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When my preservice teachers create authentic, literature-based thematic units in my reading and social-studies methods classes, they are invariably drawn to the topic of bullying. They are deeply invested in the idea that school climate and classroom culture play a role in how children treat each other, and they believe that as future teachers, they have to be prepared to “deal with” students who bully and are bullied.

I share with them the concept of a universe of obligation, from the educational organization Facing History and Ourselves, as a pedagogical framework that asks us to consider the people and issues surrounding us. By placing the names of people or groups for whom we feel protective into concentric circles that radiate outward in degrees of connection from ourselves at the center, we can start to understand better our interconnected relationships. My students are sometimes surprised at the people they name in their circles and where they place them in relation to themselves.

The rich discussions that follow reveal a smorgasbord of constructed communities—which is precisely the point. Do biological connections outweigh nonbiological ones? Is the closeness of a connection based on shared racial, cultural, religious, or other identity factors? In which circle do we place people who have died, or those not yet born? How far would we extend ourselves, and for whom? Such questions are tied to the creation of curriculum around bullying, because they involve recognizing levels of human connectivity, the consequences of words and actions, and the ways that culture shapes who we are and what we do.

Creators of children’s fiction have approached ideas of identity and community for a long time and in many ways. The topic of bullying is not new either, though it has been the focus of much national attention recently. In classrooms, children’s literature about how people treat each other generally focuses on the consequences of bullying behavior after the fact. Recently, we are seeing an approach that is proactive rather than reactive, depicting communities of children who demonstrate ways to prevent hurtful behavior before it happens.

Highlighting the connections between self and others is one way to recognize that everyone participates in everything that happens: as bystanders or “upstanders.” Mr. Browne, the

fifth-grade teacher in R. J. Palacio’s *Wonder*, begins the school year teaching about precepts, which he and his students define as “rules about really important things.” One precept he instructs his students to think about is, “When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind.” For the protagonist, August, who has much to worry about, this is the sign that he is going to like school. With this bold and provocative statement, and by getting his students to think, Mr. Browne has taken the first step in creating a culture of kindness. In a classroom, creating a culture of kindness might begin with a precept, or a universe-of-obligation activity. It rests on a shared belief that everyone is capable and deserving of kindness. Even strangers. And that kindness is transformative.

The novels and picture books included in this feature share several distinct features: the characters have highly permeable universes of obligation, they reach out to and stand up for friends and strangers, and most are upstanders, rather than bystanders, when their participation is called for.

Within a culture of kindness, companionship can be fleeting, temporary, or long lasting. It forms between people (and sometimes between people and animals) motivated by empathy, affinity, curiosity, or serendipity. Invariably, antagonists are transformed by being part of such a culture. Furthermore, the books are rich in literary quality, include a multicultural array of experiences, and are already established in terms of their appeal to children. These represent a fraction of outstanding youth books about the topic of kindness, and hopefully teachers and librarians will share lists of others.

Five of the thematic strands from the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) are grounded in the belief that all individuals are shaped by culture and by time, place, people, and environment, and that identity is externally and internally constructed by numerous factors, making it a dynamic process, rather than an inherent feature. Conceptually, these are rigorous and progressive ideas that could be challenging to teach and learn without the right materials.

The concepts and content in the following set of books are appropriately aligned to the NCSS thematic standards. Characters such as Pattie Nguyen, in Holly Goldberg Sloan’s *Counting by 7s*, are proactive, rather than reactive, in realizing the interconnectedness of all people and the value of multiple perspectives—a link with the “Culture” strand. Mick and Summer in Cynthia Kadohata’s *The Thing about Luck* connect, despite disparities in age, gender, and culture, over their respect and appreciation for their work—a link to the “People, Places and Environment” strand. All the characters in *Wonder* guide readers to think about identity construction as it plays out at the intersections of biology, society, emotions, and cognition—a link to the “Individual Development and Identity” strand. And all the characters in Vera B. Williams’ *A Chair for My Mother* demonstrate the deep impact of selfless kindness—a link to the “Individual Groups and Institutions” strand.

