

Reaching Out to Understand Others

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TEED 521
Literacy
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THEMATIC FRAMEWORK: CENTRAL QUESTIONS

I have great hopes for my students as I prepare them for an ever changing and increasingly interdependent world. I have specific social and academic goals but my guiding principle is that my students learn to understand others. It is harder to hate or fear if you understand. If I am successful, the knowledge and skills I teach my students will become the tools they need to make informed and reasoned decisions not just for themselves but for the public good. At the end of this themed literature unit I want my students to be able to answer these questions:

1. What does it mean to understand others?
2. Why is it important to reach out to others?
3. What can each of us do to reach out to others?

THEMATIC FRAMEWORK: RATIONALE

The answers to those questions dovetail nicely with the central questions found in my “Explorers” social studies unit plan. In that unit my focus is on what the European explorers (during the Age of Discovery) were hoping to find and why they were willing to risk so much. More succinctly, what motivated them? And what could both the explorers and the Native Americans have learned if they had reached out to one another more? Although they don’t share common content, the central questions of my social studies and literature units match quite closely.

I intentionally made the decision to use different content because I didn’t want to artificially limit my choices of literature. I wanted to avoid having to make compromises on quality just because they met content criteria. This decision freed me to make selections based on great literature, and based on what I knew would resonate most profoundly with

these students. That decision also allowed me to assemble a list of books that closely matched the abilities of this class so all students have the opportunity to read independently and develop a real love of literature.

The learning targets in this unit align closely with EALRs for the fifth grade. Students will understand ideas and concepts in multiple texts (Reading 2.4.6). They will apply the comprehension monitoring strategies of predicting and inferring (Reading 2.1.5). Students will first determine and then use theme to increase comprehension (Reading 2.1.3). They will also evaluate books and authors to share common literary experiences (Reading 4.2.1). Students will write for different purposes (Writing 2.2) and to develop concept and design (Writing 1.1). Finally, they will be expected to work cooperatively as members of groups (Communication 3.2) and to use language to interact effectively and responsibly with others (Communication 3.1).

Developmentally, the issues introduced in this unit are particularly appropriate for fifth graders to begin pondering. Children at this age begin to move beyond a predominantly egocentric outlook on life. They are on the cusp of adolescence and an entirely new developmental stage. Understanding and reaching out to others seem like particularly important skills for both their academic and social development.

Erickson believed that children at this age are moving or getting ready to move from what he called the latency stage into adolescence. Their task in adolescence is to achieve ego identity and avoid role confusion. It is at this stage that students start trying on other personas to see how they fit. I think having some rudimentary skills in ascertaining what motivates other people would be very beneficial—both in helping them develop a deeper understanding others and in avoiding hurtful choices for themselves.

Also, according to the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, this is the age at which students are able to think abstractly for the first time as they move into the formal stage of development. This is the point when speech and practical activity, two previously independent paths of development converge. I want to be there for that, and I cannot imagine a more ethically relevant topic than reaching out and seeing the world through eyes of another person.

THEMATIC FRAMEWORK: LEARNERS

The range of academic abilities in this class of 26 is quite broad. All 10 of the girls operate at or above grade level in reading and writing. A few of the 16 boys work at grade level, but quite a few are well below. Their social development tends to mirror their academic abilities. This unit requires students to work cooperatively in both pairs and small groups. Carefully selected heterogeneous groups should overcome any individual deficiencies and allow students to help one another. And these students really want to work in groups. From an Interest Inventory I conducted I learned that 18 out of 26 prefer to work in groups rather than alone.

This class is racially diverse. The families of 12 out of 26 kids identified themselves as members of a minority group. A relatively even distribution exists among the classifications of Hispanic, Indian, Black and Asian. The literature circle book choices were specifically chosen because of their inclusiveness of racial minorities and sensitivity to economic differences.

Although three students have official limited English proficiency, only one of these students is pulled out of the classroom for specific ELL training. None require modification of assignments.

There are two special education students. One has a specific learning disability and requires assistance in reading, math and writing. The other is health-impaired and requires assistance in reading, math, writing and speech. Both these students receive in-class resource service from a special education teacher. Coordination with this teacher and carefully selected grouping will assure that these students are able to keep pace with the rest of the class.

The school is located in the Fremont neighborhood of Seattle. While, most of Fremont has been gentrified in the recent past, a relatively wide corridor around I-99 contains the low-cost housing from which most of the 49% of the students who are at the school on free and reduced lunch live. I-99 splits the B.F. Day neighborhood right down the middle. Although it no longer has the official designation within the Seattle Public school system, the school still attracts a large number of homeless youth who are bused in from all over the city. In this unit students will have the opportunity to read books about foster care and economic deprivation. Sensitive handling will be necessary if/when this material is related to students' personal lives.

