

## Childhood Heroes

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Human beings are deeply divided, eternally torn between apathy and activity, between nihilism and belief. In this short life, we wage a daily battle between a higher self and a lower self. The hero stands for our higher self. To get through life and permit the higher self to prevail, we depend on public [and private] models of excellence, bravery, and goodness.

-Peter H. Gibbon, *Heroes for Our Age: How Heroes Can Elevate Students' Lives*

### INTRODUCTION

In this unit that will last for one nine-week grading period—it could conceivably go for a complete semester—I want my students to be able to identify themselves or their peers as heroes. They need to be taught that heroes are real people who do real things, that they *in fact* can be heroes. I require them to understand that heroes are people who have the courage to do things that are difficult. Heroes are people who transcend their own wants and desires to provide for the needs of others. I desire them to understand that heroism is not always a death-defying activity. It can be as simple as denying self. Children need to realize that heroes are people whose life experiences are filled with good and bad. Helping them to accept flaws with humility is giving them the freedom to make mistakes and still feel good about themselves. It helps them to understand that learning and growing are good, and that mistakes can teach as much or more as getting it right the first time.

Assisting students in examining the spirit of heroism through dramatic cases is to invite them to adopt that spirit themselves and to embrace the qualities of the hero. Morally, politically, and personally, stories of heroes can inspire students through the examples of their lives, for in many respects they promote a vision of the possibilities for heroism within each of us. (Sanchez)

In light of what our nation is experiencing presently, it will not be hard to come up with real life heroes, probably some from students' own families or communities. With war or acts of war a constant threat to our country and our military, many families are affected. Many lower income families use the military as an option for higher education. How does higher education change the status of minorities? A well-known phrase is "necessity is the mother of invention." In this class we will try to find examples where searching for solutions to problems in all phases of our culture, from space technology to private industry and even our civic culture lead to "heroic" inventions and focus on those from a minority culture.

Dr. George Washington Carver is an example of a successful minority figure. His exploration of the peanut revolutionized the food industry. How did the exploration of the peanut affect the life of the modern child? How did it impact the life of minorities? What happened to industry because of these discoveries?

Many times these new solutions or inventions lead to development of new words or phrases. Children love creating new vocabulary or changing the meaning of existing words and phrases to suit their needs/desires. Nearly everyone knows what a PB&J (peanut butter and jelly) is. Another example is how the use of the word “cool” to mean desirable or acceptable has now been replaced with “tight.” Sometimes the application is not as smooth or as clearly defined to make the application apparent. In class, we will determine the traits of a hero and develop an extended vocabulary to describe the meaning of hero and a hero’s attributes.

The genuine hero is not a mere celebrity or famous person. The heroic person expresses values through self-sacrificing acts that benefit others and the community. And others are inspired and united in recognition of the hero’s selfless contributions to the common good. The self-promoting celebrity or notorious seeker of fame fails to meet the definition of hero. (Sanchez)

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

In my classroom, there are posters, pictures and charts everywhere, enough to cause a complete sensory overload if you are older than seven or eight. This is what my students see upon entering my classroom. They are not only comfortable with this environment but they enjoy it. This riot of color and information is there to stimulate them toward becoming at least proficient if not avid readers. Many of my students are first- or second-generation Americans who travel frequently to Mexico to see their extended families. Although my students are predominately English speakers, I do have a few ESL students. On occasion I have a student who has transferred out of a bilingual class. The 10% of my class that are not Hispanic are usually Caucasian or black.

Since the majority of my class (90%) is Hispanic, this array of color is part of their cultural background and thus is completely normal for them. Such variety of color can be seen in the works of artists such as Steven Martinez Stribling, who does abstract art in New Mexico, and Pablo Antonio Milan, a contemporary artist from the same state. Frederico M. Vigil puts this type of art into frescos, while Marco A. Oviedo and Armando Lopez use sculpting as their medium, with Lopez depicting angels. This use of color and exuberant material is also seen in the work of Santiago Perez and Francisco Sanbria, an artist from the Colombian jungle (*New Mexico Visitors Guide to Galleries*). Zulia Gotay de Anderson is a female artist that depicts traditional Hispanic life with much color and life in her art (Ibid).

One of the subjects that grabs the attention and imagination of this age level is heroes. They are thrilled by the adventures of Spiderman, Batman and the like. Trying to re-enact the exploits of their favorite television and game characters, they talk about them constantly. These are the heroes of my students' imagination. This is who they try to emulate and pretend to be. Talk of the imaginary characters of the Power Puff Girls or Kim Possible (for the female portion of my class) and Dragon Ball Z or Yu-Gi-Oh is incessant if I let the students have free talking time. Of course these characters change as the fashion changes and yesterday's Pokemon is today's Yu-Gi-Oh and so the story goes.

I remember my heroes at that age, many of which came from books that I read. I dreamt of being those heroes. I remember reading about Trixie Beldon and Nancy Drew, two of my favorite heroines. I was the main character in *My Friend Flicka*, then the heroine in *Black Beauty*. Although television was available, it was not as widely viewed, as is the trend today. According to Murray, "only 2% of households today do not have a television" (Murray 2). Those books helped to shape my ideas of how I should live my life and what my attitudes would be. I developed my concepts of friendship, loyalty, honor and courage from what I read and experienced vicariously in these volumes. It is my intention to share this love of reading and the same type of character acquisition with my students. I believe that, with a careful and concerted effort on the part of the parents and myself, my class will benefit from learning to read for enjoyment and, as a result, gain in character education.