The texts included in the accompanying activities are rich in all literary elements, specifically language, character complexity, and plot development. The shared theme of a culture of kindness unites them as a set that could be used in a thematic unit or novel study with interdisciplinary connections to English language arts, writing, and social studies. The activities are designed to enable students to engage with the texts on many levels, focusing on the concept of identity and a culture of kindness, in which all living things are connected across time and place.

A Chair for My Mother. By Vera B. Williams. Illus. by the author. 1982. 32p. Greenwillow, \$16.99 (9780688009144); paper, \$6.99 (9780688040741). PreS–K.

When a little girl's family loses their home and possessions, friends, neighbors, and family members pitch in with essential items and companionship. In their new home, the girl, her mother, and her grandmother patiently save coins in a jar until they have enough to buy a comfortable armchair in which the women can rest after work. Bright watercolor scenes illustrate this now-classic title.

In the Classroom

Read aloud *A Chair for My Mother*. Then, working in groups, students can make a collage using words and pictures to represent all the ways that people in the story are kind to each other. Along the border of their collages, group members can include verbal and visual examples of kindness demonstrated by themselves or classmates while working on the project.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7.** Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2.** Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

Counting by 7s. By Holly Goldberg Sloan. 2013. 384p. Dial, \$16.99 (9780803738553). Gr. 7–10.

As an adopted, self-identified “person of color,” precocious, brilliant Willow has loving parents who celebrate her idiosyncrasies, but after their unexpected death, Willow finds new friends who support and protect her.

In the Classroom

All the characters in *Counting by 7s* need each other in ways that they did not expect. For example, Jairo, a taxi driver, is moved by the fact that Willow recognized that the growth on his neck might be malignant and, in letting him know, effectively saved his life. He eventually returns the “favor.” Although Willow seems to be the one in most need, the other characters’ lives are enriched by her presence, and she is

pivotal in bringing them all into each other’s lives. As a class, discuss and identify the symbiotic connections between the characters, and providing text evidence, have students represent their findings and analysis using apps such as Popplet, which visually organizes ideas.

Common Core Connections

- **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.6.3.** 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.

Each Kindness. By Jacqueline Woodson. Illus. by E. B. Lewis. 2012. 32p. Penguin/Nancy Paulsen, \$16.99 (9780399246524). K–Gr. 3.

When a new girl in class, Maya, gets the empty seat next to Chloe and tries to be friends, Chloe and her clique want nothing to do with her, and their cruelty grows after Maya asks to play with them. Chloe’s teacher, Ms. Albert, drops a stone in a bowl of water to demonstrate the ripple effect of acts of kindness. Written in Woodson’s eloquent free verse and illustrated with Lewis’ beautiful, spacious watercolor paintings, *Each Kindness* is written in the first-person voice of Chloe, who is both a bully and a bystander and who contemplates the loss of a “chance of a kindness with Maya” at the book’s end—a rare conclusion in a picture book in its sense of regret and also the bully’s and bystander’s perspectives.

In the Classroom

Teachers of all elementary-grade levels can use *Each Kindness* to introduce the concept of being a bystander and spark discussions about why Chloe did not reach out to Maya, about what she might have done, and how she might move forward. Younger students can make inferences about how Maya felt when her peers ignored her, how Chloe felt when she saw this happening, and the ways in which the words and pictures in *Each Kindness* provide this information. The double-entry journal strategy can be used to organize inferences and evidence. For older students, Chloe’s role as a bystander can be compared and contrasted with Miranda’s role as an upstander, reaching out to peers in a variety of selfless ways, in Rebecca Stead’s *When You Reach Me*.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3.** Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.7.** Explain how specific aspects of a text’s illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1.** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

Extra Yarn. By Mac Barnett. Illus. by Jon Klassen. 2012. 40p. HarperCollins/Balzer + Bray, \$16.99 (9780061953385). K–Gr. 2.

