Curriculum Rationales: English 7

Karen Knappenberger

***Black Brother, Black Brother*** by Jewell Parker Rhodes

1. Plot Summary

Donte wishes he were invisible. As one of the few black boys at Middlefield Prep, he feels as if he is constantly swimming in whiteness. Most of the students don't look like him. They don't like him either. Dubbed the "Black Brother," Donte's teachers and classmates make it clear they wish he were more like his lighter skinned brother, Trey. Quiet, obedient.

When an incident with "King" Alan leads to Donte's arrest and suspension, he knows the only way to get even is to beat the king of the school at his own game: fencing. With the help of a former Olympic fencer, Donte embarks on a journey to carve out a spot on Middlefield Prep's fencing team and maybe learn something about himself along the way.

1. Rationale and Learning Objectives

Reading this book, students will gain exposure to topics such systemic racism, the justice system, and activism. This book also allows students to learn more about athletes of color and historical figures of color, such as Ibtihaj Muhammad and Thomas-Alexandre Dumas. This book is set in middle school, with the protagonist being a seventh grader himself. It demonstrates methods of activism and promoting awareness that are positive, constructive, and community-minded. It has strong overarching themes of perseverance, cooperation, and social justice.

We will begin with this book because in addition to being engaging, it is useful to illustrate basic plot structure, characters, and literary devices. It also provides the opportunity to engage with non-fiction in a supplementary way.

1. Common Core Standards

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| 7.RL.2 | Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RL.3 | Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot). |
| 7.RL.4 | Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama. |
| 7.RI.2 | Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RI.3 | Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events). |
| 7.RI.8 | Trace and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence is relevant and sufficient to support the claims. |

1. Addressing Sensitive Subjects

Possible sensitive subjects that may arise from this book center around racial bias and discrimination, as well as miscarriages of justice, microaggressions, and systemic bias. The issues in this book, such as systemic racism and unconscious bias, are important issues to discuss because in order to dismantle systems of racism, the first step is awareness. It is important to show that everyone is affected by these systems, often in ways we do not realize or understand, but that everyone also has the capability to move forward and to remake these systems into better institutions. The ultimate goal is to create a classroom, then school, then community environment that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive.

***The Outsiders*** by S. E. Hinton

1. Plot Summary

*The Outsiders* is about two weeks in the life of a 14-year-old boy. The novel tells the story of Ponyboy Curtis and his struggles with right and wrong in a society in which he believes that he is an outsider. According to Ponyboy, there are two kinds of people in the world: greasers and socs. A soc (short for "social") has money, can get away with just about anything, and has an attitude longer than a limousine. A greaser, on the other hand, always lives on the outside and needs to watch his back. Ponyboy is a greaser, and he's always been proud of it, even willing to rumble against a gang of socs for the sake of his fellow greasers--until one terrible night when his friend Johnny kills a soc. The murder gets under Ponyboy's skin, causing his bifurcated world to crumble and teaching him that pain feels the same whether a soc or a greaser.

1. Rationale and Learning Objectives

Reading this book, students will engage with themes of communalism, privilege, and stereotyping. Ultimately hopeful, this book depicts young people who feel like they have a lack of choices and eventually presents the idea that there are more options than originally thought. Themes of family, both blood and found, are interwoven throughout. The literary learning objectives include recognition of character development as an important part of plot development, as well as the different types of conflict and how that impacts the story. Students will also practice identifying plot development, i.e.: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. In addition to reading the novel by S. E. Hinton, students will view the film version: *The Outsiders*, directed by Francis Ford Coppola (1983). The purpose of viewing the film is for students to compare the novel to the visual representation, examining the use of lighting, stage direction, dialogue, costume, music, and actor choice and its effectiveness in conveying the story.

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| 7.RL.4 | Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama. |
| 7.RI.2 | Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RI.3 | Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events). |
| 7.RI.7 | Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium’s portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words). |
| 7.RL.9 | Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history. |

1. Addressing Sensitive Subjects

This book deals with topics such as homicide and violence, arson, parental death, abuse, and the foster care system. We will approach these topics with care, empathy, and understanding. It is entirely possible with all books that there are students who have had close experiences with these subjects, and as such it is important to treat everyone with respect and dignity. We will also be discussing themes of powerlessness and class. This novel is important because while we will discuss racial bias and systemic injustice in *Black Brother, Black Brother*, this book will bring up issues of classism and we will be able to interrogate the systems of privilege from a different perspective.