Huesmann states that "the ages six through eight are very delicate and critical years in the development of children. Youngsters are learning 'scripts' for social behavior that will last them throughout their life . . . [and that some] didn't always have happy endings" (2). It never occurred to me that I could be a hero then or even later. In my mind heroes were demigods, perfect beyond question. This does not seem to have changed. Children still see their heroes as demigods as exhibited in Yu-Gi-Oh and the like. I remember when I realized that one of my idols had clay feet. I can still feel the devastation and bewilderment of that moment in time. My very first hero was my father. I recollect clearly the day that I was "helping" him work on my mother's car. We existed upon his teacher's salary. My mom was going to school to become a keypunch operator because money was so tight. The wrench he was using was not doing what he needed it to do. In anger and frustration he threw the wrench into the woods behind our house with a few choice words added into the mix. That was when I began to realize that my father was truly a fallible human and not the perfect hero I wanted him to be. Although I still loved my father dearly and respected him greatly, my perception of his God-likeness was forever altered.

Television had just become available when I was a child. There were no Video Cassette Recorders (VCRs). VCRs are now being replaced by DVD players. Vinyl records have been replaced by compact discs, which are not only for music but movies and computers also. The idea of a microwave was restricted to physics and space

technology, and was still far removed from the home. Manned space flight involved a three-man crew, whereas now, crews of six to eight co-gender persons operate spacecraft.

Technology has greatly increased within the past two decades, with a major part of the increase taking place within the last five to seven years. Children have become more technically oriented, which is a good thing, but often little time is left for quality reading in family life. The children I teach are just beginning to form their ideas of what the world is and how it works. This is the beginning of much of their social experience and learning to get along within their world. This is the age during which their personal concept of right and wrong is developed and cemented. This is the time that social skills are developed and refined. At this developmental stage they are constantly practicing their interpersonal skills. They are trying to find out what works and what doesn't. They figure out how to disagree without being disagreeable (or if appropriate, being disagreeable in some cases). The stage for teaching is set and the options for action are numerous. With this thought it is the best age to begin addressing multicultural issues. Lu argues that "exposure to quality multicultural literature also helps children appreciate the idiosyncrasies of other ethnic groups, eliminate cultural ethnocentrism, and develop multiple perspectives" (2).

By learning that the differences in others is what makes the world interesting and exciting, they see that no matter how much we are different we are all basically the same. They also learn how different cultures solve problems and view heroes. Lu states, "Dowd also argues that . . . from reading, hearing, and using culturally diverse materials, young people learn that beneath surface differences of color, culture or ethnicity, all people experience universal feelings of love, sadness, self-worth, justice and kindness" (1). She writes:

Jenkins and Austin . . . emphasize the value of good literature, for it can reflect many aspects of a culture—its values, beliefs, ways of life, and patterns of thinking. A piece of good literature can transcend time, space and language, and help readers to learn about an individual or a group of people whose stories take place in a specific historical and physical setting. (Lu 1)

Children can take these books, articles, or written works and transfer what they have learned about present day society to cultures being studied from the past. They will be able to make assumptions about life as it used to be and how people were affected by their situations. In this manner the students will be able to relate to their predecessors. Reisinger asserts, "Carefully selected literature can make historical periods come to life and provide a flavor of the thoughts and feelings surrounding an historical event" (2). Lu also states the following:

From reading stories about their own culture, children have opportunities to see how others go through experiences similar to theirs, develop strategies to cope with issues in their life and identify themselves with their inherited culture. It is

therefore important that educators incorporate multicultural literature into the curriculum and make it part of children's everyday life. (Lu 1-2)

Since a large portion of the population at the school where I teach is technically a minority, I feel it is imperative for me to provide them with good literature about their culture in order to present to them ways to relate their lifestyle to a written work. In this way they will have valid resources to draw from for personal growth and solutions to everyday problems that will be relevant to them.

## **DEVELOPING VOCABULARY**

Studying the attributes of heroism is a good way to study synonyms and antonyms. In our seminar class a consensus was reached on the definition of a hero. Some of the words used were: courage, selflessness, sacrifice, dedication, valor and loyalty, just to name a few. Of course my second grade class will not know these words, so in their case the dictionary is a good tool to use. One of the skill objectives in Project Clear is dictionary use. Dictionary skills are necessary because students need to understand alphabetical order and how to find words quickly. They need to know how to use the guidewords at the top of the page to find the specific word they are looking up and how to choose the correct meaning in a given context when a word has multiple meanings. I have found that they can become especially excited looking up words in the dictionary. It makes them feel very grown up. I use this excitement to help them increase their vocabulary. As they become familiar with a word, they grow more willing to use it in their normal conversation.

Beginning in second grade, readers need to know and recognize words. They also need to understand what these words mean and how the words affect the meaning of what they are reading. This vocabulary will be included in the spelling lesson. One idea is to have them write out their own definition of a hero on a sentence strip and post it on the wall. I might also have them draw an outline of their body to create a "paper person." This paper person could be posted by their definition of hero, thus creating an implicit suggestion that they can be heroes. This will be one of the projects done in connection with the high school speech class that is taught by an associate fellow from this class. The high school speech class will do the same exercise and present the qualities from the perspective of the paper people. This is detailed further below.

As students progress in their educational careers, reading becomes a critical skill. I believe that it is imperative that primary students begin to be taught critical reading skills so that as they continue in later years these skills are already ingrained in their thinking. As they have to learn newer skills they can scaffold on the critical reading skills that will enrich not only their school careers but also the rest of their lives. In Norma Collins' paper "Teaching Critical Reading Through Literature," she asserts that

Teaching students to think while reading is referred to in the professional literature as critical reading. It is defined as ‘learning to evaluate, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on evidence.’