In this Caldecott Honor Book, young Annabelle’s dilemma is that her box of yarn never runs out, no matter how much she knits. So she turns the dilemma into a gift, one that warms jealous Nate, cranky Mr. Norman, and all the other people and animals in her town, turning winter drear into woolly cheer. Annabelle’s gift of color and warmth is meant to be shared, so when a greedy archduke steals the box for himself, the magic stops. Finally, though, the box finds its way back to Annabelle, and the sharing and happiness continue.

In the Classroom

Following a class reading of *Extra Yarn*, ask students to retell the story, returning to the text for details that support the main idea. Then, ask students as a class to present their findings on written notes, connected with yarn strands to form a web.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2.** Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2.** Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

Flora and Ulysses: The Illuminated Adventures. By Kate DiCamillo. Illus. by K. G. Campbell. 2013. 240p. Candlewick, \$17.99 (9780763660406); e-book, \$17.99 (9780763667245). Gr. 3–6.

Flora Belle Buckman is a self-proclaimed “natural born cynic,” which is not a trait typically conducive to creating a culture of kindness. Many things have happened in her young life to cause her to be cynical, and she is particularly distrustful of adults. So it takes a besotted squirrel and an odd little boy named William Spiver to melt her heart with love. During the course of their adventures together, she learns that she is capable of more compassion than she might admit and would go to great lengths for her strange companions. The winner of the 2014 Newbery Medal.

In the Classroom

Ask students to chart Flora’s character development by using examples from the text to show how she changes over the

course of the novel. Students can demonstrate how they used text evidence; inferences; and text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections to understand her growth. Open-mind portraits or character webs would also be useful strategies for this exercise. As an extension of character analysis, students could highlight the connections between the primary and secondary characters in *Flora and Ulysses* and their influence on each other. The connections could be visually represented in a poster or by using presentation software.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.** Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2.** 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.

A Sick Day for Amos McGee. By Philip C. Stead. Illus. by Erin E. Stead. 2010. 32p. Roaring Brook/Neal Porter, \$16.99 (9781596434028). PreS–Gr. 2.

A dedicated presence at the zoo, Amos McGee knows what each of his animal friends needs and makes sure he provides it, whether it’s playing chess with an elephant or reading stories to an owl. Erin E. Stead was awarded the Caldecott Medal for her exquisitely warm, tender illustrations, rendered in pencil and colored woodblock prints.

In the Classroom

After reading *A Sick Day for Amos McGee* aloud, ask students to consider the traits of each animal character (e.g., the patient elephant, the shy penguin, the slow tortoise) and list them in a chart. In a second column, students can add the ways Amos goes out of his way to appreciate those traits. Next, students can add animals that are not on the list, identify appropriate traits based on their knowledge of the animals, and then imagine possible ways that the animals might need Amos (e.g., a lion might not be as courageous as he thinks he ought to be). Finally, students can write letters from the perspective of the animals, describing Amos’ kindness and how they depend on it.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.3.** Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3.** Describe characters in a story (e.g., their traits, motivations, or feelings) and explain how their actions contribute to the sequence of events.

Out of the Blue. By Alison Jay. Illus. by the author. 2014. 32p. Barefoot, \$16.99 (9781782850427). PreS–Gr. 2.

In this beautiful, wordless picture book, children lead by example, showing courage and kindness when the adults flee the scene. A boy who lives in a lighthouse spends his day rescuing little sea creatures that have been stranded in tide pools. So when a storm washes a giant octopus ashore, its tentacles wrapped in fishing line, the boy, his friend, and the other animals see only a fellow creature in need. Putting any fears aside, they cut the lines and pull the octopus back into the sea.

In the Classroom

Pair Vera B. Williams' *A Chair For My Mother* with *Out of the Blue*. Ask students to compare the images in both picture books and describe the ways in which they depict characters (both animals and people) who are depending on each other. As an extension, students can write poems about kindness using words they think *Out of the Blue* would contain if it were not wordless, an exercise that would also be a good accompaniment to a lesson on found poetry.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.3.** Describe how characters in a story respond to major events and challenges.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.7.** Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.

The Thing about Luck. By Cynthia Kadohata. Illus. by Julia Kuo. 2013. 288p. Atheneum, \$16.99 (9781416918820); paper, \$7.99 (9781442474659); e-book, \$9.99 (9781442474673). Gr. 4–8.

