

Voices from the Ghetto: Youth Drama from Houston's At-Risk Youth

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INTRODUCTION

Many of my students come from the “ghetto” and identify themselves as “hard” or “tough.” In truth, many, if not all, of my students have been damaged by poverty, neglect, illness, abuse, and other forms of trauma. In an environment where violent death is a distinct possibility, where many of my students witness events that are shattering, school is often seen as an unnecessary nuisance that must be endured. School is well known as being “boring,” precisely designed to force-feed facts to students who do not care. Deep down inside, however, under the mask of anger and indifference, lives a child who wants to be loved and accepted and who is also curious about his or her world and wants to learn about it. When I say my students are damaged, I mean that certain pathways to learning have been blocked and curiosity has been impeded by the need to appear invulnerable.

It is unfortunately a fact that our students are increasingly raised by television, video games, and movies, which present a barrier to the natural flow of creativity inherent in children. By the time they get to high school, many students feel uncomfortable using skills rusted by disuse or misuse and thus label learning at school as “boring” because what they really mean is that they are ashamed that they lack the tools to comprehend and analyze problems. “*The New York Times* 1993 report ‘Kids of the 90s: A Bolder Breed’ cites a lack of motivation on the part of students in today’s schools that can sometimes border on ‘juvenile nihilism’” (Salvante 36).

The issue at hand is what teachers can do to battle this “juvenile nihilism” in their students. This is especially true in the case of my students who are battling almost every conceivable problem that young people can face. In addition to the pains of adolescence and puberty, some of my students are walking case studies in the problems that plague inner city youth: drug addictions, arrests, pregnancies and/or children, and a host of other issues that make learning seem superfluous.

Combating the many issues urban at-risk youth face is therefore a difficult challenge. Creating and maintaining lessons that engage students is of vital importance. Trickier than coming up with interesting lessons is the need to quietly insert some character development into the curriculum. Many people believe church and state should be separated. I am one of those people. However, as politically incorrect as it sounds, sometimes the parents of the students are far from being good role models for their children, plagued as the parents are by the same factors that affect their children. Often, teachers are the only positive adult role models children see all day. Character development has connotations linking it to Sunday school and is often considered the

province of one's place of worship. However, I personally adhere to the idea of teaching ethics and values to children in the spirit of the ancient Greek philosophers and teachers. We have something concrete and vital to offer our students and we can subtly introduce ethics in the classroom. According to Lisman's *The Curricular Integration of Ethics: Theory and Practice*:

[We] need not resolve the debate concerning the ultimate source of our crises of moral confidence. Instead, we must recognize that education has a significant role in revitalizing a sense of morality among young people. Families and churches have declined in moral influence over the past few decades, and schools must assume a greater role in providing moral education. (2)

The best way to introduce ethical and moral thinking to our children is to insert it into lessons, especially in discussions of literature, the best of which deals precisely with moral and ethical dilemmas. For more advanced students, a reading of *Crime and Punishment* could be used to discuss the implications of murder and what punishments are appropriate to different crimes. Since I currently teach middle school students, my choices of literature are narrower in terms of finding appropriate, high-interest materials that have the ethical and moral underpinnings I desire. Some of the novels typically given to children this age are *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, and *The Outsiders*. These are good novels to use to introduce ethical and moral dilemmas. However, one does not need to stop at the use of novels. The creative teacher who wants to challenge her students will also include drama. Why drama? Plays are often the most accessible form of literature available to students. A journal article entitled "Teaching Self-Advocating Strategies Through Drama" says, "The creative force of drama often empowers students. As students gain confidence using this medium of expression, they are often able to demonstrate previously unrevealed skills and imaginative ideas" (Schnapp and Olsen). The article is particularly aimed at teachers of students with learning disabilities. Many of my students suffer from learning disabilities: dyslexia, ADHD, and a myriad of other problems. In addition, though many of my students have not been officially diagnosed with learning disabilities and seem to have high intelligence quotients, the environments in which they have grown up often serve as efficient "learning disablers," and students who have been in and out of institutions of various sorts may have difficulties learning in an academic setting, whereas they could tell an outsider how to survive well in the harsh streets.