Children’s literature is a powerful tool for teaching critical reading. It offers children the opportunity to actively engage in texts while simultaneously considering ideas, values, and ethical questions. Through literature, students learn to read personally, actively, and deeply. (Collins)

As children are engaged in higher level thinking skills they become more proficient thinkers and have a greater level of success throughout their careers, whatever they may be. Doing this in the classroom is very simple and does not always necessitate a change in lesson plans. It only requires a few word changes in the questioning process. Wording questions so that they are open-ended and do not allow for single words or short phrases for answers, creates a situation where the children must think and come up with solutions by reasoning. This relates to all areas of learning, but especially character education, where children must be taught to think, reason, and make decisions for their own well being. As Collins states, “When literature is approached from a problem solving perspective, students are asked to evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, make inferences and develop a line of thinking” (Collins). She continues:

. . . children are capable of solving problems at all ages and need to be encouraged to do so at every grade level . . . According to Wilson, critical literacy advocates the use of strategies and techniques like formulating questions prior to, during, and after reading; responding to the text in terms of the student’s own values; anticipating texts and acknowledging when and how reader expectations are aroused and fulfilled; and responding to texts through a variety of writing activities which ask readers to go beyond what they have read to experience the text in personal ways. (Collins)

By using this type of literature in my lessons and having my students respond to it in writing, I will provide them with opportunities to role-play situations on paper that may happen or have previously happened to them. This will allow them the chance to come up with new or alternative solutions that may not have occurred to them. They will also have peers to discuss the situation(s) with and perhaps be able to view it from another perspective.

## **DEFINITION OF HERO**

In my second grade class, we will stay with a more traditional definition of hero. The basic idea of a hero is someone who goes beyond normal expectations to perform a deed of great courage or strength. This would include self-sacrifice and overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. Sanchez describes a hero as:

A person (female or male) whose voluntary actions reflect the moral or ethical standards—the values—of a culture at a particular point in time. Some values that heroes exemplify, of course, transcend a particular time and place and may be viewed more broadly—even universally. (Sanchez)

Since this age group's values are just forming, I think it best to stay with the basics. This format can be expanded as they mature. The traditional definition deals with courage, responsibility, selflessness, bravery, and sacrifice. We will also discuss the idea that heroes cross gender stereotypes in ways that affect the definition of hero and heroine. Can one's gender regulate how brave one is? With the masculine dominance of the Hispanic culture, this is a vital element to discuss. Girls need to see themselves as strong, independent, and courageous people. They need to have heroic role models to help them become the best that they can be.

## **PROJECTS AND ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Reading**

Having already presented Lu's ideas concerning multicultural literature and Collins' views about critical reading, I now present Risinger's pronouncements about how reading impacts social studies:

If students are to acquire the understanding and skills necessary for effective participation as citizens, they must explore topics in depth. Trying to teach all of world or U.S. history in a single year is both impossible and ineffective. The perspective and thoughtful judgment that should be a primary goal of social studies requires sufficient time for students to explore topics in depth, analyze a variety of literature and other sources of information, and discuss issue-oriented questions with other students and the teacher. Students who are taught the in-depth approach learn more information, enhance their ability to relate knowledge to other situations, and enjoy their social studies classes more. More important, they perform well on standardized tests. (Risinger 3)

### **Writing**

Since reading and writing are so interconnected, I plan on having my students do a lot of writing. Risinger states:

Student writing is the most effective way to improve general student achievement. Quite simply, students who write more learn more. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the social studies, where the thoughtful deliberation involved in writing leads to enhanced creativity and helps students connect reading, writing, and other subject areas. (Risinger 4)

And also:

Writing is one of the best ways to utilize the in-depth approach to social studies. Effective writing assignments require sufficient time to both explore a topic prior to writing and discuss it with classmates and teachers as part of the evaluation process. Group writing assignments have been effectively used as part of social studies. (Risinger 4)

It is with this reasoning in mind that I plan to assign several writing projects to my class. Writing in daily journals during this unit will be focused on heroes and aspects of heroes. These journal entries will be refined and put into a book. One of the class projects will be a Book of Heroes, which the entire class will compile. The students will each come up with one or two heroes and describe why they consider these people to be heroes. They will also include a short biography. I plan on doing this work on the computer using a writing software program, such as Kid Pix, that also allows the students to include artwork with the story. This project will be printed and displayed within the room or possibly as a bulletin board display in the hall of the school as well as being presented at the district's Digital Book Fair held each May and featured on the class web page. Windows XP has a program that will help design a web page. Our school technician is helping to upload the design into our school web page.

Included in the book design are references to assorted books by David Saddler, who has written several historical biographies written on an elementary level. He has authored an extended series of books about such historical figures as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Jackie Robinson, Ruth Law, Helen Keller and George Washington. It is necessary to include history as a part of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills requirement for social studies as well as giving some role models for heroes. TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) 113.4.a.3, 113.4.a.13, and 113.4.a.14 all deal with citizenship, which is a large part of being a hero. TEKS 113.4.a.8 concerns geography, which will be covered through our study of the places where heroes live and perform heroic deeds. TEKS 113.4.a.11, 113.4.a.10b, 113.4.a.12 have to do with the government. This is important because many of our national heroes are/were civic figures. TEKS 113.4.a.3, 113.4.a.4 involve history, which is where we will find many of our national heroes. TEKS 113.4.a.17, 113.4.a.18 cover social studies skills, which include map reading and understanding key legends. This skill will be used when we discover where heroic deeds took place or where their hero came to live (See Appendix A for a conversion to Project Clear objectives).

