

Josephine Teo Chen, Malaysia

'**Dan's Secret Weapon**' by Therese Rea
Illustrations by Gary Rees (1996)

Language: High proficiency level

Illustration/text: There are good, clear, authentic, coloured pictures on every page; sometimes a double spread; Text is in fairly large print

Profile of students to use the text with: Upper primary school of advanced English proficiency

Themes

- The seemingly disadvantaged or inferior can also win as long as there is determination and courage
- It doesn't pay to have an attitude/ to look down on others
- The value of friendship

Main reasons for selection: It is a text which young children can identify with because in school, conflicts among individuals occur and this text can motivate and teach children how to deal with such conflicts. The main character is given a nickname. The book is full of language learning possibilities. Not only can language patterns be learnt, the children can retell the story and write perhaps their ending. All the four skills would be practised while exploring the text.

Role of the illustrations in the book:

Significant features:

- The children in the pictures look exactly like real children and are of different races.
- The key character is chubby with freckles- a very typical boy in school.
- Settings are common- the school, the home, the bus, the park

Function:

- They help the readers to visualize the context, situation and the characters so that they can better understand the story.
- They provide a change from just reading print.
- They provide a form of stimulus to generate discussion.

Teaching Strategies/ techniques:

- **The book cover**

Each child is asked to predict what the book is about from looking at the cover. They are told to use the title and the picture as a guide. They can write their predictions on pieces of paper. Some discussion could be held on the title. What is Dan's secret weapon?

The children can also be asked to look at the back cover.

A discussion based on the children's responses

- **Reading the book aloud**

Teacher reads the book aloud and shows the children the pictures as she reads.

The children check their predictions to see how much of their predictions were correct. This could be done in pairs or small groups.

Teacher gets some responses from the children.

- **Using the 'Tell Me' model for book talk and read the book again**

Teacher use Aidan Chambers' model to enable children to think and talk about the book. Get the children to answer four basic book-talk questions:

Was there anything that you liked about the book? (LIKES)

Was there anything that you disliked? (DISLIKES)

Was there anything that puzzled you? (PUZZLES)

Were there any patterns – any connections – that you noticed? (PATTERNS)

The children share their responses. Teacher writes their answers on a grid on the board., eg.

LIKES	DISLIKES	PUZZLES	PATTERNS
When Dan won the race	When Jason refused to shake Dan's hand	How long did it take Dan to train?	Similar to the story of 'The Hare and the Tortoise'

Teacher discusses with children their responses and shares her own.
The children write their reflections on the book and illustrate their work.

- **Other activities**

List difficult vocabulary e.g. 'inwardly seething', 'scowled' 'pleaded'...

Plot the time line /events in the story

Talk about the relationships: between Dan and Jason; between Dan and Jolene, between Dan and the coach

Talk about Dan's secret weapon.

Did you expect Dan to win? Why did he win?

What do you think will happen between Dan and Jason in the future?

- **Drama techniques**

Hot seating: put a student on the hot seat as Dan and then Jason. Ask him questions e.g. Why did Jason bully him? Why did Dan fight back? This will get the children to better understand the main characters' emotions.

Tableau: The race just before the end showing Dan winning 'with a second to spare'.

Cross-curricular connections: Health / Fitness (both Mental and Physical) issues. Discuss Dan and how he trained for the race. Get children to list what they would do if they were Dan. Point out the thinner Dan after his training. Students can research on what it takes to train for a big race, e.g. types of food eaten, types of exercise...

Social load in the text:

Get children to think about the theme in the book. What is the social message? Get them to discuss the issue of bullying, how some students can be made to feel they are not as clever as others. They can write their views to be posted on a board for sharing. They can also illustrate their views.

How the book would facilitate the learning of English:

The story is mainly in the past tense. The children can be asked to write down all the verbs and note their past tense forms. There are also simple as well as compound and complex sentences using conjunctions such as but, although, because, while.... The children can identify these sentences and write similar sentences about themselves using these conjunctions. There are also dialogues with questions and answers. The children can practise using these questions and answers. They can form similar questions and answers. There are also plenty of adjectives and adverbs.