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# Literacy & Art: The Story behind the Quilt

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This unit is intended to expose second through fourth graders to the many ways quilts were used to chronicle the history and experiences of African slaves and African-Americans in America. It presents the students with a brief synopsis of the rich, cultural background of Africans and tells of the degrading effects of slavery. It tells of the struggles of African-Americans in America and the reasons for the development of a hidden code of communications. It discusses briefly how quilts were used to navigate the Underground Railroad and introduces two African-American story tellers and quilt makers: Harriet Powers and Faith Ringgold. It provides the children with the opportunity to examine their story quilts and finally, to tell their own story through quilting. The activities found in this unit are integrated across the curriculum but focus mainly on literacy in art. These activities are intended to 1. encourage students to read 2. increase vocabulary, 3. provide students with a reason to write, and 5.provide an outlet for creative expression. These topics were chosen because I felt that children of African descent in America have been denied the knowledge of the country their ancestors are from. They have therefore, lost the sense of direction that the knowledge of past experiences brings. This lack of understanding has not only bred contempt and ridicule of the continent of Africa and the African people but is a major factor in the lack of importance these children place on the educational experience. The need for a deeper understanding of the African people and the African-American in America experience is evident in the third graders I teach. These children have little to no knowledge of the depth of the struggle and accomplishments of past generations. They have only a superficial knowledge of the sacrifices made to achieve and retain the current status of African-Americans. Education, the right to vote, freedom of speech, etc. are looked upon by many of these students as incidentals that have no value in their lives. One of my colleagues, who is Caucasian, expressed her shock at the callous remarks made by my third graders after watching a video during a music class that featured Africans and African-Americans dressed in African garb. She remarked that the names the children used to describe the people in the video were derogatory and disgraceful. The joking and insensitive remarks made by these children convinced me of their lack of understanding and appreciation of that beautiful continent called Africa and its people. The educational system in the United States has propagated the belief that European values should be the yardstick by which all contributions to society are measured. It has been used to measure beauty, aesthetic value, intelligence, etc. These teachings created an atmosphere for the ridicule of those whose skin color and facial features differed from those of Europeans. These same teachings are responsible for maintaining the status quo. These negative attitudes of Europeans towards Blacks have been portrayed in visual art, movies, and literature. We do not have to go back very far in American history to find those debasing images of African Americans painted by artists and described by historians. Those stereotyped images of African-Americans were painted and described by some that America labeled as "fine" artists. Regardless of the role