How then, can we reach them through drama? One of drama's greatest assets, at least from the point of view of a teacher of at-risk youth, is that it has an immediacy lacking in other forms of literature. For one thing, plays contain mostly dialogue. If there is one thing students love to do, it is to talk. Furthermore, I have found in my classes that students who normally would never volunteer to read raise their hands when I ask who would like to read for a certain part. This is not to say my students read the parts the way an actor would read them. Often their reading of the lines is clunky or breathless. However, reading drama gives them a sense of satisfaction that reading long, exposition-

laden paragraphs in novels does not seem to offer. Drama offers immediate gratification in terms of the swiftness of reading time, the oral/aural aspect of reading, and the ability, especially in emotional passages, to really engage the students in the action.

UNIT OVERVIEW

Background

A well-thought out curriculum will address the needs of the students, be readily available to them, and include good quality literature with a strong, ethical/moral message that will create dialogue between teachers and students and amongst students. The basic set-up of the curriculum I am proposing is thus: First, a work with an ethical or moral dilemma will be chosen that is of an appropriate reading and interest level. Secondly, the play will be read, analyzed, and discussed. Third, several “workshops” will be arranged in which to get students started learning dramatic terms, learning to interact, learning “drama” games and pre-rehearsal techniques, and getting comfortable talking about semi-personal issues in a public setting, and finally, to create dialogue, plot, and story. Fourthly, students will again sit in workshops of a small number to create their own one-act plays based on incidents or issues in their lives that are important to them. They will use previously learned techniques to create the dialogue and a believable plotline. Lastly, after the completion of the one-act plays, the students will have a reading of the plays, with a goal toward performing them in a public venue, possibly as a treat for other classmates in their own grade or as a small production to be done in front of the school.

The most important starting ingredient is the play one chooses for dissection and reading. For the purpose of my classroom, I have chosen a work that is sometimes neglected in schools and yet carries rich implications for my students. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a beautiful play that, though slightly dated, introduces the students to a strong, moral African American family and their experiences living in poverty, living in a “tough” neighborhood, and dealing with an important moral dilemma involving Walter “Brother” Younger and money. I chose this play because A) it deals with an African American family, and half to slightly over half of my students are African American; B) because it contains the moral dilemma which, it is hoped, will lead to discussions on appropriate moral decisions; C) because it is accessible, contains nothing that would be considered inappropriate for students to read; and D) deals with issues of race that can also open discussions on ethics (for example, was it ethical or moral of Karl Lindner, the white “neighborhood representative,” to offer the Youngers money in lieu of their moving into the neighborhood?). In addition, students typically enjoy this particular play. *A Raisin in the Sun*’s themes are family relationships, black/white relations, moral dilemmas, and, to a certain extent, issues facing black men. The very fact that Walter Younger is present in the family as a father and had a strong father figure himself is not something a majority of my students can relate to. Many, but not all, of my students are from single-parent (read: single-mother) households. Therefore, the play will have important things to say to my students, among whose ranks males are the slight

majorities. Young African American males in particular have special issues that must be addressed in school, because they may not be addressed anywhere else.

My Hispanic students will also benefit from the play, because though it specifically addresses African American issues, the problems of poverty, racism, and family troubles are universal. A play I originally suggested tentatively as a good play for dissection with my students was *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* by Reinaldo Povod. *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* is a Hispanic play set in a poor neighborhood in New York City, dealing with drug dealers, homosexuality and father/son relationships. At first glance, the play seemed like it would prove to be a worthwhile tool for my curriculum project. However, after reading the play thoroughly and examining it, I found that the play did not meet my criteria for selection because it contained no positive message (some may see the play as a validation of a certain type of existence and that may be true). For my own part, however, I find that our students need more POSITIVE images. The 6 o'clock news can be said to "validate" my students' experiences. Furthermore, the play does not have a clear moral compass or even an easily definable set of circumstances. I found it, in truth, to be fairly poorly written and not something I would want to hold up as an example of authentic Hispanic life, though it might be. Because the play is depressing and ends on down note, I could not see myself presenting it alongside *A Raisin in the Sun*. I did not like the possible connotations of showing it as the *sole* realistic example of Hispanic life.

However, I do think, if a teacher chose, she could use certain scenes in *Cuba* (warning: most of the scenes contain profanity and obscene references) to give a "flavor" of the play and to counterpoint *A Raisin in the Sun* as an example of life in poverty-ridden setting in a more modern time period (the 1980s) and for its realism. I am emphatically *not* advocating the use of the play beyond a few snippets, as I do not believe, as a whole, that it has any real value to offer to middle school students. The discretion of the teacher in this case is highly advisable. The search for a Hispanic American dramatic text to complement *A Raisin in the Sun* continues.

