

## *A Guide to Teaching Paul Fleischman's*

# SEEDFOLKS

### THEMES

Celebrating Differences  
 Community  
 Friendship  
 Meeting Challenges  
 Turning Points  
 Twentieth-Century America  
 Urban Life

### READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

Compare and Contrast  
 Identify Problems and Solutions  
 Identify Steps in a Process  
 Recognize Point of View

In *Seedfolks*, Newbery Medal winner Paul Fleischman creates an urban garden that brings a new sense of hope and community to a bleak Cleveland neighborhood. *Seedfolks* consists of a series of first-person vignettes, each told by a different character. As perspectives, dispositions, and backgrounds shift with the narratives, the reader comes to understand the personal reasons that bring these thirteen very different individuals one by one to a vacant lot to plant and nourish seeds. Despite prejudices, hesitations, and language differences, the estranged neighbors begin to find ways of overlooking these barriers to develop new relationships with each other. Before long the multiethnic seedfolks have developed a sense of pride and fellowship. The distinct voices of each character show the reader the vast differences and similarities that can exist simultaneously among diverse people, and how these differences can actually help those people form a community as vibrant and rich as the garden they have created.

## READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

### Before Reading

Although the characters in *Seedfolks* all live in the same neighborhood, most of them never bothered to introduce themselves to each other until they started seeing each other at the garden. Have students think about their own neighborhoods. What does it mean to be neighbors? What are their relationships with their neighbors? What are some things that could potentially turn a neighborhood into a community? Do they think that their neighbors would welcome an opportunity to get to know each other better?



### Challenging Issues

*Seedfolks* deals with certain issues that might be difficult for some students to discuss in the classroom, such as teen pregnancy and drugs. Keeping the focus on the novel's characters and their social context rather than on students' personal experiences can make it easier for the class to discuss these issues.

When discussing Maricela, the character introduced on page 52, students should recognize that she is angry with herself for the situation she has gotten herself into. On page 5, be sure students recognize that "Negro" was the name used for African Americans during the time period (the Depression) being discussed.

### Compare and Contrast

Each character in the book has distinct backgrounds and reasons for coming to the garden. Select five characters from the book. For each character consider the following: What is the character's

ethnicity? What plant did the character choose to grow, and why? What brings this character to the garden? What does the character gain from participating in the garden? Address these questions in the form of a chart, with the characters' names down the side and the questions across the top. Fill in the chart with the class as you read.



### Identify Problems and Solutions

In *Seedfolks*, the gardeners encounter the problem of getting water to their plants. How did the group work together to solve this problem? What other problems come up throughout the book, and how are they dealt with? What problems do you think the garden might face in the future?

### Identify Steps in a Process

In the course of the book the small garden turns estranged neighbors into a community. As students read, have them identify the steps that lead to this unexpected outcome. Make a poster-size diagram of this process, and update it as you read.

### Recognize Point of View

Ask students to think about how the author gave each of his characters a distinct voice. Describe some of the ways Fleischman distinguishes the characters by how they tell their stories. How does the way in which characters present their stories help convey their personalities to the reader? Recall an example of when the same event is described by two different characters. How do their depictions differ? What factors may have contributed to the characters' different perspectives?

## SHARING THE BOOK

### Questions for Group Discussion

◆ How does the garden itself become a metaphor for what happens among its members?

◆ Kim starts the garden without even realizing it. How does she do this? What are her reasons for planting lima bean seeds?



◆ What does Ana assume about Kim when she sees her burying her seeds? How does she feel when she realizes her error?

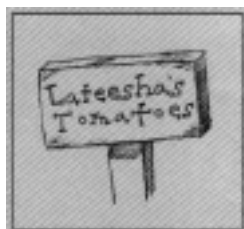
◆ On page 13 Gonzalo says, “The older you are, the younger you get when you move to the United States.” What does he mean by this?

◆ How does Leona affect the course of the narrative? How does she use the garbage from the lot to her advantage?