in which African-Americans were displayed, servant, soldier or slap happy stereotype, it's plain to see the negative feelings most Americans had in regards to their Black citizens. These same sentiments were expressed both in the literature and film of early America. History books and children's literature in America were written and recorded by writers who perceived what was important based on their own experiences and prejudices. Some of the most inflammatory statements were published about people of other ethnic groups. This resulted in the biased recording of events, the degradation and ridicule of a people, and the almost total exclusion of people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds from the written page. It also led to the devaluation of their contributions to society. I remember hearing the tale and seeing the pictures of Little Black Sambo as a child and thinking it was quite funny. I didn't realize that these so-called tales were degrading my people and me. I remember some of the labels that were used in literature and film to describe African-Americans. I didn't understand that there is so much power in naming. There is power in naming! And when a label or name is coupled with a visual image, whether positively or negatively, it has the power to identify and define. Thus America negatively labeled its African-American citizens. Today, we are still trying to overcome the negative effects that those labels elicit in the mind. Consider the countless hours that African-American children spent being indoctrinated with the European-based standards of beauty. I recall looking at the "classic" movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* . We all remember how enraged the wicked stepmother becomes after looking into the mirror one day and asking, "Mirror, mirror on the Wall. Who is the fairest of them all?" The mirror responds, "Snow white is the fairest of them all." Both Snow White and the wicked stepmother exemplify the European-based standards of beauty. The stepmother had been the most beautiful or so the mirror said, until Snow White became of age and became a viable contender. Carrie Mae Weems, an African-American photographer, expresses her opposition to such standards and America's constant assault on the identity of African-American women in her photograph, *Mirror, Mirror* . In this photograph, a young African-American woman looks into the mirror and asks, "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, Who's the finest of them all?" The face of a white women appears in the mirror and the response comes back, "Snow White ... And Don't You Forget It!!!" These are the books and films from which African-American and other minority children have caught their first glimpse of themselves and their ancestors. African-American children peered into schoolbooks that denied their very existence. They've watched countless movies in which roles requiring minority casts were replaced by white counterparts and they've have been forced to study and learn lessons from books that ridiculed and degraded their ancestors or excluded them completely. These experiences are very much responsible for the attitudes that African-Americans have about each other and their African ancestors. These children have failed to be taught that Africa is a continent of diversity with numerous tribes of people who have their own cultures, languages and practices. They have failed to be taught that the Africans have always appreciated aesthetic beauty and that their influence is seen in many of the designs and fabrics so popular in today's society. It is important that children learn to appreciate their own culture and to accept themselves and their people as significant contributors to the society in which they live. They should never be taught that the values, customs, and beliefs of their people must be minimized or absorbed into the mainstream or else they cease to be of worth. Racial and cultural acceptance must be taught. In our diverse society children need to be taught to work and play with others diverse from themselves in a positive way. They need to know that the racial and cultural differences in people are not indicators of superiority or inferiority. They may indicate that each group has special gifts that others may or may not possess and that by developing the uniqueness of these gifts within their cultural group each group justifies its right to exist African American children need to see Africa and Africans in all their beauty. They need to know that their homeland is a beautiful place full of natural resources and beauty. They need to see the African as real people, living real lives not much different from their own. They need to know that African children go to school, play games, and write stories just as they do. When our children learn to appreciate their ancestors, then and only then, can the deep scars left by slavery and racism begin to

heal. African-Americans, as a whole, need to learn to love the land from which they came and to reflect the princely bearings of their ancestors. They need to know the beauty of the continent of Africa and be able to see that beauty in the faces of its people a beauty not defined by the standards of others but one that exists within its own right With such a background and understanding, then each child can begin to accept him or herself just as they are and not feel the need to ridicule or degrade those that they don't understand.

## Introducing the Unit

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**Africa: Before there was Slavery**

I plan to begin this unit with a brief look at Africa. Veronica Freeman Ellis authored the book, *Afro-Bets First Book about Africa* , which tells the story of the cultural diversity, rich history, and beauty of this continent. This book attempts to counteract the misunderstanding that many people have about this beautiful land and its people. By using this book, I will lead the children into a discussion of their knowledge of Africa and provide opportunities for them to evaluate or re-evaluate their opinion of this wonderful, extraordinary land.

*Background Information*

Africa is a land of beauty. This beauty is the heartbeat of Africa. It can be witnessed in its landscape, wildlife and jungles. It is evident that Africans also appreciate the beautiful. This beauty can be seen in the sun-baked homes on their angular streets to the intricately woven baskets. The rich fabrics of cotton and silk, the detailed designed of the kente cloths, and the embroidered hats and tie-dyed dresses all give witness to the beauty and grace of the African experience. The people enjoy the artistic expressions of Africa. Traditional art is used to reflect the ways of the community. Skilled artisans create beautiful objects that help the community to practice its rituals and religions. The history, philosophy, and traditions of the community are communicated from one generation to the next through oral history and its art. The kingdoms of Africa were once rich in natural resources and material goods. The Kings and Queens, who ruled the kingdoms of Africa, traded merchandise of gold, salt, iron, ivory, and other substances with people from the Arab world. These powerful kingdoms had highly developed civilizations. They created great works of art, developed a form of writing called hieroglyphics, and built wonderful buildings. Africa had universities and libraries long before their European counterparts. African standards were used to define beauty and the kingdoms prospered. The following lesson is designed to assess the children's background knowledge of Africa and gain insight into their initial feelings about the land and its people.

*Lesson Plan #1*

***Objective***

- To assess the children's background knowledge of Africa
- To provide information about Africa and its people

***Materials***

• Book, Afro-Bets First Book About Africa by Veronica Freeman Ellis
• Chart Paper
• Markers and Crayons

***Procedure***

• Due to the large amount of information contained in this book, I will present this book in parts over several days.
• Make a KWL chart by dividing a large sheet of chart paper into three columns. Label the first column, What I Know, the second column W(What I Want to Find Out, and the third column, What I Learned.