Implementation Strategies

Reading and Discussing the Play

So the play has been selected. Now the question becomes how to use this in a middle school classroom, as *A Raisin in the Sun* is typically used in high school. The simple answer is to move discussion of it more toward a basic understanding of the play's themes, plot and characters, instead of worrying about a more sophisticated explication as would be expected of high school students. If a high school teacher would like to apply the curriculum to her students, it is simple to find many curriculums that contain detailed analyses of the play and contain useful materials and supplements. Some websites for examination include *Teacher Vision*, *Teach With Movies* and *Welch English*.

Work would begin perhaps, with a mini-lecture on the life of Lorraine Hansberry, with an emphasis on her experiences in Chicago, particularly her house being set on fire during her move to a white neighborhood. A slide show or PowerPoint presentation with photographs of that era of Chicago along with a sampling of era-appropriate blues and jazz music might be played to give the students a feel for Chicago as it was when Hansberry wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*. Another very good option would be to read the poem “Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes, from whence Hansberry got the title of her play. If possible, the teacher might wish to get a recording of Langston Hughes reading the poem (there are some available). Good for getting the classes’ writing juices flowing, such a reading might provide students with a journal response to the following questions: “What might this poem mean? Without looking in a dictionary, define ‘defer’ using context clues.” A class discussion should follow to explain the meaning of the word “defer” and the meaning of the poem as an explanation of African American dissatisfaction over the status of African Americans in the 1920s up until the Civil Rights movement.

Each child should be allowed to read a role in the play, changing out characters each new day. The purpose is to allow the students the opportunity to read aloud and form their own interpretations of the characters. Character interpretation can lead to an examination of self. Learning to interpret the motivations, personality traits, and mindsets of fictional characters is good practice for learning how to interpret one’s own motivations, traits, and mindset. *A Raisin in the Sun* contains excellent scenes that both exemplify and encourage character analysis. Beneatha, as a character, engages in many instances of self-analysis, especially as compared to Walter, who does not seem to be particularly introspective. The teacher might ask her students to examine themselves the way Beneatha does. It might also be asked by the teacher that the students analyze Walter’s character and examine who he is and why he feels so trapped by his life.

Being trapped by life is a familiar theme for many of my students. Aside from reading the play and participating in reading, students should also be encouraged to engage in activities that connect their lives to the literature. This can be accomplished through role-playing games. Students in this case would pretend to be a television reporter and interviewee, for example, or an employer and an employee. The teacher would give each student a moral/ethical dilemma scenario where each student would respond in the manner in which they think a person would react under the circumstances. For example, the scenario could be that the employer finds his employee stealing money from the cash register. As the students act out the scenario, the teacher would go around making sure that the scenario is not getting out of hand and that everyone remains on task. After the students act out the scenario, working together they could record their impressions of the situation and how they could have reacted differently to the situation. The students would also discuss whether their reactions were appropriate under the circumstances and why, and other similar questions.

The point of this exercise is to help the teacher understand what types of decisions her students think are reasonable to make and to help the students think about their own reactions to different types of situations. One reason students feel trapped by situations is that they lack moral training. If a person is raised by television and violent video games, it may seem that a reasonable response to being accused of stealing is to react with raised fists or to return later for revenge killings in order to “save face.” As Janet Pozmantier, creator of the *Parents Under Construction: Seventh-Twelfth Grade Curriculum*, asks:

Children who are raised in poverty; children who are unwanted; children who are abused, neglected, tortured; children who are hungry; children who have drug-addicted parents; children who have no adult to depend on; children who live with violence every day of their life—what will they be like when they grow up? (6)

My students’ ideas about respect and my ideas about respect often differ. Whereas being kind and allowing freedom of choice in a school situation is something I personally think indicates respect for individual choices, such behavior has been interpreted as “weakness” by some of my students. Mike Knox, a Houston police officer who has worked with gangs, writes in his book, *Gangsta In the House*, about the way in which gang members operate outside of society’s norms. In general, everything considered positive by society at large—settling disputes peacefully, doing well in school, to name a couple of examples—is considered anathema to gang members, who see peaceful resolution and doing well in school (“the system”) as “weak” or somehow less than acceptable. In fact, doing poorly in the “straight” world becomes a badge of honor in a gang. Acceptable forms of behavior include showing “respect” for those higher up in the pecking order. Respect, as defined by gangs, usually means showing fear. If people fear the person and stay out of his way, that means the person is “respected.” Real respect, as defined by mainstream society, makes no sense in this context. Therefore, many students who are involved in gangs automatically do not respect schools or administrations or teachers, because these institutions and the people associated with them represent “the system.”

