suzanne. *The Hunger Games*. New York: Scholastic Press, 2008.

Middle school students love this series! It is too intense for elementary students, though. This was my first choice for the unit, but I could not get permission due to the edginess of it—a great motivation. All my students are reading it now! Ban a book and kids are sure to read it.

Hinton, S. E.. *That was then, this is now*. [1st ed. New York: Viking Press, 1971.

Like the better known Hinton classic *The Outsiders*, this book has an edge and some mature content including drug use. I have used it with 7th graders, but would not use it with 6th graders. It follows the friendship of two high school boys, and the students are always floored at the ending because it is not your typical happily-ever-after.

Korman, Gordon. *Chasing the Falconers*. New York: Scholastic, 2005.

This is a great book for reluctant, low-level readers in upper elementary and early middle school. It is about two kids, a boy and a girl, who start off in federal protection and end up running for their lives. It is the first in a series.

Mikaelsen, Ben. *Touching Spirit Bear*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

This is the book I chose to use for my unit. It has an edgy main character and plot line.

Prineas, Sarah, and Javier Caparo. *The magic thief*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

Sara Prineas came to our school two years ago and spoke to our 6th graders about writing. She is so down to earth and has written a gem of a book for fantasy lovers.

Riordan, Rick. *The lightning thief*. New York: Miramax Books/Hyperion Books for Children, 2005.

The well-known first book of the Percy Jackson series was written by a middle school language arts teacher turned author. This book is an easy read in middle school and is



appropriate for upper elementary as well.

Sage, Angie, and Mark Zug. *Septimus Heap*. Advance reading copy. ed. New York: Katherine Tegen Books, 2005.

Angie Sage came to our school last year and spoke to the 6th graders about her writing inspirations--much of which come from her home in England. This series is fantastic for avid readers--seven books--and there is talk of a movie deal.

Weyn, Suzanne. *The bar code tattoo*. New York: Scholastic, 2004.

This futuristic science fiction book with a strong female protagonist is a great choice if you want to connect to science content of genetics. My male students loved this book too. It deals with the ideas of people being tagged through a tattoo that determines their status in society. There is a brief kissing scene that needs to be considered when selecting the book.

#### Materials for Classroom Use

Computer connected to projector with screen

Index cards for postcard assignment

Native American music CD or Pandora.com or groove shark.com

Microsoft Publisher

Computer lab for student use

Class set of *Touching Spirit Bear* or other novel

Large paper or poster board

Markers

Feather for Sentencing Circle Performances

Appendix A  
Implementing District Standards

North Carolina Standard Course of Study for 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts

1.03 Interact appropriately in group settings.

Throughout the unit, students are working in teams, which require them to listen and be a team player. When we discuss the chapters of *Touching Spirit Bear* and the experiences of the characters, empathy and personal connections abound.

2.01 Explore informational materials that are read, heard, and/or viewed.

The research done on spirit bears and their assigned newspaper topics addressed this standard. In every unit, I utilize fiction and non-fiction resources so students can deepen their understanding of the world and literature through broadening their knowledge base.

5.01 Increase fluency, comprehension, and insight through a meaningful and comprehensive literacy program.

This is the focus of this unit. In order to increase fluency, comprehension, and insight in middle school students, the literature must be relevant to their lives and interests, while opening their eyes to the world beyond their neighborhood.

5.02 Study the characteristics of literary genres.

By reading fiction and non-fiction in the same unit, students are able to see the different defining characteristics of each genre. When they create their own text, they must apply this knowledge.

6.01 Demonstrate an understanding of conventional written and spoken expression.

This goal is worked on mostly through their writing assignments, but it is also touched upon in class discussions. This is a very individualized goal. While speaking to the class, all students must use proper grammar and Standard English, or they are corrected. For example, when they make a personal connection and say, "My mom and me were..." I make them start over and say it correctly: "My mom and I..."