

The Superhero Self: Speculative Fiction for Identity Development and Social Change

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Content Objectives

Problem Statement

I work as a Learning Support teacher at D. Newlin Fell Elementary School, a K-8 school in South Philadelphia. Our school is a wonderfully diverse community as its population is about 40% Asian, 20% Hispanic, 20% Black, and 20% White. 75% of students are low-income and 25% of students are English Language Learners.

Every School District of Philadelphia school serves students with learning disabilities who require supplemental services in order to fully access the curriculum and make academic growth. In our school, there are currently 50 students identified as requiring these Learning Support services, which is about 10% of the total student population. In my experience as a Learning Support teacher, I have found that middle school students who receive Learning Support services in the School District of Philadelphia rarely have opportunities to learn through engaging, culturally relevant lessons that involve student choice and voice.

Since students in Learning Support classes or groups have been identified as needing research-based intervention services, students are typically “pulled out” from the general education environment for approximately half of their literacy block every day. For most students, this means that they are exposed to the general education lesson for 45

minutes and then leave to work with a special education teacher for 45 minutes. During their time with the special education teacher, they often receive direct, explicit instruction from a scripted intervention program. While these programs incorporate research-based practices that are vital to making significant progress in literacy skills, they are one-size-fits-all programs that do not address students' individual cultures and interests. They tend not to include opportunities for creative projects or writing. As a result, these programs often fail to foster student motivation and engagement.

Consequently, special education teachers in the School District of Philadelphia must find ways to use research-based intervention practices that will help their students to make progress while also engaging students with lessons that relate to their lived experiences, cultures and interests. To determine what content motivates and engages my students, I look back on past successful units. For reading instruction, students have been very engaged by graphic novels and comics. For three years, I have taught a unit on the graphic novel "American Born Chinese" by Gene Luen Yang. We read the graphic novel and analyze themes related to tradition, culture, identity, stereotypes, and tolerance. Students consistently rate this unit as their favorite reading experience of the year. Additionally, during independent reading time, my students tend to gravitate toward comics and graphic novels. In particular, Miles Morales Spiderman comics, Avengers comics, and the Dog Man series were very popular this year.

In terms of writing instruction, students tend to engage deeply with two writing assignments: the classic argumentative essay and an assignment called "soundtrack to my life." In the argumentative essay, students choose a problem that they would like to solve

and write an essay persuading an audience about that issue. In the past, students have chosen issues that affect them personally, including increasing school funding, reducing gun violence, reducing traffic fatalities, improving treatment for addiction, and expanding college access and affordability. In the “soundtrack to my life” essay, students choose songs that reflect their identity and explain how those songs convey their personalities or experiences. These assignments have likely been successful since they incorporate high degrees of student voice and choice. As Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) write, “Time and again, research has shown that the more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise,” (p. 27). They also incorporate both social change and identity exploration, two themes that I will include in my curriculum unit.

I plan to use the content of the Teachers Institute of Philadelphia seminar on The Dark Fantastic in order to plan a literacy unit that will foster students’ academic skills as well as their personal interest and development. Students need intensive interventions that use research-based practices, yet they also need opportunities to engage with high-interest texts and activities.

The Dark Fantastic Seminar

Throughout the seminar on *The Dark Fantastic: Reading Science Fiction, Fantasy and Comics to Change the World*, we engaged with a variety of topics including visionary fiction, Afrofuturism, decolonizing the imagination, diverse representation in children’s literature, and speculative counter-narratives.

As I considered which topics and ideas would be most relevant to my students and their academic and personal development, I continually found myself returning to the idea of speculative fiction as a tool for both personal liberation and broader social change. As Walidah Imarisha writes in the introduction to Octavia's Brood, "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction...Organizers and activists dedicate their lives to creating and envisioning another world, or many other worlds - so what better venue for organizers to explore their work than science fiction stories?" (p. 3). In the Dark Fantastic seminar, we used various speculative fiction videos and texts as "venues" for exploring injustice in our world and imagining better worlds.

