



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2001 Volume III: Reading and Writing Poetry

"African American Poetry: Miss Wednesday and Friends take us on a Journey of Feelings and Friendship"

Curriculum Unit 01.03.01
by Geraldine Martin

Introduction

African American Poetry becomes the basis of analysis for enrichment and enlightenment as young children are challenged to look not only for beauty within their own lives but also for the beauty that surrounds them and those individuals whose paths cross theirs on a daily basis. In her book, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*, Ysaye M. Barnwell gives the reader a picture of beauty as she so eloquently tells a story poetic style as seen through Nana's eyes. There are no mirrors reflecting the unsightly trash in the hallway, the cracks on the walls, and the clothes that do not fit are. Like the rising of the sun, the world becomes a magical place of love and beauty through the eyes of a loved one. Are children able to grasp the meaning of love and compassion in a world where mirrors are found on all of their walls reflecting hate and crime, injustice and injury, competition and revenge? Or can today's child find beauty and magic in the rising of the sun through the eyes of a friend, teacher, family member or perhaps through the eyes of a poet? Can they reflect that beauty from their own soul and help others to see the magic of love and joy in the rising of the sun?

With these thoughts in mind, I will explore strategies in which poetry and the art of puppetry can be integrated into a unit for helping children capture the beauty and magic of feelings and emotions, instilling those positive experiences within their young lives to help them express love on life's pathway. The unit whose primary emphasis is poetry would also integrate various art forms such as literature (African American), writing, song, drama, and crafts.

Why would I choose African American poetry as a basis for my unit of study? In our elementary school at L. W. Beecher, 90 to 95% of the student body is African American with the remaining Hispanic/Latino and Caucasian. I teach first graders in a self-contained classroom with varying abilities in the six-to eight-year-old age range. Along with a need for improved vocabulary, many children exhibit poor self-images and have difficulty conveying their thoughts and feelings. They come from varying social-economic backgrounds, and also have varying academic abilities. Few of them are void of difficulties that seemingly overpower their efforts in the classroom. Few positive role models, conflicting messages via television and various other sources cloud their perceptions for forming meaningful relationships. As a result, beauty is lost through antagonism and anger - it's as though the sun has not risen or on some days becomes stuck on the horizon. It is my contention that memories are made only when one becomes actively involved in creating them.

Wouldn't it be sad if all of those memories were filled with sorrow, loneliness, emptiness, anger, fear - it would be as if the sun had never risen, as if the world were void of beauty and love. So many African American poets have written about those very same feelings that our children face in their daily lives, and yet the sun has risen in their lives. It seems that they have taken down so many mirrors and although those problems and difficulties may not have gone away, they have seen beauty in the child's world like the rising of the sun... Can my children grasp this inner beauty that so many African American writers express in their poetry and prose and be able to experience the feelings and emotions in their relationships at school and at home? I want the children in my classroom to be able to draw upon their inner strengths, enhance their academic skills and strengthen their overall social-emotional development.

More specifically, my unit will include activities suitable for children in kindergarten through third grades with an emphasis on literacy for the first grade child. In addition to hearing the poems and stories read in the classroom, the children will do shared readings of the poems, and will read and write their own poetry.

Objectives

My overall objectives for the course of my curriculum unit are:

- (1) To provide an interactive experience through the use of puppetry and poetry in:
 - a. self-expression
 - b. small groups of two or four
 - c. large group interaction
- (2) To help stimulate children's intellectual and cognitive development about friendship through African American poetry:
 - a. through written works by African American poets
 - b. with creative puppetry
 - c. by a drama production
- (3) To improve listening and oral reading skills through:
 - a. written language
 - b. spoken language
- (4) To encourage self-confidence while participating in class activities:
 - a. as listeners
 - b. as readers
 - c. as actors
 - d. as members of an audience
- (5) To connect the classroom unit with the school curriculum:
 - a. reading, writing, and the arts
 - b. science and social studies
 - c. socialization skills

