Dreams: A Literature Based Text Set

We all have dreams: dream cars, dream jobs, daydreams, life dreams. A dream is important to the dreamer’s life and to all of our lives as dreams provide hope for the future. The idea for this text set came from a fascination with the energy, spirit, expressive voice, and explosion of talent that emerged in the literary and musical communities in Harlem in the 1920s, in spite of many social and political hardships. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural awakening, sparking a period of intense expression of life, and a refusal to be subdued or ignored. “Harlem was a hotbed of intellectual, artistic, literary, and political blossoming for Black people…They came to St. Louis, Chicago, and ultimately to Harlem seeking peace, prosperity, and freedom” (Hill, 2003, p.2). The Grade Nine textbook I referenced in creating this text set left something to be desired in terms of the Harlem Renaissance. Including one poem by Langston Hughes, the book leaves readers wondering, “Why do we ignore the movement that refused such treatment?” The very culture we ignore demands our recognition.

Using Langston Hughes as a jumping off point, the text set focuses on a theme presented in three of the items included in the set, three poems by Hughes about dreams: “Dreams,” “Harlem: A Dream Deferred” and “Dream Variations.” “Hughes, like his peers, found the voice of justice, the voice of hope, and put it into words that others would hear, identify with, and understand” (Hill, 2003, p. 3). The exploration of dreams in African American culture yields a wide array of sources and insight from the period of the Great Migration to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous speech. To understand the richness and the capacity of the Harlem Renaissance, one must first understand how it came to be. In recognizing the Great Migration and the attempt for a large group of Southern Blacks to relocate to a better life, one might understand the celebration of life in the 1920s. That celebration of life and the dream of something better carried on to Martin Luther King Jr., and carries on to today as well. Dreams, though confined in this text set to the African American tradition, are common to the human condition, and explore issues to which every person might relate.

Rationale:

I chose to use the literature-based text set because I wanted to replace the traditional textbook. In accordance with Virginia SOL 9.3, students will “read and analyze a variety of literature” focusing on format, distinguishing characteristics of literary forms, viewing relationships between literary elements, and investigating the historical context and the influence on style, form, and point of view. The text set focuses on common themes with a wide range of reading levels for use in both whole class and individual settings. In a standard Grade Nine English classroom, I might have a reading ability spread of four levels. I tried to consider this as I looked for books at the public library to bring the Harlem Renaissance, and the passion of dreams to life. Part of the energy of this text set is giving students the opportunity to focus on one concept and explore the nuances of text within that theme. Students will experience poetry, film, dramatic works, narrative pieces, and history in attempts to discover dreams of a culture and how those dreams change, struggle, re-manifest, and find realization. It is important also for students to understand the relationships between the texts within the set culturally and historically in order to understand how dreams change and evolve. It is, in true sense, a survey of literature and style.
A note about Readability:

Readability was determined using the Fry Readability Graph and the Qualitative Textbook Analysis. The Fry Graph predicts an instructional reading level. Since I am using the text set in place of a traditional textbook, I will be using the resources during classroom instruction. The range of reading levels varies from Grade Two to Grade Twelve. Because several short poems are included, the reading level is skewed slightly to the lower range of reading levels. Less precision is used in determining readability for poems using the Fry formula. Though the reading level for the poems is low due to the short sentences and fewer words, the content can prove to be difficult for many students to comprehend and apply. As such, many of the texts will be used as whole class resources while others will be used on an individual basis. Due to the variance of reading levels, not all students will access the same resources. All students will, however, receive the same content through my instruction. Checks of comprehension will be determined and performed on an item by item basis.

Preparation:

Four items in the text set will be used in the preparation stage to help engage students and prepare them for learning about the Harlem Renaissance, the dreams of African Americans and of people as a whole.