Role-playing

Role-playing allows teachers to challenge students’ assumptions about right and wrong without directly confronting the student. Even when students in a teacher’s class are not directly involved with gangs, chances are that their neighborhoods are ruled by gangs and that a brother or sister or other family member is involved in a gang. It is a good rule of thumb not to ignore this reality of urban youth. Consistently showing students a firm, morally strong stance may help a student to regain some respect for a system that may have failed them. It is the responsibility of a teacher to at least attempt to show students that life has other options that do not involve gang life. Role-playing is also good in preparation to acting in the plays the students write. Once students are comfortable with role-playing, it is not much of a stretch to get them involved in real acting. They have already read as characters for *A Raisin in the Sun*, so they are getting more familiar with

what acting entails. Role-playing could also ask the students to pretend they are characters from *A Raisin in the Sun* and act how they think Walter, for example, would act if he were in a certain situation. A discussion of Kohlberg's moral hierarchy (in a simplified form for middle school or less-advanced high school students or a more in-depth form for advanced high school students) would be appropriate here.

Kohlberg's moral hierarchy is a theory about the development of moral reasoning in humans. Kohlberg's hierarchy states that there are five stages of moral development. Stages three and four (conventional) are the stages in which most adults find themselves. These stages are concerned with moral decisions based on, respectively, love and approval from family and friends and morals based on law and/or religion. The last stage of morality is based on ideas of fairness, truth and other ideals. The other two stages, the first ones labeled "preconventional," deal with morality based on the consequences and benefits derived from an individual's actions. In other words, the pre-conventional moral decision maker would likely ask himself these questions: "Will I be punished?" or "What's in it for me?" This is the moral stage of toddlers and elementary school-age children. Without a doubt, most of my students are firmly rooted in the pre-conventional stages of morality. The purpose of character education is to help gently bring them to at least a conventional stage of morality. Decisions based on "What's in it for me?" are likely to have disastrous consequences in cases of teenage pregnancy, for example. A young man may decide that there "is nothing in it" for him to help the mother of his child and he may abandon her, thus perpetuating troubling family cycles. Kohlberg's moral hierarchy could also be applied to the decisions made by the characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* or in *Cuba and His Teddy Bear*, if the teacher has chosen to present snippets of the play to her class.

Playwriting

After the play has been discussed and analyzed, the next step is to have free writing workshops, getting the students to daily engage in writing about topics which interest them. If students have particular trouble coming up with suitable topics, the teacher might assign them to carry a journal (a cheap drugstore notebook would work, as would a few sheets of loose-leaf paper stapled together) and jot down things that interest them or ideas they have as they go about their daily lives. The purpose of the journal is simple: it keeps students motivated to write by allowing them free reign over what they jot down. It also keeps the students aware of what kinds of ideas they have over the course of a day. Many students are surprised by how many things they actually think about. Helping to reinforce their natural curiosity stems the tide of "juvenile nihilism." The students now have a reason to care about schoolwork because the schoolwork in this case is all about what the students think and not about what their parents, peers, or others think.

A teacher should be very careful at this point condemning students who are honest about what they are thinking. Being hormonal means that sex is naturally something students think about. From my personal experience, I have discovered that my students

lack the sense that I had as a student of not telling adults about sexual feelings. My students have, in writing or out loud, told me things that could make a person blush. Sex is natural, however, and teachers have to accept that this is reality for students, especially in secondary school. In fact, many of my students knew more about sex at 10 years old than I knew at 16 years old. It is wise to separate feelings about sex from issues of morality. You may feel, for example, that sex before marriage is wrong. However, many of your students will not feel the same way and they should not be condemned by their teacher for decisions they make regarding what they choose to do with their bodies. Where the moral should come in is what to do if having sex has affected another person. You should never tell a student what to do, but you should present them with choices they can make regarding their situation.

