

Discovering Your Ethical Self through Text

Patti-Brown Milstead
Westbury High School

INTRODUCTION

As a reading teacher my main focus is to help students become better readers, so that they can meet the many challenges they will face in the future. My students are basically non-readers and as such their perspective on the world tends to be very narrow. Many of them are also considered at risk for failure for reasons which include but are not limited to living in a single parent home, being a teen parent, lacking parents, and living in poverty. Their poor reading skills compound their poor academic skills. They often come to class empty handed with no homework and no materials. In spite of this, they often surprise me with their wisdom and insight. A student once told me that all children are gifts that should be taken care of. Ordinarily quiet and relatively reserved students surprise me with their conclusions. One African American boy who enjoyed listening to rock music was asked by another student why he was listening to white music. The boy responded that music has no color. These and numerous other experiences tell me that students are thinking about life and what is right and wrong. This unit will push students to explore their ethics and really think about what lies behind their ideas of what is morally right. When they make a moral decision, do they think before they act or do they just act? If they think before they act, then what thoughts or experiences are they basing their actions on? These are the ethical issues I would like them to consider. Their lack of strong academic skills makes them unsure of themselves, so they are either slow or unwilling to risk placing themselves in a situation which might bring ridicule and shame from their peers. Students ridicule each other constantly. If someone makes a mistake while reading, gives an incorrect answer, wears their clothes in an unusual way, talks differently, or perhaps has unusual ideas, he or she become potential targets for the other students' harassment. The classroom is not the only place where students fail to show good judgment in making ethical decisions. A girl can't concentrate because she can't decide whether to leave her best friend's boyfriend alone even though she really likes him. A boy doesn't complete his homework because his "friends" talk him into going out to make mischief. Doing the right thing is not always easy for anybody.

By nature, teenagers are trying to figure out who they are and how to act given a certain situation. Often they depend on "friends" and pop culture to help them figure out the best course of action or the right attitude to take regarding social events that require an ethical decision. Careful thought and reflection are not commonly used when deciding whether or not to skip school or ditch homework to be with friends. In this unit I will broaden my student's perspective through a detailed investigation of the self and ethics. Some of the questions students will develop answers for are: How do we come to be who we are? and How do we determine what is right and what is wrong? Students will accomplish this through guided reading, annotation, reflection and questioning. Initially we will compose a list of values which can be fine-tuned and added to as we go through the unit. This list will provide students with a reference point or context from which they can reflect on textual events. The list will also serve as a vocabulary reference point for students to refer to if they are looking for an expression.

Teenagers are naturally drawn to texts which will help them to understand themselves and their place in the world. The texts that I have chosen which meet these criteria are *Who Am I Without Him?* by Sharon G. Flake and *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* by Stanley “Tookie” Williams. Even though one book is fictional and one is a memoir, they both will provide students with a context in which they can examine the ethics of a variety of situations which they themselves encounter on a daily basis. More importantly, both selections will grab their interest and give them situations they can relate to on a personal level. As they read, students will examine vocabulary, draw conclusions, make generalizations, discern cause and effect relationships, and generally develop their comprehension skills. By actively reading these selections, students will broaden their ethical perspectives and enhance their ability to stop and think about their behavior toward themselves and others as they continue to grow into adulthood.

WHO AM I WITHOUT HIM?

Who Am I Without Him? is a collection of short stories which discusses relationships between teenage boys and girls. This is a topic which teenagers are intensely interested in, and this novel will grab the student’s attention and keep it the whole way through. I can hear the boys saying, “This is a girl’s book; we don’t want to read a girl’s book.” To that statement I will ask them why they think it is a girl’s book and what is wrong with them reading it. For every objection that they come up with, I will come back with a question until they exhaust their argument. I can begin each question with “why” until they have nothing left to say. This will set the trend for the rest of the unit in that it forces students to question the whys and wherefores of their own ethical behavior.