Item One:


Reading Level 7

One of the first manifestations of dreams in this text set occurs in Jacob Lawrence's beautifully illustrated book. In the early 1910s many Blacks fled the Southern states to the Northern cities in search of a better life and greater economic and social opportunities. Jacob Lawrence’s colorful illustrations explain the movement depicting the bleak conditions and violence that plagued many groups of migrants, and the resounding hope that carried them through. One of the most prevalent themes throughout the book is the dream of a better life for the travelers, and the hope that, despite all of the bad, something good will emerge. Lawrence’s book is important as it explains the journey to Harlem and other Northern cities. The movement into Harlem prompted the cultural and creative uprising at the heart of the text set.

Students will be very interested in reading the text, primarily because the text is not the focus of the book. Students will see in vivid color the cultural struggle to find a better life. This book would be especially engaging for students who enjoy art, color, and vivid portraits. Though the book is intended for below grade or struggling readers, Lawrence’s portrayal of the migration would be appropriate for grade level and above grade level readers as well. The book contains mostly Lawrence’s paintings, which depict hard images of violence and segregation, yet the information is relevant for all age groups. The information is presented in a way that is not “dumbed-down.” Since many History classes touch on the topic of the migration, we will complete a KWL, so students can relate their previous knowledge of the Great Migration and of migration in general to a new context. The KWL will also ensure that students comprehend the material. I will read this book aloud to my
students. After the reading, we will discuss important concepts and issues that the book raises.

**Item Two:**

Reading Level: 8-9

One of the most famous speeches in American History is Martin Luther King's charge to America about his dreams for African Americans to achieve equal status. It is arguably one of the only items in this text set with which students have some familiarity. Students know this speech, and most would be able to recite at least a small portion of it. Because students know the speech and the story behind the speech, it is likely that this might be the text that makes the exploration of cultural dreams a reality. Martin Luther King's journey to help African Americans gain equality in our country is one of the most famous civil rights stories, and is one of the more recent events in our history.

Through the study of King's speech, students will realize that dreams motivate us to write, to speak, and to make changes in our lives for a hope of a better future. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance had a dream much the same as Martin Luther King, and they activated their writing and speaking capabilities to create social change. The flourish of arts and music in the 1920s ultimately resulted in the greater acceptance of black Americans in jobs that were previously reserved for white Americans. Writers of the Harlem Renaissance, like Martin Luther King, celebrate black culture and creativity, and strive to make it a part of the mainstream culture. Through the study of Martin Luther King's speech, students will also note that dreams require reworking and struggling. Some are realized, while some must be put off until they are ready for realization.

The reading level for Martin Luther King's speech was a borderline 8-9. The speech uses repetition of "I have a dream" to propel the speech to its conclusion. Many of the vocabulary words might be tricky for students, like "languishing," and "inextricably." The powerful imagery is important for students to comprehend and experience, but might be difficult for students to grasp if they struggle with the reading. Reluctant learners might engage with the content because it is familiar and because it is a recent event that is continually discussed in media and History. Since the speech will be used in the preparation stage, I will bring in a recording of the speech so that students can hear the emphasis of the words from Martin Luther King. As students are following along with their handouts of the speech, they will have a greater opportunity to think about the images, the dreams of Martin Luther King, and the consequences of having dreams or having dreams deferred. Students will struggle less with fluency aspects as it is being read to them, and will focus more on the speech as a whole.

**Item Three:**

Reading Level: 5

The first poem of the text set is the inspiration poem for the set, Langston Hughes' "Dreams." The poem is short, sweet, and to the point. It calls everyone to hold on to dreams and to keep dreaming, because if we allow our dreams to die "life is a broken-winged
bird that cannot fly.” Langston Hughes presents positive images of dreams as necessities of life.

As Langston Hughes is the inspiration for this text set, students will encounter Hughes' perspective on dreams as a way of understanding how other writers of the Harlem Renaissance viewed dreams. This poem in the preparation stage will allow students to consider if all dreams are necessary for life to continue. Students will also consider the message of this poem in relation to the Great Migration and Martin Luther King's speech; are the dreams manifested in those two contexts necessary for life? This particular poem will allow students to think in the context of their own dreams and will draw in their understandings of dreams and of their importance to their futures as a way of connecting to current and future texts in the text set. Hughes’ imagery is engaging for the reader, allowing the reader to visualize a life frozen with snow if one is not allowed, or not willing, to hold on to his dreams, even in severe opposition.