Before our first session, we read our seminar leader Dr. Ebony Thomas's (2018) article outlining her theory of "The Dark Fantastic." She writes that while speculative fiction provides doors to fantastical worlds, those doors are often closed to Black readers and viewers. Instead, readers encounter a "dark fantastic" cycle where Black characters are cast as the "Dark Other." In this cycle, violence is inflicted against the Dark Other in a way that replicates the violence of our own society. Since this cycle means that speculative fiction often fails to create liberatory spaces, Thomas proposes that we need new mythologies. She writes, "In addition to amplifying diverse fantasy, liberating the rest of the fantastic from its fear and loathing of darkness and Dark Others is essential. For the current moment not only requires new narratives for the sake of young readers. It requires the emancipation of imagination itself," (p. 8).

Discussing Dr. Thomas's theory of The Dark Fantastic throughout the seminar prompted me to examine the speculative fiction texts I choose to read with my class. While I have previously taught texts such as *The Hunger Games* in which the young Black character is violently killed during the advancement of the White protagonist's survival narrative, I aimed to select texts for this curriculum unit that moved toward the new mythology that Dr. Thomas advocates for.

In subsequent seminar sessions, we delved into the topic of Afrofuturism. According to Barber (2018), Afrofuturism uses speculative fiction as a venue for examining African American themes and concerns through imagining alternate futures. Afrofuturist narratives "combined science fiction elements to imagine alternate worlds with regard to racial politics and belonging. In so doing, it is seen as a way to make sense of the past and its relevance to our black political present," (p. 137). As a class, we discussed the project of imagining alternate futures with our students. The Afrofuturist idea of using science fiction to speculate about alternate worlds or futures in which current injustices are addressed certainly seemed like an activity that would engage my students.

In late February, our seminar attended a Black History Month Read-In at the Penn Bookstore led by Dr. Thomas. During the discussion portion of the evening, many Black attendees voiced their frustration with the fact that to become speculative fiction fans, they often had to sacrifice their desire to see themselves reflected in Black characters. For these readers, there was a dissonance between their love of speculative fiction and their recognition that these narratives often inflict violence on or silence people of color. However, there was hope that new stories written by Black authors were providing

liberatory spaces within the speculative world. This event emphasized to me the importance of exposing my students to stories that they can see themselves in to further their love of reading and their literacy development.

Finally, our seminar was fortunate to have a presentation from Dr. Stephanie Toliver about her dissertation. Dr. Toliver began by discussing how while she loved speculative fiction as a young reader, as a Black girl she rarely saw herself reflected in those narratives. As a researcher, she chose to address this by conducting a workshop with a group of African-American middle school girls in which they wrote “speculative counter-stories.” This work involved mining the stories of the girls’ lives to create narratives rooted in critical race theory that addressed current injustices and imagined possibilities beyond our current reality. Dr. Toliver’s work served as a powerful model for the work I would like to do with my students when they create their own superhero narratives during the curriculum unit.

Through these readings, viewings, discussions, I learned about a great deal about speculative fiction and its pedagogical potential. First, through learning about the theory of The Dark Fantastic and listening to speculative fiction readers of color, I was reminded of the importance of selecting stories in which all of my students can see themselves as agentive protagonists. Additionally, the discussions of Afrofuturism encouraged me to consider the potential of prompting students to imagine alternative selves or realities that address current injustices that they experience. Finally, hearing about Dr. Toliver’s work with young writers to create speculative counter-stories inspired me to undertake similar work with my own middle school students.

Content Objectives Related to The Dark Fantastic Seminar: The Superhero Self

As I began to consider how to connect the seminar on The Dark Fantastic to a curriculum unit that would benefit my students, I realized that reading and creating superhero stories would allow us to engage with seminar content in a way that was exciting and approachable to my students.