“So I Ain’t No Good Girl”

“So I Ain’t No Good Girl” is the story of an abusive relationship. When we hear of an abusive relationship, people often say how stupid the girl is for putting up with it. Sometimes people will even say that she deserves what she gets because she does put up with it. This presents an ethical question that is unfortunately all too common. Even if someone is not involved in a violent relationship, most of us have known someone who is. This short story is told in first person, so we never know the name of the girl telling her story of her abusive relationship with Raheem. The female character’s low self-esteem is illustrated not only in the title but also by the way she allows herself to be treated by Raheem. She does what he wants her to do, and when she expresses displeasure of his wondering eyes, Raheem is quick to remind her that he will do what he wants, and if she doesn’t like it, then that is too bad for her. This is illustrated by Raheem’s behavior: “Raheem’s hand smashes the words back into my mouth. “Girl! Don’t make me . . .” (Flake 5). Raheem’s statement implies that he does not have control over his own behavior. He implies that she has control over whether or not he hits her even though she does not control his brain. This is a common sentiment amongst my students. They like to say “he/she made me . . .” or, my favorite is “you failed me . . .” This part of the story will open up a discussion on individual responsibility. Is each person responsible for his or her own behavior or are there circumstances which can preclude ownership of one’s own behavior, and if so, what would those circumstances be? When can we exempt personal responsibility and how should students/society view these people? I will ask the class: (1) To what extent are you responsible for your own behavior? (2) Which aspects of your life are you responsible for? They are still young, so it will be interesting to see what they have to say. It will also cause them to stop and think about the characters in the story more carefully once they have examined their own lives in this regard.

The female character in the story makes excuses for her boyfriend at school with his teachers, takes class notes for him, and does his homework even though he seems to be totally disinterested in school. He takes money from her purse without her permission and then excuses his behavior

with the comment, “‘What’s yours is mine, ain’t it?’” (Flake 6). Obviously he uses her perceived love for him without any remorse what so ever. This presents an opportunity to ask students if they have ever used someone or allowed someone else to use them. Is it ok to use someone? Is it ok to be used? If so, when is it ok or is it never ok? Teenage boys sometimes have a reputation for using girls to satisfy their sexual urges and then dropping them once they have achieved that goal, while girls can have a reputation for using a boy as long as he can spend money on her and dropping him once she has spent all of his money. Here again students will be able to relate to this issue on a personal level because they are all familiar with these scenarios. They may begin to understand that a quick judgment of someone else’s behavior or their own behavior may require a little more thought than previously given.

At the end when the heroine gets on the bus and looks back to see Raheem with another girl, she decides not to say anything to him, so he will not get mad at her. This girl takes abuse from Raheem like her mother takes abuse from her father and like Raheem’s mother takes from his father. Does this information provide the characters with an excuse for their behavior? This is a question for the students to decide. Do we have to act like our parents or is it possible to change? Students will say, “I’m never going to do what my mom/dad does; I’m going to be different or better!” Is this always so easy or possible? If it is, how can a young person change a familial pattern? This is another question for my students to consider. How cemented are we to the environment in which we were/are raised? How does that affect who we are and who we become? Students will consider the following questions: If your parents drink, smoke or do drugs does that mean you will? If your father/mother left your family before you were grown, does that mean you will be that type of parent? If your parent whips you as a method to teach you right from wrong, does that mean you will whip your children they same way? If your parent is the pillar of the community, active in church, and a loving parent, does that mean you will be one also? Again, should a person’s background serve as an excuse for misbehavior? In each set of circumstances, students will discern what set of values is associated with each group of behaviors. Students will be asked, what does a father who is not involved with his children value? Even though they will only be able to speculate because most likely they will not know, they will question some of the values associated with behavior which is harmful to family and society.

The girl’s identity appears to be totally based on her relationship with Raheem. Who would she be without him? By the same token, who is Raheem without her? How badly does he need her to maintain his sense of self? How well could either of these people stand alone? Why do girls with low self-esteem sometimes implant themselves in abusive relationships? Why do boys with low self-esteem sometimes need someone to bully to identify themselves? Again, these are questions that students will be expected to answer. They can consider whether the question is based on something real, and if so, they can proceed with the answer. I think some students will have a difficult time answering this question, but they will have the list of values and the previously answered discussion questions to refer to. Students will go on to answer the question: If they value themselves so little, can they go on to find real or genuine value in any relationship? Once all of the students have addressed these questions and exhausted the topic, then students can write one letter to the girl in the story and one to Raheem giving each advice on how they could improve their situation not as a pair but as separate individuals.

“Girl, Didn’t I Say I Don’t Write Letters?”