The class will study heroines such as Ruth Law and Helen Keller. Ruth Law was the first person to attempt to fly from Chicago to New York City in one day. Even though she did not make it, she did set a long distance flying record that was unbeaten for one year and was eventually broken by another female. Helen Keller overcame multiple



handicaps to become a successful motivational speaker. This was extremely courageous, since one of her handicaps was deafness and the other blindness.

Multicultural heroes such as Martin Luther King, Fredrick Douglass, Benito Juarez, Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman will also be included and discussed. Harriet Tubman, Fredrick Douglass, and Sojourner Truth were all major figures in helping to abolish slavery in America. Martin Luther King Jr. was a major figure in advancing civil rights in the 1960s, and Benito Juarez was the first Mexican president who was from Mexico. He also helped to create a more modern social justice program for his country. By providing my class with examples from their own or similar backgrounds, I feel it will be much easier for them to make transitions from the lives of these people to their own.

The class will decide if musicians (i.e. rap artists, pop artists, Selena, Tejano musicians) and sports figures (i.e. Shaquille O’Neill, Michael Jordan, Mark McGuire, Jose Canseco) are to be included in the realm of heroism and if so, why. If the children decide that these figures do rate hero status, then they must defend their reasoning. They must tell why and for what qualities these people rate that status. If they decide the figures do not merit hero status, then again they must defend their position with facts.

### **Fictional Characters**

I also plan to include fictional accounts for the students to analyze and decide why the character is heroic or not. We will determine what defines a hero, who does/does not meet the standard, and why or why not. We will compare and contrast heroes of different time periods and genders. We will compare and contrast real and fictional heroes. Which one is more heroic and why? The use of cartoon characters will also be discussed and evaluated as part of our critique of heroes. Can fictional characters “count” as heroes? Can we rely upon them to be role models? Why or why not?

Children need to realize that even though an imaginary character is not real, the character is in fact drawn from real qualities that are in some cases exaggerated. This is an instance where critical reading is necessary. Even if the character is part of a fantasy, the situations depicted in a literary work are usually based on real situations and can be used to gain insight and information. The student needs to be able to sift through information provided in the work and determine what is useful and what is exaggerated. Given this, which sorts of literary figures would qualify? Why? Sanchez claims:

Dramatic stories about female and male heroes in the literature of history and fiction are likely to attract the attention of learners, to arouse their interest, and to raise questions among them that lead to discussion and reflection about values. Further stories about heroes provide examples of values that students can recognize and follow. (Sanchez)

Another of our projects may be the development of a cartoon hero modeled after the fictional accounts of Spiderman, Batman, or Captain Underpants, to name a few fictional heroes they may possibly choose. I will also guide them toward characters from some of their favorite literary works, such as Nate the Great, who is a self-proclaimed detective. And the characters from the Magic Tree House series, who magically travel through time to perform feats of daring in order to rescue Morgan La Faye and to complete tasks that she has set for them.

Again, I would be using the computer to generate much of the information for this project. This material will be printed and displayed either in the classroom or bulletin board in the school. It would also be included on the class web page. If possible and if time permits I may also include this in the Digital Book Fair, perhaps as personal projects. Sanchez states, "Teaching values through stories of heroes requires the use of various instructional materials and procedures which transcend the standard textbook. Only through multi-media instruction can the multi-dimensional qualities of heroes be portrayed in depth" (Sanchez).

## **Social Studies**

Another project that I have found would include the listening and speaking strand in the language arts Project Clear. This is what I desire to use as a History Fair project. Once the children have chosen their heroes, they will decide upon a costume for each hero. The children will need to have library or computer time to find out what types of clothing their particular character wore in his/her time period. They will have to draw or create in some manner a costume that is similar to what they find in the research. The students who participate will be part of the school's Wax Museum. This could be done during an afternoon or perhaps at an open house for the school when families and the community in general will visit. The children would wear or present their project, memorize the facts about their particular hero and give a speech when the button attached to their clothing or project is pressed.

One of the ways I plan to draw the community into the lesson is by exposing my second graders to role models near their age. I am working out a plan with one of my associate Fellows who works at one of our feeder high schools. The object is to expose the elementary students to positive role models from the high school while giving the high school students a chance to see themselves as being "heroic" in nature. The high school students will come to our campus and interact with one class each time. This will not be too stressful for either class, and it will allow some one-on-one interaction between the classes (closely monitored by both teachers). The high school students will model correct behavior in social situations by performing several one- or two-minute skits about how to introduce someone, how to display proper telephone etiquette, and how to act in other social situations. If this goes well we plan to extend it to other classes within our school.

I can easily see this particular curriculum being slightly modified to fit upper grades. This would be an excellent unit for any social studies class and especially a fourth grade class where the elements of writing are tested. This would provide the student with a topic that they could relate to their life and make it real for them in a way that nothing else could.

### **WHY TEACH THE LESSON?**

Why is it necessary to teach about heroes today? According to Gibbon, “heroes have been in short supply in our nation for the last few decades up until 9/11/01” (Gibbon 48). I agree with that sentiment to some extent. I believe that heroes have existed, but it was not the proverbial ideal as it has been in the past for our culture. Cynicism became the norm during the decades of the 60s and 70s. Politicians were caught flagrantly flouting the laws that they had sworn to uphold. They bent the rules to benefit themselves. It became expected that every one was out for his/her own well-being, and if anyone were naive enough to believe that public figures were there to serve the public, they were laughed at for being foolish. Cynicism has been rampant in our culture for many reasons, some legitimate and others not. Disrespect and lack of discipline have become the norm in our culture today. One has only to look at the record of the last Presidency to confirm this opinion.