Developmentally, my middle school students are exploring their own identity and their place in the world. In this way, they are constantly speculating about future and alternate versions of themselves. Superhero stories, which explore their character's origins and their unique traits that make them powerful, are a fitting venue for identity development and exploration. As Khurana (2005) wrote about using of superhero comic-making during an after school literacy program for adolescents, "comics production in the afterschool program offers them a unique way to enter into an imagined world that allows them to experiment in safety because it is their own creation," (p. 7).

However, speculative fiction does not only let us explore alternate selves, but also alternate, better worlds. This will engage my students, as they are often concerned with the injustices they witness in our community, city, country, and world. When I think about issues that we have had passionate discussions about in the past, I quickly recall our conversations about the raging fires in Australia and the Amazon rainforest, incarceration of family members, and issues of racism and stereotyping that we confront in our diverse school community every day. One consistent trend throughout these conversations is that while my students are mature and observant enough to identify the problems in the world

around them, they generally feel frustrated at their perceived inability to change things due to the incompetence of the “adults” in charge. This frustration has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted their lives in so many ways. Imagining our way out of these problems coheres with Walidah Imarisha and adrienne marie brown’s idea of “visionary fiction,” which they define as “a term we developed to distinguish science fiction that has relevance toward building new, freer worlds from the mainstream strain of science fiction, which most often reinforces dominant narratives of power,” (p. 4).”

Fortunately, many superhero comics have themes of social justice woven into the narratives. This history of superheroes fighting against real-life injustices stretches back to the first Superman comic, in which Superman fights corrupt politicians and an abusive husband. In the 70’s, Iron Man and Green Arrow’s sidekick struggled with alcoholism and addiction while Captain America fought against a government official seeking dictatorship who resembled President Nixon. In the early 2000s, the Green Lantern sought revenge for a hate crime inflicted upon his gay friend. More recently, Superman swooped in to protect undocumented factory workers from a xenophobic attacker in a 2017 issue (Gonzalez, 2019). While not every superhero narrative tackles real-world injustices, superheroes stories have continued to revisit current issues throughout their history in popular culture.

Ultimately, I knew that I wanted to use speculative superhero stories as a venue for exploring students’ identities and their desires for social change. I needed to select stories in which students could see themselves reflected in agentic superheroes who used their special characteristics to impact the world around them. This search led me to select *Moon Girl and the Devil Dinosaur* and *Green Lantern: Legacy*. In *Moon Girl and the Devil*

Dinosaur, Black preteen super genius Luna Lafayette reckons with the discovery that she has inhuman genes. She reclaims the name “Moon Girl,” which her classmates had used to bully her, when she teams up with a giant dinosaur to battle bullies and neighborhood gangs. In *Green Lantern: Legacy*, Asian American teenager Tai Pham inherits a magical family heirloom ring and is inducted into a group of space cops. Tai uses his new powers and taps into his immigrant family’s resilient history to save his neighborhood store from a greedy billionaire. As we read selected issues of each of these comics, we will see how each character grapples with who they are and their unique ability to make change in the world.

In our seminar on *The Dark Fantastic*, we have also discussed how speculative fiction can connect to action in the real world. As a result of these conversations, I wanted to engage not only with speculative fiction, but also with nonfiction texts that show how the themes of identity development and social change are reflected in the lives of “real-life superheroes.” These are individuals who are able to identify their unique qualities (identity development) to impact the world around them (social change). One individual that we will study is Judy Heumann, a civil rights advocate for people with disabilities who was instrumental in passing disability rights legislation in the 1970s. We will also read about Malala Yousafzai, who used her unique skills to advocate for girls’ access to education. Engaging with nonfiction films and texts about these “real-life superheroes” will not only allow us to target academic standards related to nonfiction, but also help to impart that “superhero” actions do not have to be purely imaginative.

Finally, students will shift from consumers of visionary fiction to creators of speculative fiction that serves as a venue for identity development and social change. Students will craft their own superhero narratives that imagine how a superhero character or a fictionalized version of themselves could use their unique powers to address a pressing issue. In this culminating project, students will become creators of visionary fiction that builds “new, freer worlds,” (Imarisha, 2015, p. 4).