For an example, I will use theoretical student named John. John has just told you, his teacher, that he has sex with his girlfriend. His girlfriend has recently told John that she is pregnant. You may feel uncomfortable with the information that John, who is 15, has been having sex without being married, but you must not condemn him. Your place is to talk to him, if he comes to you, about the possible choices he can make in this situation. You may tell him, for example, about what his parental rights and responsibilities will be and what he could do in his situation. It is then up to him to use the information he has received and make the best choice he can. From your standpoint, you have done everything you can to make John aware of his responsibilities. At the very least, John now has something he might be able to make into a play! Drugs and alcohol are similar situations that require sensitivity. Your role as a teacher is as a facilitator only. You are not a judge or jury and you must never condemn decisions students make for themselves. However, it is within your expanded role as an educator to inform them of the many options available to them and you can even tell them which options are more morally sound than others. To purposely steer them in any particular direction, however, can get you into trouble. You are wisest to simply state the options and consequences and encourage them to foresee options and consequences for themselves. Sometimes all it takes is a rational look at the pros and cons of a situation to make students realize their best (and most morally sound) option. The key thing you should get students thinking about is how their actions will affect *others*.

The force of drama is in its portrayal of personal relationships. The therapeutic effect desired from having students write plays about their own lives is derived by using the drama as a tool for working through and analyzing problems. You must understand your role as a catalyst for this type of work. The students will not be impressed with your own experiences unless you have been asked to share them and you should be careful what you tell them. A student's memories about your relationship with your father may be different from your own. You may not feel comfortable sharing your personal life with your students, but be forewarned: if you expect truth and candor from your students, you may be required to return it. You should also refrain from telling a student that you think what they wish to write about is inappropriate. The entire point of the exercise is precisely to get "inappropriate" feelings aired, to have ideas and thoughts exchanged

hopefully to gain something meaningful from it. What you can do if they wish to write a scene involving anal sex, just for example, is to ask them what other situations they could write about that would have the same sort of impact. A good way of thinking about this situation is to consider the drama itself a diamond that has to be carefully mined from a lot of useless rubble. It is your most important job as a teacher to help the students create and shape that brilliant jewel, but the work should always be the students' and never your own.

Most important in your endeavor is not to have expectations that are unrealistically high. If you expect your students to become budding Tennessee Williamses, your expectations might be too high. If you expect that all students will absolutely love this project, you may discover yourself losing hope in it. If you expect that all students will walk away from the experience of playwriting with a profound respect for literature and a healthier mental attitude, your ideals may be destroyed. If, on the other hand, you understand that not all of your students will benefit from the exercise because they will not put themselves into it, you stand a chance of helping a good deal of your students. Above all, be flexible. Realize that the students themselves are growing and changing and what they find important today, they may not find important tomorrow. Be patient and model the behavior you want to see from them. You should also strive to be enthusiastic for your students as much as your personality will permit. After all, if you are not excited about the possible outcome of the unit, how can you expect that they will be? A motivated, excited role model will propel some of your students to work they did not realize was possible.

As much as having a good, positive attitude, I must also stress the ill effects of having a negative attitude or low expectations for a project like this. You must understand that if you can get them enthused enough, your students may well surprise you with the depth and reach of their feelings and observations about their environment. Do not expect them to do poorly. Repeat, as often as necessary, how truly important their work can be for their lives and how the work they do reflects on them. Always stress, if your school will allow it, that these plays all have the possibility of being presented in front of the student body, parents, teachers, and administrators. Excellence should be your watchword. Expect that most of the students will do as well as they can, but that some will do better than others. If you feel yourself losing focus or becoming frustrated, it would be wise to maybe go on to other things for a day or two before circling around and coming back to it. A frustrated or unfocused teacher will not help students produce good work. Low expectations are dangerous because students will sense your lack of faith in their abilities. If you work with at-risk students, you know that many of them are profoundly insecure and that despite the need to appear "hard," many of them may secretly wish for your approval. Therefore, if you say "Don't worry about how good it is" or "Just get something written" you are sending them a subtle message that you do not expect much from them.

Realistically high expectations; a steady, measured pace; and an unflagging enthusiasm for your cause should make students, even reluctant ones, come out of their shells to do the best work that they can do. Most importantly, you are modeling appropriate adult behavior for your students.

CONCLUSION

To help you keep focused on the important aspects, I am reviewing the *what*, the *why*, and the *how* of the playwriting unit.

The What

The playwriting unit is a curriculum developed for use with at-risk middle school students in mind. It can easily be adapted for use with high school students or upper-grade level elementary students. The playwriting unit consists of a published, well-known play, such as *A Raisin in the Sun*, used as a model and guide for student-written plays. Through several phases incorporating writing workshops, peer and teacher conferences, brainstorming sessions, and other methods, students will develop their own plays, either as individuals or as small groups. The student-written plays may be full-length plays (this would suit upper-level high school students well) or they may be one-act plays or even just dramatic scenes. These plays may then be performed for the whole school.

