At first glance, it would appear that most students in the ever growing, upscale village of Victor, New York, lead very similar lives and come from homogeneous cultural backgrounds. Of the 80 students that I see each day, not one of them is black. Two girls came from another country, but speak English relatively well. They fit right into the Victor population, and I often forget that they came from outside the United States.

Yet, as similar as students appear, it does not take long to discover that the diversity among these students is tremendous. Neighboring the school campus is a development of homes priced in the million-dollar range. The students who wait for the bus each morning at the corner of this development have never heard mom or dad proclaim, “Sorry dear, we can’t afford to eat out tonight.” They come to school with their Abercrombie & Fitch uniforms, often donning makeup and perfume before stepping out to face the junior high school. Social image is the cornerstone of the adolescent lifestyle. On the other side of town, however, students awake each morning to find themselves in a vastly different situation. These students come from average or even low-income families, some of which struggle daily to put food on the table for dinner. In fact, just last November, the school donated a full turkey dinner to a family that could not afford to celebrate Thanksgiving. These students sit down to eat a hurried breakfast before heading out to face the scrutiny of peers who will never understand what their life is like. This contrasting lifestyle provides the perfect forum for S. E. Hinton’s novel *The Outsiders*.

Students love that *The Outsiders* was written by a 16-year-old. Each year junior high students around the country read S. E. Hinton’s 50-year-old tale about life as an adolescent, and devour its universal message of acceptance and stereotype as told through the vision of a teenage author. Smith (2005) wrote, “*The Outsiders* … transformed young adult fiction from a genre mostly about prom queens, football players and high school crushes to one that portrayed a darker, truer adolescent world” (p. 1). For 12-year-old students, the world looms overhead, stealing away their innocence one day at a time. Of course, to them, those of us who already went through adolescence have no idea what it is like. If given the opportunity to talk to S. E. Hinton, one seventh grader in Victor would tell her that, “For a teen, you wrote a sample of what happens in real life, and it’s not what most adults think.” In the eyes of preteens, adults’ memories of the cliques, the friendships created, the
friendships destroyed, and the turmoil in their bodies during junior high disappeared with their graduation from high school. The Outsiders appeals to students because the 16-year-old author explores these issues in a way that becomes real for them.

I always get chills in the days before I start The Outsiders, when I split the classroom into two separate sides, agree and disagree. I explain to the students that I will read a series of statements to which they must respond by moving to one side of the room if they agree or the other if they disagree. I then exclaim statements such as, “Appearance can often tell a great deal about a person!” or “Anyone can be popular!” Students scramble to one side or the other, and then we debate back and forth about why they chose the side they did. Sometimes students switch halfway, and sometimes they do not, but they always come through with excruciating honesty. I love watching students learn and discuss things that they really had never considered about one another. It is a real eye-opener for everyone. I always end the activity with, “It is possible to change the way students act toward one another!” This is my favorite part of the hour, as I watch the class fight about the idealistic notion that all students can get along. One very bright, but certainly not “popular,” girl shocked me this year when she explained to us that she would not want to change the way things were, because she would not want to ever be friends with the popular students. She very politely described their hurtful words, and said she was very happy not being included in their category. Several students were unable to take their eyes from the floor, and the impact was tremendous. You could have heard a pin drop as she talked. The next day, they came into class to find a copy of The Outsiders sitting on their desks.

We were ready to begin.

The Outsiders is so effective as a young adult novel because students immediately see the connection S. E. Hinton makes to their lives. In an article about effective reading instruction, Langer (2000) contended that “[Higher performing schools] point out [real-life] connections so that students can see how the skills and knowledge they are gaining can be used productively in a range of situations” (p. 8). When asked if this book related to her life, one girl told me, “Yes, … in this book Greasers and Socs are two different cliques. They come from different worlds.” I understood that my own students came from very different worlds. There are the rich, the poor, the male, the female, the popular, and the outcasts. I knew that I would need to differentiate my teaching to reach all students. I wanted them all to feel like this book spoke to their everyday lives. I wanted it to become real. For this to occur, students needed to take control of their learning. When reading and discussing, they needed to become knowledge partners, teaching one another to acknowledge and overcome economic differences to come together as one class. During activities I sometimes grouped the class to include different types of students in each cluster, sometimes I tried to group similar students together, and once this year, I even separated the males and the females.