Content Objectives Related to Students’ Individualized Education Plans

As discussed above, the content of the curriculum unit will explore identity development and social change through the consumption and creation of superhero stories. However, as a special education teacher, I must also ensure that the unit is designed to meet the literacy goals of students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). By middle school, most students with learning disabilities have IEP goals for improving their reading fluency, vocabulary, comprehension skills, and writing ability.

Reading fluency is a student’s ability to read accurately at an appropriate rate to facilitate comprehension. Many adolescents with learning disabilities have learned how to decode text but still require explicit instruction in how to read fluently. The most common intervention for improving reading fluency is repeated reading, in which students engage with a text multiple times through hearing it from a teacher, peer, or audiobook and then reading it on their own until they are able to fluently read the text (Hughes & Kubina, 2008). In this unit, I will use repeated reading by having students play “parts” of different

characters when we read the text aloud as a group. Then, students will re-read the text individually or with a partner.

Another key component of reading interventions for adolescents with learning disabilities is comprehension strategy instruction. Struggling readers often need to be explicitly taught “what good readers do” in order to make meaning of text. This includes pre-reading strategies such as previewing the text and activating background knowledge, self-monitoring comprehension during reading and fixing comprehension breakdowns, summarizing during reading, and asking and answering questions after reading. I teach these strategies at the beginning of the year as part of the Collaborative Strategic Reading framework and we will continue to use them during this unit to bolster students’ comprehension skills (Cavendish & Hodnett, 2017).

For many students with learning disabilities, limited vocabulary impedes their comprehension of new texts. One research-based strategy for improving vocabulary is using keyword mnemonic pictures to teach new words. For example, to help students to remember that a scow is a type of boat, you would point out that “scow” sounds like “cow” and present a picture of a cow sitting in a boat. When students are later presented with the word during reading (scow), they will be able to think of the keyword (cow) and the picture (the cow sitting in the boat) to remember the definition (boat) (The Iris Center, 2013). For this unit, I will select 3-5 new vocabulary words per day from the text and briefly present keyword mnemonic images for those words before reading. Since I frequently use this strategy in the classroom, I also encourage students to come up with their own keyword mnemonic images during some lessons.

Finally, many students require writing interventions to assist with their written expression skills. High-leverage practices for writing instruction include allowing students to use word processors for writing assignments, teaching steps for the writing process, and modeling strategies to use with each step of the writing process (Gillespie & Graham, 2014). When we create our own superhero narratives, I will model and provide students with strategic steps for brainstorming, planning, drafting, and revising their stories.

In the curriculum unit, I will link fluency, comprehension, and writing instruction to grade-level Common Core standards so that students can continue to access concepts from the general education curriculum. Specific objectives and standards are included in the Classroom Activities section.

Content Objectives Related to Common Core State Standards

Learning support teachers are not only responsible for improving foundational literacy skills addressed in students' Individualized Education Plans, but also for aligning content with grade-level Common Core State Standards as much as possible. Since this unit was designed for fifth, sixth, or seventh grade students with learning disabilities, standards for each of those grade levels are included in the Appendix.

The first part of the unit addresses Reading Literature standards. Through reading and analyzing superhero comics, students will improve their ability to analyze story elements to craft theme statements, use text evidence to support their ideas, understand new vocabulary, and improve their general reading comprehension of literature. The

second part of the unit addresses Reading Informational Text standards. Through reading nonfiction texts about “real life superheroes,” students will improve their ability to understand how key details contribute to a central idea, use text evidence to support their ideas, understand new vocabulary, and improve their general reading comprehension of nonfiction. Finally, the third part of the unit addresses Writing and Language standards. Through crafting their own superhero narratives, students will improve their ability to write narratives and edit them for clarity and mastery of writing and spelling conventions.

