

Random Acts of Kindness has brought more meaning into my life, and I am committed to help spread the word.

— Carol, State Parent Facilitator, HI

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These Lesson Plans are a culmination of school-wide activities and classroom activities, ranging from grades K-12.

Lesson Plan

Heroes, Kindness and To Kill a Mockingbird

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Grade Levels: 7-9th. (Although this lesson is focused on secondary levels, the basic concept and exercises can be adapted to lower grade levels by using a different piece of literature.)

Subject: Reading & Writing. Addresses topics such as heroism, bullying, kindness and compassion.

Materials Needed:

- To Kill A Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Background:

These exercises came out of a growing awareness that seventh graders in our school were bullied by ninth graders and that these seventh graders then grew into ninth graders who felt bullying was acceptable. It seemed necessary and beneficial to develop a solid unit focused on intolerance, tolerance, and kind acts of compassion.

Since all ninth graders study To Kill a Mockingbird and one of the uses of studying literature is to help students rethink their own lives, this novel provided us a springboard for reflection. The goal of this was to have students reflect on the actions of characters in the novel and to apply whatever they learned about compassion to their own behavior. In reviewing the activities, I realized that my kindness project could be applied in any instance where a story, poem or novel focused on courageous and compassionate action. As a result, there are three different exercises below.

While each project started with the reading of To Kill a Mockingbird, many other works of literature could be substituted and the activities modified to that piece. These activities focus on the many instances in the book where compassion is shown by Atticus Finch and others. It takes courage to be different, such as Atticus Finch raising his children in a manner that scandalized a lot of the people in town, and his defense of Tom Robinson. Thus, expressing kindness can be heroic.

Exercise # 1: Recognizing Everyday Heroes

1. Initially, discuss the term “hero” and what it means.

Defining hero is awkward because of the cultural emphasis on money as a criterion of success and accomplishment. Ideas of a hero as a person who perseveres, and is not merely lucky, would include examining such lives as those of Martin Luther King, Dolores Huerta, Caesar Chavez, Mother Teresa and Eleanor Roosevelt. Which is more difficult ... doing one glorious act such as rescuing someone from a burning building or coming to school each day and making good grades? The purpose of this is to get the students to understand that there are various kinds of heroism.

Discuss the characters in the novel To Kill a Mockingbird and try to identify who is a hero and why. Usually, conversation develops so that the idea that heroism can occur in small, quiet acts, not necessarily one big flashy action. Propose questions about a) what makes them feel good b) to recognize someone who notices them daily and offers small favors or c) recognize someone who occasionally makes a presence in their lives, quietly, but makes a difference. Ask the students if going to work each day to provide food and shelter for someone is a heroic act. Typically, this generates a lot of discussion. Talk about the heroism of the tasks of living each day, and that even though we don't want to do something, it is often necessary to do so to help family, friends, community, etc. Ultimately, this conversation revolves so that it is obvious that kindness and compassion are critical parts of heroism.

2. From the discussion about heroism, students are asked to answer the following question: Choose three people that can be used as a model of actions that reflect kindness and explain why. List the admirable qualities of the chosen role-models/Heroes.

The examples can be personal acquaintances, literary, or historical figures. These sheets are turned in for the following day. Use their lists for discussion and explanation, allowing all students to share, telling why they have chosen as they have. This discussion helps students who were not satisfied with their models to re-think and adjust their ideas. It assists students in understanding what “hero” really means and dispels the popular mythology that heroism has to be a glamorous deed and flashy.

Exercise # 2: Developing a Mission Statement

Discuss how life philosophies are developed. Address how people use models that others set and how written documents, such as holy books in religion (The Bible, The Koran, etc,) and public documents in secular life (The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution) give us ideas in print that guide us.

Discuss the fact that many businesses and organizations use a mission statement to form a philosophy for a group. Show them the mission statement for your school and any others that are available. (Usually there are mission statements available from city and county governments as well as from local businesses or corporations.) Share with them your personal mission statement and discuss how/what formed your ideas.

Give your class a half-completed mission statement for Atticus Finch, and have them finish it. Have the class share their answers and talk about what in Atticus Finch's actions shows us his philosophy. Students then can refine the mission statement they have written.

Next, ask the students to write their own mission statement. Tell them that these statements are living documents; that is, they change as our focus and goals change. However, stress that there are underlying concepts that shape the ideas -- positive concepts, such as compassion and kindness, or less desirable concepts. Ask the students to consciously come to a conclusion about what they want to shape their lives. Then, students are to use the format below to frame their mission statements:

My mission is ...
My mission is ...
My mission is ...
I will accomplish this by ...

This writing activity is usually a homework assignment. Their statements are shared the next day in class and interesting discussions come out of questions and answers among the students.

Exercise # 3: A small research project to be shared in front of the class

This is a research project that will be shared orally by each students once the written final draft is completed. Students have a choice of researching:

1. A person who brought kindness into the world in some way
2. Developing a kindness project of their own that would bring more kindness into the school
3. Taking one situation in the novel To Kill A Mockingbird and re-writing it to be more kind.

Interesting and unusual results have come out of each of these projects. In the first choice, one student researched a neighbor who for years had provided neighborhood activities, which brought children and adults together and provided fun and connection. Her report was a heartwarming example of someone in our community who shared kindness and made a whole neighborhood happy through small acts of kindness over many years.

The second choice is to identify a problem in the school. After describing the problem in detail (in writing), the student was to propose a solution to the problem that would be able to be accomplished. These were shared with the group and forwarded to our leadership class in school.

The third choice is to insert kindness in a book section that might not have had anything to do with kindness originally. It allowed us as a group to rethink the novel and our own actions in life. For example, one response modified a horrifying scene in the book. A cavalcade of cars, in the book, descended upon the county jail where Atticus is guarding Tom Robinson. Men in the cars were going to overpower Atticus and lynch Tom Robinson. The student changed that scene so that the men arrived with food baskets to take Tom and Atticus out for a picnic in the country, to show appreciation for them. While the student started his idea out as a joke, by the time we finished discussing the situation and thought about the ripple effects such an action would have had, we all realized the power and impact such a simple act of kindness would have had on all the lives in the novel.

Overall Conclusions:

This project provides an opportunity to rough draft and finalize two documents: a statement of philosophy and a short research paper. It provides the students an opportunity to participate in two oral presentation times, which they can share meaningful ideas of their own. The list of models of kindness helps them envision, the mission statement gives them a credo, and the final exercise allows them to create a meaningful piece of writing that reflects their own thinking about kindness. One year I kept copies with self-addressed envelopes and mailed students their mission statement at the start of the new year. I had a lot of positive responses to this "redelivery."

Overall, the exercises for this project provide a way of linking the novel and its characters to students' lives. These activities allow reflection and discussion and its characters to students' lives. This also allows for reflection and discussion that generates many new ideas about how kindness works in the world and what power it has. For the formative ages of middle school, the activities described are appropriate and allow the natural idealism of this age to appear in unexpected ways.