

Literature Guide for 4th Grade

Alec's Primer

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December 9th, 2013

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Rationale:

“Alec’s Primer” brings out a really important perspective about slavery that is accessible to children in the 4th grade. Very often black history is limited to what we refer to as black history month. This is a very unfortunate limitation on our part to educate our children. It maintains segregation of race via the curriculum. This literary guide is an attempt to bring forward a more diverse curriculum by bringing a new perspective to the class in a way that students are able to understand. Hopefully in the future more racial literature will enter into our schools and classes.

This text has the power to intrigue fourth graders with its connection to the local community, i.e. Vermont. The boy in this narrative eventually finds freedom from slavery in the state of Vermont. This will be particularly powerful for students who live nearby because for them it is a very place-based narrative. And at this age students are very interested in exploring their local communities. The place-based aspect of this text will also provide the teachers in the local area great opportunities to use this text in a more integrated context. For example, since fourth graders are beginning to learn how to research (Wood, 114), they can look in their local resources, e.g. historical society, to see if there are other soldiers who once lived nearby and also fought in the Civil war. And since this narrative is based on a true story, they may even come across some research material about Alec Turner’s life in Vermont.

This narrative is great for fourth graders developmentally for many reasons. Fourth graders are fascinated with true stories and non-fiction. Though this is a beautiful narrative, it is derived from a true story. In “Yardsticks,” Chip Wood describes children in fourth grade as “at their most actively receptive as learners of factual information” (120). Children at this level have

a great deal of intellectual curiosity as they begin reading to learn, rather than learning to read. This would be also developmentally appropriate because at this age students are fascinated with fairness issues as they struggle to understand ethical behavior at new levels (Wood, 108). Fourth graders really begin looking at issues of justice and fairness, and this narrative provides a lot of emphasis on such issues. Additionally, fourth graders are interested in our country and the world, racial and ethnic diversity, literary characters or themes emerging from books (Wood, 115), as well as history (Wood, 129). All of these fourth grade interests are accessible through this piece of racial literature.

Summary:

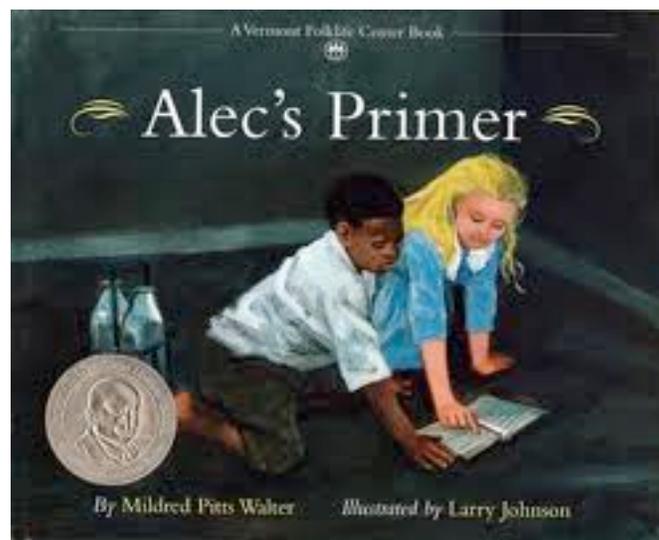
“Alec’s Primer” is a short narrative about a boy who lives in slavery in Virginia. This text does a good job in portraying some of the fear that occurs in being a slave without being overly extreme. The granddaughter of Alec’s master wants to teach Alec how to read and Alec struggles with this idea. He believes that reading will lead to his freedom but fears that if he is caught he’ll be sent away from his mother and/or physically punished, as slaves are forbidden to read.

No matter the cost, Alec decides what he really wants is freedom and allows the master’s granddaughter to teach him how to read. He dreams of one day moving to Vermont where he will be free. Unfortunately he is caught, and although he is not sent away he is punished. He grows up in this way until one day he hears that there is a war going on and that a black man can fight for freedom. This war is the Civil War, and Alec decides to join the union and fight. The book ends with Alec attaining freedom and becoming a landowner in Vermont. This book is

based on a true story about a man named Alec Turner who was born to slavery and whose biography is on the last page of the book.