Teaching Strategies

The teaching strategies involved in this unit will target both the content objectives related to the Dark Fantastic seminar and speculative fiction as well as the academic objectives related to the students’ Individualized Education Plans and Common Core State Standards.

Before engaging with the unit, students will complete a pre-test comprehension probe, reading fluency probe, and curriculum based writing probe. These measures will serve as the baseline for students’ performance, which will continue to be monitored during and after the unit.

One important comprehension strategy for students with learning disabilities is activating and using background knowledge when reading. During the first lesson, we will do a “This or That” anticipatory walk to activate background knowledge and interest. I will present a series of statements such as, “It’s bad to be different from others. You have the

power to change the world around you. Heroes sometimes make mistakes.” One side of the room will be designated as the “Agree” side and the other side will be the “Disagree” side. Students will move to the side of the room that reflects their beliefs and taking turns defending their positions. This will also serve as an informal pre-assessment of their thinking around identity and social change.

In the next several lessons, we will engage with superhero narratives. For each narrative, students will fill out a graphic organizer with spaces for the superhero’s name, setting, character traits (including their superpower), problem they tried to solve, main plot points, and the theme of the narrative. As a scaffold, we will first watch video clips of “Spiderman: Into the Spider-Verse” and use the video to fill in the first graphic organizer. This will allow me to provide modeling and guided practice of how to fill in the graphic organizer before tackling challenging texts.

Over the subsequent lessons, we will read sections of *Moon Girl and the Devil Dinosaur*, and *Green Lantern: Legacy*. For each reading, I will pre-teach key vocabulary words. We will utilize evidence-based comprehension instructional practices, including previewing the text to activate background knowledge, summarizing during reading, fixing comprehension breakdowns during reading, and generating and answering questions after reading. These strategies are part of a framework called Collaborative Strategic Reading, a process that has been proven to help students with learning disabilities to improve their metacognition and comprehension skills. Finally, for each reading we will fill out the same graphic organizer used to record information from *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* movie.

While I expect that superhero movie and comics will engage students, I also want to explicitly connect the speculative existence of super powers and social change to real-life examples of people who used their special identity and talents to change the world around them. First, we will watch the part of the documentary *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* that discusses disability rights activist Judy Heumann's leadership in the 504 Sit-In of 1977. During this protest, Heumann was able to galvanize 150 people with disabilities and allies to sit in at the San Francisco Federal Building for 26 days to demand enforcement of Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act. Next, we will read three chapters from the younger readers edition of *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World*. In these chapters, Malala Yousafzai describes her activism around access to education for girls in Pakistan. For both stories, we will use the same graphic organizer we used with the fictional narratives to analyze the subjects' special character traits and how these characteristics allowed them to change the world around them. Since the "superpowers" are not described explicitly in the text or film, this will take some more in-depth thinking and discussion than with the fiction texts.

After engaging with a variety of fictional and nonfiction hero narratives, we will turn toward the creation of our own superhero narratives. I will model strategies for each step of the writing process by first working together on a whole-class superhero story. First, we will brainstorm an issue of common concern. Then, we will brainstorm a superpower that could help someone to address that issue. We will continue to fill out the graphic organizer we had previously used to record information from the superhero narratives to plan our own superhero narrative. This will include the setting, protagonist name, character

traits, conflict, main plot points, and theme. Next, we will fill out a storyboard to plan what will happen in each part of the narrative. Finally, I will model each choice for students' final product: a written narrative or a comic using the Pixton program.

After each step of this whole-class writing instruction, students will complete the step for their own superhero narrative. With teacher and peer feedback, they will eventually create a written superhero narrative or a Pixton comic.

Classroom Activities

Each of the following lessons addresses one or two key objectives. Each lesson may take multiple days, depending on learning support teachers' amount of intervention time with students.

Lesson 1: Pre-Assessment and Anticipatory Discussion

Essential Question: What do we already know and believe about heroism and social change?

Objective: Students will demonstrate baseline knowledge of the topics of the unit.

Standard: See Appendix.