This is a cute story of a budding relationship between two classmates who have been assigned the task of writing notes to each other on a regular basis for a grade. It provides an opportunity for students to examine behavioral differences that pertain to gender. I believe students will quickly get caught up in the spirit of the text and read, learn, and grow without even being aware of it. The female character’s name is Devita and the male character’s name is Jaquel. As Devita and Jaquel write back and forth to each other, their assumptions and generalizations about the

opposite sex are revealed. Devita tells Jaquel that his letters are not long enough to which Jaquel responds, “Girls are always trying to change us dudes” (Flake 15). This provides an opportunity for students to explore this idea and determine for themselves whether or not they believe Jaquel’s statement to be true. Do boys change when they begin hanging out with a specific girl? If so, is this a good thing or a bad thing? If this is true, what kind of value is associated with a girl wanting to change a boy? What does this say about the boy in question? These are questions that students can discuss and answer. Researchers say that married men live longer than single men. Is this because women change men?

Devita goes on to ask Jaquel, “Why do boys lie?” (16). I will ask students to respond to this statement and ask them whether or not they believe this is true. For the students who say yes boys do lie to girls, the question will then be why and is it ever justified? Of course, students will most likely not be satisfied until we consider whether or not girls lie to boys. Again, we would consider why and whether there is a reasonable excuse for such behavior. For the students who say no, I will play the devil’s advocate and question their answer, for example, by saying, “even if you think by telling her the truth you will hurt her feelings?” Students can discuss whether the value of honesty is more important than caring for other people’s feelings. Where do you draw the line? If students say that it is more important to consider someone’s feelings, then I will ask them about the feelings of someone they do not know very well; does that person’s feelings count as much as someone you have strong feelings for?

As the letters progress, Devita tells Jaquel about a boy on the bus who started making out with a girl he had never seen before. She thinks that the girl is nasty for coming on to the guy and the boy is nasty for accepting her proposal, but, Jaquel thinks that as long as the girl was pretty then the whole situation was perfectly ok. This presents an opportunity for students to ponder and discern how they feel about fast girls and equally fast boys. Students will consider this topic on a personal and social level by answering the following questions: Does society view this behavior from girls and boys differently? Should they be viewed differently? Why might a double standard exist? Does this attitude reflect a difference in the way girls and boys are valued? Is this kind of behavior right or wrong, and why do we judge it the way that we do?

At the beginning of the letters Jaquel has a long distance girlfriend from Chicago, yet at the same time Devita and Jaquel’s relationship continues to grow. Finally Devita becomes angry at Jaquel about this girl and tells him, “Boys get just what they deserve, ‘cause when you are mean and stupid why shouldn’t bad things happen to you?” (Flake 41). This is an important question for students to consider because bad things happen to everyone whether they are mean and stupid or loving and kind. If bad things happen to people because they are stupid, does that mean they deserve those bad things? If a person rides a motorcycle without a helmet, crashes, and suffers from permanent brain damage, did he or she deserve to have this happen to them? These are the kinds of questions my students will consider and answer. I will ask them what kind of school-related bad things have happened to them in the past. There is always the student who is never late to class except on the day of the hall sweep and now must attend Saturday detention. Then there is the student who is late everyday all day who also gets caught up in the hall sweep and has the same detention. Does one child deserve detention more than the other? Assuming that students say that the always tardy student deserves detention while the late-one-time person does not, then I will ask: what is the number of tardies one can get before they deserve detention? I will then ask them if their rule would apply to themselves. With regard to mean people deserving bad things happening to them, I will ask my students if the mean person in question was beaten everyday before coming to school since he/she was little, does this person still deserve bad things to happen to them especially since bad things have been happening to them for most of their lives already? In our society we put people to death for committing the ultimate crime of murder. Some of the people on death row suffered in childhood from violence, abuse, and neglect. Are

these destructive environmental circumstances an excuse for the criminal's behavior? What if the murderer is a sociopath and kills for the fun of it? Obviously this person has something wrong with their brain as it does not function normally. Is a broken brain an excuse for someone's behavior such that they should not receive the death penalty? These are all questions for my students to consider, discuss, and answer.

Who Am I Without Him? contains twelve different stories and all of them provide an opportunity for students to read and think about what they have read. I believe that through careful reading, most of the students can come to new realizations about themselves and others. What we remember most as we go through life are the events that touch our feelings and emotions. I think that this book will make that connection for many of my students and hopefully leave them with a desire to repeat the experience. A good experience is worth repeating again and again so perhaps some life-long readers will emerge from this unit.