The reading level for this poem is Grade 5. The method of calculating reading level using the Fry formula is imprecise, as a specific coefficient is used to determine sentence average and syllable average. The poem only contains thirty words, two sentences, and thirty-seven syllables. The multi-syllabic words in the poems are not difficult. Students of all reading levels should be able to read and comprehend the text independently.

**Item Four:**

Reading Level: Grade 2

All students have had to put a dream or a hope on hold. Students will easily identify with Langston Hughes's poem about the fate of dreams that are continually deferred. He wrote this poem in the years following the Great Depression. The flowering of arts in the 1920s was significantly halted as many black Americans, and Americans in general, lost their jobs. Many white Americans fled to the suburbs, leaving blacks behind in severely dilapidated communities. In contrast to Hughes' "Dreams" poem, "Dream Deferred" seeks answers to the tension between needing and craving dreams, to the impossibility of realizing those dreams in an oppressing social system. The poem again reminds the reader of the importance of dreams, leaving the reader to question what happens to those dreams we have to put on hold.

This poem will be used in conjunction with Hughes' "Dreams" to question students about their own deferred dreams. Students might also begin to categorize movements in time: The Great Migration correlates with "Dreams" while Martin Luther King's speech correlates with "Dreams Deferred." Important discussions will arise about the necessity for all dreams to be realized. Is it primarily the dream of equality for Langston Hughes, or is it the artists’ dream? Are all dreams equal, or equally important? The two poems, "Dreams," and "Dreams Deferred" are great precursors to the ideas of celebration and defeat, triumph and tribulation found in much of African American history. Dreams sometimes require a struggle to bring them to fruition. In the context of their own dreams, students will think about this poem as a preparation for later texts.

The Fry formula designates a Grade Two reading level for this poem. The concept of the poem is fairly simple. The sentences are incomplete and very short, possibly skewing
the poem’s readability lower than it should be. There were only a few multi-syllabic words which could cause problems for readers who are not familiar with "deferred" or "fester."

Assistance:

Items used in the assistance phase will be used either as a textbook or as a support for the textbook by drawing in more political and social contexts.

Item Five:


Reading Level: Grade 10

*Harlem Stomp!* is a colorful, energetic, and bold analysis of the cultural explosion of the Harlem Renaissance. *Stomp!* traces political, social, and cultural events that defined the period, and expands the topic from our literature focus. The book includes photographs and vivid portraits of the time period. A glossary of “Harlem Jive” is also included in the margins. Students will be able to participate with the book and dive deeper into the sense of energy and excitement. One of the praises of the book claims that it “celebrates a time, a place, an energy, and a people who refused to be held back and so they created a culture the entire world is still reeling from” (Hill, 2003, back cover). Hill's *History* expresses the perseverance of dreams despite constant struggles. Hill shows a culture, desperate to create and share an identity, that their dreams take flight in a pervasive cultural movement. Hill's book expands the context of dreams to include the global sense of dreaming and achieving. The book puts into living color the feeling of the movement, the excitement of the achievements, and the importance of continual dreaming.

The Fry Graph returns a reading level of 10 for *Stomp*. Though it is above a grade 9 level, the book is a valuable resource for all of my students. *Stomp!* has a lyric style that is easier to read, many colorful pictures, and small excerpts that might be more appealing for readers who are less comfortable with the text. Sections of the book will be used during whole class instruction as they offer important background information and contexts for the period and events of the Renaissance. Since this is a liability for my struggling readers, I will check comprehension by asking all students to complete a quick write. By checking the quick writes, I will be able to determine where students might have conceptual trouble and where I can offer further instruction. The rest of the book will be available for individual exploration and discussion or for use on other classroom projects.

