

"Mother to Son"

Pillar: Positive Social Environments

Division II and III

Grade Levels: 6-9

Core Curriculum Connections: English Language Arts

I. Rationale: Students are given the opportunity to talk freely about life and its challenges as they write meaningful metaphors, creating comparisons between life and other things. This lesson could be used as part of a unit on poetry and figurative language. It is designed to teach students the concept of a metaphor within the context of poetry. Metaphors about life are used in this lesson when a mother gives advice to her son. She tells him she has not had an easy life. She compares her life to a staircase. She says it has been difficult to climb the stairs. The stairs have been rough with splinters and no carpet. However, she keeps climbing. By her example, she persuades her son not to give up. Students will demonstrate their understanding of metaphors by creating an original metaphor poem. The value of persistence and the realization that life can be challenging and difficult at times is reinforced when students examine the struggles and obstacles that they face in their own lives. This lesson targets the ELA curriculum outcomes for Grade 6, but this activity could be adapted to include language objectives for grades 7-9.

II. Activity Outcomes:

The students will:

- recognize that all people face challenges and obstacles throughout their lives.
- understand that these struggles and difficulties help to shape their identity and influence their perspective on the world.
- reflect upon obstacles that they have overcome and develop an appreciation for their own unique set of life circumstances.
- begin to see the value of these trials and tribulations and understand that they can grow and benefit from them.

III. Curriculum Outcomes: English Language Arts

Grade 6

GENERAL OUTCOME 1

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences

1.1 Discover and Explore

Express ideas and develop understanding

- read, write, represent and talk to explore and explain connections between prior knowledge and new information in oral, print and other media texts
- engage in exploratory communication to share personal responses and develop own interpretations

1.2 Clarify and Extend

Consider others' ideas

- select from others' ideas and observations to expand personal understanding

Combine ideas

- use talk, notes, personal writing and representing, together with texts and the ideas of others, to clarify and shape understanding

GENERAL OUTCOME 2

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to comprehend and respond personally and critically to oral, print and other media texts.

2.1 Use Strategies and Cues**Use prior knowledge**

- combine personal experiences and the knowledge and skills gained through previous experiences with oral, print and other media texts to understand new ideas and information

2.2 Respond to Texts**Experience various texts**

- explain own point of view about oral, print and other media texts
- make connections between own life and characters and ideas in oral, print and other media texts
- discuss common topics or themes in a variety of oral, print and other media texts

Construct meaning from texts

- observe and discuss aspects of human nature revealed in oral, print and other media texts, and relate them to those encountered in the community
- identify or infer reasons for a character's actions or feelings

Appreciate the artistry of texts

- explain how metaphor, personification and synecdoche are used to create mood and mental images

2.3 Understand Forms, Elements and Techniques**Experiment with language**

- alter words, forms and sentence patterns to create new versions of texts for a variety of purposes; explain how imagery and figurative language, such as personification and alliteration, clarify and enhance meaning

2.4 Create Original Text**Generate ideas**

- choose life themes encountered in reading, listening and viewing activities and in own experiences for creating oral, print and other media texts

Elaborate on the expression of ideas

- use literary devices, such as imagery and figurative language, to create particular effects

GENERAL OUTCOME 4

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to enhance the clarity and artistry of communication

4.1 Enhance and Improve**Appraise own and others' work****Expand knowledge of language**

- choose words that capture a particular aspect of meaning and that are appropriate for context, audience and purpose

GENERAL OUTCOME 5

Students will listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to respect, support and collaborate with others.

5.1 Respect Others and Strengthen Community**Appreciate diversity**

- compare personal challenges and situations encountered in daily life with those experienced by people or characters in other times, places and cultures as portrayed in oral, print and other media texts share and discuss ideas and experiences that contribute to different responses to oral, print and other media texts

III. Materials:

- Copies of the poem, ["Mother to Son"](#) by Langston Hughes which is a clear example of the use of metaphor.
- Paper, pencil, chalkboard, or overhead.

IV. Procedure:

Pre-activities:

- Review what is a metaphor. Be sure students know the difference between a simile and a metaphor.
- Discuss how to recognize a metaphor.

Activities:

1. Read aloud "Mother to Son" by Langston Hughes. Discuss the comparison between life and a stairway. Make sure all of the students can recognize the comparisons.
2. Together with the students, discuss other things that life could be compared to. Write the starter, "Life is..." on the chalkboard. Have the students provide you with 5 to 8 different comparisons. Examples of some commonly suggested metaphors include: "Life is a rollercoaster," "Life is a race," etc.
3. Have the students select one metaphor from the list and together as a class, expand it by listing details. For instance, "Life is a Rollercoaster" may be developed by listing all those things which could be considered as shared elements of both. For example, both have ups and downs; sometimes it is scary; there are slow times and fast times. Take these various commonalities and create a five line poem together on the board.
4. Break students into small groups and have each student select one of the "Life is..." comparisons from the master list, or come up with one of his/her own. Having students brainstorm in small groups, allows them to discuss commonalities for each of their comparisons.
5. Once these are compiled, students then take the ideas generated and individually create a metaphor poem about life of 4 to 6 lines.

V. Assessment Ideas:

- The completed poem was used to evaluate whether a student understood the literary term metaphor. The completed poem should not contain any comparison which has "like" or "as" in it.

VI. Extensions and Variations:

Discussion Questions:

- This poem tells us what life is not--it is not a "crystal stair." Let's think about this image a moment. Is this likely one of the things that Hughes saw on a daily basis? Do most people have a crystal stair in their house? Now we know what life is not--what then does the poem tell us that it is? This poem gives us not one or two images, but a whole set of related images for "life." How are they related? What feelings do students associate with these images? What emotions color the mother's speech

to her son? What feelings are conveyed in the contrast between the crystal stair and the set of other images that, as the mother tells us, really characterize life? As you discuss the poem, record any additional items on the board for your definition of *voice* in poetry.

- How does Hughes create a voice for this character, the "Mother" of the title? In terms of words or phrases, how does the poem reflect the speech of this character? Do you think the mother in the title is necessarily Hughes's mother, or someone else's mother, or perhaps even more than one mother?
- As a class, discuss how the difficulties and struggles we face in life can help to shape who we are and how we look at the world. Does anyone have an example of how their perspective was shaped by their struggles? Now return to the poem. Do the mother's words suggest that her perspective on trouble and struggle may differ from her son's? What lines suggest that her own perspective has been directly altered by struggle?
- Ask students to respond to the following prompt in their journals: *What obstacles have you overcome in life? What struggles have you faced?* As they write about these obstacles, have them also give some thought to what they have learned from their struggles.