Heroes, according to the generally accepted definition, are self-disciplined (denying their own desires or putting them at a lower priority than others) and respectful other people to the point of dying for them if necessary. Such behavior put them at odds with what was culturally expected of public figures. This has led to a cultural shift in thought toward putting one’s self and one’s family first over the needs of the public. This shift has led to families desiring more and better “things” or possessions and less time for the development of character. To gain “things” there had to be more income, which is one of the reasons for the dual-income family. Typically, both parents work long hours and are mentally and physically exhausted when they come home. This leaves less time to spend with their children. Television and video games are used to keep the children occupied while parents take on tasks at home.

Many times there is only one parent who works long hours. Then there is the guilt and frustration of dealing with an ex-spouse who is able to provide more material things for the child, which creates a need on the part of the other parent to compete for the child’s/children’s affection. These things plus many others make it easier to ignore disrespect and harder to demand discipline from children. In Sanchez’s paper *Using Stories about Heroes to Teach Values*, he claims:

There has been a renewal of concern during the 1990s about teaching and learning values—standards that everyone should have about what is good or bad. And leading educators have recommended stories about heroes as a main means of teaching and learning values . . . Prominent educators recommend that certain

widely held values or virtues should be at the core of the school curriculum for the purpose of systematically developing the character of students. They stress the integration of cognitive development and character development through perspective-taking, moral reasoning, thoughtful decision-making, and moral self-knowledge. (Sanchez)

And

. . . they also urge the use of personal models—heroes—in history, fiction, and current events to exemplify and encourage emulation of particular virtues or desirable traits of character, such as honesty, civility, courage, perseverance, loyalty, self-restraint, compassion, tolerance, fairness, respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, responsibility for the common good, and so forth. (Sanchez)

Some parents have fallen into the attitude of wanting to be the child’s “friend” instead of serving them as their parent. When a parent becomes a friend, his/her authority is lessened to that of a peer. Children do not feel it is necessary to obey a peer. At that point, there is no one that the child *must* obey. This creates a feeling of instability for the child as well as raising safety concerns. The child knows that he is not able to control his world although that does not stop him from trying. Children have an inherent need to believe that their world is stable and that the adults in their life are in control of their world. If this is not provided for them, then they progressively get out of control in both attitude and behavior. In order to train children, there must be stability and control in their life so that they can learn self-control.

Learning about heroes can foster such knowledge. Learning about heroes leads to an appreciation about the value of discipline, self-control, and respect for other people. When a child learns that he/she can control his/her own actions to do what is good and right, then he/she is emulating the heroic. This, in my opinion, leads to higher self-image and esteem.

Then there is the “I want it now” attitude. What previous generations had to work long and hard to achieve, many young couples and parents think they have to have *right now* to be happy or to make the family happy. Parents want their children to be happy, naturally, but the knowledge that exposure to denial breeds character has been lost or greatly ignored. Teaching children to work for and achieve rewards has lost its appeal in the light of instant gratification. Working toward a goal and achieving it is a great esteem builder and character developer. It also brings respect for property, both theirs and others.

There is a prominent theory that television violence affects the actions and attitudes of the young populace today. Children today have been exposed to numerous episodes of violence on television. The more violence they see, the more they accept it as normal and

as the proper way to behave. In his field studies, Eron found that children who viewed more than average violence were “more likely to strike out at playmates, argue, disobey authority, and less willing to wait for things than those who watched non violent television” (Eron 1). Also listed among the major effects of seeing violence on television were “1. Children become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others. 2. Children may be more fearful of the world around them. 3. Children may be more likely to behave in aggressive ways toward others” (Eron 1). Visual images of violence have become the daily fare of the children of today. Constant reports of murder and destruction both domestic and abroad are a normal part of a child’s life now. It seems almost impossible to avoid the mention of death or violence in today’s news.

I tend to agree that exposure to violence at a young age desensitizes children at a time when they are most prone to empathize and sympathize with others. I know that young children can often be very cruel to each other. This is the age that children can be easily molded and greatly influenced in whatever direction they grow as they mature. Just as you cannot direct the growth of a tree very easily after it reaches a certain level of growth, so it is hard to redirect the moral growth of a young person after certain ideas and attitudes have been developed. Often the ideas and attitudes have been molded. One could compare this to the old Chinese custom of binding girls’ feet, which will continue to grow after they have been bound, taking the shape of the binding.

At the elementary level, children have great difficulty in making the distinction between reality and fiction. This is one of the main reading strategies we work on in the second grade. When children see television programs and video games that have violent actions in them, they do not realize that when those actions occur in real life, the consequences often are irreversible. They see that the cartoon or game can be continued. Characters reappear, and as a result the students I teach equate the world of make believe to the real world. They expect the same things to happen. This is why it is imperative to teach children the difference between fact and fiction. Children need to understand that when a real person gets hit over the head, shot, or in some other way mutilated, maimed or hurt, it is horrible. The damage will not just magically disappear. They need to realize that some of these things cannot be changed. They must understand consequences for actions. Again, accepting responsibility is part of the heroic makeup. The magic is in the development of the human spirit from being totally self-absorbed to becoming heroic.