The Why

I have explained the reasons for this particular curriculum in more depth in the previous pages. Here I simply want to state those reasons as an aid to any teacher seriously considering using this curriculum in her or his classroom. The first reason is to teach major literary skills, such as plot, dialogue, et cetera. This particular area is especially well adapted to use in any level of classroom. A teacher of British literature, for example, might wish to use a Shakespearean play with the students instead of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Teaching literary terms and showing students what is involved in the mechanics of playwriting can be reason enough for wanting to use the curriculum. But as anyone who has read the article can plainly see that my ultimate motivation for developing the unit was the idea of using playwriting as an unobtrusive means of character development education. I have argued, persuasively I hope, that for students who are at-risk, the school environment may be the only environment in their lives that is safe, orderly, and caring. The teacher who sees the students every day for an entire year can have tremendous influence on his or her students. I believe that this influence should be positive and influenced by the fact that in today's society, teachers have an expanded role. As teachers, we are paid to teach grammar, reading, and vocabulary skills (or math, science, or whatever our subject matter) but we also have a subtler lesson to teach, one for which we are not paid in monetary terms, but for which are paid in more intangible rewards. The reward for teaching students how to live in morally and ethically correct

ways is living in a society populated by caring, educated individuals. This idea sounds like an improbable dream and it may well be impossible. The seeds for greatness, however, are all around us in the eyes and minds and hearts of some of society's most neglected children. We continue to neglect these children at our own peril. As Janet Pozmantier so plaintively asked, "Children who are abused, neglected, tortured . . . what will they be like when they grow up?" (6). We have a responsibility to try and make sure we are not afraid of the answer. As families and churches exert less and less influence on today's youth, someone (or something) must step into fill the void. Will we let that void be filled by violent movies, video games, or pornographic television shows? Will we allow our children to grow up uncultured, ignorant, and unsocialized? This curriculum will not solve all these problems, I am well aware. Think of this curriculum as a tool to help you to do all you can to reach these children. It is a difficult task, and you have my gratitude as a fellow educator on the front lines for showing up to work every day and doing your personal best to help children who may otherwise have no help. The third reason to use this curriculum? Accomplishment. My mother, a 20-plus-year veteran of inner-city high schools, has a sign over her desk, which reads, "The only true self-esteem comes from accomplishment." A play written and performed by the students is an example of an accomplishment of which a student can rightfully be proud. Such pride can help raise critically low self-esteem. Success in a mainstream arena can help reduce the risk of gang involvement, but it takes a teacher to show the way and model appropriate adult behavior.

The How

In the following lesson plans, I give more in-depth examples of how to proceed with the curriculum. However, these are some general guidelines in planning and executing the curriculum. 1) Give yourself a minimum of *three* weeks. If your school or district has a particular curriculum for you to follow (mine does), you can always do this as a side project, to be worked on as you work on other things. A benefit to doing many things in one day and maintaining a swift pace is keeping students out of trouble and focused on class! The reading and discussion of your guide play (I used *A Raisin in the Sun*) should take about a week. I find that a filmed version of a play is handy for referral. I recommend the Sidney Poitier version of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The Poitier version is a classic and vastly superior to the newer one featuring Danny Glover. Showing your students photographs from a recent staged version starring Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, a popular rap artist, might make it more accessible to them. Make sure though, that you get the students prepared for the black-and-white movie in advance. If you think your kids cannot handle black-and-white, you might do well to show the Danny Glover version. The reading and dissection of the play may take longer than a week, depending on your class's needs and the objectives you must cover. At least two weeks should be devoted to the workshops and other activities involved in students. Topic brainstorming sessions should be held in the format of individual free writing periods, followed by group idea shares/think tanks. Students should then be guided to write a simple conversation between two people based on an idea developed in brainstorming session. For example, a

student in your class comes up with a topic about teenage pregnancy. The student might then write a simple conversation between a mother and a daughter. A good idea at this point might be to have some simple role-playing games to help students develop their ear for conversation and dialogue. Students should also keep written journals at this time in which they write down anything that comes to mind and/or write about topics they care about. The purpose of this is to have a continuously developing idea. It keeps students focused and prevents “writer’s block.” Writers’ workshops should then be held in which students share their scenes with others and all positive and useful feedback should be encouraged. As the drafts are being developed, keep in touch with your students through teacher conferences, daily if possible. Once the cycle of workshops has gone around two or three more times and the plays have been critiqued by you and by their peers, the students should select the plays to go on via an anonymous vote. The winning plays from each class can then be performed in each class, for the grade-level, or for the school as a whole. Alternative assessment forms, such as rubrics, should be utilized in helping compute grades.