This year, I also decided to find out how students from the contrasting worlds received the book’s message differently. I wanted to know, number one, did males and females react to the book differently, and number two, did students from different economic circles have altered interpretations of the ideas? I wanted to know what sections of the book affected students the most and also which of my teaching practices were most effective. I ended the novel with the survey in Figure 1.

Figure 1 The Outsiders survey

The Outsiders Survey

Are you male or female?

What do you consider your family? (check one)

Tons of money ☐ Average ☐ Don’t have much ☐

Please answer the following in at least three sentences:

1. What do you think is the most valuable lesson to be learned from the novel?
2. Is there anything that you are going to try to change in your life after reading this?
3. Who was your favorite character and why?
4. Which character do you relate to best and why (could be same answer as above)?
5. What part of the book had the biggest impact on you?
6. Do you think this book connects well with your life? Anything specific?
7. If you could speak with S.E. Hinton, what would you tell her?
8. Would you ask her any questions (can be one sentence)?
9. What was your favorite class activity while reading and why?
10. Least favorite?
11. If you were me, what would you change next year and why?
12. Do you think the message of the book applies the same to everyone? How might different people react differently to the book? Did you notice differences when you talked about the book with your friends? Please answer this question completely…take as long as you need.
I compiled and studied the results. Some of these results did not surprise me. Some of them did. Of course, the most valuable lessons were those of acceptance and perseverance. Answers to the first question ranged from the very positive, “Friends can sometimes be your closest family,” to the bleak statement, “Happy endings aren’t real… it’s a cruel world.” The answers followed no trend other than they were consistently powerful. I learned a great deal about my students and also learned some things about myself. The results of the survey helped me to better understand how my teaching influenced students and also how to improve upon my teaching for future years. As with everything we teach, teachers hope to one day create a unit that reaches out and affects students of all types with the same degree of impact. Using the results of the survey, I examined my teaching practices, analyzed the differences among the various groups, and created a unit that not only improves students’ comprehension and writing skills but also enables students to fully immerse themselves in the characters, the themes, and the ideas presented in the novel.

Starting out
A colleague of mine, whom I greatly respect and admire, often laughs when I talk about teaching *The Outsiders*. He asks mockingly, “Who names a character *Ponyboy*?” Similarly, during a discussion for a graduate class on young adult literature, I observed as the class criticized the obvious themes and moments of blatant foreshadowing that occur throughout the novel. Yet, year after year, junior high students find themselves enthralled by the characters and absorbed in the action of the story. In her groundbreaking text, *In the Middle*, Atwell (1998) wrote, “It’s easy for secondary teachers to scoff at [Hinton’s] novels, but she’s important to adolescent readers because they identify with and love what she did in the book. Part of it is Hinton’s use of fiction to explore inequities in the social situation among kids in her hometown, but most of it is her style: The narrative voice and characters are direct and compelling, and the big ideas in the novel are both evident and important to my kids.” (p. 172)

Junior high students are not interested in the literary greatness of Faulkner and Hawthorne. However, we can rope them into literature using texts like *The Outsiders*, because the students relate to the themes and characters. I read chapter one of *The Outsiders* aloud to wrap students up in the story. I spend the majority of the first few chapters connecting students’ lives with the characters from the mid-twentieth century. We compose a T-Chart comparing Socs and Greasers and discuss *Ponyboy’s* narrative voice. Once they understand the differences between the two groups and the rivalry that these differences cause, the class inevitably shifts toward a discussion about cliques and stereotypes. Most students immediately envision themselves as a part of one group or the other. By the end of chapter three, students no longer see *The Outsiders* as a book about gangs in the 1950s, but rather a novel about the rivalry that goes on in the hallways of their own school each and every day.