School systems, administrators, teachers, and counselors are being charged with teaching children social skills and character education as well as academic subjects. Educational administrators agree that this might produce a better society. It may decrease the criminal element of our society. Studies show that when students learn how to cooperate in a friendly manner, failure is reduced. Many positive social aspects arise, including successful higher education, independent living, and a decrease in substance abuse and/or incarceration (Lewis and Sugai Module 5). This is why I believe that teaching about heroes gives our children role models to help guide their actions and thinking. Character education is prominently featured in many school districts now to

emphasize to the children correct social behavior and acceptable attitudes toward others. In this vein, Houston ISD has initiated a Character Education Program that expounds appreciation, respect, civic virtues, citizenship, responsibility, and generosity. Many schools have started the No Tolerance for Bullies campaign, food drives for the community shelters, appreciation days for teachers and other civic leaders, and Combat Hate programs. It is carried out in the Code of Student Conduct, which every student is required to sign at the beginning of each school year. In this document it is stated that the student is expected to show respect to others and be responsible for his/her own actions.

Our businesses demand productive people who are able to work together and be creative. To prepare them for the future, our school systems need students that are able to learn together and cooperate. Our society needs people who can cohabit peacefully and productively to create a harmonious and beneficial community. In order for this to happen, children need to learn how to obey laws, abide by rules, and understand morals. To gain their highest potential, they need role models. They need to know how to set goals for themselves and how to go about achieving those goals. This is accomplished by studying heroes who take risks to improve society because of their concern for others and by observing contemporary role models such as older siblings or older students whom they perceive as “heroes.”

Children and second graders need to know that heroes make mistakes. Primary age children tend to deify their heroes. When the object of their adulation is unmasked as an imperfect person, these children can become angry and react violently. This is not in the best interest of the child. When children are taught that people are fallible, they are able to deal with imperfection and accept it as a normal part of life. They are shown that despite past failure or mistakes, individuals are able to overcome obstacles and achieve greatness. Sanchez asserts that:

Stories of heroes should be accurate and balanced in presenting both positive and negative aspects of the person’s life. Honest examinations of heroes’ lives inevitably reveal human imperfections, which necessarily are part of the story of humanity at the center of values education. In terms of moral consistency, few heroes can be regarded as total successes. (Sanchez)

Heroes can raise standards for a young person. A hero can inspire and create a desire and belief that impossible dreams can be achieved. A hero can brighten the way for a child in a difficult situation. A hero can teach how to behave when there is no readily available role model to be attained. A hero can set an appropriate standard for the children I teach. In a world of uncertainty and instability, a hero can provide the stability so desperately needed in a child’s world. In short, a hero can be a lifesaver to a child by serving as a guide.

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson Plan One

One of the first things to be done is to develop the vocabulary to be used in writing about heroes. The words listed here are ones that are commonly used when discussing heroes. Words can be added or deleted to fit grade level or class needs.

Courageous	reliable
Brave	determined
Strong	truthful
Smart	dependable
Muscular	loyal
Daring	fast

The first activity with these vocabulary words is to look up definitions and make sentences with them to correlate with the appropriate definition. Depending upon the number of words used this may take up to three days using 45-minute blocks. This covers the Project Clear Objective (hereafter known as PCO) in language arts writing, concerning the use of the dictionary. It also covers the PCO in reading, determining the acquisition of vocabulary. In developing this vocabulary, higher order thinking skills are being developed by causing the student to create a definition of heroes and ways to describe a hero (PCO ELAL\* 1a, ELAR\*\* 3a, 3b, 3c, 3d, 4d.). The student must defend his/her choices with logical and reasonable explanations for why the particular words should be included in the list (PCO ELAL\* 1e, 2a, 3a, 3c, 4a, 4b, 5a, 5b; see Appendix B). After the list has been determined other activities could include a word scramble and word search to help with the PCO for spelling. This will allow the students to become familiar with the words and their spelling as well as proper usage when used in the writing exercises.

### Lesson Plan Two

As a daily activity and to stimulate thinking processes, I start the morning with a writing exercise, usually 30 to 45 minutes in length. I have certain skills drills that are practiced, such as grammar and analogies that each student must include in a journal. Along with these drills I include a daily journal topic, which each student must respond to in length. Some journal topics might include:

My favorite hero/heroine is \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .

My mom is a heroine because . . .

My dad is a hero because . . .

The most important person in my life is . . .

The most heroic thing I have ever heard about . . .

A hero is . . .

The closest I came to being a hero is when . . .  
One day I saw a . . .

At the second grade level I require at least one page, front and back, in their journal. (This is in the primary spiral bound writing book, or you can create one by using copies of second grade writing paper and have the students design their own front and back cover.) After you have had them edit each of these topics, you may also have them illustrate the topic and create a book of heroes for each student. At this point I laminate their work for protection and keep it in a portfolio. It is a great idea for a student portfolio to be shown at open house, displayed during meet the parent night or parent teacher conferences, or exhibited during a walk through by your assessor (PCO ELAW\*\*\* 1a, 1b, 2a,d,e,g, 3a,b,c,d,e, 4a,c,g, 5a,b,c,d,e,f,g a; see Appendix B).