Instructional Activities:

1. Pre-assessment: Administer an oral reading fluency probe and reading comprehension probe to students to establish baseline performance levels.
2. Anticipatory "This or That" discussion: project the following statements on the board. Designate one side of the room as "agree" and the other side as "disagree." For each statement, students will move to the side of the room that represents their position and share their rationale. (Statements: 1. It's bad to be different from others. 2. You have the power to change the world around you. 3. Heroes never make mistakes. 4. You should be proud of what makes you different or unique. 5. If you see something wrong or unfair, you should try to fix it).

Demonstration of Learning: Pre-assessment results, verbal responses during "This or That" discussion

Lesson 2: Modeling with Superhero Movie

Essential Question: How can we analyze the elements of a story to determine its theme?

Objective: SWBAT identify and analyze elements of a story (character, conflict, setting, plot) IOT determine the theme.

Standard: See Appendix.

Instructional Activities:

1. Watch selected clips from “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.” Pause frequently to discuss the setting, protagonist, character traits, conflict, and main plot points. Fill out story elements and “text evidence” on a projected graphic organizer.
2. At the end of the movie, model how to analyze the conflict resolution and the changes in the main character to craft a theme statement for the narrative. Record theme statements in the projected graphic organizer.

Demonstration of Learning: Verbal responses during discussions of story elements and theme.

Lessons 3-4: Discovering Theme through Superhero Narratives

This “lesson” will take place over several classes. The process (pre-teach vocabulary, preview text, repeated reading, graphic organizer) will be used to read excerpts from *Moon Girl and the Devil Dinosaur* and *Green Lantern: Legacy*.

Essential Question: How can we analyze the elements of a story to determine its theme?

Objective: SWBAT identify and analyze elements of a story (character, conflict, setting, plot) IOT determine the theme.

Standard: See Appendix.

Instructional Activities:

1. Pre-teach vocabulary: Introduce students to Tier 2 vocabulary (words frequently used in written language across content areas) from the day’s text selection by presenting words and accompanying keyword mnemonic pictures. Ask students to use new vocabulary words orally in a sentence.
2. Preview text: Prompt students to ask themselves, “What do I already know about this text/topic?” and “What do I expect to happen or learn while I read today?” to activate background knowledge.

3. Repeated reading: Assign students to different roles in the graphic novel. Read the text selection out loud as a group, stopping to ask questions to ensure comprehension. Have students re-read the selection on their own or with a partner.

4. Graphic organizer: Have students fill out the graphic organizer to identify story elements and supporting text evidence. Go over the graphic organizer as a group to ensure understanding and share theme statements.

Demonstration of Learning: Graphic organizers

Lessons 5: Discovering Central Idea through Documentary Film

Essential Question: How can we analyze a documentary to determine the central idea?

Objective: SWBAT analyze key details in a documentary IOT determine the central idea of the text.

Standard: See Appendix.

Instructional Activities:

1. Watch selected clips from “Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution.” Pause frequently to discuss the setting, main characters, character traits, conflict, and key details. Fill out key details and “text evidence” on a projected graphic organizer.
2. At the end of the movie, model how to analyze key details to determine the central idea of the documentary. Record the central idea in the graphic organizer.

Demonstration of Learning: Graphic organizer

Lesson 6: Discovering Central Idea through Biography Texts

Essential Question: How can we analyze an informational text to determine the central idea?

Objective: SWBAT analyze key details in an informational text IOT determine the central idea of the text.

Standard: See Appendix.

1. Pre-teach vocabulary: Introduce students to Tier 2 vocabulary (words frequently used in written language across content areas) from the day’s text selection by presenting words and accompanying keyword mnemonic pictures. Ask students to use new vocabulary words orally in a sentence.

2. Preview text: Prompt students to ask themselves, “What do I already know about this text/topic?” and “What do I expect to learn while I read today?” to activate background knowledge.

3. Repeated reading: Have students silently pre-read the text to themselves. Then, have students partner read (taking turns each sentence or paragraph) the text.

