

Make Me Proud
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Arsenal Middle School

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Introduction

History for African-Americans is a vital missing part of many of this race's life. Students, especially those in middle school, need to see a positive side and need to recognize that they are truly from a race of people who have made some significant inroads in this nation. My goal for this curriculum, as a middle school reading teacher, is two-fold. One is to impart a positive attitude and view of noted African-Americans who have made a significant and positive impact on American society. The other is to incorporate specific reading skills within the curriculum itself.

Arsenal Middle School is considered a Title I school, which means the students are impoverished. Most students receive free breakfast and lunch. As a matter of fact, I only have one homeroom student out of 18 who does not receive this service. The students in my seventh grade classrooms may be considered as having a double whammy in that they are also poor readers. My job is to get these students to read more and comprehend better so that they will be ready for "regular eighth grade curriculum" for the following September.

Overview

This lesson is for Arsenal Middle School Seventh graders in a READ 180 classroom. The Read 180 classroom curriculum is based on multi-activities to keep the reluctant reader active and moving to different areas of the classroom. A brief description of the set up of the classroom includes three areas. A computer section where the student gets a 20-minute lesson from instructional reading software; a comfortable reading section for modeled and independent reading for 20 minutes; and a 20-minute teacher directed small group area. Obviously, there must be blocked time for this curriculum to take place and have success.

In the past several years, I've discovered more and more of the Arsenal students (who are primarily African-American) don't seem to know any of the past achievements of African-Americans. There have been contests that I have encouraged students to participate in, only to have them tell me they've not heard of that particular person or subject. One case in point was a reference to the Negro Baseball League teams of the Pittsburgh Crawfords & the Homestead Grays. The questions about Hall of Fame players like Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige left questioning looks on all students' faces, causing me to feel a real sense of loss for them. It also left me with the question of how will I be able to impart some of this history to them before it's too late. After all, I'm old enough to be their grandmother--in some cases great grandmother.

I believe the history of some of these great people will allow these students to acknowledge the strength and knowledge African-American people have always had and would allow them to internalize some of that strength so they could carry on in academics and sports or whatever profession they chose in their future. The unit lets them see the hardships a minority race has faced and has always faced. It should allow them to say, "If he/she could do this with those types of barriers, then I should be able to succeed, too."

Rationale

Caring Habits is a character-building program that Arsenal Middle School "bought" into this past year. Each month the students at Arsenal are presented a theme for building character and for the month of May the theme was "Be Appreciative." I believe most of the students understand what appreciative means, but the fact of the matter is, is that my unit takes this theme a step further. It allows each student, not only to acknowledge this theme, but also incorporates the "practice" of the theme.

I'm excited that each student will be able to utilize the academics as well as the practice of good behavior in one curriculum lesson plan. Of course, the practice of good moral character will also have to be used by myself, as a teacher/individual. This could prove to be difficult at times since middle schoolers really try us as teachers. An essential part of the Caring Habits program is to display a poster each month in the classroom as a reminder of the theme for the week. In the past, Administration has reminded each "House" they head to consider this theme before dismissing each student for the day.

Objective

Students will be able to:

Use effective research and information management skills

Read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex texts or media.

Respond in writing to information gained by reading, viewing and listening to all types of media.

Analyze and know the effects that certain individuals have made in this society.

Prepare final written copies of their papers for class oral presentation or publication.

In addition to the above, students will learn to recognize good moral character (I don't want to seem "preachy" here, but for lack of better term. . .). They will also recognize and name the driving force or qualities of the person they will use as an example that has made significant inroads to reach a goal; and, hopefully, as a result of this study, students will also learn to strengthen their own self-image.

Strategies

Communications is a very important part of our lives and there are many students (and adults) who find it difficult to state their opinions or speak out, period. In this curriculum each student will develop a feel for writing and putting their information in an orderly fashion. The curriculum will involve having others (their peers) critique their drafts. Students will also learn to acknowledge a feeling of gratification in knowing they have assisted in making a classmate's project workable or successful.

