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### Finding Belonging Through the Cultivation of a Chosen Family

#### Rationale:

The topic of finding community and belonging outside of one's family, whether out of having no other option or out of natural desire, is one that needs to be highlighted to students who are still developing the concept of what community means to them and the role it plays in their lives. Throughout literature, the topic of relationships prevails, whether as the focus of the text or as a supplementary tool. With that, literature showcases relationships beyond familial ones that fill the hole that not having a connection with family can leave. Specifically, the concept that a chosen family can be all that one needs in life in order to combat isolation and hardship is a crucial message for students to hear because as seen through literature, such a bond has the power to save whether in a literal sense or metaphorical sense.

Through utilizing the canonical text, *The Outsiders*, by S.E. Hinton, I aim to show students that if they do not have a positive relationship with their family or do not truly have a family, there are lifesaving and fulfilling qualities in finding community with others who become their chosen family although they are not related. Sometimes, when family members fail their own children, it is friendships that rise to the level of a family member that can enrich the life of an individual and even save their life through giving them the vital knowledge that there is someone who cares for them and sees them. As Shanon Coggins and Annabelle Small put it in their YA Wednesday article, "*The Outsiders* is a novel that has been used in the classroom for decades, with hard-hitting concepts such as (...) the reimagined family connection" (Coggins and Small). This "reimagined family connection" is what gets the Greasers through life as they lean on each other, help each other, defend each other, and provide unwavering support and

understanding of each other. In other words, their lives would not contain the enrichment that encourages them to keep going in life if they did not have each other as a chosen family.

There are many students who I will come into contact with who have tumultuous or nonexistent relationships with their families. While I personally believe that family is one of the most important aspects of life, not every student holds the same belief due to instances, amongst others, like not receiving reciprocated love from their family, being abused or neglected by their family, or not being accepted by their family. Not every student will have the luxury of having a loving family, so they will have no choice but to find support and community through friendships. There may be students who feel that they don't fit in with their peers who tell them stories about how great their mom is or how much fun they had with their sibling. They may also feel in comparison that they are less than or missing something in their life since it seems that "everyone" has a proper family but them. My goal is to demonstrate to students that there is hope in the fact that they can find family and community through friendships that can act as a strong force that propels them through life instead of feeling unseen and unsupported.

I desire for students who feel that they don't belong due to not feeling a part of their family to feel seen through the characters' experience of going through life with their chosen family and know that community can provide a sense of true belonging. Texts like these show students that there is someone out there who is going through a similar struggle, and banding together might just be the only thing that will get them through a tough time or a major hurdle in life. There is something in this topic for every student. For instance, the student who has a healthy relationship with their family members will be able to see the importance of forming community through friendships. The student who goes through life alone might just be inspired to get out of their comfort zone and form connections that allow them to acquire a newfound

enrichment in life and visibility amongst others. In a world where people can find escape through a screen, it is important to highlight the necessity of building community and creating a symbiotic support system.

### Into the Text:

In order to get the students interested in the topic of chosen family and the ability to find identity through this group, I will play them the song “Till Forever Falls Apart” by Ashe and FINNEAS. This song portrays the idea of being able to suddenly die happy knowing that a loving friendship enriched the individual’s life. I would project the song lyrics while students are listening to the song so that they can focus more on the lyrics rather than the instrumental. The reason behind selecting this song is that it demonstrates the gravity of love that one can have specifically for a friend. This love can amount to the love someone might hold for their family member or significant other.

### **Lyrics:**

Out on our own  
Dreaming in a world that we both know  
Is out of our control  
But if shit hits the fan we're not alone  
'Cause you've got me and you know  
That I've got you and I know  
If the tide takes California  
I'm so glad I got to hold ya  
And if the sky falls from heaven above  
Oh, I know I had the best time falling into love  
We've been living on a fault line

And for a while, you were all mine  
 I've spent a lifetime giving you my heart  
 I swear that I'll be yours forever  
 'Til forever falls apart  
 'Til forever falls apart  
 So this is it, that's how it ends  
 I guess there's nothing more romantic than dying with your friends  
 And I'm not sorry for myself  
 I wouldn't wanna spend a minute loving anybody else

<https://genius.com/Ashe-and-finneas-till-forever-falls-apart-lyrics>

Moreover, this song is fitting with the concept that *The Outsiders* depicts of one's chosen family being a motivation to live. For example, the character Johnny who has parents who do not show him love or care leans on Ponyboy and the rest of their friend group as he would his own family. The fact that his last words were to Ponyboy telling him to "stay gold" reveals the impact that Ponyboy had on his life (Hinton 148). This impact was so strong that the last thing he thinks about before dying is making sure to tell his friend to not lose his quality of being "golden"—the very quality that enables Johnny to feel a sense of belonging and purpose. He specifically chooses Ponyboy to tell his last words to, which also reveals the degree of importance that Johnny held him at. With that being said, the song connects with the text through depicting an alternate scene of what it looks like for a label-defying friendship to be the most notable and impactful part of someone's life, as exemplified through the lyric "If the tide takes California / I'm so glad I got to hold ya."