Item Six:


Reading Level: Grade 9

Giovanni compiled a book of poems that attempts to connect the Harlem Renaissance and the fundamental feelings and ideas behind "rebirth" to earlier Renaissances. Giovanni includes poets and poems from before the Harlem Renaissance to modern writers in order to capture the idea that "the Harlem Renaissance is the pivotal period that shows – as a people – these are the possibilities; these are the probabilities; these are the things that we may achieve and these are the things we probably won't, but we hope for a better world
and we support one another in whatever desires we have to move forward" (Giovanni, 1996, p.13). Giovanni’s eloquent description of the Renaissance and delicate compilation of poems expresses one of the main concepts of the great flowering of talent and heart of the 1920s: the Renaissance is still affecting us. Their dreams are still our dreams.

I think students will be very interested in reading portions of Giovanni’s compilation as it includes more familiar current artists. This book will be used as a primary text for which the other examples in the text set will support. The book uses a wide variety of poems and poets with a wide variety of topics with the same underlying energy, enthusiasm for writing, and dream. As our primary text, the book will be used in the assistance phase as it is on grade level. Though the Fry reading level is a Grade Nine, the book contains many poems as well as Giovanni’s insight. The poems would more than likely yield a lower readability. When the readability was performed, the random selection of passages led to the counting of Giovanni’s insight more than the poems themselves. As such, even struggling readers should have no difficulty reading the poems when assigned. It will be challenging for all students, regardless of reading ability, to comprehend the poems as the language is terse and descriptive. Activities will be done in class to aid comprehension for all students.

Item Seven:

Reading Level: Grade 9

Powerful Words expands the concept of dreams and passions to the political and social realm. Writing samples from African Americans dating from the 1700s’ Benjamin Banneker to current day musician Lauryn Hill grapple with social problems, personal realizations, and the powerful contributions of other influential African Americans. The book represents the enormous struggle of African Americans from all decades: the anti-slavery freedom fighters, the women’s rights movers, the education activists, the Harlem Renaissance, and the civil rights leaders, to create new dreams for Black culture and to have those dreams realized. “Words can be powerful whether written, spoken, or sung…Words can open the door to new and better ways of understanding. Words can change things” (Hudson, 2004, inside cover). Through reading the powerful words of the influential contributors to black culture, students will discover the hopes and dreams at the heart of their words. Students will discover how words move others to take action through writing and speaking. Dreams motivate us to find better ways of understanding ourselves and the world around us and can lead to change.

Since the book contains a selection of a Lauryn Hill song, students may be more willing to engage with the book. Lauryn Hill is a recent star that students will know and listen to. By involving students with the Lauryn Hill selection, they might be more interested to see what other writers in the book have to say. As an added bonus, I could bring in Lauryn Hill’s music as a way of presenting the text to the students. A wide selection of authors and time periods are presented in this book, and time will not allow for the discussion of all of them. Whole class discussions will focus on the three time periods represented by the majority of items in the text set: the Great Migration era, Harlem Renaissance, and Civil Rights Movement. Students will peruse the rest of the material, if desired, at their own leisure. The readability for this book is a grade nine, which could potentially be difficult for below grade readers. A small excerpt of text is included from each person’s influential writing, and the writing varies from oratory pieces to written narratives.
Each piece is likely to yield a different readability level. Some of the poems and narrative pieces would probably yield a lower readability level and would be more appropriate for readers of a lower ability level, while the more oratory and terse pieces might be better suited to challenge higher ability level students.

Struggling readers will find help in the opening sections of each writing section. Each excerpt is accompanied by a small introduction which gives background information and decodes the text that the student is about to encounter. Students will be given this material to read independently, but factstorming or other comprehension activities will be completed to ensure that each student has comprehended the text, to clarify misunderstandings, and to provide a review of the material for the day’s discussion.