\*ELAL- English language arts listening

\*\*ELAR- English language arts reading

\*\*\*ELAW- English language arts writing

[These are the three strands of Project Clear for language arts]

### **Lesson Plan Three**

It is my plan to incorporate literature circles. The timeframe on this particular project will be determined by the length of the book being read and is usually two or three weeks. In order to do this, some basic training must take place to prepare the students for this type of activity. Once they have become familiar with the activity and the different jobs for each member, they will be able to carry over to other classes and/or grade levels. When beginning with inexperienced literature circle participants, I suggest that the teacher start out with the entire class on the same title, and then divide the class into groups. As the class becomes familiar with the operation of literature circles, each group can have different books for discussion. When this happens, the groups will change and each student will be able to learn to adjust to different group dynamics. The teacher has some control by naming the list of books from which the student may choose. Some examples appropriate for second grade include:

- Any Cam Jansen books
- Books from the Boxcar Children series
- Any from the Magic Tree House series
- Judy Blume books (the Ramona series and others)
- Book about National Leaders (George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, MLK, etc)
- *If You Lived in . . .* (*Colonial Times*, *Revolutionary Times*, and others)
- *Molly's Pilgrim*
- Any others your class enjoys or you think would go with the subject or grade level.



The next step is to begin to teach the children the job descriptions in a literature circle:

The **discussion director** leads the discussion and keeps everyone on track

The **wacky word finder** looks up unknown words and provides definitions

The **super summarizer** does the selection summary

The **passage picker** chooses a favorite passage to share with the group

The **idea investigator** would check on ideas generated from the story.

These are just a few chosen from the web site <<http://www.eduscapes.com/ladders/themes>>. Others are available or can be created to fit the need. It is best to keep each group from four to eight members, with five or six being optimal. Agree upon signals for quiet reading and quitting time. Set up your choice of assessment (rubric, journals, check off sheets). Make sure your students are aware of expectations for grading purposes.

Monitor group activity frequently at first and at least two or three times weekly as they become more accustomed to the activity. I would do some grading each day though I would not grade each group every day. This would insure frequent feedback for the members of the group and encourage them in their participation of the group activity. Be sure to alternate activities so the children do not become bored with literature circles. I would intersperse other projects to create interest and freshness in the activity.

## **Lesson Plan Four**

### ***Materials/resources needed***

Library time scheduled for access to research books

Computer lab time scheduled for access to online activities

Art materials (paper, pencils, crayons, markers, glue, scissors, etc)

Tag board or poster board to use for display

Clothing of the period (for optional extra credit) can be made of butcher paper

Any materials needed for science project if desired

### ***Process***

One of the projects that I would use to break up literature circles is a research project for history/social studies. I would make the project two or three weeks long. The research I would have them do is about the life and times of their favorite literary person, either real or fictional. If the character is real, I would have them research where that person grew up, what life was like in that time period, how the student may have related to the person in that timeframe, and clothing at that time as just a few ideas. If the person is fictional, then I would have the student research what the things listed above may have been like if the person had been real.

As part of this project I would have the students create pictures of clothing of the time period. Also they would be required to create a short biographical speech for their character to be presented as an extra credit at an open house or to the school. Some of the

areas to be included in the biographies and background would be the scientific discoveries of the time and possibly examples of how they work. This could easily be expanded into a thematic unit and be used throughout the entire curriculum to include the reading, language arts, history, social studies, science and math. Discussing geometry—measurement and shapes—would be an excellent math lesson (compared to the inventions of the time).

### **Lesson Plan Five**

#### ***Materials needed***

Writing paper

Construction paper

Pencils, crayons, colors, scissors, glue, etc.

Poster board or tag board for covers

Laminate for the pages (optional)

Binding material (can punch holes and tie with cord or ribbon, use a binding machine, or any other method you can think of)

#### ***Process***

This lesson will cover objectives for language arts, including writing, grammar, communication, and artistic techniques. As the children become accustomed to journal writing, I would have them begin to accumulate their favorite journal entries. This will take four to six days to complete. They would then edit these entries and follow the editing process to the point of publishing them. At this time, I would have the students add illustrations to the topics. All of this can be laminated and correlated into a book form. I would have the student create a cover for the book and have it displayed in the writing center. Each student could write a book review on these books. Each student would get feedback from his/her peers about his/her work and be able to compare it to the work of others and get ideas for correction and changing the work into a more pleasing or beneficial format.

### **Lesson Plan Six**

#### ***Materials/resources needed***

Computer lab time

Drawing/writing program such as Kidpix

Newspapers or books with comics for reference

Computer paper

Computer printer (color preferably)

Laminate for paper

Poster board or tag board

Binding materials

***Process***

In this lesson, which will be extended to several days' time, the students will create and edit a comic strip character who exemplifies heroic properties. They will use the computer program to draw or insert graphics for the illustrations and write copy to go along with the pictures. In this lesson they will demonstrate their knowledge of grammar, technology, and story writing.

The children will express their ideas and imagination while creating a comic strip hero. When doing this they will exhibit their knowledge of what exemplifies a hero and their ability to formulate a cohesive storyline.

As this project is correlated the pages need to be laminated and bound. Again the books can be displayed within the room or school with others writing critiques of and comments about the book for feedback to the author. This allows the student to become accustomed to working with others and presenting him/herself to his/her peers. I would probably allow the students two or no more than three weeks to work together on a comic book.

**Lesson Plan Seven*****Materials needed***

Paper  
Scissors  
Sentence strips  
Butcher or bulletin board paper (skin tone shades if available)  
Pencils and markers

***Process***

In this lesson, which should take about 45 minutes for two days, have the student write a definition of a hero. Then have the student transcribe that definition onto sentence strips. Next the students should work in pairs, since one will outline his partner while the other is lying on a large piece of bulletin board paper. After each student has been outlined, have them decorate the paper person in whatever manner they desire (acceptable boundaries may need to be applied). Once this has been completed, post the paper people along with the definitions of hero in an appropriate place (usually on the walls).

**Lesson Plan Eight*****Materials needed***

Assorted props for acting out social situations.