*(chart availaable in print form)*

• Assess the children's background knowledge of Africa and list this in the first column, What I Know.
• Establish a purpose for reading by asking the children what they would like to learn about Africa. Record these questions in the second column under the caption, What I Want to Learn.
• Read and discuss the book, Afro-Bets First Book about Africa with the children. Record what the children have learned in the final column.
• Post the chart in a visible area for future use.

**African Expression in Crafts & Textiles**

The love of art and design appears to be as natural for the African as the stunning surrounds in which they live. Nature is a wonderful teacher and provides many opportunities to witness the majesty of sunburst colors through its wildlife and scenery. Africans have treasured this beauty for years and have incorporated this love into their own lives. African proverbs and fables attribute their love for the beautiful to their closeness with nature. It is said that Africans believe that no one should live without beautiful things. However, nothing is created just for the sake of creation. African art is designed to be both aesthetically beautiful and beneficial to the people of the community. It still continues to play a significant role in the political, social, and religious affairs of the African people. Once considered to be a primitive people by their Western neighbors, Africans are now being recognized for their unique ability to create exquisitely detailed works of art. The artistic designs found in their work range from simple, uncomplicated forms and patterns to very complex, abstract designs. African art is just as diverse as the African people are. It can't be grouped into any

single classification or defined by any single term. The locale, ethnicity, and beliefs of the community it serves define the significance of the art. Like other types of African art, the patterns used in textile have specific meanings and purposes. The designs and weaving techniques used today were derived from their ancestors and still play an important role in African lifestyles. Africa has long been producing textiles as a means of preserving the customs and traditions of the community. The colors of the clothing made by African women are vibrant and beautiful. Unlike many of the fashion designs found in Western countries, the designs and patterns are unique and different from the other. The market places of Africa are like a menagerie of color. African women gather arrayed in outfits having a different design and color. These colors fill us with the desire to look, feel, and touch. They are thought provoking and mood creating. The natural earth tones to the bright vibrancy found in the reds and yellows can create moods of tranquility, excitement, and power. No wonder the market places of Africa are synonymous to a mecca of laughter, joy, and activity. The people of Africa place great meaning on the use of color. The significance of the meanings varies from one culture to another. Once a meaning has been placed upon a color it is hard to eradicate. This is the experience with the word "black" in America. In America, Europeans associated the color black with everything evil and corrupt. They applied these same associations to slaves and later to African-Americans. The bad guys in the movies always wore black. Their actions were dark and dingy. Black cats, and evil witches in black costumes were synonymous with evil. Even the color of the African slave's skin was associated with everything evil and derogatory. On the other hand, the color white was associated with everything good and beautiful. Snow White, the knight in shining armor riding upon his white horse, etc. were all used to suggest the positive attributes of the color white and to further promote the negative connotations of the color black. Unfortunately, many African-American children still see anything as black or brown as evil and anything white as good. Blacks in America were ridiculed for their love of bright, cheerful colors. Blacks who wore reds, greens, or yellows were viewed as being less sophisticated than their white counterparts. Everything Blacks did was defined and redefined by standards that were foreign and unnatural to their ancestral instincts. African-American children need to know that in their native land that the impact of a wide variety of colors was used to stimulate the imagination and to promote a love for nature in which so many of these colors exist. The use of colors and the meaning associated with that usage varied from one society to the next. Africans frequently use a combination of colors from bright reds, yellows, and greens to the more natural colors of more blacks, browns, and tans in their creations. The colors used and the significance of the combinations is dependent upon the region and community in which they are made.

