Literature Guide for Ezra Jack Keats'

Whistle for Willie

by Robin M. Huntley
Summary

One of many wonderful and beloved children's books by Ezra Jack Keats, *Whistle for Willie* is a simple story that perfectly captures the play-based learning that is essential to early childhood. The child engaging in such play is a character named Peter, a young boy who graces the pages of six of Keats' other stories as well. *Whistle for Willie* begins as Peter is exploring his neighborhood one afternoon, wishing desperately that he could whistle. Peter observes an older boy whistling to summon his pet dog, and longs to do the same – but he just can't seem to make his lips work properly. Throughout the rest of the story, Peter alternates between longing for the ability to whistle and engaging in creative free play using chalk, a mirror, and even an empty box that he finds on the street. Peter's play is unstructured and driven by impulse, and echoes the play that all children engage in during early childhood. Young readers can easily relate to both Peter's play and his desire to be just a little bit more grown up (and to prove this growth by whistling loud and clear!).

In addition to Keats' spot-on portrayal of childhood play and discovery, the book is important within the realm of children's literature because it features a black protagonist yet does not address the character's race – in other words, Peter is black, but the story is not about the fact that he is black. While this is common in modern children's literature, when *Whistle for Willie* was published in 1964, such stories were far less common. In fact, Keats' first story, the ever-popular *The Snowy Day*, also features Peter, and was at first met with criticism because it too featured a black protagonist without addressing the theme of race. While it is important for children to have access to literature that *does* allow them a critical look at race, it is equally as important for children to have access to literature that features characters of any race engaging in acts that are part of the human experience – and *Whistle for Willie* does exactly that.

Critical Thinking Questions

The questions listed are meant to be used to spark discussion amongst readers of *Whistle for
Willie. The questions can be asked both while the story is being read and after the story has been finished. In fact, readers can further their own understanding of the story by revisiting pages in the book while considering the questions below. Very young readers in particular can benefit greatly from reading the book twice – the first time for the story, and the second time to consider critical thinking questions. Intended for use with children ages 4-7, these questions are intended to help readers reflect on the story, create connections between the text and themselves, and use visual clues to deepen their understanding.

- What is Peter's neighborhood like? How can you tell?
- How old do you think Peter is? Why?
- Why does Peter want to whistle? Why do you think it is so difficult for him?
- How do you think Peter feels the first time that he tries to trick Willie from inside the carton?
- Does Peter do anything that you have done before?
- Why do you think Peter's mother play along when he pretends to be his father?
- How do you think Peter feels when he finally is able to whistle for Willie?
- How did you feel the first time you whistled? (Or mastered another similar skill?)

Mini-Lesson

Designed with preschool-aged readers in mind, this mini-lesson is designed to strengthen not just literacy skills, but readers' ability to question, investigate, and reason. Utilizing play as a means for learning, this lesson encourages readers to explore their own shadows in order to draw conclusions about how shadows work. Readers will engage their physical bodies greatly for this task, making it ideal for young readers who learn best in this way. Additionally, readers will engage in some informal learning about shadows and light, and their observations will become the foundation for further
learning about light energy.

Shadow Play

1. After reading Whistle for Wille, revisit the pages where he tries to run from and then jump over his own shadow, only to notice that whenever he lands, his shadow is stuck to him again. Ask readers if they have ever done anything like that before, and allow them to share some brief stories and observations.

2. Ask readers what they think they know about shadows. Make a list using words and pictures (if possible) that is large enough for all to see.

3. Tell readers that you're going to go outside to play for a little while, but that they are actually going to be scientists by investigating their own shadows! Encourage readers to learn as much as they can about their own shadows by testing, observing, and drawing conclusions – just like Peter does in the story. Ask readers to try to learn at least one new thing about their shadow.

4. Go outside and play! Engage with readers as they play, imitating some of their motions and sharing your own observations of your shadow aloud. If some readers struggle to find ways to test their shadow, make suggestions verbally or physically demonstrate some movements or activities that could make for interesting observations (spinning, crouching to the ground, leaning to one side, laying down, moving body parts, turning body, etc.).

5. Bring readers together (outside) and ask them what they've seen. Allow readers to share their observations verbally and by demonstrating the things that they did in order to make such observations.

Extension Activities

Each of the following activity suggestions are designed to support readers in not only deepening their understanding of this story, but in strengthening their ability to relate to characters and to
recognize connections between their own experiences and the stories that they read. Additionally, some extension activities encourage creativity and play-based learning, and offer opportunities for creative free play. Loosely written so as to allow for adaptability, the activities have been designed with readers ages 4-7 in mind.

A Biography of Peter

This activity will require reading at least two of Keats' other stories about Peter (complete list below). After reading three books about Peter (Whistle for Willie and two others), discuss with readers what they know about Peter. It could be useful to make a list on a large piece of paper, but young readers may not be literate enough to benefit from a list yet. Regardless, discuss everything that you know about Peter – where he lives, what he looks like, what his family is like, how he acts, what he enjoys, etc. Then, ask readers to write a biography about Peter, keeping in mind that a biography is not a story but a piece of writing that teaches readers all about a person. Readers can write very simple sentences and illustrate them, combining their literacy skills with their ability to share their understandings visually.

More books about Peter:

- The Snowy Day
- Peter's Chair
- Goggles!
- A Letter to Amy
- Hi, Cat!
- Pet Show!

What Would You Do With a Box?
In the beginning of the story, Peter finds a crate on the sidewalk. The illustrations make the crate look like it is either a large cardboard box or a wooden box, such as the kind that hold apples at an orchard. Peter uses the box to hide from Willie while he tries to whistle. Ask readers what they would do with a box if they happened upon one while exploring their neighborhood. Then, offer a collection of cardboard boxes of varied sizes and let readers exercise their own creativity with them!

*Peter's Neighborhood*

Keats’ beautifully collaged illustrations provide readers with a colorful and exciting picture of Peter's neighborhood. Readers learn that his neighborhood has traffic lights, sidewalks, bright murals, neighbors, pets, and lots of bricks. Ask readers to share what they know about Peter's neighborhood after reading the story, then re-visit the pages to examine the illustrations a second time. Then, ask readers to draw pictures or maps of Peter's neighborhood, connecting the many things that they've taken note of from looking at the story's illustrations.

*Motor Skill/Sensory Walk*

Many of the types of play that Peter engages in throughout the story activate not only his mind and his senses but his entire physical body. Activities like spinning, jumping, walking along cracks, drawing with chalk, and making faces connect a creative mind and a physical body to make for fun and interesting play that promotes the development of motor skills and provides new sensory input. After discussing the many “silly” things that Peter does while he walks around his neighborhood, ask readers to share (verbally or by demonstrating) some of the silly, fun, and safe things that they can do with their own bodies while they walk. Then, take readers on a follow-the-leader walk, where they take turns leading the group through a series of different silly and fun movements. Challenge readers to use the landscape around them creatively, just as Peter utilizes things like sidewalk cracks and shadows to inspire his movements.
Childhood Skill Milestones

Learning to whistle is a small milestone for many children, as are other small skills like winking, standing or hopping on one foot, and snapping or crossing fingers. Discuss these types of small skills with readers, and ask them to share other small skills that they can do (this could get very silly – which is great!). Then, discuss with readers whether they've ever encountered a challenge like Peter's – wanting to learn a new skill, but not being able to do it yet. Facilitate discussion about learning new small skills and allow readers to share their feelings surrounding the practice and acquisition of these skills.