BLUE RAGE, BLACK REDEMPTION

Blue Rage

Blue Rage, Black Redemption is a memoir of the life of Stanley "Tookie" Williams. Stanley Williams was a co-founder of the Crips, a street gang founded in California, and a former death row prisoner. He was executed by the state of California in December of 2005. My students will not read this entire book as I believe the school year would end before the book could be completed. The book is, like the title suggests, broken up into two parts. The first part is Mr. Williams' life up to the time he is arrested for the murders which land him on death row. The second part of the book explains Mr. Williams' redemption while he is on death row. My students will read only parts of the first half of the book, but they will read the entire second half as this is the half of the book which carries the message of hope.

I have selected this book because I was looking for a book which would appeal to the male members of my class. I do have a disproportionate number of male students, and this is a problem that I would like for this unit to address. A boy can't be expected to grow into a whole and complete man unless he has had the opportunity to explore the various aspects of himself and his place in the world. I believe this book will not only improve student's vocabulary and reading skills but also provide students with an avenue through which they can learn more about their ethical selves and the expectations they hold for their lives as adults.

"Born in the Bayou" tells of the author's birth and early years in New Orleans, Louisiana. He was raised by his mother and grandmother whom he refers to as "Momma" (Williams 5). As for his father he writes, "My memories of him were so remote that I could not have recognized him in a jailhouse line-up" (4). He was frequently beaten by his mother for his mischievous behavior. This was her effort to control and discipline him. Even at that young age he was stealing food and toys from the store. He also writes that he had a short attention span and was hyper-active, which makes me wonder if he could have been given some medications which might have enabled him to follow a different path. Eventually his mother decides that she can build a better life for herself and her son in California, so they move to South Central Los Angeles. After reading this chapter, students will summarize the chapter and determine what kind of outcome could someone expect given the parameters of a single parent home, poverty, frequent beatings, hyperactivity, and a short attention span. As a class we can discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each parameter. Somehow I do not think there are any advantages for frequent beatings. Are there advantages to being poor? Some people believe there are, but then again perhaps those people have never been poor. These questions will give my students something to think about as they follow the author's life from childhood to adulthood.

At the age of six he settled with his mother in South Central LA. Poverty leads him right to the streets where he found violence, drugs, alcohol, social injustice, and “filth” (Williams 13). At least the streets were more interesting than staying home with no TV. He writes, “The streets became my TV set, where I played the leading role” (13). Poverty wasn’t the only negative factor; society was the main reason for his downward spiral toward becoming a co-leader to one of the most dangerous gangs that plagues American streets today. In the late 1960s the media was filled with negative stereotypes of African American males. He naively believed the stereotypes, hated them, and eventually hated himself. Neither his family nor society was able to teach him about his African roots which left him with “a profound identity crisis” (13).

Is it fair or right to blame society for one man’s undoing? Many people go through life in poverty, but they do not grow up to become a detriment to society. On the other hand, did society at large let Mr. Williams and the other children like him down? This question revisits the previously discussed issue of responsibility. If society is responsible for raising a child to insure that he grows up happy and healthy, then what is the responsibility of the parents? The author exonerates his mother from any blame for his demise, “She is not responsible for my actions. Any of them. My mother exhausted every possible effort to raise me properly, but she could not stand guard over me 24/7.” (13). If his mother is not responsible and he is not responsible, then how can such a large and vague entity as society as a whole be responsible for one man’s behavior. To answer this question I will have students compile a list of all the parts of society that Mr. Williams might be talking about. This list would include government, church, media, schools, community, individuals, and whatever else the students come up with. From there we can break down each part to look at the even smaller parts. For example, in schools there are teachers, administrators, councilors, and numerous support personnel. Students will consider to what extent each of these people is responsible for an individual following a path to destruction. The author discusses a few of his teachers in his memoir. One is a white woman named Miss Atkins who “would paint a false portrait of me, assassinating my character, behavior, mental state and ability to learn...in her class, reading and writing seemed to be prohibited” (26, 27). Another teacher was a black woman named Miss Johnson who Mr. Williams describes as “a master motivator...imposing presence...commanding voice...her classroom” was “void of Black curriculum” but “she talked about Black greatness” (34). Obviously he preferred Miss Johnson over Miss Atkins, but the question remains: to what extent are teachers accountable for one broken life? One teacher was an emotional detriment to him and the other lifted him up culturally and emotionally. Does one cancel out the other? I would like for the students to think this through and come up with their own conclusions. To do this we will fill the left hand side of a sheet of paper with the characteristics of Miss Atkins and then fill the right side with those of Miss Johnson. This way the students can readily compare how each teacher might have had an effect on the author’s life, and then generalize the extent to which teachers, as members of society, are responsible for a single student’s life outcome.