<p><u>Learning Target & Category</u></p> <p>1. Students will make inferences and predictions based on evidence in the text. (Skill/Strategy)</p>	<p><u>EALRs Addressed</u></p> <p>Reading 2.1.5 Apply comprehension monitoring strategies before, during, and after reading: predict and infer.</p> <p>Writing 2.2 Write for different purposes.</p>	<p><u>Evidence of Achievement & Assessment Type</u></p> <p>Performance Assessment: Formative After the first literature circle discussion students will make predictions in their writing response journals about what they think will happen in the book they are reading. They will support their inferences and predictions with evidence found in the text.</p> <p>Performance Assessment: Summative After the final discussion, students will be asked to return to these predictions and assess whether or not they came true. Students will demonstrate their understanding by identifying the most meaningful clues from the books and being able to explain whether their predictions were plausible or whether they overlooked evidence from the book.</p>
<p><u>Learning Target & Category</u></p> <p>2. Students will work cooperatively in a variety of group settings. (Skill/Process)</p>	<p><u>EALRs Addressed</u></p> <p>Communication 3.1 Use language to interact effectively and responsibly with others.</p> <p>Communication 3.2 Work cooperatively as a member of a group.</p>	<p><u>Evidence of Achievement & Assessment Type</u></p> <p>Personal Communication: Formative After the first of three discussion groups in this unit, students will complete an evaluation of other members of their group in an effort to provide constructive feedback to their fellow students. Students will use a cooperative group work rubric to assign each group member a score between one and four. (4—Exemplary, 3—Expected, 2—Below Expectations, 1—No Effort) Those who give out scores of two or lower to other students must provide specific ideas about how the individual could improve performance.</p> <p>Personal Communication: Formative After the second discussion, students will score themselves using a self-assessment rubric. Those scoring a two or lower will need to provide a specific written course of action for improving their performance.</p> <p>Personal Communication: Summative After the final discussion, students will assess themselves once again using the same rubric.</p>

<p><u>Learning Target & Category</u></p> <p>3. Students will identify important points in the text that are central to the theme. (Skill/Strategy)</p>	<p><u>EALRs Addressed</u></p> <p>Reading 2.1.3 Apply comprehension monitoring strategies before, during, and after reading; determine importance using theme, main ideas and supporting details.</p>	<p><u>Evidence of Achievement & Assessment Type</u></p> <p>Performance Assessment: Formative In their writing response journals students will identify golden lines in the text that help them understand and appreciate the central theme the author is attempting to convey. They will also explain how the golden lines are central to the theme.</p> <p>Performance Assessment: Formative As an extension project, students will create bookmarks that graphically depict a favorite character on one side. On the other side, students will write the golden line from the book that encompasses the theme of reaching out to understand other people and resonates most strongly with the student. They will also include an explanation of how the golden line is central to the theme in their writing response journal.</p>
<p><u>Learning Target & Category</u></p> <p>4. Students will understand what it means to reach out and understand others. (Concept/Generalization)</p> <p>We can never truly know ourselves until we understand other people.</p> <p>Despite differences, at the most fundamental level most people have the same basic needs and desires.</p> <p>Reaching out to others can be risky and often demands sacrifice.</p> <p>If we understand someone it is more difficult to hate or fear them.</p>	<p><u>EALRs Addressed</u></p> <p>Reading 2.4.6 Understand ideas and concepts in multiple texts.</p> <p>Reading 4.2.1 Evaluate books and authors to share common literary experiences.</p> <p>Writing 1.1 Develop concept and design.</p>	<p><u>Evidence of Achievement & Assessment Type</u></p> <p>Personal Communication: Pre-Assessment Students will respond to writing prompts about any prior knowledge they might have about reaching out to understand others.</p> <p>Performance Assessment: Formative As an extension project, students will write reviews of the best book they have read from the school library. The focus of the review will be on how the book allowed the students to either better understand themselves or others. These reviews will be published and handsomely posted in the school library as a service learning project.</p> <p>Performance Assessment: Post-Assessment Writing from the perspective of a character found in their chosen book, students will write a letter to another character in the same book. They will use one of the generalizations from the theme to explain a decision or action that wasn't specifically addressed in the book. The letters must reference evidence found in the book to support the student's premise. Although students will be encouraged to generate their own topics, students will get a specific idea and characters from which to work if they are unable to develop an original idea.</p>

PRE-ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT: PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

This pre-assessment will be used to gather data about any prior knowledge students may have as it relates to the theme. It will be used to help guide the first focus lesson when as a class we will discuss what it means by reaching out to understand others.