Please note that peer input is one of the most essential activities that Pittsburgh Public Schools has added to student portfolios. In observing my classroom these past few years, I've noticed that most students don't mind sharing their writing with each other for the sole purpose of "correction." Some even welcome it because a peer may seem less intimidating than a teacher. Also note that there may be some students who just will not cooperate. You, as the teacher, must be able to use instinct, insight, and professionalism to counteract any "negative" student.

Students will need to have some pre-writing skills introduced or reinforced to them. Some of the pre-writing skills will include sentence structure, punctuation, etc. However, lots of media will be used and lots of discussions will be in place before students start to write.

Among the pre-writing skills, the student's diary or journal is an important facet of writing. Since this part of the curriculum is already in place for Pittsburgh Public Schools, it should be a familiar and comfortable activity for most of these students. Journal writing is a very important aspect of learning for our students. It can include items a teacher would like to grade. But, more importantly, it can generate the student's more intimate or personal thoughts on a subject they choose or the teacher chooses for them to write. And it certainly can be used in this instance as a jumping off point to a positive self-image.

Presently, my students use their journals as a personal account of their daily lives. But they also use their journals to give brief descriptions or summaries of books they have read as well as accounts of whether they enjoyed the book or did not like the books and why. In this way, the student can also make connections with the author or more importantly with any of the characters in the book. Please note, that in my Read 180 classroom curriculum, the students are not obligated to read books at a 7th grade level. Students are given what is called an SRI (Student Reading Inventory test) and whatever score they have made, literally places them at a certain reading or grade level.

Lesson 1

Explain to students the objective is to build a more positive self-image. Ask students what they think this means. Make sure students have their own journals and pencils before asking this question. Let students take time to answer this question in a discussion mode first and then write their own interpretations of what the answer means to them. Walk around the room to confirm each student has written something down. If a student is reluctant, share some ideas with him or her.

After sharing this activity, ask students about certain African-Americans who have "fallen from grace" or who have been considered controversial personalities. O. J. Simpson, Rodney King, and Tupac Shakur are names most students will recognize. A video clip of each of these people will educate those students who are not familiar with them. The video may show some negative qualities of these characters. (Also note that parents will have to become involved by giving permission to have students view videos if anything shown is not rated PG. This is very essential because of the diverse grouping of students that may be included in your classroom--even if these same students watch R rated videos at home.) However, the goal is to move from negative to positive character qualities. These qualities can be brought out not only for future characters introduced in class lessons, but also qualities the students, themselves, may identify.

After viewing the video, discuss some personal traits or qualities about Simpson, King, and Shakur. Note that some qualities or opinions have already been set in place for some of the students since they may have overheard older siblings or parents discuss these characters. At this point, students could also write another paragraph on one of these people. Ask students if they would share some character traits of these people from their journals and start listing them on the board.

Despite the fact that Shakur may still be admired as a "rapper", he is still considered one of the most violent people who ever lived. His first album disrespected the female population by calling them "bitch." Obviously, profanity is in large part one of the qualities that, we as teachers, request students (especially at the Middle school level) to refrain from.

O. J. Simpson, one of the most affluent black athletes in the 20th century, has raised much controversy over his acquittal on murder charges. Did he or didn't he do this? Murder is the most wretched of sinful acts. And once again, we probably are split about his innocence. However, the mere fact that he "ran" from law enforcement causes real doubt about his innocence. Why run?

Was there any type of "domestic violence" in the household? These terms must be defined and discussed if students are to get a sense of what some negative characteristics are about O. J.

For some positive role models, you may also consider utilizing SCOPE Magazine dated March 26, 2001. This issue is important in that basketball player Kenyon Martin shares some of his journal writing from the day he was drafted through his first season in the NBA. Be sure to recognize all vocabulary for your students.

Another issue of SCOPE Magazine dated January 22, 2001, features Tiger Woods. In this issue Tiger recounts the reasons why he is successful. Both of these young men can be used in a comparative/difference skill chart. Later, a Venn diagram (this is a reading comparison/contrasting strategy activity) can be utilized comparing one of the fallen characters with Kenyon Martin or Tiger Woods.

Other skills that can be used include sequencing and points of view, and the reading strategy called KWL (Know, What, Learn).