Mr. Williams feels that he grew up in a cultural vacuum which left him with little or no understanding of who he was as an African American. To this point he writes, “Exposed to a multitude of ambiguous, mostly negative influences, I would pass through my young life with cultural neglect and a profound identity crisis” (Williams 13). He explains this further in a chapter entitled “The Art of Dys-education.” Here Mr. Williams explains that he “had been duped into believing that all Black people were inhuman and inferior” (35). Who has duped or tricked him into believing such trash? The media is to blame for tricking him into believing he is not worthy of self love. All forms of media dished out negative stereotypes of African Americans on a daily basis, leaving Mr. Williams with a model of self-hatred and a hatred of all blacks thus causing his life of violence against his community. Is the media, as a part of society, to blame for Mr. Williams’ tendency for self destruction? Here is an opportunity for my students to consider two points. First, is the author right or wrong in his assessment that books, television, magazines,

radio, film, newspapers, advertisements, etc. are to blame? This was the late 1960s and early 70s which might make a difference in determining whether or not the media tricked Mr. Williams. Secondly, students can examine the extent to which the media determines their identity. Are they being duped as well? Are we all being duped? To examine the first point, students will be assigned different media of the late 60s to investigate how African Americans were portrayed at that time. This will have to be completed as a homework assignment with perhaps some class time given to support those who may have difficulty accessing resources outside of school. Students will be required to report of at least one page of information plus a visual aid in the form of a poster or an actual piece of history such as a book or magazine from the 60s. As each student presents his/her report, the rest of the class will be required to write down at least one piece of pertinent information that might help to determine the validity of Mr. Williams' claim that the media, as a part of society, was responsible for his undoing. We can then move on to look at the second point which deals with media today and young people today. This should be much easier because the information is everywhere. I will again assign students to a different media form and tell them to analyze the movie, TV show, radio program, news show, etc. to determine how the people are portrayed. I will have them consider the list of values to determine what is being valued in each portrayal. Once everyone has presented their information, I will ask students to consider whether they accept or reject the image they and their peers have presented as being representative of young people and more specifically young African Americans in today's society. I believe once students have directed their energies in this way, they will be equipped to answer the question does the media dictate your identity. If students reject the values presented in a particular type of media, for example, the way girls or women are depicted in some gangsta rap videos, then they can determine whether or not it is ethically wrong to support or watch these types of videos. Hopefully the whole experience will be a real eye opener for many of the students in that the activity will get them to think critically about the multitude of information that is out there for their consumption.

In the chapter entitled "Crip Walk," Mr. Williams tells of the formation of the Crips when Raymond Washington, another gang leader, approached him one day in school about aligning forces to become one larger gang, thereby eliminating many of the smaller gangs in the area, thus eliminating the violence in the neighborhoods. Apparently this only seemed to escalate the problem as the Crips worked to eliminate the other gangs by making them Crips also. What Mr. Williams and his uneducated friends did not consider was that the violent activities which made someone a gang member would not cease just because they had become one gang. A group of uneducated kids running around with a purposeless agenda will go exactly no where, which is what happened. Mr. Williams started lifting weights, so he grew in strength, but he did not grow emotionally or intellectually. He saw people die around him but was not touched personally by each person's passing. He had two sons but could not stop Crippin' long enough to bother with being a father. Could it be that he did not know what it was to be a father? He had a stepfather who tried to be there for him, but apparently this man came into his life too late to make that kind of impact. As far as women were concerned, he had several girl friends and even managed to sleep with other girls while he had a steady girlfriend. It is as if he had no respect for girls and seemed to be unable to bond with anyone except his male friends or fellow Crips. He was a leader in that people would come to him to settle disputes or consult him about various activities, and he had a body guard who would have easily given his life for him. He was generally known amongst the other young people as someone not to be messed with. Some of this might sound rather glamorous to some of my students, but when they see how empty it all really is, the glamour will fall away to reveal a sad, pathetic, and contemptible person. This becomes apparent when Williams begins using PCP or Phencyclidine which is an animal tranquilizer. It tends to enable a person to endure physical punishment beyond the normal limits as well as cause someone to do things that they later do not remember. At this point Mr. Williams was earning

money by robbing other criminals, mostly drug dealers. His deterioration accelerates with his increased drug usage. Of this time he writes, “It was a personal hell where the longer I remained in such a state, the further I was alienated from society. I failed to notice the increase in my aggression and outlandish behavior” (Williams 172). I believe this chapter is important for my students to read for the obvious anti-drug message. When you read it, you get this vision of a big strong man, respected by his peers, someone who could have his life together, and yet he walks around as fragile as an empty hardboiled egg, yet as dangerous as a megalomaniac on drugs. It is sad.