**Africa Personified**

I have a friend from Nigeria who often appears in the garments of her native land. She crowns her outfits with the traditional African headdress that is so indicative of her cultural glory. The outfits she wears remind me of the stories I've heard of the African kings and queens who once ruled the kingdoms of Africa. Many of the outfits are regal in their appearance and when she enters a room decked out in her fine African garb heads turn in sheer admiration for her beauty, charm, and poise. I have spoken with her and have expressed my desire to have her visit the children in my classroom. She has consented to come dressed in full African attire and to talk with the children about her native land. She will bring artifacts, pictures, and food to enhance her presentation. The presence of such a beautiful African sister in the classroom is sure to have a profound effect on the third graders I teach. They will be able to gather first hand information about a land that many of them have heard so many negative things about. I know the opportunity to view a person from Africa so beautifully dressed will alter their concept of Africans forever. I will also use this opportunity to develop the art appreciation portion of this unit by discussing the fabric from which the outfit(s) she is wearing or has brought with her are made. They will discuss texture, color, design, lines, etc.

## Africans: Enslaved in America

The slave trade changed the lives of many western Africans forever. Tribes, who were at war with each other, were encouraged by European traders to capture and sell people as slaves. Families were separated, entire villages were destroyed, and the long cruel journey from freedom to slavery began. Slave ships, crammed with human cargo, made the six-week voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to America. Many of these people came from royal ancestry in their native land but here on these ships they received treatment unfit for animals. Africans who survived the mid-Atlantic voyage were sold on the slave markets of the United States, Trinidad, Brazil, Cuba, and a host of other countries. In America, this "cargo" was stripped of its humanity and traded on the same trading block as household items, guns, gold, and animals. Those Africans who survived the lack of food, sunshine, and water during the mid-Atlantic voyage found conditions even worse upon arrival in America. Upon arrival, they were sold to plantation owners who used whips, hanging, and brutal floggings to force them to work their fields. The annals of history record hundred of years of the entrapment, beating, and selling of African people so that plantation owners in America could produce and sell the sugar, cotton, rice, and tobacco grown by their captive laborers. They were required to labor from sun up to sunset in the sun with insufficient food, clothing, or shelter from the hot, blistering sun. Many died from exhaustion or from disease contacted from the Europeans. In America, Africans were forced to adapt to this hostile environment and to learn new ways to survive and express themselves. Cultural bonds and traditional means of communication were forbidden and all connections to their homeland were forever severed. Slaves were confused and disheartened by the harsh treatment received at the hands of these strange people. Amateur storytellers and trained narrators in Africa had used tales, proverbs, and riddles to preserve and transmit African literature from one generation to another. The "groit" acted as the repository of the customs, histories, and traditions of the African community and was responsible for the preservation of past events and the re-creation of community traditions. He led the tribe in celebration, appreciation, and reflection of tribal customs. When Africans stepped upon the shores of America these rich oral styles of historical and cultural transmissions emerged with them. White slave owners in American prized the literary transmission of knowledge and histories, and they frowned upon these Africianisms. They could not understand the customs of these people and banned anything that might lead to rebellions or insurrections. The African had to develop a system of communication that the slave owners could not recognize. Plantation owners however, kept erecting barriers in order to complicate and discourage communication among slaves.

Laws were passed prohibiting slaves from learning to read or write. Slave owners understood that slaves who could read and write would have open channels of communications that could possibly lead to the spreading of discontentment throughout the plantations. The African found themselves facing a "Tower of Babel" experience as people from tribes using different dialects were inter-mixed in an attempt to completely eradicate any chance of communication. Slave owners used the scriptures to further their hold on the minds of the African slaves. Slaves were taught that they were created inferior and that God expected them to obey the commands and dictates of the superior race the slave owners. The slave heard in these stories, however, the hope of deliverance and incorporated these beliefs into songs of encouragement and as a means of communication. Loneliness, misery, and fear were constant companions for the African in America. Many slaves found refuge in the stories and songs of the Bible. These songs and stories could be heard resounding through the fields as the slave toiled under the heat of the southern sun. One such person was Harriet Powers who told her story in what was then and is still considered to be a masterpiece, The Bible Quilt.