Reaching Out to Understand Others

1. What does it mean to understand others?
2. When is it helpful to consider other viewpoints? Describe a time when you considered another perspective.
3. Pick somebody you know really well. Describe a situation where you could predict their actions and tell why you think they would make a particular choice.
4. When you make important decisions in your life, what are the things you consider?

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT: PERFORMANCE

Character Letter

Directions: In your writing response journals you made predictions based on evidence from the book you read. To complete this assignment, you will use the skills you learned in that lesson. In these books you met some very colorful characters—hopefully they came alive for you as you were reading.

For this assignment, I want you to imagine that they are real people. Your task is to write a letter from one fictional character to another. The purpose of the letter is to explain the reasons behind a decision that one of the characters made. You can choose your own issue and set of characters, but if you are stuck, here are suggested letters for each book:

Bridge to Terabithia

Write a letter from Jess to Leslie before they became good friends and explain why Jess felt threatened by her.

The Great Gilly Hopkins

Write a letter from Gilly to her Mom and explain what Gilly wants from her.

Charlotte's Web

Write a letter from Fern to Wilbur explaining why she didn't want him to be killed.

The Lion, the With and the Wardrobe

Write a letter from Edmund to Lucy explaining why he pretended to have never been to Narnia.

The Sign of the Beaver

Write a letter from Attean to Matt about why he bothers to show up for his reading lessons.

Writing Directions: Write a draft of your letter. Be sure to use words and figures of speech that make your writing come alive and paint vivid mental pictures for your audience. Read the letter out loud to your literature circle group. Get and give advice to each other. Take those suggestions and then write a final version of your letter.

Cooperative Group Work

Remember that a good group member:

- Listens to others.
- Keeps an open mind.
- Contributes ideas and suggestions.
- Always treats everyone with respect.
- Asks good questions.
- Helps everyone stay on task.

Directions: Rate yourself based upon how well you interacted with your group.
Choose one:

4 — EXEMPLARY

You *consistently* and *actively* helped your classmates to achieve their goals. You communicate well with others and encourage them. You *willingly* share materials and the responsibilities of cleanup.

3 — EXPECTED

You *usually* help your classmates to achieve their goals. You *generally* communicate well with others and encourage them. You share materials and the responsibilities of cleanup.

2 — BELOW EXPECTATIONS

You *sometimes* help your classmates to achieve their goals.

1 — NO EFFORT

You *do very little* to help your classmates to achieve their goals.

Directions: Answer one of the following questions.

What can I do to improve my work within groups in the future?

— *or* —

What did you learn about yourself by working in this group?

COMMUNICATION TO FAMILIES & COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Dear Family,

As you already know from my last letter, our class began a social studies unit on the European explorers during the Age of Discovery. We will soon start a literature unit that shares many of the same themes.

In our Explorers unit we are learning about what these people were hoping to find and why they were willing to risk so much. More succinctly, what motivated them? And what could both the explorers and the Native Americans have learned if they had reached out to one another?

In our literature unit we will learn about what we mean by reaching out to understand others. We will let the following thematic generalizations from our chosen books guide our discussions:

- We can never truly know ourselves until we understand other people.
- Despite differences, at the most fundamental level most people have the same basic needs and desires.
- Reaching out to others can be risky and often demands sacrifice.
- If we understand someone it is more difficult to hate or fear or them.

In addition to various reading and writing assignments, the students will actively participate in literature circles. They will meet in small groups of five to six students to discuss the books they have read. We will focus on the following learning targets:

- Students will make inferences and predictions based on evidence in the text.
- Students will work cooperatively in a variety of group settings.
- Students will identify important points in the text that are central to the theme.

I have chosen books that are appropriate in both content and reading level. Each student will be given the opportunity to make a first, second and third choice. I hope as many students as possible get their first choice.

Book choices include:

Charlotte's Web

Bridge to Terabithia

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

The Great Gilly Hopkins

The Sign of the Beaver

If you absolutely love (or hate) one of these titles please share your thoughts. I think it would be wonderful if we could get parent volunteers to act as discussion facilitators. Let me know if you are interested and available.

As the unit progresses, be sure to ask your student to share what is happening. We will be dealing with some fairly heavy-hitting emotional topics so the more they can discuss with you, the deeper they will be able to understand the chosen themes.