NOTE: I hope this curriculum can help you reach your students and keep them motivated for learning and life. Use this curriculum as a tool and adapt it in anyway you see fit. If you or your class comes up with new ideas to make this curriculum even better, do not hesitate to contact me via e-mail at klbaroski@yahoo.com

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One

After your guide play has been selected (*A Raisin in the Sun* was the guide play chosen for my class), you will want to create a presentation that gives background information on your play, the playwright, and any interesting tidbits of information you discover about the play. For *Raisin*, I would create a PowerPoint presentation using photos and music samples from Chicago circa the 1950s, especially African American music and photos from the South Side of Chicago. A discussion of the poem “A Dream Deferred” (*Raisin*’s title is derived from a line in the poem) would be appropriate at this juncture. Students should be keeping notes (PowerPoint allows you to make printouts of your slide show, along with blank lines by each slide in which to put notes, which makes an excellent option for note-taking). Individual folders should be set up at this point to allow students to keep their notes, brainstorming session results, and any other materials together in portfolio fashion. This allows students to see their development as the unit progresses. A worksheet or activity that uses a graphic organizer to compare and contrast 1950s south-side Chicago with 2000s Third-Ward Houston (or wherever it is your school is located) would be a good idea.

You may choose to make a class timeline, in which students, as a homework or mini in-class assignment (provided your classroom is equipped with Internet-ready computers or at least a set of encyclopedias), research the era of the 1950s and make a large timeline on a long piece of butcher paper, decorated with photos or quotations from the era. This

is your opportunity to get as creative as you wish. You could decorate the room in the style of the 1950s or organize a “sock-hop,” for example. Anything that brings this era alive for your students will help them when it comes time to see snippets of the play.

You can also show the play in its entirety after you have read the play with the class. I strongly recommend reading the whole play (especially *Raisin*) because though the dialogue is not particularly difficult, the play itself is complex and full of important ideas and comments about society. Reading only snippets would be to the detriment of your students because only the full play will have a full impact. On a practical note, the more students see how a play is structured, the easier it will be for them later on to construct their own.

Lesson Two

The student should be given a blank plot line sheet, with room on it to write in a brief description of what will happen at any given point along the plotline. In a lesson prior to reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, plots, scenes, and other play elements have been described fully. Using the information from the previous lesson, the students will now be able to structure their one-act play based on the plotline. The purpose of the plotline sheet is to allow students to visualize the play and concentrate on creating dramatic structure. Once these elements are in place (the teacher should be having one-on-one conferences to clear up confusion and to help point students in the right direction), the students begin to fill in their plotline skeletons, using dialogue. Remind the students that the dialogue and stage directions should account for the progress of the play. The student should be allowed at least three class periods in which to complete this lesson.

Lesson Three

After the guide play is read and thoroughly examined, the next step is to write a scene. A workshop-type setup would be ideal for this purpose. Students should be told that the dialogue (a vocabulary term they will have been taught beforehand) should be a conversation between two or three people about something of interest to the student. For example, a conversation between a mother and child or between a boyfriend and girlfriend could be used. The teacher will provide a worksheet that helps the student organize their ideas. The worksheet should contain room for at least four characters and their descriptions. The first line would say “Character name,” with room to write in the name, and the next line would say “Character description” with enough lines to allow the student to briefly describe the appearance and personality traits of the character. A third possible line might be “Relationship to other characters,” again with room for the student to write in the relationship between the characters.

Students would be required to write a simple scene (or several, depending on how fast the students work) during one class period. If students are doing more than one scene per class, the teacher should make it challenging by telling the students that the scenes must be as different from each other as possible. If one scene is between a boyfriend and

girlfriend, for example, the next scene could be between a teacher and a student. The teacher would make copies of the work toward the end of the period to distribute to the class to read for the next class period. During the next class period, the class would discuss each person's scene, with ideas and hints for improvement. Of course, insults or meaningless praise would be outlawed at the start of the project. The emphasis would be on *useful critiques*. The student whose work is being read would then jot down the comments on a piece of paper for inclusion into his or her play portfolio (discussed in Lesson One). Next, the student would be given several class periods, with one-on-one teacher conferences in which to expand that scene into a one-act play. Alternatively, a teacher may choose to allow students to co-write a play together. The individual writer or the co-writers would have to create a one-act play with at least two or three characters in it. To provide a structure, the teacher will need to provide a lesson about plot and pacing. Using a traditional plot arc, the teacher will ask students to arrange several pictures with captions along a blank plot line, putting them in the proper place of the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. This will allow students to see, in a graphic way, how scenes fit into a plotline.