Still, students will need a whole slew of characters they can pool from to continue these activities and eventually prepare a paper that will acknowledge their sense of what a positive role model's characteristics or traits should include.

Lists of African-Americans should come from several occupational categories, both past and present. This will also lend itself to some African-American history, as well as some character building traits.

Some of the lists could include the following:

Sports Figures:

Kenyon Martin
Tiger Woods
Jackie Robinson
Jackie Joyner-Kersey
Williams Sisters (Venus and Serena)

Literature/Arts:

August Wilson	Eloise Green
Walter Dean Meyers	Maya Angelou
Sharon Glass	Romare Bearden

Entertainment:

L. L. Cool J
Will Smith
Paul Robeson

Lena Horne
Halle Berry

Government:

Colin Powell
Barbara Jordan
Nelson Mandela
Byrd Brown
Carl Stokes
Fannie Lou Hamer
A. Philip Randolph
Shirley Chisholm

Medicine/Science:

Dr. James Thatcher
Dr. Charles Drew
Dr. Daniel H. Williams
Dr. Mae Jemison

Other lessons would be more specific using skills to help create more information students could pull. For instance, the following could happen:

Lesson 2

Show the A & E video/film entitled "Jackie Robinson." But before showing this film, have a handout entitled "KWL." This handout is basically a reading strategy chart (please see attachment 1) that leads students to understand What they Know (background); What they'd like to Learn; and What they have Learned.

Have students write down in the What they Know column everything they know about Jackie Robinson. Then have them write What they'd like to Learn after a short mini discussion in the middle column. Save the last column, Learned, to complete after showing the video. This is another good way of revealing some positive characteristic qualities before students start to draft their own papers. Some of the character traits for this film would include self-discipline, self-control, and good sportsmanship.

"Jackie Robinson" is significant in that it gives as honest and as personal account of a noted black celebrity dealing with civil rights or racial issues most of his life. It portrays him early on as a fighter to this end. Not only did he have to fight racial injustices, but he also had to act as an example for most of the blacks at that time.

The film begins with the childhood of Jackie, who was born in Cairo, Georgia, in 1919. Jackie was the son of a sharecropper and the grandson of a slave. It speaks to the fact that his father

abandoned the family when Jackie was just two years old. His mother moved to California with her five children for a better life.

Here the film reveals that Jackie played a lot of sandlot baseball while a young child and helped to supplement his mother's earnings by doing odd jobs. The film also states that Jackie was like many other kids his age and that it was a minister who directed his energy towards sports. He was an exceptional athlete. As a young black man, he earned a scholarship in football to UCLA and was the first 4-letter man there with letters earned in football, track, basketball, and baseball.

The film talks about his speaking out against the many racial injustices blacks faced during his service in the 2nd World War; so much so that he was made the Officer acting as an intermediary. The film states he was "articulate and honorable."

It speaks to the fact that Branch Rickey, who ran the Brooklyn Dodgers, wanted baseball to become integrated and chose Jackie Robinson as that first player. It states Rickey had a strategy all worked out and prepped Jackie starting in 1946, by sending him to a minor league team in Montreal, Canada. There the country was more tolerant of blacks. It is mentioned the US was much less accepting. Rickey made Jackie promise to endure all types of physical threats, even while other players threatened to "boycott."

Several people interject comments throughout the film about Jackie's character. Andrew Young states Jackie was a "gentleman athlete" in every way. Former Governor of Virginia, Douglas Wilder, recalls how Jackie was once spiked by a Cardinals player and never uttered a word. His "achievements impressed all Americans." Arthur Ashe and Maya Angelou speak well of Jackie, also. Ashe states that many wanted to emulate Jackie's "pigeon-toed walk" while Maya Angelou states he was "handsome and brilliant as an athletic speaker." In 1947 Jackie was voted Rookie of the Year.

The film speaks about his playing ability, as well. Once on first, he would steal second base. He was the first black in a World Series. By 1949 other blacks were added to the team as a result of Jackie's strong resolve and determination. 1956 was Jackie Robinson's last year in professional baseball. However, by 1959 formal desegregation of major and minor league baseball teams was complete.