I refuse to give quizzes that test comprehension of specific details of the text. This book needs to become real to students. The quickest way to destroy that for these kids is to show them how much they failed to “understand.” Atwell stated, “If [students] were to grow beyond enthusiasm and use literature as a prism for viewing and participating in the adult world, I had to figure out how to inspire them to higher, deeper purposes” (p. 45). To propel my students toward these higher purposes, I end chapter three posing the question, “When Johnny states, ‘I can’t take much more. … I’ll kill myself or something,’ what does he mean?” It forces them to use examples from the book, shows me that they read, and at the same time, it reinforces how the Greaser-Soc rivalry affects individual characters. One student responded:
At the end of chapter three, Johnny states, “I can’t take much more. … I’ll kill myself or something.” What he can’t take much more of is living with this rivalry of Greasers and Socs. He can’t take being jumped anymore, like the night when Steve found his jacket and then found Johnny crying. At the end of Johnny’s story, Ponyboy says, “He would kill the next person who jumped him.” It’s showing that he can’t take anymore, and that he has had enough. Also in chapter three, Johnny says, “It seems like there’s gotta be somewhere without Greasers or Socs, with just people. Just ordinary people.” This above all shows Johnny’s hatred toward the rivalry and how he feels. Johnny is determined to get out of this. When Ponyboy says they are running away, he goes. No questions asked … he just wants out! Student responses varied slightly, but the message was the same. It was time to start looking at how this rivalry affected individual characters.

While many of the young men in my classes performed beyond my wildest expectations, I had a select group that discovered that group presentations offered opportunities for disrupting class.

Reeling them in

To explore the next few chapters of the novel, I created a series of presentations to force students to pick apart the text and converse with their peers about the novel. The first presentation focused on one particular character. Groups of three or four students were given a character to present to the class with prompt questions to assist them. For example, Ponyboy’s group received the following:

**Ponyboy**

- “I wish they were more gray, because I hate most guys that have green eyes, but I have to be content with what I have.”
- Begin with this quote and the rest of the description on the first page. What does this tell you about Ponyboy’s character?
- Why does Ponyboy get so caught up on the sunset? Do you think any of the other members of the gang would have used this comparison when talking about the Socs and the Greasers?
- Why is it significant that Pony runs off to the park with Johnny? Would things have been different if it had been another member of the gang?

My first year, I found that during many of the presentations, students just spit back information at me. They answered the questions in a sentence or two and considered it a done deal. It bothered me that they completely immersed themselves in the novel, yet there was no excitement when given the chance to immerse themselves in a character.

As I struggled to figure out what I could do to connect the readers to the text, I came across a passage in Robb’s (2000) *Teaching Reading in Middle School* that explained, “To a text, a reader brings his/her personality, present mood, and memories, making each person’s experience of a text almost as unique as a fingerprint” (p. 14). If I expected students to present a character to the class, I would need to ensure that I carefully selected characters that would connect with each student’s unique personality and memories. This year, I worked with single-gender groups, tried to group together students with similar personalities, and recorded which groups seemed to engage in the presentation best.

I taught this novel to four separate classes, and during each I switched which characters I gave to boys and which I gave to girls. I recorded the results, and figured I would see a great disparity of information. I was convinced that the boys would do a poor job with Cherry and the girls would do a poor job with Dally. The results shocked me. Nearly every group dove head first into the assignment, except the boys who had Cherry, a group of boys who had Soda, and a whole class full of boys who would be considered struggling learners. In fact, as I looked at the results after the presentations, I realized that I had a new problem on my hands. While many of the young men in my classes performed beyond my wildest expectations, I had a select group of boys who discovered that small-group presentation time offered prime opportunity for disrupting the class.

