Dear Educator,

I wrote the first Nikki and Deja book in response to the dearth of early readers for African American children. I was teaching second grade in Oakland, California, and set out to add to my classroom library books that my students would find engaging and reflective of their own everyday lives: their wants, their hopes, their squabbles, their anxieties . . . I wasn’t looking for books that necessarily included poverty or violence, or even books based on historical events. I wanted books that reflected the same emotional range that is a part of every child’s life—but with a cultural tweak, so to speak. There were very few. So I decided to write one.

In this series I purposely repeat the central theme of friendship with all its accessible and universal complexities. I always wanted the characters in this series to ultimately appeal to all children. The classroom, a world in itself, is central to each book as well, just as it is central in the lives of almost all children. As a former teacher, I have been happy to discover a number of possibilities for enrichment activities that support core language arts standards within this series. As educators we know that skills have a better chance of being retained when they are reinforced with meaningful activities.

I hope you and your students enjoy the books!

Sincerely,

Karen English

Karen English, author of the Nikki and Deja series, writes from her home in Los Angeles, California. She is a former elementary school teacher and the mother of four. She is currently working on a companion series for boys, which involves two characters (best friends, of course) from Nikki and Deja’s world.
Enrichment Activities Supporting Core Curriculum Standards

1. Core standard: Writing narratives to develop real or imagined experiences using descriptive details and clear event sequences.

Journal Entry

In the series, the children in Ms. Shelby’s third grade class at Carver Elementary begin each day writing in their morning journals. For some it’s a challenging task; for Nikki, who has so much to write about, her hand can barely keep up. It’s a wonderful way to start the day.

Teachers can have their students select one of the Nikki and Deja minor characters, imagine that he or she is that character, and write an imaginative journal entry. Have students share their “journal entries.”

Materials needed: paper; pencils

What Happens Next?

When a book is a page-turner, it’s difficult to come to the end. What if your students had the power to extend the book beyond “The End”? What if they could write just a bit more, maybe an ending they would prefer? After reading one of the books in the series as an “after lunch” read-aloud, let the students write about what they would like to see happen after the end of the book. For example, students could write two or three paragraphs about what they imagine might happen the day after the wedding in Nikki and Deja: Wedding Drama or what might happen during the next school day after the election in Nikki and Deja: Election Madness, etc. They could then share what they’ve written with their classmates.

Materials needed: paper; pencils

2. Core standard: Map skills that lead to understanding that maps and diagrams serve as representations of places, physical features, and objects. Cardinal directions are used to locate places and physical features. Symbols represent places and can be used to locate geographic features and physical characteristics.

Mapping the Neighborhood

Ms. Shelby announces that map presentations will begin after lunch during Social Studies. “Who wants to go first?” she asks in an encouraging tone, sounding like a cheerleader. Deja decides to go first. Nikki holds the map and Deja does all the talking. “Nikki and I live next door to each other,” Deja says. Then she proceeds to point out Vianda’s house across the street, and Keyon Denver’s house next door, and Auntie Dee’s friend Phoebe’s house, and Miss Ida’s house and Mr. D’s store on the corner of Maynard Street, where she and Nikki buy their hot chips.

This activity can be introduced with a read-aloud of chapter 2 in Nikki and Deja: Birthday Blues, “Mapping the Neighborhood,” and chapter 4 of the same book, “The Map of Many Clever Features.” In groups of four, students can construct their own imaginary maps that incorporate real features of their neighborhoods, as well as imaginary features. Maps must include a compass rose and a map key. The group will need to select a spokesperson to share the map with the class.

Materials needed: markers; colored pencils; rulers; pencils; 14” x 11” sheets of white paper

3. Core standard: Creative writing, using dialogue and descriptions of actions, thoughts, and feelings to develop experiences and events or show the response of characters to situations.