## Harriet Powers

Harriet Powers began her masterpiece quilt at the age of forty-nine. Though she had sewn many other quilts in her lifetime this quilt was to be a diary of her spiritual life. In it she would combine local folktales and Biblical truths to produce a fifteen-squared quilt. Harriet was born enslaved on October 29, 1837 in Clarke County, Georgia. She never learned to read or write. Most young slave girls were taught to sew at an early age by their mother or the wife of the plantation owner. Social events for slaves often revolved around the quilting bees. During the long, cold winter slave women would gather together to work on a quilt. If allowed they'd travel from one plantation to the other for they understood the old cliche that many hands make light work. It was not unusual for the women to complete two or three quilts in a night. Quilts were usually made from large squares of fabric with detailed pieces sewed into intricate patterns. The patterns used varied. To the slave women working on the quilt, it was more than a piece of cloth. Some referred to the finished projects as music, others as poetry. Mrs. Powers would later refer to her Bible Quilt as one of her children. The men were allowed to join only after the quilting was done. Food and dancing followed. Ingenious in their ability to adapt, music was often provided using cow bones for drums, animal hide stretched over a box, or broom sticks with fiddle strings to produce an entire band. It may have been at one of these quilting feasts that Harriet met her future husband, Armstead Powers.

**Lesson Plan #2**

*Objective*

- To describe the Bible Quilt using parts of speech
- To speculate what might be happening in the quilt

*Materials*

- Picture of Mrs. Harriet Power's Bible Quilt
- Paper
- Marker
- Copy of worksheet below

*(chart available in print form)*

*Lesson*

- Divide the class into small groups of 4 or 5 students

• Provide each group with a picture of Harriet's quilt
• Ask the children to choose a square from quilt to analyze.
• Have the group complete the worksheet above and be prepared to share their answers with the class.

## Quilting Gone Underground

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The African experience is unparalleled by any other group who came to America. The African was forcefully removed from his homeland and exiled in a strange and hostile land where he was forbidden to be an African and yet never fully allowed to become an American. The language and culture so familiar to him was completely banned. One has to strain the imagination to the breaking point just to begin to understand the unfathomable conditions created by such conditions for the African slave. The denial of the basic human need to communicate must have made life extremely difficult. In response to this inhumane treatment many aspects of African culture went "underground". People who are denied the ability to learn to read or write place greater meaning on symbols. The African became ingenious for their use of symbols. Many modes were used to communicate hidden messages unknown to plantation owners. These included songs and chants, dance and drums, and quilting. Quilts, full of power and laden with hidden significance, enabled slaves to preserve histories and traditions, which though weakened, may have been lost completely. Stories have been told about fugitive slaves using quilts as a means to navigate the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad quilt, previously known as Jacob's Ladder was supposedly hung somewhere on the outside of a house or in a window as a signal to fugitive slaves that the home was a safe haven for weary, fearful travelers. Other stories suggest that fugitive slaves who traveled to freedom via the Underground Railroad inspired the "North Star" quilt pattern. Other quilts concealed in their patterns and color the route to the next station on the Underground Railroad and provided slaves with information to help calculate the distance form one station stop to the next. In this way, thousands of slaves made their way to freedom.

**The Underground Railroad: Background Information**

The term Underground Railroad symbolizes a network of people who assisted runaway slaves in their quest for freedom. It had many routes that led slaves by the most direct path possible from slave holding states of southern United States to the closest free county. The Underground Railroad began in the early 1800s and lasted for over fifty years. Canadians and Americans alike risked life and property to help fugitive slaves find freedom. The secrets of the routes of the Underground Railroad were so well kept that only a fraction of the whole story is known today. The Underground Railroad got its name from a slave owner, Tice David, in 1831. David had been looking for a fugitive slave when he commented that his fugitive slave seemed to have "disappeared on an underground road." The name was later changed to the Underground Railroad because the disappearance of slaves seemed to happen as quickly as the new steam trains that were crisscrossing the countryside. Codes and symbols were essential to the activities of the Underground Railroad. They kept the activities concealed under a cloak of mystery and unknown meaning. Fugitive slaves were often referred to as "parcels" and conversations about their arrival could be spoken undetected in the

presence of bounty hunters. Music was another means by which the slaves communicated an anticipated escape with each other. Songs such as *Steal Away, steal away, steal away to Jesus* and *the Promised Land* alerted other slaves that the attempted get away was coming up. Many slaves were unable to read or write but had learned to tell which way was north by following the North Star or the Drinking Gourd and by recognizing that moss grows thicker on the side of the tree facing north. Slaves began their journey north without map or instrument. So armed with nothing more than the clothes on their back slaves brave enough to try began the journey towards freedom. Those slaves bold enough to attempt to escape from slavery usually did so at night using the North Star as their guide. Those who ventured this journey had to be strong, with stamina, courage and determination for the road was long and weary.