Black Redemption

The whole second part of Stanley “Tookie” Williams’ life was spent behind bars on death row in San Quinton Penitentiary in California. His redemption did not come quickly to him but occurred over a period of time and as the result of several experiences. On his first day in prison, he got into a fight with another prisoner which caused him to be sent to The Hole which is a place with greater restrictions. He spent most of his time lifting weights, watching TV, and talking with other prisoners about life before prison. People began sending him books which he could not comprehend. He wrote, “Intellectually I was bankrupt, and as quickly as they passed books down to me, the faster I sent them back” (245). Mr. Williams was unable to give up the reputation he had developed before his incarceration until he met two people who had a positive influence over him and seemed to help him to move toward the road to redemption. These two people were Evil and Treach. Both men enjoyed studying, reading, and writing. Evil and Mr. Williams would spend time together building their vocabulary through direct study where they would quiz each other. Treach asked him if he had ever written anything literary. Treach’s question made him think in a way he never had before, “Seeking to reeducate myself was the first step toward reasoning” (Williams 258). This is the beauty of this half of the book. Over and over again Mr. Williams expounds on the rewards of knowledge, reading, and education in general. Education will be a value which the students will be able to see every day that they walk into the room, but to hear it and read of its value from this person who has reached the bottom of the human barrel will be powerful. Several times Williams had to go back to the Los Angeles County Jail for a court appearance. On his return from such a trip, Treach sends him books by Chancellor Williams, Cheikh A. Diop and others whose words reveal to him “contradictions in myself and in the world I thought I knew” (270). He was beginning to question all that he had known to be true. I know that my students will periodically complain about all of the questions that I will expect them to ponder and answer, but if they do not believe me when I tell them that thinking, reflecting, and questioning is good for their academic growth, then perhaps when they read what a profound effect this activity had on Mr. Williams, then perhaps they will be more willing to practice mental gymnastics with texts.

On another trip to the Los Angeles County Jail, Mr. Williams had an epiphany. He reflected on his life and all that being a Crip has meant to him, and he realized that “my life as a Crip had come to an end...consumed by sadness...for all the Crips who had died, for the innocent Black lives hurt in the crossfire, for the decades of young lives ruined for a cause-less cause” (Williams 280). What a sad epiphany to realize that your whole life’s work has been not only meaningless but destructive as well. For the students who are in gangs (and unfortunately there are plenty of those), this may produce an epiphany for them. To the students who may be thinking about getting into a gang, this may cement the idea that gangs are not the way to go. For those students who are swept away by the romanticism of gangsta rap that glorifies violence and degradation of women, this may cause them to stop and think about the message they are being given. I believe these words coupled with all the readings and work we have done previously will have a profound effect on many of my students.

Ms. Barbara Becnel introduced herself to Mr. Williams through correspondence in December 1992. She was interested in writing a book about the Crips. He met with her, and by the time they were finished with their first discussion, he was ready to write a book telling children about the dangers of gang life. Meeting Ms. Becnel would change Mr. Williams' life dramatically. Her belief in him and his ideas coupled with her knowledge of the publishing world would eventually enable him to produce and publish a series of children's books detailing the dangers of gang life, *Life in Prison* and *Blue Rage, Black Redemption*. As he began writing the children's books, he began to feel human compassion for the first time. He writes, "Maturation was occurring. I was becoming a person with a heart" (Williams 292). Most people grow up with a heart, but for Mr. Williams this was not the case. He seemed to have lost his perhaps somewhere in childhood only to find it again so much later in life. I have met many students who have a damaged heart. One student did not have a mother because she had left the family when he was very young. His father was frequently out of town doing construction work. He had a stepmother, but apparently she did not care about him either. He seemed to have a difficult time caring for anyone, but you could tell that he was in pain and that some part of him still desired parental love. He was very sad. The author's lack of compassion reminds me of this boy, and I hope he will not have to be locked up somewhere to discover himself through service to others. This part of the memoir will solidify the concept or value that helping others or doing for others is not only good for the person who is being helped but also good for the person who is helping. To illustrate this point to my students, I will have them do something helpful for someone in the school. We will brainstorm different ways that they could help a fellow student, a teacher, administrator, or support staff person. Some possible choices could be to just say something nice like "I enjoyed the lesson today," or perhaps we could spend 15 minutes out of one class picking up trash from the common area after lunch. We could solicit ideas from those people to find out what they might need help with; it would have to be something the whole class could participate in. This activity would allow students to take an idea they had read about in a genuine text and apply it to their lives. This will take reading from the cerebral to the physical which is the most powerful way to make text come alive for anyone.