Item Eight:

The video clip from United Streaming gives the background of the creation of jazz and “The Jazz Age” in the 1920s. The video provides clips of musicians, people dancing, the wardrobe of the flappers, and other cultural markers, while explaining the influence that jazz had on American culture and on the literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance. While students are mesmerized by the sounds and sights of the Roaring 20s, the video educates them about the racial tensions that came to a head as a result of segregation. The tension in the video between the depictions of the black musicians and between the scenes from night clubs of only white patrons and dancers might give students an understanding of the racial segregation that occurred during the era. Since there was such a flourishing of Black culture during the time period in the areas of literature, music, and film, in particular, students may lose sight that the struggle to maintain one’s dreams faced enormous opposition in terms of social constraints.

Though students are not reading while watching the video clip, the clip may inspire them to read more about the poets and activists we study, simply seeing the harsh opposition that many of their powerful words and strong voices had to face in order to achieve success. Students will be able to experience the liveliness of the era with an awareness of the social and political constraints that affected many of the poets and writers that we will read. Students may also see that the same types of social issues and political issues that affected the earlier writers are still affecting writers today.

Reflection:

Items used in the reflection stage will allow students to recall the information from the unit and to think about the theme in a new way. Students will question their own dreams and their own contexts for their dreams.

Item Nine:
Reading Level: Grade 3

The third and final poem by Langston Hughes in this text set expresses a very specific set of dreams. In the two other dream poems, Hughes postulates that without dreams, life is a barren wasteland, and by deferring dreams, dreams may dry up. Dreams in this context are the dreams of equality, "to whirl and to dance till the white day is
gone…while the night comes on gently, Dark like me.” Hughes’ dreams take the same hopeful and positive tone of the first dream poem, but draw a stronger connection to the Great Migration and to Martin Luther King. This poem may be the link for students between the early explorations of dreams to the later explorations. Here students might begin to reflect about the nature of dreams, their purpose, and their mode of expression. Are their dreams a hope for some type of equality or for better self expression?

The beautiful imagery of the poem and the rhythmic structure is enough to engage readers. The readability for this poem is a grade three. Students will easily be able to complete this assignment for homework and think about their own journey through different cultures to arrive at an understanding of what we, as humans, dream about, and how those dreams manifest in art, literature, and speech. The poem is lyrical with no difficult words for the age group. The imagery is very clear and will be easy for students to understand.

**Item Ten:**

Reading Level: Grade 12

Hansberry’s title is an allusion to another item within the text set, Langston Hughes’ poem, “Dream Deferred.” *Raisin in the Sun* is a portrait of a Black family in Chicago. It questions what happens to a family and to individuals in a family who have competing dreams. Ultimately, someone’s personal dream will be deferred, but maybe the joint dream of a better life will be realized. Hansberry’s play is a “representation of black life, one that was resolutely authentic, fiercely unsentimental, and unflinching in its vision of what happens to people whose dreams are constantly deferred” (Hansberry, 1958, back cover). Hansberry’s text is a direct contrast to the life and energy of Hill’s *Stomp*, but explains the concept that we all struggle for the same dream. Our methods of voicing our struggles are different. Hansberry expresses the same context and dreams that the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, and of the travelers of the Great Migration, in a new context and in a new era. *A Raisin in the Sun* depicts the characters that are determined to live a better life and dream of all that that life might entail.

Students will enjoy reading Raisin in the Sun as it depicts an average family, struggling to get by. Regardless of age or race, students will appreciate Hansberry’s depiction of a “slice of life.” Students may encounter the same relationships, struggles, and triumphs in their own families and lives.

Though the Fry reading level for this particular text is a grade 12, the play itself is conversational and uses many colloquial phrases. The entire play may be too challenging for use in a whole class setting, given that some readers will be on grade level or below, but portions of the play would emphasize previous themes and give all students the opportunity to explore dramatic styles. The entire work is more appropriate for higher level readers. Students will use portions of the play in the assistance and reflection stages of PAR to aid their understanding about the culture, time period, and human condition, and to think about the relation of a later text to an earlier text with similar ideals and values.