***Process***

This lesson plan, when done with lower elementary grades, works best if they are paired with older classes. Upper elementary and higher (4<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>) can do it with a single

class. It can be completed in as little as one class meeting or as many as four or five, depending upon the availability of the classes to pair with if necessary. Usually, each class should be a 45-minute block. In this lesson students will be paired (older with younger in lower elementary) and will practice role-playing social situations. They will learn how to respond to several different situations, to develop acceptable social skills, and to model appropriate peer interaction. Some situations could be:

- Introducing new friends to each other
- Introducing family to new friends
- Answering the phone
- Greeting the host/hostess at a party
- Job interviews/Applying for a job

## Appendix A

Texas Essential Knowledge and skills used in this work (Second Grade Level)

### *Social Studies*

- 113.4a.3 Explain characteristics of good citizenship such as belief in justice, truth, equality, and responsibility for the common good. P. C. goal 2.1.a
- 113.4a.13 Predict consequences of different types of behavior P.C. goal 2.1.b
- 113.4a.14 Identify selected patriotic songs such as (America the Beautiful) P.C. goal 2.2.a.  
Describe selected patriotic symbols, such as state and national flags, Uncle Sam, and the state bird and flower. P.C. goal 2.1.b  
Analyze how selected customs, symbols, and celebrations reflect American individualism, inventiveness, and freedom. P.C. goal 2.2.c
- 113.4.a.8 Analyze how people use the physical environment including the use of natural resources to meet basic needs. P.C. goal 2.8.a  
Identify ways in which people have modified the physical environment including building roads, land for urban development, and mining coals. P.C. goal 2.8.b  
Evaluate consequences of human modification of the physical environment including the use of irrigation. P.C. goal 2.8.b
- 113.4.a.11 Describe individual actions and group activities that can be taken to conserve and replenish material resources. P.C. goal 2.8.c  
Discuss how the governmental services in the community including libraries, schools, and parks and explain their value to the community. P.C. goal 2.9.b  
Describe how government establishes order, provides security, and manages conflict. P.C. goal 2.9.a
- 113.4.a.10b Compare the roles of public officials including, mayor governor and President. P.C. goal 2.10.a
- 113.4.a.12 Describe the ways elected officials are selected including election and appointment to office. P.C. goal 2.10.b
- 113.4.a.17 Evaluate information about a topic using a variety of oral sources such as conversations, interviews, and music. P. C. goal 2.17.a  
Analyze information about a topic using a variety of visual sources such as Pictures, graphics, television, maps, computer software, literature, reference sources, and artifacts. P.C. goal 2.17.b

Use various parts of a source including the table of contents, glossary and index, as well as keyword computer searches, to locate information. P.C. goal 2.17.c

Sequence and categorize information. P. C. goal 2.17.d

Interpret oral, visual, and print materials by identifying the main idea, predicting and comparing and contrasting. P.C. 2.17.e

- 113.4.a.18 Express ideas orally based on knowledge and experience. P.C goal 2.18.a  
Design written and visual materials such as stories, poems, maps, and graphic organizers to express ideas. P.C. goal 2.18.b

## Appendix B

### *Project Clear objectives used in this paper (Second Grade Level)*

<i>English Language Arts Listening</i>	<i>TEKS Correlation</i>
1a. Differentiates purposes for listening	110.5.2.1
e. Gives and follows multi-step instructions and directions	110.5.2.1
2a. Uses and evaluates standard grammatical structures	110.5.2.3
3a. Chooses and adapts spoken and non-verbal language appropriate to the audience and purpose	110.5.2.3
c. Presents dramatic interpretations	110.5.2.2
4a. Monitors and modifies his/her own communications	110.5.2.3
5a. Connects own experiences and ideas with those of others	110.5.2.2
b. Explores language and oral traditions that reflect customs, regions and cultures	110.5.2.2
<i>English Language Arts Reading</i>	<i>TEKS Correlation</i>
3a. The student develops vocabulary using a variety of strategies	110.4.2.8
b. The student uses spelling patterns and rules to recognize/read words	110.4.2.5
c. The student uses structural clues to recognize/read words	110.4.2.5
d. The student uses a variety of reading strategies to support word identification and confirm word meaning	N/A
<i>English Language Arts Writing</i>	<i>TEKS Correlation</i>
1a. Writes legible letters and words in manuscript	110.4.2.15
b. Uses appropriate margins and letter/word spacing in written work	110.4.2.15
2a. Writes to record, develop, and refine ideas and reflections by means of words and/or pictures (using temporary spelling if needed)	110.4.2.14
d. Writes in different forms for different purposes: invitations, lists, letters, captions, poems	110.4.2.14
e. Writes a description about a specified topic	110.4.2.14
g. Writes a simple “how-to” composition	110.4.2.14
3a. Uses punctuation with increasing accuracy in written forms of communication	110.4.2.15
b. Uses capitalization with increasing accuracy in written forms of communication	110.4.2.15
c. Writes with increasing accuracy in spelling	110.4.2.16
d. Uses resources to find appropriate spelling and word choice	110.4.2.16
4a. Uses basic parts of speech appropriately in written communication	110.4.2.17
c. Edits writing toward grammar and usage in final draft	110.4.2.17

5a. Generates ideas by using prewriting techniques	110.4.2.18
b. Develops drafts.	110.4.2.18
c. Revises selected drafts for varied purposes	110.4.2.18
d. Edits selected drafts	110.4.2.18
e. Publishes selected pieces	110.4.2.18
f. Uses available technology for aspects of writing	110.4.2.18



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