Mr. Williams continues to grow and have experiences that some people can only dream about. Winnie Mandela came all the way from South Africa to visit him to discuss his work helping kids either in gangs or who might join gangs. A movie was made about his redemption and his input was considered by the producer. For all of this to happen to a death row prisoner is pretty amazing. He came to realize that the "roadblocks" which directed him toward the wrong path were of his own creation. He writes of his redemption:

My redemption is a continual process of change that promotes day-to-day improvement in my life. No one can give redemption to me; no one can intercede on my behalf. I have to earn it myself. Even now, attempting to clarify this experience, I fall short. I don't expect anyone who's not had this sort of experience to comprehend it or be able to relate to the redemptive struggle by a condemned man. I have swum in the gutter among the dead, but had the fortitude to step out of the filth, wash off, and walk among the living. (Williams 302)

I believe the rewards of completion of this unit will be tremendous for the students. They will read texts which they can readily relate to with concepts they must reach for. Through annotation, reflection, discussion, and various activities students will interact with texts in a truly meaningful way. Some of the vocabulary in *Blue Rage, Black Redemption* may be a bit tough for some of the students, but with my help and Mr. Williams himself relating the importance of expanding one's vocabulary, students will rise to the challenge. I have always talked about doing a word wall. I think now would be a good time to actually do one starting from the beginning of the year up to the very end. So many of my students fail to visualize what they read in print, but

in this unit what they will be expected to “see” (especially in *Who Am I Without Him?* is what they experience all the time? This will make it easier for them initially, so that by the time they get to Mr. Williams’ memoir, they will be better prepared to be challenged by his work. This unit will awaken student’s sense of ethics and give them an opportunity to truly think about their actions and what those actions might mean to themselves and to society in general. Students will consider exactly how much control they have over their lives and how through reflection and critical thinking, they can take greater control over their own actions.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson One: Background

Objective

The student will develop background knowledge to better understand text as well as examine an author’s purpose using various forms of media.

Materials Needed

Internet access
Books
Records
Tapes
Magazines

Activity

Students will be assigned either individually or with a partner, to find information on how African American males were portrayed in the late 60s and early 70s. Students will look on the Internet to find old newspaper articles, magazine articles, and advertisements to see exactly what is being discussed, what is the tone of the piece, and how the people are portrayed. Students will also look for popular books and music of that time from African American authors. Students will be given two weeks to complete this project outside of school plus one class day for any extra help that might be needed. Students will need to present their information to the class. A visual aide will not be mandatory but may be used for extra points. After each presentation, the other class members will write down who they think the target audience is, what value is being presented, what is the message of the piece, and what is the target audience supposed to feel from being exposed to the media being examined. Once everyone is finished, the class can look at their notes and determine if there is any repetition in the messages presented by the different types of media. The class can then discuss what they have learned and whether they think that what they have learned about the past could profoundly affect a young person’s behavior at that time.

Lesson Two: Present Day

Objective

Students will examine various forms of media to determine author’s purpose.

Materials Needed

Internet access
Magazines
Books
Music videos
Newspapers

Activity

Students will be assigned, either individually or with a partner, to a specific type of media which discusses African American males to determine what is being expressed, what is being shown, and what is the tone. Students will have one week to complete this task before presenting it to the class. Once each presentation is made, students in the class will have to determine who the target audience is, what the intended message is, and what is the value being presented. Some students may be intrigued by the activity and may want to find media that portrays Hispanic males or African American females. If that happens, I will tell them that they have to do that as an extra credit activity. Once all of the presentations have been made, students can look at their notes and we can determine as a class if there is a trend in all or most of the media. We can discuss whether we agree on what we see and whether there are trends in the messages which can affect how a young African American male might define himself.

Lesson Three: Making a Difference

Objective

The student will practically apply what they have read in class to their everyday lives thereby engaging actively with the text.