Examples of Strategies

How would the art of puppetry tie into a unit using African American children's poems to explore friendship and feelings? The art of ventriloquism has been in my teaching repertoire for twenty plus years and as a result many characters have evolved along with my first grade curriculum. For example, Willie Sunday, a favorite in the classroom, is an encouragement to all and is compelling in bringing the best out in most of us. His main trait in the classroom is his expertise in phonics, or lack of it, as he misses letters and letter sounds to the squeals and delight of the children. Tuesday's Cup of Sugar, Alphabet Thursday, and Blue Monday have all gained a stronghold in the classroom through their initiation of the writer's workshop, story mapping, interactive writing, and read aloud stories. Miss Wednesday Delight's expertise allows her to bring new poems to our classroom on a weekly basis. She aids the children in discussion and reading of the poems, and sometimes gets their assistance for ideas to various lines or words in the poems. All of the puppets contain unique personalities, interesting voice variations and a flare for bright colorful appearances. Along with the other puppets, we dare not forget Friday Funtastic who sports a red hat, green vest, and bright yellow fur - a duck who speaks in a somewhat distorted voice.

Although my puppets are for the most part full size ventriloquist's puppets (i.e. dummies with either soft sculptured or hard plastic faces) hand puppets could just as easily be used for introducing or reading the poetry. Omitting puppetry entirely from the lessons will not weaken the unit. If one does not wish to use puppetry, the teacher can easily adapt the lessons by introducing the poetry and stories in class.

With all of these characters in mind, Miss Wednesday Delight would continue to introduce our African American poetry on a weekly basis. However, all of her friends, (the puppets) would be used at various times to aid in the discussions and writings of our theme, "Feelings and Friendship." Puppetry will also be used in our art center where the children make their own puppets and write stories and poems on a more spontaneous basis within a less structured setting. For example, the children are given examples or ideas and then given the option of choosing and making their own crafts and stories. In other words, the teacher is more of a facilitator and helps to guide the children once they have made their selection.

A good starting place for my unit will be Eloise Greenfield's poem "Honey I Love." She speaks in very simple terms about love and that love must start with ME. The children like to write about things they love. They will enjoy writing a poem about love and listing those things that are dear to them. They could end the poem by saying, "But I especially love..." Certainly, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* will be read in conjunction with Greenfield's poem to stimulate the children in seeing beauty and love around them. The paintings of people in the book by Synthia Saint James are void of any eyes. The children look past their surroundings and experience beauty through the eyes of a trusted older family member. In other words, love becomes the brightness of the sun clouding out those things that could control and destroy one's joy for living. The group Sweet Honey in the Rock sings the lyrics in this book. Music in African American culture articulates many feelings that children can relate to in meaningful ways. The children will enjoy singing along with Sweet Honey in the Rock as well as making up some additional lines to the song. Miss Wednesday and her friends will also aid the children in a discussion with questions such as: What are some things that the children in the story did not see because they did not have eyes? Do you think that it made a difference because they could not see these things? Why? What did they experience instead of seeing the bad things? For example, how did the dust feel? What did the noise in the hallway sound like? How did the trash on the floor feel?

Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky by Faith Ringgold also tells of trust and love of others as she

relates the story of Harriet Tubman and her flight for freedom. Perhaps that is why slave rag dolls rarely if ever had eyes on their faces. How could one hold a doll that expresses joy, love, and magic when they could see all of the horrible, atrocious surroundings of slavery? It would be better that they had no eyes and one could pretend with them only beholding the beauty of the inner soul in expressing love, trust, and security. The puppets will help to stimulate a discussion about fear. The children will relate in their writings, either fictional or real, feelings of fear and how those feelings dissipated. We could stitch rag dolls or make puppets of our own with no eyes and write stories about them, pretending we were only seeing beautiful things in our surroundings.

Nikki Giovanni expresses so eloquently her feelings of security with family and friends in the poem "The Reason I Like Chocolate" when she writes about snuggling with Mommy and her big sister during a scary movie or licking her fingers after eating chocolate and nobody tells her that it is not polite. The puppets will model their writing after Giovanni's poem. Then the children will write a poem in class and illustrate it.

Langston Hughes writes many poems expressing feelings of hope, joy, and love. In his poem of "Dreams," Langston tells the reader to hold fast to their dreams for if they die they are like a bird with a broken wing that cannot fly or like frozen snow in a barren field. In Faith Ringgold's book *If a Bus could Talk*, Ringgold tells the story of Rosa Parks through a talking bus. Dreams usually blossom when one is sleeping, has their eyes closed or is not clearly focused on their surroundings. Rosa Parks could not have seen her dream come true had she only focused on her wrongful situation. Young children like to dream. They like to tell what they want to be when they grow up - how they will help the world to be a better place. They will write a simple poem of dreams, naming one thing on each line (e.g. I dream of...) and then ending the poem by saying, "But when I am big, I will dream of..."

