

English morale

Business



Middle school students are impressionable and often make misguided decisions. For example, they will bully their classmates so that they can feel superior to them. In the classroom, they examine stories that reinforce in their minds that this behavior is normal and acceptable. In middle school, students are supposed to read about what life is like in the real world, but the stories they read neglect to portray the number of kind, thoughtful people who exist. Instead, the stories create the illusion that people never show consideration for each other. Students should read about characters who do not feel the need to torment others in order to learn that they can feel happy about themselves without making their peers miserable. When I was in sixth grade, my Language Arts teacher read us “ All Summer in a Day,” a story in our literature book about a girl who moves from Earth to a colony on Venus.

The girl desperately misses seeing the sun, which only shines through the gasses in the atmosphere once every several years. On the day that the sun comes out, the girl’s classmates spitefully lock her in a closet and forget about her until after the sun has receded. Embedded in this story, there was no message, no life lesson that we could use to improve ourselves as human beings. The story could have shown that the children learned to consider the consequences felt by their victims before pulling pranks, but the author made no hint that they even felt remorseful. The next year, in seventh grade, my class was introduced to violent stories when we read *The Outsiders* in which a teenage orphan, Ponyboy, tries to survive as a member of a street gang. In the novel, Ponyboy is beaten up by a group of wealthy boys in his town and bullied by his older brothers.

The only two people who give Ponyboy help, both members of his gang, die at the ending. The plotline includes many unnecessary occasions where boys hurt each other just because they think it is fun. These incidents give middle schoolers reading *The Outsiders* the impression it is okay to get a thrill from attacking other kids. Instead of implying that everyone is free to treat others as they please, middle school reading should lead students to the conclusion that they will be happier if they do not hurt people, learn from their mistakes and respect their fellow humans. The purpose of reading *The Outsiders* and, less directly, “*All Summer in a Day*” was to examine how the characters change and mature from the beginning to the end of the story.

Because those stories were chosen for us to read, we were also exposed to an amount of thoughtlessness and violence disproportionate to that in the real world. If in addition we had read books like *Travels with Charley*, in which John Steinbeck, the author, overcomes his grief and gains a confidence in the goodness of America, and *Chasing Vermeer*, in which two children learn that they can accomplish their goals if they work together, we would still have been able to analyze a change in the characters. We would also have seen that people who respect others and care about them live more contented lives than people who cause others pain.