At the end of the unit students will be able to bring home their writing response journals and the culminating project of this unit which will be a letter they have written from one character to another from the book they will read. In an extension project, students will also write reviews of the best book they have read from the B.F. Day school library. The focus of the review will be on how the book allowed them to either better understand themselves or others. These reviews will be published and handsomely posted in the school library. I'm hoping this assignment will live on at B.F. Day long after your student has graduated.

Sincerely,

Dirk Vonderlage
email address
phone number

LESSON OUTLINE

Week One (Learning Target #2 & 4)

Focus Lessons:

- How to choose a good book
- The responsibilities of a group member

Activities:

- Read aloud *Swimmy* followed by introduction and class discussion of theme
- Introduce themed literature unit and explain how it is related to Explorers social studies unit
- Distribute and discuss pre-assessment instrument on reaching out to understand others
- Conduct book talks
- Give students choice in forming literature circle groups
- Introduce writing response journals
- Begin read aloud of *Tuck Everlasting*

Week Two (Learning Target #2 & 4)

Focus Lessons:

- Making inferences and predictions based on evidence in the text
- Finding golden lines

Activities:

- Class time to read first third of books
- Literature circles will meet for first time to create guidelines and assign roles if desired
- Respond to prompts in writing response journal
- Begin collecting golden lines in writing response journals
- Continue read aloud of *Tuck Everlasting*

Week Three (Learning Targets #1, 2 & 4)

Focus Lesson:

- Finding evidence to support a point

Activities:

- Class time to read second third of books
- Literature circles will meet for first time with teacher observation
- First peer assessment rubric will be completed for group work
- Respond to prompts in writing response journal
- Continue collecting golden lines in writing response journals
- Make predictions in writing response journals
- Write draft of book review extension project
- Continue read aloud of *Tuck Everlasting*

Week Four (Learning Targets #1, 2, 3 & 4)

Activities:

- Class time to read final third of books
- Literature circles will meet for second time with teacher observation
- First self assessment rubric will be completed for group work
- Respond to prompts in writing response journal
- Finish collecting golden lines in writing response journals
- Design and publish book review extension project
- Create character and golden line bookmark
- Finish read aloud of *Tuck Everlasting*

Week Five (Learning Targets #1, 2 & 4)

Activities:

- Literature circles will meet for third time with teacher observation
- Final self assessment rubric will be completed for group work
- Student review of accuracy of predictions in writing response journals
- Character Letter writing (draft and final)
- Read Character Letters to other Literature Circle group members
- Final reflection on unit in writing response journals

INTRODUCING THE THEME

I will begin the first session of this themed literature unit by reading aloud *Swimmy* by Leo Lionni. This short and sweet picture book goes to the heart of our Reaching Out to Understand Others theme. I'll engage the students in a brief discussion about the lesson(s) that Swimmy learned.

I will tell them that we are beginning a literature unit that will focus on reaching out to understand others. I will explain to them how this theme relates to those we will study in our Explorers social studies unit. I will tell them I have chosen five outstanding works of literature and that they will be able to choose the books that they want to read the most. I will assure them that every student will find a book that is personally meaningful and that matches their reading ability. To build anticipation I will tell them that they will need to wait until the next day to find out which books have been selected.

I will then ask them to respond in writing to my pre-assessment prompts. I will draw the class together to discuss what they have written. Together we will begin to build a concept map around the theme of Reaching Out to Understand Others. The concept map will be drawn on a large piece of butcher paper. It will hang in the classroom throughout the unit. Additions will be made by both the whole class and by individual literature circle groups.

CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

During the unit students will help complete the concept map. And from that map we will agree as a class on a few generalizations about our theme. Students will have completed other extension projects that demonstrate their understanding of the theme and responded to prompts in their writing response journals. But the final assignment will require a synthesis of everything they have learned. In the Character Letter assignment, students will assume the persona of a character in the book they read and write a letter to another character in the same book. They will use one of the generalizations from the theme to explain a decision or action that wasn't specifically addressed in the book.

Students will be highly encouraged to come up with their own choice of characters and situation. However I will provide a fallback situation and characters for each book if individual students are simply stuck. In the final class period students will read aloud their letter to the other members of their literature circle group. After allowing sufficient time for discussion I will ask students to write in their response journals to these prompts:

- What was the most important thing you learned during this unit? Why?
- What did you like the best?
- What would you recommend I change for students next year?

TECHNOLOGY

On Thursday mornings I teach these students basic computer skills in the computer lab at B. F. Day. Sometime before this unit starts I will teach them some rudimentary desktop publishing skills in Adobe PageMaker. Then when they are expected to design and publish a review of the best book they have read from the B.F. Day school library, they will be ready. Those desktop publishing skills will allow students to create professional looking results. I hope the reviews will be posted indefinitely in the school library.