Langston's simple poem of "Hope" speaks volumes when he writes about feeling lonely and he really doesn't know why, but eventually the feelings go away. The children will center their discussion on such questions as: How does it feel to be lonely? When do you feel lonely? Why? Do the feelings go away? How?

Ashley Bryan's collection of beautiful African American poetry suggests another way to work with the alphabet. She took complete poems and fragments from others, capturing many feelings from the African American culture. In each poem, she centered on a word that was relevant to the theme and capitalized it according to the ABC's in the alphabet. For example, Lucille Clifton writes a poem about love; the word "Leaves" is capitalized because it pertains to the main theme in Clifton's poem and follows the main word, "Kojo" found in the previous poem. We could make a list of the words on chart paper in class, and the children could recite them helping to increase their sight vocabulary for reading. The list would look like this...And, Black, Comes, Dear, Each, Freedom... Willie Sunday would love to read the list, make mistakes and have the children correct his errors.

Literacy will play an important role in every facet of my unit. In addition to hearing and reading the poetry and stories in the classroom, the children will be paired with a fourth grader from our proposed Beecher team. The first graders along with their fourth grade buddies will compose poetry and share an illustration in class.

Of course, Miss Wednesday Delight and her friends have an array of activities planned for the children. African American history contains a rich heritage of traditions and customs. The children will be given the opportunity to participate in spirituals that were sung during worship services and then to feast upon some of the traditional foods that were relished after Sunday morning services. We may even try jumping a broomstick as the slaves did during their wedding ceremony as a symbol of beginning homemaking for the new couple. We may rely on some of the grandmothers and great-grandmothers to teach us a song or dance, perhaps even a

few of their favorite games that were passed onto them by their parents.

A culminating activity will be a drama production based on the story *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* . (See the appendix.) The production will be rehearsed in our Extended Day Academy and produced on stage for a school wide assembly sometime near the end of the school year. The culminating activity will be part of a team effort in which three teachers from L. W. Beecher School will center their units upon a common theme, "African American Poetry: A focus on Family and Tradition; Feelings and Friendship, and Pride and Protest." The team will involve a first grade, second grade, and a fourth grade.

Feelings and Friendship Through Poetry and Literature

"Honey, I Love"

Eloise Greenfield's poem captures the sentiment of a young child when relatives come to visit. The excitement is caught when the family takes a drive into the country where they will meet a lot of church folks and enjoy some good food to eat. She speaks of love in such a home spun, down to earth way so that children can easily identify and begin to think about love in their own surroundings. Eloise helps the reader to see that the simple things in life are the most fun and most treasured.

Week One - First Day

As an introduction to our unit Wednesday Delight will tell the children that we will be taking a journey with our feelings and friendship. Eloise Greenfield knew all about forming friendships in her neighborhood, the housing projects. Although not all of her childhood memories were happy because of the segregation in schools, stores, swimming pools, etc., she remembers the fun times with family, neighbors, and friends who cared for one another on Langston Terrace, Washington D.C.

The children will enjoy a shared reading of the poem, "Honey I Love" with Wednesday Delight. Wednesday will invite her friend Willie to class, who will give a list of things that he loves, like - unopened soda pop, candy wrappers, lollypops with bows, a hug and a kiss... He will complete his list by saying, "But I really love - sharing poems with kids." Now it is time for the children to write their own poems about "Love." Each child will start their poem with "I love..." Their list will contain their favorite things from either home, school, church or anyplace that they wish to focus upon. Their last line will end with "But I really love..." Willie will circulate around the class, reading the children's poems, making mistakes, and helping those who are having difficulty.

No Mirrors in My Nana's House

Barnwell takes the reader on a journey of love and beauty in a child's world through the eyes of her Nana. Even though there are cracks on the walls, trash in the hallways, noisy neighbors, clothes that do not fit, a nose that is too flat, etc. there are no mirrors to reflect the negative when one beholds love and beauty through the eyes of their Nana. It takes trust and love to see the world as a magical place where there is only love and no hate.