When compiling the results of the survey at the end of the novel, nearly 20% of the girls listed the
presentation as their favorite activity. The presentation did not make a single boy’s list. Gender researcher Gurian (2001) offered me insight in his captivating text *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*, where he stated, “[During group work] one or two dominant or attention seeking males use a lot of words and other males far fewer, whereas there is more parity of words among the female group” (p. 46). The answer, I thought, was simple. Girls liked presenting better because they had more to say. The boys were looking to the few “dominant” boys to lead them and, therefore, if the dominant boy enjoyed causing trouble, the rest followed suit. Determined to meet with success, I introduced another presentation. This time, the groups were co-ed. I selected several quotes that offered students the opportunity to explore the bigger themes and ideas of the novel. For example, one group received the following:

“*And we ran into the darkness.*” *(page 62)*

- Where does this quote come from? What is it in reference to?
- What does this quote mean at first glance? Where are the boys headed?
- What does it mean from a symbolic standpoint?
- Look at page 48. Pony talks about going to the country. What does he say?
- Now look at page 63 … Pony says he’s finally made it to the country. Is this what he had in mind?
- Is it necessary for the boys to run away? What if they turned themselves in?
- Remember to somehow tie in your life as a seventh grader in Victor.

Again, the majority of the class performed beyond my wildest expectations. One group even created questions on note cards for each student in the class that forced students to relate their own lives to the book. Once again, however, it seemed that there were a select group of young men holding back the crowd. Once again, not a single boy listed the presentation as his favorite activity.

This time it was Sax (2005) who offered me the answer. He claimed, “Small-group, self-directed learning works for girls but not for boys. Boys can raise their status in the eyes of other boys by disrupting the teacher’s program. If the teacher breaks the class into small groups and two boys in a group of four start being disruptive, those boys raise their status in the eyes of at least some of the other boys in the room” (p. 77). The atmosphere that I thought would allow all students the opportunity to connect to the novel on a personal level was also a breeding ground for boys in search of a chance to “raise their status.” In the few groups of disruptive boys, even the typically well-behaved students discovered that joining the mischief would boost their image in the eyes of the other boys. Next year, and even in future units, a change will need to be made to keep the boys on task. Perhaps simply requiring a PowerPoint on the character, or a poster to hold them accountable will do the trick.

Once students had the opportunity to analyze a character and break apart a quote with their peers, I assigned them what they like to call “the four squares thing.” It requires only a sheet of white paper, and may be done by hand or with the computer. The students broke the paper into quarters and responded in each box (see Figure 2). About 10% of the students, boys and girls alike, listed this activity as their favorite, and not a single student listed this as his or her least favorite. The finished product almost always came out stunning, and very few students failed to do it. One girl told me, “This

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**Figure 2 Instructions for the student “Character Diagram”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name and Description</th>
<th>Symbolism of the Eyes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Include:</td>
<td>Begin with a quote describing the character’s eyes. What do the character’s eyes tell you about him? What does this add to the book? Be sure that you go beyond just stating, “He has blue eyes, and this means he was good looking.” You need to illustrate what the description of his eyes has to do with what is going on in the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job/Position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I felt like [your character] when…**

Choose an event or time in your life when you faced the issues that your character faces. It might be a direct similarity or an indirect one, but you must be able to tie the things that your character is going through to your own life.

**“The Big Picture”**

Why is your character in the story? What does he bring to the table that no other character does? Describe how he relates to the bigger themes that Hinton is trying to discuss.
was my favorite activity, because you could pretend that you were actually talking to the characters and asking them questions!” The activity proved that, while not as effective as I would like, the presentations succeeded. Students completely immersed themselves in both the novel’s main themes and the individual characters. Now it was time to bring the two together.

The home stretch: Reinforcing the message
A while back, a colleague introduced me to the concept of “The Fishbowl” discussion. Students are arranged in a circle around four desks in the center, and only the students in the center may speak. Students from the outer circle may exchange seats with those in the center when they have something to say, and all students must visit the center circle at some point during the period. For the first part of class, I hand them a sheet with topics such as these:

- After Randy and Ponyboy talk, Pony says that Randy wasn’t a Soc, he was just another guy. What does he mean?
- Then at the end of the chapter, Pony notices that Cherry has green eyes. Look at the first page in the book. How is this significant?
- Do you ever label people as being a part of a group rather than an individual?
- “On page 129, Cherry tells Ponyboy about Bob’s ability to lead people. She says, “He had something that made people follow him, something that marked him a little different, maybe a little better than, the crowd.” What if he had used that leadership differently?
- Can one person really make a difference?