**Lesson Plan #3**

*Objective*

- To examine a young slave girl's plan to map the route to freedom via the Underground Railroad on a quilt as a guide for herself and other slaves.
- To develop a symbolic map
- To increase vocabulary
- To decode hidden messages

*Materials*

- Storybook: Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt
- Construction Paper
- Scissors
- Glue
- Chart Paper
- Markers and/or crayons

- Make a KWL chart by divining a large sheet of chart paper into three columns. Label The first column K(what I know), the second column W (what I want to find out) and the third column L (what I learned)

*(chart available in print form)*

• Assess the children's prior knowledge about the Underground Railroad and record it in the first column. Accept all responses as valid.
• Record in the second column, what the children hope to learn by studying this topic.
• Read and discuss the story, Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt with the children.
• As the children learn new information, add this to the KWL chart under the appropriate column. Post the chart in a visible area for future use.

**Lesson Plan #4**

*Objective*

• To make a coded map

*Materials*

• Large sheet of construction paper 18"x 24"
• Crayons/markers
• Various art materials: scraps of fabric, paper, etc.
• Glue

*Preparation for the Lesson*

• Send a letter home with the children informing the parents that their child will be making a coded map of their neighborhood
• Explain that the only acceptable place for words is in the map key. The remainder of the map is to be done in symbols. Those symbols are to be identified in the map key.
• Have the children complete the following survey prior to beginning the map. Keep this for future use.
• Have the parent choose a starting point at least three to four blocks from the child's street and help the child complete the following survey listing those items to be used on the map. The items listed should be constants (things that happen on a daily basis).

*(chart available in print form)*
Give the children the following directions for making their map. Set a time limit for when maps are due. Making a Coded Map Directions You cannot read or write but you've extended an invitation for me to come to your home. Draw a map using various symbols to help me find your home. Choose a starting point at least four to five blocks from your home. Be sure to use directional clues such as an arrow showing a right turn at a mailbox, etc. Show streets, parks, churches, schools, unusual buildings, etc. Decide when would be the best time for me to travel in your neighborhood, morning, noon, or night? How did you depict this on your map? Will I hear any familiar sounds? If so, how did you symbolize these sounds on your map. Are there children who always play on your street? Are there any animals or neighbors that you see regularly as you travel in your neighborhood. Use those items listed on your survey as you make your map. Make your map as colorful as you can. Be creative.

## Quilting: Patches of Precious Memories

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Quilts have long been used as family heirlooms recording on their fabric pages special events and memories of a family's past. Later, these quilts become an important part of the family's celebration as they record on their fabric pages the fundamental qualities of family life. As the years go by, the quilts are often handed down from one generation to the next.

**Background Information: Patchwork Quilts**

The term "patchwork" refers to several types of quilt making techniques. It is commonly used to describe the method of connecting pieces of contrasting fabric along the edges thereby creating some type of geometric pattern or design. The patches can be cut irregularly or in a particular geometric shape. These quilts can be put together in such a way as to create an abstract design.

**Lesson Plan #5**

*Objectives*

- To share a story about an important cloth item
- To tell a story

*Materials*

- Pieces of fabric (brought in by the children)
- Cutout of human form
- Glue

*Procedure*

- Read the story, *The Patchwork Quilt* by Tony Johnson to the children
- Allow the children to bring in pieces of fabric from home
- Have the students share the real story/stories behind the fabric pieces
- Provide the students with a cutout of the human form
- Children can glue the fabric pieces to the form thus creating their own story quilt.