Week One - Day Two

Willie will read this beautiful story written in poetic form by Ysaye Barnwell. He will ask the children why they think the artist did not include eyes in her illustrations. If one does not have eyes, are they able to see ugly things around them? What would some of those things be? If there are no mirrors in one's house, could you see skin that is too dark, skin that is too light, hair that will not stay in place, tears on a face? How could one see through the eyes of another? Would one need to be blind?

Ysaye Barnwell is a member of the singing group, Sweet Honey in the Rock. Sweet Honey in the Rock is an a capella quintet made up of African American women. A CD is included with the book, and the children will enjoy singing along with the group after hearing the story read by Willie.

Week One - Days Three and Four

Dolls were made for slave children from various pieces of cloth and stuffed with rags which gave the doll a rather floppy, soft feeling for cuddling. Eyes were generally not sewn onto the doll's face. The children will stitch and sew their own doll from a simple cutout and stuff it loosely with left over scraps and a little cotton binding. On our sewing day, mothers and grandparents will be invited to assist the children in their sewing.

After the dolls have been completed, the children will be asked to write a poem by Alphabet Thursday (a friend of Wednesday Delight) for their doll. The children will insert their own names in the title, e.g., "Seeing through the Eyes of..." They will think of their own home and write lines such as: Look deep in my eyes and see... The green grass that surrounds our house; Sidewalks to ride bikes; Steps to run and skip; Railings to slide and glide; Hallways to run and shout... Look deep in my eyes and see - Love between you and me.

Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky

Cassie and her brother Be Be fly far above the mountains and the oceans where they encounter a railroad in the sky - the Underground Railroad. They meet a woman dressed in a conductor's uniform. The woman is Harriet Tubman who takes them on a historical journey of the Underground Railroad and the facts of Harriet Tubman's life.

Week One - Day Five

Faith Ringgold tells a beautiful story for young children about the faith and courage of Harriet Tubman. Although Harriet Tubman could neither read nor write, yet this courageous woman set up a network of real conductors who helped to carry out escape routes for as many as 300 slaves. The children will understand again the significance of their rag dolls having no eyes like the paintings in No Mirrors in My Nana's House. If those trying to escape had seen only with their own eyes, surely fear would have overtaken them and they would have succumbed to their own capture. However, the slaves had to look deep into Harriet Tubman's eyes and put their trust into the conductors.

After the story is read in class, Friday Funtastic, a friend of Wednesday Delight will read a poem by Langston Hughes titled, "Hope." In the poem Hughes speaks about feeling lonely, but he doesn't know why. He can only think that by and by he won't be lonely any more. Friday will help to center a discussion on feelings of loneliness. Do you think the slaves that escaped through the Underground Railroad ever felt lonely? Why? Do you think the feelings of loneliness went away when they reached the Canadian border and knew they were safe and free? Do children feel lonely? Why? Friday encourages the children to talk about their feelings, and then write about those feelings. The feelings will be put into poetic style. For example, I feel lonely when... My sister eats all of the cookies; I am asked to stay home when Mom and Dad go out; I am told that I'm too little

to play football with the big kids; Mom says the light must go out; Grandma hugs my big brother... But I don't feel lonely when... I can lick the frosting from the beater all by myself.

Harriet Tubman often sang signals through spirituals to the slaves who were trying to escape through the Underground Railroad. We know that many times the slaves sang spirituals in the fields, partly because it gave them hope to continue under the severe bondage of slavery. The children will participate in singing spirituals in class such as: "We're Marching to Zion," "Oh, Freedom," "Git on Board Lil Children," "Wade in the Water," "Go Tell it on the Mountain," etc.

"Aunt Sue's Stories"

Aunt Sue has a lot of stories to tell to a brown-faced child on the front porch of a summer night. She tells stories about Black slaves working in the hot sun, and singing songs on the banks of the river. The dark-faced child knows that these stories do not come out of a book. The stories come right out of Aunt Sue's life.

Week Two - Day One

Wednesday Delight will assist the children in a shared reading of Langston Hughes' poem, "Aunt Sue's Stories." She will assist the children in a class discussion about the poem asking questions such as: What does Hughes mean when he says the slaves were singing songs of sorrow on the banks of the river? Why do the slaves mingle softly in the dark shadows that cross and recross during Aunt Sue's stories? Do they do this in reality? Why or why not?

We will search for a great-grandmother who may know distant relatives that were slaves or know stories to tell in class.