Lesson Four

After the students have created their one act plays, it is time to workshop those plays. Having become familiar with the workshop process in a previous lesson (see Lesson Three), the teacher will distribute one to three student plays and the workshop will commence as outlined above. The teacher could also help make this easier by providing "critique forms," which ask specific questions that will help the student know what they are supposed to be looking for in the play he/she is reading. Some questions could include: "What is this play about? Who are the characters and what are their characteristics? What scene do you think is particularly good? Why? What scene do you think could use some improvement? What would you suggest to fix it?" The class would go over the plays (at-risk students work best when all work is done in class as opposed to being taken home) and discuss the plays individually as they fill in the critique forms for each one. The teacher should play this part by ear and do only as many plays as can realistically be done in a class period. This particular lesson model will likely run several days, depending on the number of students and the length of the class.

Lesson Five

A final session should include a final ranking of the plays. This may be done as a class or it may be done by the teacher. At any rate, the class finalists should be selected. I would suggest no more than three plays per class. The grade finalists (that is, the finest play from each class period) should then be chosen, hopefully by the teacher and a friendly colleague. The criteria chosen for the final plays will be up to the teacher, but remember, at-risk youth will likely have "inappropriate" subject matter in their play. I strongly urge against limiting your students in terms of subject matter, but point out that even profanity has a certain place within plays and should not be used simply for shock value. If a character swears in a fit of pique at a moment of heightened drama in the play, this might

be acceptable, whereas having characters swear at all times would not be considered appropriate and would be considered gratuitous. As I have mentioned elsewhere, the point is not to judge, but to make students aware of other options they can exercise. Special care should be taken to explain the difference between gratuitous foul language and foul language used judiciously to create an effect during a scene. For that purpose, a study of selected scenes from *Cuba and His Teddy Bear* might be a good idea.

Once the final plays are chosen, the teacher should distribute copies of the plays to all classes. Remind the students that the play itself was a part of their experiences and expresses a truth about their lives. There should be care taken to explain that plays were chosen for the final cut on the basis of previously stated criteria (a rubric would be helpful here) and not on popularity. Tell all students that they have done noteworthy jobs, but these plays have been selected due to their accessibility and stage-readiness. Then, the finalists will have their plays read in class. The class will be encouraged to write evaluations of the final product. If the teacher decides to go through and have a performance of the play, the entire class should be involved in the process (i.e., everyone should have a role on or offstage).

A good play will have strong scenes that can make even the novice actor look good. Involving all the students in the final production should be your goal, whether as directors, actors, or stagehands. Remembering our motto that “True self-esteem comes from achievement,” students should be engaged at a level that allows you the teacher to step back and supervise. If you are doing more than your fair share of the work, call a halt immediately. Delegate work as the class as a whole sees fit and continue on. Members of class who are not willing to work as hard must come before a delegate of their classmates to discuss improving the work or taking a consequence, which must be agreed upon by everyone—students, teachers, and administrators alike.

I hope you have found this curriculum interesting, exciting, and usable. At-risk students are, without a doubt, a difficult group, and at-risk adolescents (especially those in middle school) are a particularly challenging group to work with. With any luck, your patience, dedication, and enthusiasm have brought your students to a new understanding of plays and the work it takes to develop them. If you have taken the opportunity to incorporate character development discussions in the lesson plans, you have given your students a valuable gift. This gift of introspection and thinking-before-doing will aid your students for the durations of their lives. You may not save them all, but it is certainly within the realm of possibility to turn a few toward more positive channels.

If you do not work with at-risk students, please be aware that many students not labeled as being at-risk still have many of the same limitations. At all levels of our society, students are increasingly without direction or motivation. This curriculum and its emphasis on character development through achievement and discussion can work for any student. Let it work magic in your classroom. Society as a whole will benefit.

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Internet Resources

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Works Consulted

Books

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Video Resources

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A version starring Danny Glover. It is a more modern version and in color. I recommend the Sidney Poitier version over this one.
- A Raisin in the Sun*. Dir. Daniel Petrie. Columbia/Tristar Studios, 1961. (128 minutes)
The classic film version of A Raisin in the Sun starring Sidney Poitier. The definitive version and my personal favorite.