## Art & the Narrative Quilt

Three major influences led to the surging interest in African-American quilt making: the Civil Rights Movement, the study of African-American history in educational institutions, and the feminist movement. With this new surge of interest, African-American quilt making began to take its rightful place on the pages of American history.

**Faith Ringgold**

Folk art and oral family histories are now being incorporated into the work of many contemporary African-American artists. Faith Ringgold is one such artist. She was born in Harlem, New York on October 8,1930. Faith's childhood years were sandwiched between the Harlem Renaissance and the threshold of the Great Depression. Faith found that in her art she was able to deliver the story of her personal history to her viewers.

Faith grew up in the company of her parents and great grandmother. Her great grandmother had been a slave and had to stitch quilts for her master's wife while living in Florida. Her mother, Willi Posey, used her talent to design and creates dresses for the fashion society. Faith's father, Andrew Louis Jones, Sr., entertained his daughter with the stories of family history which he had derived from a lineage of preachers well versed in oral tradition. These influences combined to give Faith a love for artistic expression and to propel her to define her own style of art. Faith is an activist for women's rights but her most intense focus has been on being Black in America. The American flag has symbolized her protest in her work since 1964. She also uses the colors and stripes of the American flag in her children stories. Faith's art forms utilize a combination of painting, quilts, writing, and mixed media sculptures to tell her story. After studying art at City College in New York Faith began the search for a artistic style that reflected her beliefs. She borrowed designs from the African aesthetics such as the Kuba, and the usage of human figures with oversized heads. These enlarged heads symbolized great wisdom. The children's book written and illustrated by Faith uses a combination of fiction and autobiography to tell stories of African-American legions and history. Faith wanted to say more to her audience than her images could convey. This led her to begin to write her story on the borders of her quilt. Faith at last was able to present her stories and artwork to the public.

**Lesson #6**

*Objective*

- To analyze a story quilt using the elements of storytelling

*Material*

Picture of the quilt, *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold

*Procedure*

- Divide the class into small groups of 4/5 students
- Provide each group with a copy of the quilt: #4 The Sunflowers Quilting Bee at Arles
- Allow the children time to view and discuss the quilt in their groups
- Have the group complete the following worksheet.

*(chart available in print form)*

In her children's book, *Tar Beach* , Faith shares scenes from her childhood while growing up in Harlem. When the summer evening were hot, the adults would retreat to the roof of the house to cool off. The children were sometimes allowed to accompany the adults but only if they fulfilled the promise to lay quietly upon a mattress or blanket. The adults entertained themselves by playing cards and the children reaped their entertainment through vivid imaginations of adventures in the stars. The following lesson provides the children with the opportunity to learn a bit about the life of an African American family growing up in the inner city.

**Lesson Plan #7**

*Objective*

- To share the life of an African-American child growing up an urban environment
- To compare the tar beach to an real beach setting using the Venn diagram
- To tell their story through a quilt

*Materials*

- Book: *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold
- Large sheet of chart paper
- Markers

*Procedure*

- Show the children the cover of the book
- Allow the children make predictions about the story
- Record those predictions next to the child's name
- Read the story
- Using the Venn diagram compare the tar beach of the child in the story to a real beach setting

## Narrative Quilts: The Children behind the Story

Send a note home to parents, at least a week or two in advance, informing them that the children are making a class quilt. Tell them that each child will have the opportunity to tell a story about a picture that is of significance to them. Ask the parents to help the child choose a meaningful picture of them involved in some type of family activity. The picture should be full of memories that the child has shared. Ask the parents to have the picture enlarged to 8"x11" and to send it to school with the child. Stress that if the picture is in color, that a color copy would enhance the quilt.

**Procedure**

- Allow the children to show their picture and to share their story with the class.
- Mount the picture on construction paper leaving enough borders for the children to write their story on.
- Tape the story squares together to create a class quilt.
- Allow the children to name the quilt.

## Readings for Research


Algotsson, Sharne, *The Spirit of African Design* . New York, Random House, 1996. This book shares various elements of African design in and around the home.

BenBerry, Cuesta, *Always There: The African-American Presence in American Quilts* . The Kentucky Quilt Project, 1992. This book gives a profile of the African American quilt making in America.

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