I would have the students explore this idea by first taking a poll and asking them to write down what kind of relationship they think is being portrayed in the song. Of course, those who notice the mention of friends through the lyric, "I guess there's nothing more romantic than

dying with your friends,” will guess correctly. However, the word friends is only mentioned once, so I think the poll will generate some mixed results. I would then reveal the results and ask the class why they voted one way or another and to cite a lyric that gave them this impression. These mixed results will then enable me to point out that having a genuine friendship when one would otherwise be alone in the world has the power to become someone’s most valued part of life.

Also, I would ask the students who thought that certain lyrics portrayed a romantic relationship rather than a friendship to explain why they landed at this conclusion. I would then work through the metaphors used in the song that could be interpreted either way and demonstrate that it could easily be about friendship. For instance, I would explain that “I’m so glad I got to hold ya” could be meant in a metaphorical way rather than a literal way of physically holding the person. In this case, holding the individual who is one’s friend would mean keeping them in one’s life.

### Through the Text:

In an effort to get the students to focus on the power of the role of chosen family in the lives of the characters in *The Outsiders*, I would have them “map out” instances where Ponyboy acted as Johnny’s chosen family in a vital way. This map would include “stops” on the map of Johnny’s life until he sadly passes away. His death would be the last stop as I would ask that each group include a part of this scene as the last stop on their map. Specifically, I would split the students into groups of four and have them locate quotes that answer the prompt. Each group would receive a large, almost poster size, paper and four sticky notes. Half of the groups would be responsible for finding words that demonstrate the power of chosen family and the other half

would locate events that demonstrate the same idea. They will write the quotes on the sticky notes and place them in chronological order on their large paper. I would then have each group share out with the provision of why they chose the quotes they did and a brief analysis of each. The idea behind mapping out Ponyboy's role as Johnny's chosen family is to reveal how having a presence like Ponyboy in his life got him through life, made him feel seen and less alone, and ultimately provided him with someone he could live for.

In addition, as the students do their at home reading of the novel, I would ask them to keep a log, whether physical or digital, of quotes or instances where the Greasers made each other's lives feel more golden in contrast to their bleak circumstances. Of course, calling these instances golden moments stems from the famous quote from the novel, "stay gold, Ponyboy" (Hinton 148). The purpose of logging such moments is to first, encourage the student to allow the words of the text to resonate with them and for them to connect with the text. Second, the purpose is to encourage the students to see on their own how the Greasers' chosen family that they found amongst themselves allowed them to move through life in solidarity and with a support system. Without this familial-like support system around them, it is not hard to picture what would happen as an example, a drastic one at that, is provided at the end of the novel when Dally ultimately gives up living after not feeling motivated to go on in life after beloved Johnny's death. At the end of the unit, I will open up a discussion based on the quotes that the students choose. These quotes will then be written on a decorative looking poster and hung in the class so that even when the unit is over, the students can be reminded of the special nature of a chosen family as exemplified through *The Outsiders*.

One of the writing pieces for the unit would be to answer one of the following prompts:

- How have you been positively impacted by people who you would consider to be your chosen family? How is this similar or different to the way in which the Greasers functioned as chosen family for one another?
- Which of the qualities of the Greasers' cultivated chosen family would you seek in your own chosen family, whether you have one or not? Why?
- Select an instance in poetry or media, whether it be a song, film or television scene, or lines from a poem in which the idea of a chosen family resonates with you. In your mind, why do you consider this to be an ideal portrayal of chosen family? How does it relate or differ from the chosen family amongst the Greasers?

These prompts will allow the student to reflect on their own lives and ideas of a chosen family in light of the text. It is important that the students draw their own connections to the concept so that they can note the bigger picture/reality of the situation of only having a chosen family.

#### Beyond the Text:

1. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena: As the main character Miguel navigates trauma and the consequence of his unintended actions, he feels utterly alone and has trouble finding the point in forming connections with the other boys in the group home. As time passes, he forms unbreakable bonds with two of his group home housemates. These bonds change his perspective on life and allow him to forgive himself and work through the trauma he has carried with him for a while.
2. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher: This novel features the creation of a chosen family through the example of a group of boys coming together to form a swim team. They find

that the value of the team extends beyond success in the sport as they form a community with one another and find their place of belonging.

3. *I'll Give You the Sun* by Janey Nelson: In this novel, the main characters each form bonds with others that reach the level of chosen family. Noah finds himself through his close friendship with a boy who moves in across the street while Jude finds belonging in the art community through the friendship she creates with her sculpture mentor. Although she is a teenager and her mentor is an older man, there is a bond that forms that unexpectedly enriches both of their lives.
4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* by J.K. Rowling: The main character, Harry Potter, does not have parents since they passed away when he was a baby. Although he lives with his aunt, uncle, and cousin, they do not provide him with the love and support that a family should. Instead, he finds a sense of belonging amongst his fellow wizard friends, Hermione and Ron. Harry's consideration of them as his chosen family is revealed through the way that he sacrifices himself for them.
5. *Notes From the Midnight Driver* by Jordan Sonnenblick: In this novel, the main character unexpectedly finds his chosen family through his friendship with an old man who he has to take care of. The old man provides him with the feeling of family that he needs while his own family is falling apart.



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