Materials Needed

The materials may vary greatly depending on what the students set out to do. If they decide to do something like make positive message posters, then they may need poster board and markers. If they decide to pick up trash, then they may need rubber gloves. If they decide to move boxes or carry something, then they would just need themselves.

Activity

When students come into the classroom, there will be a “Make a Difference” title on the board, and underneath there will be a list of people commonly found in school. The list will include teachers, administrators, councilors, support staff, friends, and classmates. I will remind student’s that Tookie Williams found a sense of well being, purposefulness, and righteousness when he began to make a positive difference in other people’s lives. I will then tell them that I want them to emulate Mr. Williams by making a difference in the life of one of the people I have listed on the board. Together we will go through the list to determine different ways they could make a difference. If we do not come up with enough possibilities, I will have students compose a short letter to the person they would like to help which will request suggestions from that person. We will give that person two days to respond. For the people who know right away how they would like to make a difference in someone else’s life, we will still wait two days, so we can complete the activity as a class, even though different people will be doing different things. Once everyone has participated in the activity and completed their task, students will have to write (1) What did you do, and who did you do it for? (2) Did the activity go as you expected it to? (3) Do you think you really made a difference in that person’s life no matter how small? (4) How did this activity make you feel? (5) Do you think you might repeat this kind of behavior sometime in the future just for the sake of doing something right and good? Students will turn this in and receive a grade based on whether or not they have completed all of the tasks they have been given.

Lesson Four: Distinguishing Yourself from Your Parents

Objective

Students will use critical thinking skills to respond to texts by making conclusions and judgments

Materials Needed

Who Am I Without Him?

Paper

Pen/pencil

Activity

After reading the selection entitled “So I Ain’t No Good Girl,” students will compile a list of behaviors which are characteristic of their parents. Students will consider what forms of punishment their parents use; how their parents interact with each other and their children; what they are afraid of; what their values are; and whether they are strong or weak, scattered or focused, loving and approachable, distant and cold, or social or solitary. From this list, students will consider in what ways they plan on emulating their parents and what do they want to distance themselves from. Students will have to explain their choices using at least two complete sentences. Students will also look at their original list of personal values and compare this list with the one they have made for their parents. After comparing the two lists, students will write two comments comparing the two lists to note differences and similarities.

Lesson Five: Girls and Boys***Objective***

Students will use critical thinking skills to interact with text by drawing conclusions and making generalizations.

Materials Needed

Who Am I Without Him?

Paper

Pen/pencil

Activity

After reading “Girl, Didn’t I Say I Don’t Write Letters,” students will look at their notes or annotations to determine differences in the characters. For example, Jaquel tells Devita that girls always want to change boys. This is a fairly common sentiment. Devita tells Jaquel that boys lie to girls. The list will continue until the differences are exhausted. From there I will ask the class to consider the differences that have occurred to them that are not mentioned in the story. I expect this activity will create some lively discussion. After we have listed and looked at all of the perceived differences between boys and girls, we will look to our values list to match up which behavior corresponds with which value. This will give us an opportunity to add words that are not there and fine tune ones that are. From here we can determine whether or not boys and girls have enough variation in values to make a difference in their overall moral ethics. This will give students a deeper understanding of the vocabulary as well as of themselves and others.

Lesson Six: Writing to Dad***Objective***

The students will respond to a text and write to express themselves.

Materials Needed

Who Am I Without Him?

Paper

Pen/pencil

Activity

After reading “A Letter to My Daughter,” students will write a return letter to the father which discusses each of the points the father raises with the daughter. In the story the father has been absent from the girl’s life. She is now fifteen, and he offers her advice about boys and men in the form of a letter. Students will be expected to discern the values associated with each point as they respond to the father. For example, the father tells the girl to stay true to herself and not let a boy stand in her way. The students will have to explain the values expressed by the father.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works Cited

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This book is filled with short stories on relationships. It would be a great addition to any classroom bookshelf where students have spare time to read as well as a good resource for direct reading instruction.

Williams, Stanley. *Blue Rage, Black Redemption: A Memoir*. Pleasant Hill, CA: Damamli Publishing Company, 2004.

This book opens the door for anyone into the life of street gangs in America. It also gives a glimpse of what life is like inside the penal system. Mr. Williams is able to change his life from being on the bottom to being on top even though he is still unable to change his life situation of being a condemned man on death row.

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