He was also the first black athlete inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, NY.

The film speaks of him and his wife, Rachel, being the most publicized black couple in America and how blacks responded to him in a positive way. He died at the age of 53 on October 24, 1972, due to complications of diabetes. His wife, Rachel, states he suffered a great deal and was under a lot of stress.

The most important message that stands out in this film is that he evoked excitement and honor. His life can be best summed up at the end of this film with his own quote: "Life is not important except the impact it has on other lives."

Lesson 3

The third and final lesson consists of several activities. One will be a chart where each student will have either a peer or family member evaluate them on how that person(s) sees or witnesses some positive character trait in the student. This could be in the form of manners or a positive behavior activity others would convey to the student. This activity needs to be in place for several days or even a week. (Please see attachment #2.) Several of these charts should be passed out in the classroom so that all students will develop a feel for whether they have actually possessed or displayed this specific "quality/qualities".

There is a character-building program called Caring Habits at Arsenal Middle School. This chart may be an offshoot from this program for all students; however, it certainly will add credence to the skills these students will eventually end up with.

After working several days with positive character building charts, students will compile these charts, which will act as proof that these traits are definitely in place for that student.

With proof in hand, students may continue with the next activity and that is to present drafts about themselves. As they prepare the drafts, students will utilize comparison/contrasting forms or, again, the Venn Diagram. These forms will be used to validate themselves with these positive traits.

The draft will actually allow them to account for some of the positive traits they see in someone (an African-American personality) they admire as well as comparing some of these same traits in themselves.

Since Pittsburgh Public Schools puts a high emphasis on writing portfolios, this can be an entry under persuasive writing.

Teachers will walk the students through the process of how their papers will be set up.

Rubrics will be set in place, as well. Criteria are also a big part of how the paper will be written. (See attachment 4.)

Each paper will have to have a certain number of paragraphs and each paragraph will address certain items. For instance, the first paragraph should act as an introduction addressing the fact that the student admires many people. Some of these people are greatly admired due to certain positive personality traits they possess. The student will list these traits. The students will also have to give examples of these traits to show that they knew exactly what they were talking about.

As the students develop their papers, there should be some type of relationship or positive trait they see or can name from their own chart(s), or diagram(s). A matter of fact, as the teacher walks the student through this process, the student should find it easy to continue in this same vein to "talk" or write about themselves. In other words, the same traits listed for the personality they admire should be cropping up for themselves.

Some examples of positive traits that were listed for Jackie Robinson was the way he communicated. Jackie's most honorable trait includes acting like a "gentleman." This would include speaking in a quiet manner; holding doors open for others (peers as well as adults); refraining from profanity; addressing adults and other peers in a respectful manner; and most importantly acting in a pleasant manner all the way around. Actually, these traits are not specifically mentioned in the video; however, these are traits to which 7th graders can relate.

After listing the positive personality traits for the person(s) they admire, the students will continue the paper revealing some of the same positive personality traits for themselves. Again, the only way to convince me (and/or his peers) is to give or cite examples in his/her paper. Two to four more paragraphs will be included in the student's paper, revealing his/her most admirable traits along with examples.

The last paragraph will be a conclusive paragraph whereby the students actually see themselves in a future situation where one or more of the positive character-building traits can be used. Students need to pair and share and critique each other's papers before writing the final copy.

The finished product should really make the student proud. It also acts as a portfolio assignment that the student can admire.

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Attachment 1

Attachment 2

NAME _____

SECTION _____

PLEASE

THANK YOU

EXCUSE ME

I'M SORRY

M O N D A Y				
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PLEASE

THANK YOU

EXCUSE ME

I'M SORRY

T U E S D A Y				
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PLEASE

THANK YOU

EXCUSE ME

I'M SORRY

W E D N E S D A Y				
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PLEASE

THANK YOU

EXCUSE ME

I'M SORRY

T H U R S D A Y				
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PLEASE

THANK YOU

EXCUSE ME

I'M SORRY

F R I D A Y				
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Attachment 3

Attachment 4