4. Graphic organizer: Have students fill out the graphic organizer to identify key details and the central idea. Go over the graphic organizer as a group to ensure understanding and share central idea statements.

Demonstration of learning: Graphic organizer

Lesson 7: Crafting and Editing Original Superhero Narratives

Essential Question: How can we apply what we learned about story elements and theme to craft “superhero self” narratives?

Objective: SWBAT use a graphic organizer and comic software IOT write narratives to develop imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Standard: See Appendix.

Instructional Activities:

1. I will model how to create a “superhero self” outline using the graphic organizer that we previously used with the superhero movie and comics. I will model how to begin by identifying a conflict and then building character traits (superpowers) that would allow my fictionalized superhero self to address that conflict. I will also model how to craft a plot outline and describe the setting.

2. Students will use graphic organizers to create their own “superhero self” outline.

3. I will model how to use the Pixton program to create a comic using the plot outline from the graphic organizer. This program allows students to use panels with different backgrounds, characters, and dialogue to create a comic.

4. Students will use the Pixton program to create their comic. They will work with a partner to peer edit the dialogue bubbles in each other’s comics for spelling and grammar conventions.

Demonstration of Learning:

Resources

Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

Cavendish, W., Hodnett, K. (2017). Collaborative strategic reading. *Current Practice Alerts*, 26, 1-6. Retrieved from <http://TeachingLD.org/alerts>

This report provides details about Collaborative Strategic Reading, an evidence-based framework for improving reading comprehension for students with learning disabilities. In this framework, students are taught to preview text before reading, self-monitor comprehension during reading, summarize during reading, and ask and answer questions after reading.

Barber, T. E. (2018). 25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought: Roundtable with Tiffany E. Barber, Reynaldo Anderson, Mark Dery, and Sheree Renée Thomas. *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 136-144.

This roundtable transcript provides insight into the concept of Afrofuturism. It involves discussion of the history of Afrofuturist thought and the current state of Afrofuturist narratives.

Gillespie, A., & Graham, S. (2014). A meta-analysis of writing interventions for students with learning disabilities. *Exceptional children*, 80(4), 454-473.

This article analyzed findings from 43 studies on writing interventions for students with learning disabilities. According to the meta-analysis, effective writing instruction for students with learning disabilities should include strategy instruction, process instruction, and opportunities for dictation.

Gonzalez, E. (2019, January 22). Social Justice Superheroes: A Quick-ish History of Superheroes Fighting Real-World Injustices. *BOOK RIOT*. <https://bookriot.com/social-justice-superheroes-a-quick-ish-history-of-superheroes-fighting-real-world-injustices/>.

This article provides examples of superheroes fighting real-world injustices. It traces this history from the original Superman comics, in which Superman fights corrupt politicians and abusive husbands to current day superhero narratives.

Hughes, C., Kubina, R. (2008). Fluency instruction. *Current Practice Alerts*, 15, 1-4. Retrieved from <http://TeachingLD.org/alerts>

This report provides research-based practices for improving reading fluency for students with learning disabilities, including goal setting with feedback, repeated reading, and modeling of fluent reading.

Imarisha, W. (Ed.). (2015). *Octavia's Brood: science fiction stories from social justice movements*. AK Press.

This is a collection of visionary fiction stories that use various genres (sci-fi, fantasy, horror) to provide imaginative perspectives on political and social issues. The introduction by Walidah Imarisha provides insight into how speculative fiction provides a venue for exploring alternate, more just realities.

The IRIS Center. (2013). Study skills strategies (part 2): Strategies that improve students' academic performance. Retrieved from <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/ss2/>

This module includes an explanation of the keyword mnemonic strategy for vocabulary instruction. This strategy helps students to link a new vocabulary word to a known concept or scheme, improving their ability to recall the word when they encounter it in a text. This strategy is used during the unit to address students' vocabulary needs.