After Summer's parents have to fly to Japan to take care of elderly relatives, her grandmother and grandfather must come out of retirement to work for a custom harvesting company, and Summer and her troubled younger brother, Jaz, accompany them. This moving novel won the National Book Award for Young People's Literature.

In the Classroom

Over the course of the narrative, Summer has frequent occasion to express her dislike for Mick, one of the seasonal workers. Ultimately, however, it is Mick to whom she reaches out and who provides the kind of support she needs when she cannot handle a multitude of complications on her own. Students can list the ways that Summer demonstrates or feels animosity and, after discussion and analysis, explain her position. Close reading of the story allows readers to make inferences and predictions about if, how, and when her attitude changes. Using evidence from the text, this information can be used to create a plot profile and to chart the trajectory of Summer and Mick's developing connection, which ultimately rests on trust and respect.

Common Core Connections

- **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.W.6.1.A.** Introduce claim(s) and organize the reasons and evidence clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3.D.** Use precise words and phrases, relevant descriptive details, and sensory language to convey experiences and events.

When You Reach Me. By Rebecca Stead. 2009. 208p. Random/Wendy Lamb, \$15.99 (9780385737425); paper, \$6.99 (9780375850868); lib. ed., \$18.99 (9780385906647); e-book, \$6.99 (9780375892691). Gr. 4–7.

In this Newbery Medal winner, Manhattan sixth-grader Miranda Sinclair recounts a mind-bending, time-traveling story that begins after her best friend, Sal, is attacked by school-mates and then, afterward, barely acknowledges Miranda.

In the Classroom

Miranda is unconventional in many ways, particularly in how she responds to the people in her world. She befriends Annemarie when Julia abandons her; reaches out to Marcus, even though he punched Sal; is kind to the laughing man, even though he seems like the kind of person a child should avoid; initiates a truce with Julia; and becomes Alice Evans' bathroom buddy. Present Jacqueline Woodson's *Each Kindness* as a mentor text to introduce the concept of the ripple effect, and then, as a class, examine Miranda's actions in terms of that metaphor. In small groups of four or five, students can examine the text and collect examples of when Miranda mentioned or interacted with the laughing man. After analysis and discussion of the significance of each interaction, students can determine how it impacted Miranda's decision to reach out to the peripheral characters. Students could employ a variety of forms to demonstrate learning: performance piece, Prezi or PowerPoint presentation, Hot Seat Interview, or narrative essay.

Common Core Connections

- **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.SL.6.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.5.** Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, images, music, sound) and visual displays in presentations to clarify information.

Wonder. By R. J. Palacio. 2012. 416p. Knopf, \$15.99 (9780375869020); lib. ed., \$18.99 (9780375969027); e-book, \$9.99 (9780375899881). Gr. 5–8.

In this best-selling novel, different characters' perspectives depict the close and tangential ways in which they are all connected to each other through the central character: August Pullman, a middle-schooler who, 27 operations later, has what doctors call facial "anomalies," and Auggie himself refers to "my tiny, mushed-up face."

In the Classroom

After being taught about Facing History and Ourselves' definition of the universe of obligation (visit bit.ly/1tx3ebT for more information), students can create a chart for August, locating all the characters in proximity to him. Ask students to use text evidence to support their decisions about where to place characters. Following this, students might consider who other main characters, such as Olivia, Jack, Julian, and Summer, would include in their circles and why. *Wonder* is filled with quotable lines, such as "It's not enough to be friendly. You have to be a friend" and "Your deeds are like your monuments. Built with memories instead of with stone." Students can pick a set of such quotes, analyze what they mean in the context of the story, and explain why the quotes have personal significance. When these are shared with the class, students can reflect on unexpected points of connection as they notice patterns and similarities in the group.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.5.** Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.6.** Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3.D.** Use concrete words and phrases and sensory details to convey experiences and events precisely. 

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BookLinks

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS:
A CULTURE OF KINDNESS
BY AMINA CHAUDHRI