many times during the first weeks of school, and it rested everywhere from Lewisburg to Lower Dauphin, but I never left it too far from where I was.

Only an athlete can appreciate the musty, sweaty smell of a sports bag full of old socks and moldy mouthguards, and during my first weeks at State High I found comfort in that familiar aroma; it seemed to symbolize both the ups and downs of my new high school experiences. So many memories were directly related to its purpose and care, for many of my initial feelings at State High were tied to the stress and excitement of playing field hockey.

Several students focused on a single event as symbolic of their first days as freshmen. One found himself to be the single freshman in an advanced math class:

I quietly sneaked into class, attempting to be unnoticeable. Despite this discreet entrance I still felt like I was walking in front of a firing squad. The entire time I feared knocking some girl’s books off her desk. Knowing my luck, her boyfriend would be some seven-foot, 400-pound gorilla that liked to eat freshmen for breakfast. Everywhere I turned there was a new and unfriendly face. It seemed even the shortest kids in the class towered above me. Every laugh and snicker seemed amplified; I thought I was the butt of all the jokes. The room was sweltering with heat and made me sick to my stomach. I prayed that another freshman would be transferred into my class because, in the words of Garfield, “Misery loves company.”

MAKING IT PUBLIC

After the memoirs were written, students began the publication phase of the project. Each was asked to contribute a drawing or a photo to be included in the book of memoirs. A student photographer was assigned to take a group photo and candid shots of students as they worked in the computer lab composing their memoirs. A highlight of this phase was choosing a title and a cover design for the book. Students were invited to submit their computer-drawn designs which were later voted upon by each class. Creativity and humor reigned as titles were presented and chosen. One class chose The Unadulterated, Uncensored Truth: Memoirs of the State High Class of ’98. Another class wanting to emphasize the naivete that characterized their entrance into high school chose Which Way to the Playground?—Memoirs of the Ninth Grade Novices.

We distributed the books during the last days of school. Students were excited to see their writing in published form and were quick to view their books as keepsakes, insisting upon time in class to autograph each other’s copies.

The Memoir Writing Project not only provided the students with a tangible product with a real audience, but it also developed within some of the students an appreciation for the diary as a method of self-exploration during these difficult years of adolescence. As we had hoped, several of our students continued to write in their diaries, using the diary techniques that we had taught them at the beginning of the year.

Teaching The Outsiders to the Real Outsiders

Sydeana M. Martin
Havana Northside High School
Tallahassee, Florida

At Harris Middle School, students who had been in trouble for truancy violations, failed a grade before, caused serious disruption in classroom settings, or were considered at high risk for drop-out were put in an “alternative” education program. Students who ended up in this program had not had a very successful school experience. Though these students were all individuals with varying problems, they did share one common trait—they were not interested in school.

At the request of parents, these “alternative” students were mainstreamed into regular academic classes throughout the day, while attending one afternoon period of a course entitled “Peer Counseling.” Since these students needed extra attention, the class size of this course was limited to no more than fourteen. Curriculum for this course had not been carefully considered, and it was basically left up to the teacher of each section to determine the activities for the class. The purpose of “Peer Counseling” was to monitor students’ academic progress and encourage students to become engaged in school.

A WORKABLE SOLUTION

As a student-teacher at Harris Middle School, I was assigned one section of sixth-grade “Peer Counseling.” Panic stricken, I tried to my supervising teacher, “Peer Counseling! What in the world is that? I am an ENGLISH teacher!” She calmly looked at me and said, “Always expect the unexpected.”

While some teachers were using this class period as a study hall, I decided to use it as a way to get these “alternative” students interested in something—anything—again. It took a very long weekend of brainstorming, reading, and begging for advice to come up with a workable solution. I chose to use this extra class period to reinforce basic skills in reading and writing, to get to know my students better on an individual basis, and to gain (I hoped) their interest. Since I also taught these students for language arts, I would have access to them twice as long as any other teacher on campus.

I chose to focus on class and group projects surrounding the novel by S. E. Hinton, The Outsiders. This was a tall order for a short book like The Outsiders, but I decided it was worth an attempt.
especially since it contains social issues common to many middle school students.

At first, all eight of my students sighed and moaned while I outlined the project on which we would spend the next four weeks. However, the more we read and talked about the novel in class, the less they seemed to resent the fact that they weren't getting to sleep through another study hall-type class period. By the end of the first week, I even dared to think the students might be enjoying class.

PROCEDURES

We followed this general outline for the four weeks of the unit.

Week One

I outlined some of the basic requirements for the unit and made sure everyone had a copy of the novel and a notebook to use as a journal. I explained to students that keeping a journal in response to the novel would be a great way to understand it. I decided to keep my own journal along with my students. Since this wasn't an academic class, I decided to grade strictly on effort and completion of assignments. I asked my students on the first day if they had ever read anything by S. E. Hinton. No one had, and since they weren't aware of her gender, I decided to push it aside until later. I wondered if the six boys and two girls would be surprised to find out that, when she wrote The Outsiders, the author was a sixteen-year-old girl.

I had students write in their journal every day in class, sometimes at the beginning and sometimes at the end. Frequently, we would stop in the middle of reading a passage and write about it in the journals. I began the novel by reading it aloud to the students, which they seemed to like. They were allowed to sit on the floor in a circle. I was astonished when I looked up from my reading to notice that one boy, who always tried to sleep during language arts class, was attentively listening. Eventually, students would ask if they could read a few pages aloud. I took up the journals at the end of the first week and commented on them, giving them back on the next Monday.

We discussed the social aspects in the novel, concentrating on the tension between the “Socs” and the “Greasers.” Students were asked to respond in their journals to the following questions: Have you ever felt like an “outsider”? How did this make you feel? How did you deal with this feeling? The purpose of so much introspection was to get my students to identify with the characters in the novel and begin to care about what happened to them.