Initiating Activity:

The students and teacher will be sitting in a circle together. Because the front cover of this book says so much, the book will be introduced with the teacher holding up the front cover and asking them to infer or predict what this story is about based on the picture.



The students will likely notice that there is a black boy in tattered clothing sitting next to a white girl in a very neat dress. Behind them are two empty glass milk bottles to help aid them in knowing that this is not modern times. Perhaps they'll notice that he is in bare feet, or that it appears she is reading to him with her finger in the middle of an open book and her mouth slightly ajar. The students may also notice the title of the book, "Alec's Primer." If not, the teacher will point it out and ask them if they know what "Primer" is referring to. They've

recently learned how to infer the meaning of a word they don't understand so this would be a great time to practice that. Knowing the meaning of the title here is significant to the story, so be sure the students understand this aspect of the book before moving on.

As the students begin to respond and make predictions to these questions, the teacher should ask them to try and name the reason behind their predictions. For example, the teacher could ask, "What was your thinking behind that prediction?" This engages the student in the pattern of what they will be working on next which is "inferring" as a comprehension strategy and backing up their inference with evidence.

After a few minutes of this introduction, the teacher should ask them if they can infer what the theme of the story is. If they can't figure it out the teacher should let them know that the theme is about slavery and allow them to discuss what they already know about slavery for about a minute. Let them know that today we are going to learn about a new perspective on slavery. That is, "we will be learning slavery from a new point of view." Continue, "I often get frustrated with how little we really know about slavery from the points of view of the slaves themselves. Most of the time when we read about slavery it is from a textbook. But, when I read this book it really helped me understand slavery from the point of view of a boy who was born a slave. He was about your age, too, if you can imagine that."

At this point the teacher would engage the students on the idea that sometimes books are written to help you learn something new. But, this kind of learning something new is a little different than just reading for information. This kind of something new sometimes changes you. The teacher could ask these questions to help them engage with this idea; "Have you ever read a book that changed the way you thought or felt about something? Have you ever read a book that

made you feel you were a better person for having read it? Maybe you learned something about yourself that you never knew before, looked at an issue from another point of view, or changed your thinking about something you once believed to be true” (Miller 115). Tell your students that authors often write books because they want you to take something new away from the book or that they want to leave their readers with something new to think about. Let the students know that this may or may not happen to them while you read the book, and that either is fine. But, that all you want them to do is pay attention to whether or not it is happening.

Now, let the children know that you will be reading “Alec’s Primer” aloud to them as they sit in a circle.

Mini-Lesson on Inferring and Evidence:

“When readers infer, they use their prior knowledge and textual clues to draw conclusions and form unique interpretations of text” (Miller, 107).

The class would have been working hard already on the strategy of inferring with unknown vocabulary words. By this time they would be great at using their schema, rereading, and paying attention to words and pictures as clues to help them become better readers. There would be a couple of anchor charts from the previous lessons on how to infer the vocabulary of unknown words to help guide the students in this new context of inferring.

To introduce inferring in this context, say something to this effect, “Today as I read ‘Alec’s Primer’ we’re going to be focusing on making predictions about the text. Making predictions is also called inferring. It’s when you use your prior knowledge and textual clues to

make unique predictions. It's a reading strategy that will really help us understand what we're reading. You guys already know how to infer when you come across words you don't already know, right? This is exactly what we'll be doing, but this time we'll be doing it with the ideas in the text. Are you guys ready? Ok, great!"