Khurana, S. (2005). So You Want to Be a Superhero? How the Art of Making Comics in an Afterschool Setting Can Develop Young People's Creativity, Literacy, and Identity. *Afterschool Matters*, 4, 1-9.

This study examined the impact of a comic book writing workshop in an afterschool program on the students' creativity, literacy, and identity development. The students' comics showed that they were using this medium to experiment with alternate versions of themselves, separate themselves from roles they had been assigned in their real lives, and critique existing narratives about heroes and heroism.

Thomas, E. E. (2018). Toward a Theory of the Dark Fantastic: The Role of Racial Difference in Young Adult Speculative Fiction and Media. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 14(1), n1.

This article outlines Dr. Thomas's theory of The Dark Fantastic, which proposes that while speculative fiction provides doors to alternate worlds, those doors have often been closed to readers of color. Speculative fiction tends to inflict violence on characters of color, which reinforces rather than challenges the injustices of our world. As a result, we need new mythologies that create liberatory spaces for readers and viewers of color.

Toliver, S. R. (2018). Imagining New Hopescapes: Expanding Black Girls' Windows and Mirrors. *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, 1(1), 3.

This article builds on Dr. Rudine Bishop’s concept that books should offer young readers “mirrors” that reflect their complex identities, “windows” that show them real and imagined worlds, and “sliding glass doors” that allow them to use their imaginations to enter creative worlds. Dr. Toliver uses this framework to analyze the “windows and mirrors” being offered to young Black girls through science fiction and fantasy books. She concludes that Black girls need access to stories that provide more diverse representations of Black girls through imaginative and hopefully narratives.

Toshalis, E., & Nakkula, M. J. (2012). *Motivation, engagement, and student voice*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future.

This report offers evidence on the relationship between motivation, engagement, and student voice in middle and high school classrooms. It synthesizes decades of research showing that allowing students to direct their own learning leads to higher engagement, motivation, and learning.

Reading/Viewing List for Students

1. Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse movie
2. Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur Vol. 1: BFF by Amy Reeder, Brandon Montclare, and Natacha Bustos
3. Green Lantern: Legacy by Minh Le and Andie Tong
4. Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution documentary
5. I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World (Young Readers Edition) by Malala Yousafzai and Patricia McCormick

Classroom Materials

1. Smart Board/projector
2. Graphic organizers for fiction stories with spaces to record protagonist, character traits/superpower, conflict, plot, and theme and accompany text evidence.
3. Graphic organizers for nonfiction stories with spaces to record key details and central idea.
4. Chrome books
5. Pixton comic program

Appendix

This curriculum unit was written for students in Grades 5 – 7. Common Core State Standards for each grade and their corresponding lessons in the unit are listed in the tables below.

Grade 5 Curriculum Standards

<p>Reading Literature Standards: Lessons 1 - 4</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1</p> <p>Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2</p> <p>Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.4</p> <p>Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.10</p> <p>By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 4-5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.</p>
<p>Reading Informational Text Standards: Lessons 5 - 6</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.1</p> <p>Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3</p> <p>Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4</p> <p>Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text relevant to a grade 5 topic or subject area.</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.10</p>

By the end of the year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, at the high end of the grades 4-5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Writing and Language Standards: Lesson 7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.5

With guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 5 here.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.5.1

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Grade 6 Curriculum Standards

Reading Literature Standards: Lessons 1 - 4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3

Describe how a particular story's or drama's plot unfolds in a series of episodes as well as how the characters respond or change as the plot moves toward a resolution.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Reading Informational Text Standards: Lessons 5 - 6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1

Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.2

Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Writing and Language Standards: Lesson 7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.5

With some guidance and support from peers and adults, develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach. (Editing for conventions should demonstrate command of Language standards 1-3 up to and including grade 6 here.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.6.1

Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

Grade 7 Curriculum Standards

Reading Literature Standards: Lessons ** - **

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3

Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Reading Informational Text Standards: Lessons ** - **

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1

Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.2

Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3

Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.10

By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction in the grades 6-8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