Skit Writing

There’s always a situation brewing in the lives of Nikki and Deja, whether it’s Deja starting a drill team club and Nikki discovering she has no rhythm or Deja having to stay with an elderly neighbor while Deja’s aunt goes out of town on a business trip. It could be getting in trouble for passing out candy at school or sneaking into a classmate’s backyard to see if that classmate really does have a trampoline and a tetherball built into the ground. Life is full of situations.

After passing out copies of a Readers’ Theater script to the students and discussing its format, have students break up into groups of three. Have them select characters and situations from a “Character Box” and a “Situation Box.” Within the selected framework, the group will write a two-page skit that will be in accordance with the personalities of the characters selected. The class should be given three class periods (over three days) to complete the writing and the rehearsal of their skits. Then the skits can be performed in front of the class.
Materials needed: copies of a skit from Readers’ Theater (or a teacher-produced skit); paper; pencils; Character Box (with the names of characters from the series written on index cards); Situation Box (with situations written on index cards)


Venn Diagram

Nikki and Deja are very different. Nikki lives with her mother and father, but Deja lives with her Auntie Dee. Deja wants to be a decorator when she grows up, and Nikki wants to be a journalist. They do, however, have some things in common. They’re both in the third grade. They both love their pretty teacher, Ms. Shelby. Discuss the use of a Venn diagram. Using the diagram, have students compare and contrast the personalities of Nikki and Deja—listing how they are different and how they are the same. Similar characteristics should be listed in the common area of the two circles. Contrasting characteristics should be listed in the areas that don’t share the common space.

Materials needed: Venn diagram worksheets

5. Core standard: Making inferences and drawing conclusions about events and characters; analyzing motives of characters.

The Other Side

In this activity, students can write “the other side” of the story from the point of view of a minor character in any given situation from the books. For example, Antonia is a recurring character who, in Nikki and Deja: Birthday Blues, decides to have a “Just Because” party on the same day that Deja is having her birthday party. In Nikki and Deja: The Newsy News Newsletter, Richard, a classmate, puts his name on another student’s classwork assignment. Unable to go out for recess until he completes the morning assignment, he pilfers a paper out of the classwork basket, erases the name, and writes his own name in its place. Nikki, in Nikki and Deja: Election Madness, isn’t exactly enthusiastic about Deja’s campaign to be elected student body president at Carver Elementary School.

Students can write about any one of the above situations from the point of view of Antonia, Richard, or Nikki; or they can choose another example of a character’s “poor” or puzzling behavior and write about it from that character’s point of view, including the character’s justification or motives. Then they can share what they’ve written.

6. Core standard: Writing informative texts to examine a topic and convey ideas and information clearly.

Newsletter Project

So much happens on Fulton Street. So much happens in Room 10 at Carver Elementary School. One day after witnessing a skateboard accident across the street from her house, Nikki exclaims, “We need a newspaper! A Fulton Street newspaper that tells all the stuff that happens on our street!”

In groups of five, students will create a four-page newsletter. This activity can be introduced by reading aloud chapters 2 and 3 of Nikki and Deja: The Newsy News Newsletter. The newsletter must include an opinion piece that addresses one of the following topics: no homework on Fridays; no dress code; the need for either longer or shorter school days. It must also include three different cartoon strips, three fictitious news items, a fictitious profile piece, and an ad page. Each student of the group will be assigned one of the above tasks. There will be a two-week time limit. The layout will be a cooperative effort. (Teachers should create an example to show to the class so students will know what’s expected.)

The name of the newsletter, as well as the date, should be on the first page. The first page should also include the news items. Page two can be the opinion page; page three should include at least three fictitious advertisements. The last page, the “funnies,” should have three cartoon strips inspired by neighborhood and school events.

Students will be given a rubric that tells how their group project will be scored. Students should also be given a suggested work schedule that divides their individual tasks into manageable segments over the two-week period. Groups will present their newsletters to the rest of the class.

Materials needed: a rubric and task schedule for each student; a sheet of 14” x 11” inch paper folded in half.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggested Newsletter Project Rubric (Group Score)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked well with the group; was exceptionally cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following Directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neatness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar, Usage, Spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>