



Feb. 9, 2012

Department: The Teacher's Corner



The Wonder Years (A Vicarious Experience)

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It started and ended with a kiss. In between, more than 100 episodes of "The Wonder Years" aired on ABC from 1988 to 1993. It still remains high on my list of favorites. My friends and I were about the same age as the main characters and the show had a big impact on us as we moved through our teenage years. As I reflect on the show, I realize that we learned so much from the trials and tribulations of Kevin, Winnie, Paul, and their extended families and friends. Just think of the effect it could have on the young students encountered in today's classrooms.

For the past 13 years as a middle school educator, I have had many conversations with a colleague of mine, Anne Ejnes, on the topic of using The Wonder Years television show as a basis for social and emotional small-group discussions. In that time I have presented and worked with the technique known as Cinematherapy, a medium that allows the viewers of a film to vicariously experience situations and resolutions in a secure, safe way. I summarize the process as simply, "seeing yourself in someone else." I should also note that the use of Cinematherapy was featured in a recent article in NAGC's [*Parenting for High Potential*](#) magazine.

I was first made aware of the method by reading a paper entitled [Fostering the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children Through the Guided Viewing Of Film](#) by Thomas Hébert and Kristie Speirs Neumeister. It changed my perspective on young adolescents greatly and I recommend you

read it. You can access the PowerPoint of my presentation, "[Cinematherapy and the Implications for Social and Emotional Development](#)," which focus on two young-adult films.

Until recently, *The Wonder Years* was not available on DVD, Video, syndication, or the Internet. Just last month, Netflix began offering the entire series of the show through its streaming service. It is clear that each 30-minute episode could be used as a starting point for a host of discussions and activities. I invite you to collaborate in the development of an episode guide that could be used with students. Here's how:

- Visit Netflix and search for *The Wonder Years*. You can scroll through and read a synopsis of each episode or [visit an episode list online](#).
- Choose a specific episode to watch and list the title and episode number.
- Watch the episode once through to get a feel for the theme, perhaps making note of any specific lines or dialogue.
- Watch the episode again and be ready to list any discussion questions you might ask of a group of your students. (you will find examples in my PowerPoint) I have found it helpful to watch the episode and pause it when I find a line or section of dialogue that I can use as a prompt for a larger discussion. It is a good idea to mix specific questions about the characters first and then have the students relate it to their own experience. Organizing them by subject matter and/or theme helps greatly.
- Develop and write a list of at least four activities. Here are some of my favorite go-to activities.
 - Write four journal entries as a character from the episode. Pick one main event to start from.
 - Write a monologue expressing the feelings of one of the characters.
 - Paint a picture that illustrates the feeling of one of the characters.
 - You and a partner are to create and act out a scene involving two of the main characters.
 - Find a popular song or poem that relates to each of the main characters. Provide the lyrics and explain why you chose it. Or, write your own.
 - Find photographs in magazines or the newspaper (or online) that you think one of the main characters might take, and arrange

them in an album with captions. You can also take your own photos and use them as well.

Send your "guide" to Jeff Danielian at danielian@nagc.org. Be sure to include your name, contact information, and The Wonder Years in the subject line. I'm looking forward to your great ideas.