As the teacher I will use the following web resources for assistance in running literature circles:

<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/>

<http://www.literaturecircles.com/>

<http://eduscapes.com/ladders/themes/>

EXTENSION PROJECTS

As identified in the assessment chart, this unit requires students to complete three extension projects. For the first, students will create bookmarks that graphically depict a favorite character on one side. On the other side, students will write the golden line from the book that encompasses the theme of reaching out to understand other people and resonates most strongly with the student.

For the second, students will write reviews of the best book they have read from the school library. The focus of the review will be on how the book allowed the students to either better understand themselves or others. These reviews will be published and handsomely posted in the school library as a service learning project.

For the third, students will write a letter from the perspective of a character found in their chosen book, to another character in the same book. They will use one of the generalizations from the theme to explain a decision or action that wasn't specifically addressed in the book. The letters must reference evidence found in the book to support the student's premise. Although students will be encouraged to generate their own topics, everyone will get a specific idea and characters from which to work if they are unable to develop an original idea.

THEMATIC BOOK LIST

Literature Circle Books

Paterson, K. (1977). *Bridge to Terabithia*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: New York.
Jess and Leslie create a secret kingdom and a wonderful friendship. However, tragedy strikes and Jess must learn to cope with enormous loss.

GENERALIZATION: We can never truly know ourselves until we understand other people.

Paterson, K. (1978). *The Great Gilly Hopkins*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: New York.
Gilly is a tough kid who has bounced from foster home to foster home. Despite her defenses, she's drawn to a family with a memorable foster mother, a blind neighbor and a strange little boy.

GENERALIZATION: Despite differences, at the most fundamental level most people have the same basic needs and desires.

White, E. B. (1952). *Charlotte's Web*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: New York.
Charlotte is a spider who uses her creativity and good heart to protect her friend Wilbur the pig.

GENERALIZATION: Reaching out to others can be risky and often demands sacrifice.

Lewis, C. S. (1950). *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc.: New York.
After stumbling into the magical land of Narnia in the back of a wardrobe, four children help the lion king Aslan defeat the cruel White Witch who has created an eternal winter.

GENERALIZATION: Reaching out to others can be risky and often demands sacrifice.

Speare, E. (1983). *The Sign of the Beaver*. Houghton Mifflin Publishers Inc.: New York
Alone on his family's farm, a boy seeks help from his Indian neighbors in order to survive.

GENERALIZATION: If we understand someone it is more difficult to hate or fear or them.

Read Aloud Books

Lionni, L. (1963) *Swimmy*. Knopf: New York.
A little black fish, a misfit in a school of red fish, finds a way to protect them all from predators.

Babbitt, N. ((1975) *Tuck Everlasting*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux: New York.
A young girl receives the magical chance to live forever. In deciding whether or not to take that step, she learns about the meaning of life.

CITATIONS

Washington State Commission on Student Learning. (2004). *Reading: K-10 Grade Level Expectations: A New Level of Specificity*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: Olympia, WA.

Washington State Commission on Student Learning. (2002). *Essential Academic Learning Requirements in writing and communication*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction: Olympia, WA.

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<http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/TLU/overview.html>

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Routman, R. (2000). *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH.

Schlick Noe, K. L. *Literature Circles Resource Center*. <http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/kschlnoe/LitCircles/>

The Walloon Institute. *Literature Circles*. <http://www.literaturecircles.com/>

Lamb, A. *Themes and Literature Circles*. <http://eduscapes.com/ladders/themes/>

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Using a constructivist approach to learning requires the teacher to step back from the role of providing students with all the answers and all the direction. If students are really going to construct their own knowledge they need have the freedom to make their own mistakes and solve their own problems. My primary role will be that of facilitator.

I will not control, but I will certainly model the expected level of work. I will also be quite explicit about expectations for group work. Each student will be given a group work rubric and as a class we will go over expectations prior to the start of the unit.

Prior to the beginning of each class I will be responsible for bringing out all materials and supplies that will be needed for that day and placing them in one central area. Students will be responsible for replacing everything before the end of the lesson.

UNIT OVERVIEW

Although it was difficult to make this unit map to the themes of my social studies unit, I am glad that I decided to make the connection between themes instead of content. That way I could choose great books instead of having to settle on selections simply because they fit content guidelines. My main concern, though, is that the theme and generalizations of this unit may be a little beyond some fifth graders. I suppose I will only find out by doing it. However, it never ceases to amaze me that when kids are motivated to learn because they are doing something meaningful, they can do astounding work.