I tell them to create notes on the questions as if they were to be graded, then they go wild as I unleash the inner circle. They discuss cliques, friendships, the innocence of youth, the changing characters, how they can use the novel to improve the junior high, and so on. I can never predict quite where the discussion will go, and I rarely contribute. They discuss what the book means to them. For me, this lesson seems to drive the themes of the novel home the hardest, because, inevitably, the end of the discussion is purely based on how they can improve their own lives. Nearly 50% listed this activity as their favorite of the unit, and the enthusiasm rivals anything that I do for the remainder of the year.

Because the novel captures the students’ interests so well, I often have some students that finish it in just a few days. By the time we reach the fishbowl discussion, they become impatient to reveal to others how the novel finishes, and I can see the painful looks in their eyes, as they struggle to keep the final moments to themselves. Therefore, as I allow the stragglers to read quietly in class, I allow those students who have finished the book to work in small groups, preparing to act as discussion leaders when the class confers about the final few chapters of the novel. The students who finish early are often the stronger, or at least more engaged readers, and they consistently pull through for me. They create questions such as, “Why did Dally want his friends to see him die,” and, “Why do you think the doctor spoke to the judge before Ponyboy’s hearing?” On discussion day, they take over, once again leaving me to smile quietly in the back of the room as these 12-year-old scholars unravel S. E. Hinton’s masterpiece.

A lasting impact
Long after we finish the novel, students discuss Johnny’s character. They often list Johnny as their favorite character. Students love his self-sacrificing actions in spite of the trauma he has faced in his life. As we discuss the heroic actions of Johnny, I always ask students if they would risk their lives for others. Some adamantly believe they would, and some readily admit they would not. Either way, students admire Johnny for his courage, and his death several chapters later always brings at least one student to tears. One boy revealed that of all the parts in the book, Johnny’s death affected him the most. “It made me cry a little,” he admitted, only after the assurance of anonymity. Nearly 50% of his male peers agreed
that this was, in fact, the part of the book that had the greatest impact. One boy even went as far as to claim that, "[Johnny’s death] ruined the book!" The impact was even greater for the girls. More than 90%, all but two of the girls surveyed, listed Johnny’s death as the scene with the most impact. The girls became attached to the innocence of his character, and one girl told me, “I think the end [impacted me most], when Johnny died. I felt like I knew Johnny, and when he died, it felt like losing a friend.”

However, Johnny’s death is not the only thing that sticks with these kids after we finish reading. Commonly, I will run into a former student in the halls and conversation will shift to The Outsiders. “That book was real, man,” they will say, “It was the best book ever!” They so easily find a connection with the ideas presented by Hinton. Atwell (1998) stated, “Sometimes [students] see themselves as golden, fated to join the world of adults just as dawn inevitably ‘goes down to day’” (p. 43). Just as Johnny begs Ponyboy to “stay gold” (Hinton 148) in the moments before his death, S. E. Hinton begs these young readers not only to hold on to their youth but also to make the most of it while they can. They hear the message loud and clear. See Figure 3.

The greatest impact for me came as I read over the surveys, recognizing the handwriting of a girl who has been given very few breaks in her life. She is well aware that her family does not have what others do, and yet always comes to school smiling and upbeat. Rather than answering the survey question by question, she wrote me this:

I think that the most valuable lesson to be learned from the novel is that no matter what you wear or how much money you have, you’re still the same to people who don’t have much. I think this because people who are rich may act mean, but deep inside they are just like the rest of us. They have feelings and dreams and there is more to them than some people know; they just don’t show it. I think there is something that I am going to change in my life. I think that I should make friends with people who are different from me because for all I know they could actually be the same as me. I am also going to stop judging people by looks or how they act.

I wonder how many of her peers with all the breaks in life would agree.

References

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