◆ List some of the problems that the gardeners encounter. How do they help each other deal with these obstacles?

◆ Describe Sae Young’s traumatic experiences in America. How does the garden help her overcome them?

◆ Curtis tries to change his ways as he woos Lateesha with the tomatoes. What does he do differently? What is he trying to show Lateesha about his values and principles?



◆ In the course of the novel a homeless young man named Royce comes to live in the garden. Describe how the gardeners’ attitudes toward Royce change. How do they help Royce and how does he help them in return?

◆ Why does Penny think working in the garden will be good for Maricela? How does it get Maricela to think differently?

◆ What does Sam observe about how the garden is set up? How does he feel about this?

◆ Sam likes to spend his time “sewing up the rips in the neighborhood.” What are some of the ways he does this in the garden? What are some of the things he does that many other people never bother with? Why do you think this approach helps him get through to people?



◆ On page 59 Amir says that “the garden’s greatest benefit, I feel, was not relief to the eyes, but to make the eyes see our neighbors.” What does he mean? Give some examples.

◆ What does Florence mean by the word *Seedfolks*? Why do you think the author chose this title for the book?

◆ What are some of the stereotypes Amir has about Polish people, and how does his attitude change when he meets one? What does this demonstrate about passing judgment?

◆ What are some of the ways in which the characters work around language barriers to communicate?

# ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

## Language Arts

Have students take the role of a “seedfolk” and write their own vignette to add to this collection. Just as Fleischman gives each of his characters a distinct background, voice, and set of problems, have students develop such factors in their own stories. Make copies of the class’s stories, collate them, and distribute to the class as a book entitled *[Your Name]’s Seedfolks*.

Select an event from *Seedfolks* and have students write about it as one of the characters featured in the book. To prepare, have a group discussion about the different characteristics of the characters and the ways in which they tell their stories.

Despite differences on the outside, all of the characters in *Seedfolks* have similarities as well. Have students select any two of the characters and do a Venn diagram comparing their lives. Take into account personality traits, background information, interests, problems, and needs.

## Social Studies

The characters in *Seedfolks* come from a variety of different countries. Have students locate these places on a map. Have small groups of students choose a character and research the history and economy of that character’s country of origin. Then have each group prepare a report on that country, focusing on the factors that may have led people to emigrate to the United States.

*Seedfolks* takes place in a poor section of Cleveland, Ohio with a transient population. As Ana says on page 5, “you stay until you’ve got enough money to leave.” Creating the garden, however, not only brings beauty to the neighborhood but also a sense of pride and community. Using research and their imaginations, have students think about other ways to boost morale and pride in neighborhoods. Have them share these ideas in posters with the class.

As a class, adopt an area in your neighborhood to fix up. If it’s not possible to plant a garden in the space,

refer to the morale-boosting activities that students came up with and make your adopted space something for the neighborhood to be proud of.

## Science

Maricela is instructed to grow plants in the garden to learn how it feels to take care of something living. Have students grow their own lima bean seeds. Have them keep a journal of the plants’ progress and their responsibilities in taking care of them. Lima beans develop quickly, so have students chart the beans’ growth each day. Monitor progress and growth, and compare results. If a plant doesn’t make it, review journals and try to figure out why. At the end of the project have the students summarize what they did and how they dealt with unexpected complications. Periodically, have students discuss their progress. This is a good opportunity for classmates to help each other solve problems or complications that arise with plant growth.

## Art

Have each student design a jacket for the book. Before they start, brainstorm with the class on things to consider in designing a book jacket, such as: making it eye-catching, finding creative ways to convey what the book is about, and deciding who this jacket should appeal to. Hang the book jackets around the room.

## Drama

Choose a volunteer to select a character from the book and impersonate that character. Have the student come to the front of the room, in character, and answer questions posed by other classmates. Repeat for other characters with other volunteers. If you have more volunteers than characters, consider some of the characters that do not narrate, such as Lateesha, Royce, or Virgil’s father. Prepare students for the activity the day before so that they will have some time to think up questions for the various characters.