Week Two

On the following Monday, Danielle plopped her copy of The Outsiders down on my desk and opened to the first page where there is a short description of the author. She found it hilarious that no one in class had noticed until now that S. E. Hinton was a girl. So we spent the better part of Monday's class period discussing and writing about sexual politics. I asked students to think about how gender may affect their writing. One male student was thoroughly impressed that a sixteen-year-old girl could write such a “tough” novel.

We spent the next several days making character analyses of Ponyboy, Soda Pop, Johnny, and others. I asked students to show how family structure affected each of the characters in the novel and also how it influenced them in their personal lives. We discussed how family and friends affect our lives. Again, I wanted my students to feel some kind of connection with the characters in the novel and their daily lives.

I had students choose a partner in the class to share some journal entries with. Although I encouraged everyone to share favorite entries, no one was forced to share anything he or she considered too personal. To make students more comfortable, I read some of my journal entries aloud and offered to pass the journal around to the different partner groups to read. After sharing for about fifteen minutes, I asked each student what he or she liked about the partner's writing. I then asked for volunteers to read some of their work aloud to the class.

Week Three

We would finish up the novel during this week. I asked students to share more and more of their journal writing with partners, groups, myself, and the whole class. Students who had never even seemed to be awake during language arts class were suddenly volunteering to read their writing in front of the class.

To vary the reading-journal writing routine, I had students get together in groups and act out certain scenes from the novel. They liked the action involved in this activity. Also, one student would do an impression of a specific character, while the rest of us would attempt to guess the character's identity.

I continued to monitor the students' journals, noticing a big improvement in their entries. They were more involved in the characters and the story.

Week Four

During the final week of the unit, our classroom became the home of a newspaper office. Everyone was given a chance to work on this class project in at least one way, usually in several different ways. The eight students were divided up into three different groups, and each group was given the task of reporting on two separate stories from the novel. They were to choose the title and headline, the angle from which they would approach the story, and then take part equally in writing the articles for publication. Since we had been studying newspapers in language arts class, the students had a good understanding of the different parts of a newspaper. Students themselves decided that their newspaper
had to have all of the necessary parts of a real newspaper including an obituary column, a human interest column, weather information, advertising sales, and so on. I was pleasantly surprised to see each student really get involved in what they were doing.

We outlined on the chalkboard the requirements for a good story. Some of these were: the five Ws (who, what, when, why, and how). The students also decided we needed descriptive details and interesting content if we wanted our readers to become "hooked."

The students began gathering information to write their stories from the novel itself, from their journals, and from each other. I encouraged everyone to help write some part of the article and help each other out to make this a true class project. Even the girls who said they didn't like boys were seen working with the others without my prompting.

After the two articles were written by each of the groups, they were given to another group for editing. The students used their skills (along with some charts I had provided) to proofread each article. Finally, these articles were submitted to me for final proofing.

We took one class period to go down to the computer lab and type our articles. Some of the longer articles had to be worked on during their break time in the afternoon by the students who were better typists.

The students put together their newspaper on the last two days of class, choosing pictures from magazines and student drawings to illustrate their articles. They determined the spacing and arrangement of each part of the newspaper, using their elected name for it, The Harris Chronicle. I had the newspapers printed up so that the students could share them with their other classmates, teachers, and parents. For fun, during the next week, the students decided to design a copy of their front page on a huge poster board to display in the classroom.

RESULTS

I was delighted with the way that my students became involved with the novel, the characters, and the class in general. I noticed a marked improvement in their interest in their language arts period, also.

The class I dreaded to teach, this "Peer Counseling" for "alternative" students turned into a learning experience for my students and for me. I found ways to gain my students' trust and interest. I learned from them what they found exciting about literature. Also, I got to know my students on an individual basis, recognizing that each one has his or her own special talents that need to be reinforced.

Do I think that I influenced them as much as they did me? Probably not, but I was rewarded with a wonderful semester of interested students. Who knows? Maybe S. E. Hinton had a lasting influence. Danielle, in her spare time, had read That Was Then, This Is Now, Tex, and Rumble Fish by the end of November!

Elements of Best Practice Embedded in These Units

Diana Mitchell

Both of the units described above work with students because they are built on principles of good teaching and learning often called best practice. The elements of best practice embedded in these units include:

- an expectation that students be involved and interested in what they are asked to do and that the work is developmentally appropriate.
- a respect for learners and the knowledge and experiences they bring to class which are built on and used.
- work that is part of a meaningful context—students are not asked to do isolated activities such as skill sheets.
- writing that is connected to students' lives.
- issues of student concern which are an important part of the class.
- student ownership which can be built by asking students to do interesting things that let them tap into their own creativity.
- clear explanations with examples or the modeling of what students are asked to do.
- students' use of the material (the novel or the new writing techniques), not just hearing about it.
- a real audience for student work.
- active learning; students construct meaning as they engage in class activities.
- opportunities for students to collaborate and work with other students.
- material is used that is developmentally appropriate and of interest to students.

NEH ANNOUNCES NEW WEB SITE

EDSITEment, a Web site which has been praised by President Bill Clinton, is now online. A joint effort among the National Endowment for the Humanities, MCI, and the Council of the Great City Schools, EDSITEment offers "one-stop shopping for anyone searching on the Internet for reliable, high-quality instructional materials in the humanities."

EDSITEment includes links to other humanities Web sites, online Learning Guides, and activities. Some of the specific sites currently available through EDSITEment are: American Studies, American Verse Project, Detroit Institute of Arts, Galileo Project, Romantic Circles, and Victorian Women Writers Project.

You can reach EDSITEment at http://edsitement.neh.gov.