Read the first couple pages stopping every once in a while to infer meaning from the text to model to the students how to make inferences and predictions. Be sure to think aloud while you are doing this so that the students can see how thinking about inferring works. For example, you can infer on the first page that Alec and his Mama are poor, or you can infer on the second page that Miss Zephie is a bit of a trouble maker and that Alec is going to get in to trouble. Stop on the third page when Alec does get in trouble for eating the cookies and is asked to leave the kitchen. Put the book down and ask the students, "So what are you thinking? What do you predict will happen next?" Record the predictions on a chart labeled "Our Predictions and Our Thinking Behind Them." This chart has two columns; one side says "Predictions" and the other side says "Thinking Behind Predictions." Label their predictions appropriately and then ask them what the thinking is behind these predictions. For example, "What happened in the text that led you to this prediction?" Then record these answers under the column "Thinking Behind Predictions." If the students are making the same predictions ask if anyone has a different prediction to make.

If the students are having trouble making the connection between their predictions and their thinking behind them, let them know you are going to reread the first few pages again and ask them if they can hear anything that might've helped them make those predictions. Stop at the same place and record their thinking behind their prediction.

Go back to the text, and as you are reading if any of the the predictions come true place a “C” next to the prediction for “confirmed.” Continue reading six more pages and stop when you reach the part where Miss Zephie discusses running away to Vermont and asks Alec to come with her. On this page the reader is introduced to Vermont, its connection with freedom, and the opportunity of freedom for Alec. There are a lot of possibilities on this page for making predictions, so pause here, ask for more predictions and more thinking behind the predictions, and record them in the chart in their appropriate columns. Remember to place a “C” next to any predictions that may have been confirmed by the story as you read.

Read four more pages until Miss Zephie yells “Take it!” to Alec regarding the primer she is holding in her hands. Here is a great place to stop for just a moment to ask the students if they predict that Alec will begin reading or not. Make sure the students cannot see the pictures on this page because it will give away the story line. This is a great place for the kids to practice predicting and thinking about what is behind their prediction because Alec is really going through an inner struggle here between freedom, reading, Vermont, or getting severely punished. At this point in the story it is also hard to tell what Miss Zephie’s motive is and whether or not Alec should trust her. Furthermore, one of the ideas the author is trying to convey in this story is that reading leads to freedom. Pausing here would give the students an opportunity to see this. The teacher can engage the students in this question in multiple ways; e.g. asking them by a show of hands who thinks Alec will or will not pick up the primer to read it, passing out a piece of paper that has two sides, one side with with the prediction and the other side with the thinking behind the prediction, or having them write their prediction onto a post-it that you place on a chart.

When you begin on the next page you will immediately learn that Alec does indeed pick up the primer and begin learning to read from Miss Zephie. I imagine that some of the students will be really excited that their prediction was correct and that Alec is learning how to read. Read six more pages and stop at the page when Alec comes to a dilemma of whether or not to join the soldiers in fighting for freedom. Stop reading in the middle of the page where it says “Should he go back to the plantation? he wondered as they waited.” For the last time ask the students to make predictions and record them onto the chart.

Finish reading the rest of the book which is just one page. On the last page the students will find out that the war Alec was referring to was the Civil War, and that eventually he ended up in Vermont as a free man. The students probably made some predictions about these conclusions so don't forget to confirm them on the chart. If the students are interested there is also a biography on the last page of this book about the real Alec Turner that you can read to them.

Assessment Strategies:

The Anchor chart entitled “Our Predictions and Our Thinking Behind Them” would look a little like this.

PREDICTIONS	THINKING BEHIND THEM
Alec and his Mama are poor C	They don't have very nice clothes
Miss Zephie is a trouble maker	Because she laughs when Alec gets in to trouble
Alec is going to read C	Because he really wants freedom and he believes reading will free him
Alec's going to fight in the Civil War C	The text says that blue coats were fighting to free slaves and we know the Civil War is the war that freed slaves

In this assessment I am looking for the students ability to make inferences/predictions that are connected to the text. I'm also looking for their ability to use evidence from the text to back up their predictions. Placing the "C's" on the chart also help me to see that the students are understanding this strategy and using strong evidence to make accurate predictions. I also want to hear from the students directly that this strategy has helped them become better readers, so before the lesson ends, ask them if they were able to make new connections to the reading strategy of inferring. After assessing the chart and asking them this question, I would gauge whether or not they were ready to move on to doing this activity in pairs during reading time or if it would be more helpful to do another read aloud together using this comprehension strategy.