***The Pearl*** by John Steinbeck

1. Plot Summary

Like his father and grandfather before him, Kino is a poor diver, gathering pearls from the gulf beds that once brought great wealth to the kings of Spain and now provide Kino, Juana, and their infant son with meager subsistence. Then, on a day like any other, Kino emerges from the sea with a pearl as large as a sea gull’s egg, as “perfect as the moon.” With the pearl comes hope, the promise of comfort and of security…

A story of classic simplicity, based on a Mexican folk tale, *The Pearl* explores the secrets of man’s nature, greed, the darkest depths of evil, and the luminous possibilities of love.

1. Rationale and Learning Objectives

In addition to benefiting from reading a wide variety of authors, *The Pearl* presents an opportunity to elevate students’ vocabulary and experience a more archaic, complex style of writing. The story, being based on a Mexican folktale, allows for comparison to other folktales, fables, and fairy tales, which we will return to and compare against the hero’s journey story of *Beowulf* at the end of the year. It also allows the students to learn about and engage with a culture different than the ones presented yet in the year, as well as characters of different ages and socio-economic backgrounds. We will discuss the impact of class on the plotline as well as the role colonization has had on the setting and culture.

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| 7.RL.5 | Analyze the structure of a text, including how a drama or poem’s form or structure contributes to its meaning. |
| 7.RI.2 | Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RI.3 | Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events). |
| 7.RL.9 | Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history. |

1. Addressing Sensitive Subjects

There is a major character death in this novel. We will be discussing that event with respect and empathy, giving the students the space to reflect on the event and ask questions regarding fate and fairness. We will also be discussing classism and colonization because the main characters are poverty-stricken indigenous Mexicans. While we will not go into much depth, the effect of poverty on the choices and options of the characters, as well as the impact of colonialism on the setting and cultural practices, will be touched on and explained sufficiently for the understanding of the story.

[***Independent Reading Book***](https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/1eoELPCyxsRhmgn4RqXPUNEifA_WtF-sKp0xJwLyI5rY/edit)

1. Rationale and Learning Objectives

Students will be allowed to choose a book from a predetermined list. However, students may suggest an alternate book to read in place of one on the list and are able to use that for this project, though it must be approved by Mrs. Knappenberger. The theme of the booklist is authors and protagonists who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color. This is to support not only the educational belief that widened cultural experience brings heightened empathy and knowledge but also to give students who identify as a minority an opportunity to self-select a book with a protagonist that may reflect them or their heritage. The other purpose of this assignment is to encourage the enjoyment of reading by allowing the students freedom of choice and to allow them to read books that have more mass appeal than perhaps some of the classics that are often selected for academic reasons. It also allows students to realize that a book does not have to be labeled as a classic in order to have literary merit or to demonstrate the same literary techniques we will be studying.

1. Common Core Standards

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| 7.RL.9 | Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history. |
| 7.RL.10 | By the end of the year, proficiently and independently read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, in a text complexity range determined by qualitative and quantitative measures appropriate to grade 7. |
| 7.RI.2 | Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RL.6 | Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text. |
| 7.RL.2 | Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text. |
| 7.RL.9 | Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction use or alter history. |

1. Addressing Sensitive Subjects

While this will mostly be the purview of the parents or guardians, since this book is to be read independently, students may always discuss with the teacher their thoughts and feelings. Content warnings will be put on each book so that students may make informed decisions when selecting a book. Parents and guardians are encouraged to reach out, as well, for guidance when sensitive topics arise.

***Beowulf*** by Anonymous (Grinnel edition)

1. Plot Summary

*Beowulf* is a major epic of Anglo-Saxon literature, probably composed between the first half of the seventh century and the end of the first millennium. The poem was inspired by Germanic and Anglo-Saxon oral tradition recounting the exploits of Beowulf, the hero who gave his name to the poem. Beowulf exemplifies Viking and Anglo-Saxon ideals of leadership and heroism, including defeating enemies, being honest and fair, and responding appropriately to the situation at hand.

1. Rationale and Learning Objectives

*Beowulf* allows for the teaching of the hero’s journey, an archetype story typical in most, if not all, cultures. We can use this story to draw parallels with others from various cultures and media formats. This story also allows for the exploration of different varieties of literary devices and the opportunity to see how they are used in a different context and how they have changed over the years.

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1. Addressing Sensitive Subjects

There is monster death in this story (Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and the dragon) and, because of analysis which humanizes them, may become sensitive for the students. There is not much else that qualifies as a sensitive subject, but should anything unforeseen arise, the class will always do their best to be open-minded, empathetic, and respectful.

***Note:*** Throughout the school year, we will be addressing these reading standards as they write literary analysis essays in response to their reading:

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| 7.RL.1 | Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. |
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