The second form of assessment going in this mini-lesson is about half way through the book when Alec has to make the decision whether or not he's going to let Miss Zephie teach him how to read. I mentioned a couple of different ways one could assess this, but I personally

would use the paper with two sides to it because it would be specific to the story and would ask the students the same question. Therefore, I would be able to assess how the students are doing in using this strategy on more of an individual level to find out if anyone needs more instruction or guidance. The paper would look something like this.

Name _____ I predict Alec will or will not take the book to begin learning how to read.	What's the thinking behind your prediction?
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There's enough space for the student to make a prediction, as well as to draw a picture if they want to. However, the students would really only have about one minute to complete this. The picture may be something they add in during free time. This activity would help the teacher assess, as well as give the students a chance to engage with the text differently.

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. What are the main ideas of this text? *(Level 1A-Knowledge)*

2. How would you describe Miss Zephie's character traits? What supports these findings?
(Level 1B-Comprehension)
3. What were some of Alec's character traits that led him to eventually find freedom? *(Level 1B-Comprehension)*
4. What is the relationship between Alec and Miss Zephie? *(Level 2B-Analysis)*
5. Why do you think slaves were forbidden to read during this time period? *(Level 3A-Synthesis)*
6. What questions would you ask in an interview with Alec? *(Level 2A-Application)*
7. Can you assess the importance of freedom in Alec's life? *(Level 3B-Evaluation)*
8. How would you evaluate Mistress Gouldin's actions throughout the story? *(Level 3B-Evaluation)*
9. In what ways did slavery affect Alec's life? Use the text to support your answers. *(Level 2A-Application)*
10. What are some of the big ideas the author was trying to convey? *(Level 3A-Synthesis)*

The questions would be presented on another day after we did another read aloud of this text. The purpose of this would be for having a philosophical discussion with an emphasis on oral language development and listening skills. Depending on how your fourth graders work in groups, have them get into groups of 2 or 3. Each student chooses one question and they have one and a half minutes to discuss each question; i.e. four and a half minutes for all three questions in the group if there are three people. During this time the teacher should be walking around from group to group listening intently and writing down the children's responses and

which questions they chose to discuss to help the teacher assess their understanding of the text at deeper levels, as well as to assess how well they are working in groups regarding their oral language skills and listening skills. After the time is up we will come back into the circle together and discuss some of their findings. Be ready to have a question and answer prepared in case the students are shy and unwilling to share theirs.

Related/Extension Activity:

Write a response to this book by answering one of the following questions.

“What ideas, information, and emotions was the author trying to convey to the readers?”

“Would you have taught Alec to read? Why or why not?”

“If you were Alec, would you have chosen to read or join the soldiers in the Civil War? Why or why not?”

OR

Draw a picture as a response to one of these questions. Be sure to write a brief explanation of what the picture is saying to the reader.

This will help the students look at the bigger ideas and themes in the narrative by giving them the opportunity to enter the story through another’s point of view. Collecting these writing responses or drawings is also a great way for the teacher to assess if the students were able to learn anything new from the narrative.

Common Core Standards:

Reading Literature:

- 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.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).

Reading Informational Text:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1 Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2 Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.3 Explain events, procedures, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text, including what happened and why, based on specific information in the text.

Writing:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1 Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4.1b Provide reasons that are supported by facts and details.

Speaking and Listening:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 4 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1b Follow agreed-upon rules for discussions and carry out assigned roles.
 - CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.4.1c Pose and respond to specific questions to clarify or follow up on information, and make comments that contribute to the discussion and link to the remarks of others.

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