Harriet and the Promised Land

Jacob Lawrence has written a beautiful book in poetic verse about the life of Harriet Tubman. Harriet is born a slave. As she grows into a young lady she cleans and helps to take care of white Children. Harriet hears the Bible story of Moses helping to free the slaves from King Pharaoh in Egypt. She prays for strength when the time is right to lead her people to freedom. God enables Harriet to make the journey nineteen times to free the slaves from bondage and to "The Promised Land.

Week Two - Day Two

Willie will assist in reading the story in class. The pictures in Lawrence's book contain a lot of symbolism. We will look at the pictures in class and the symbolism that they represent. For example, when Lawrence tells Harriet to grow stronger, bigger, harder... Harriet's hands in the picture are grossly grotesque. Why are Harriet's hands so large? How will they help her assist the slaves to escape? There are other pictures where the hands of those who are helping are huge. One picture is very striking where Harriet's large hands are outstretched over a stream and the slaves are crossing, symbolizing Moses and the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. In another picture Harriet's arms are outstretched and at the end of her finger is a bright star. The text tells about Harriet getting the sign, and that the time was right to lead the slaves to freedom. In the Bible, the star led the Wise Men to the infant Jesus who would ultimately lead Christians to their faith in freedom.

Grandpa's Face

Eloise Greenfield tells a story about a young girl, Tamika who loves her grandpa. She loves to go for walks and talks around the neighborhood and parks. She loves to look at Grandpa's face and even when he is angry he always tells Tamika that he loves her. One day Tamika sees Grandpa practicing for a play and she doesn't like the hard, angry look that she sees on Grandpa's face. She is afraid that he will never love her again. Tamika learns that she can put her trust in Grandpa's love and that his love will never change for her.

Week Two - Days Three and Four

Willie will assist in reading the story, *Grandpa's Face*. He will also assist in writing a story map on chart paper pertaining to the story. A story map identifies the characters in the story, the setting, the problem, and the solution.

Day four Willie will invite his friend, Wednesday Delight to class and she will introduce a poem entitled, "My People" by Langston Hughes. In his simple three stanza poem, Hughes describes the night, stars, and sun as being beautiful and compares them to the beautiful faces, eyes, and souls of African American people. Wednesday will assist the children in a shared reading of the poem, and then proceed to tell them that they will be producing an art project in conjunction with the poem. Each child will be asked to bring a stocking and clothes hanger to school. The clothes hanger will be pulled into an oblong shape with the stocking fitting tightly over the hanger. The children will add features to make it look like a face. During our team's culminating activity, the children will recite the poem, "My People," and hold the stocking face in front of their own.

If a Bus Could Talk

Ringgold tells the story of a young African American girl named Rosa Parks. Rosa walks miles to school in rural Alabama while the white children ride on a bus to school. Later in life Rosa refuses to give up her seat to a white man while riding to work on a city bus. This act of bravery encourages others to stand up for freedom. Marcie meets a talking bus on her way to school and learns about the bravery of Rosa Parks. After Marcie's magical ride, she meets Rosa Parks at a birthday party.

Week Two - Day Five

Willie will assist in reading the story and in a class discussion. He will ask questions such as: Why do you think it was important for Rosa Parks to stay seated and not give up her seat to a white person? How did this help others to be brave and stand up for freedom? Rosa Parks had a dream that segregation laws would be abolished, and African Americans would be given equal rights. Without this dream, and had her dream faded away, there would never be a story about Rosa Parks. Segregation laws might not have changed so quickly; people might not have found freedom or equal rights in the public.

Week Three - Day One

In his poem, "Dreams," Langston Hughes compares dying dreams to that of a broken-winged bird that is unable to fly. He also says that when dreams fade away, they are like a barren field that is frozen over with snow. Wednesday Delight will be invited to class by Willie and will help the children with a shared reading of the poem, "Dreams." Wednesday will ask the children why they think Hughes compared dying dreams to a broken-winged bird or a field that is covered with snow. What would have happened if Rosa Parks had left her

dream die? Suppose she had given in to the segregation laws, would her dream be alive today? What are your dreams?

Wednesday will ask the children to write a poem about their dreams. The poem will begin with "My dream is..." The children will list things that they would like to accomplish as a young person. They will end the poem by saying, "But when I am big I will dream of..."

"The Reason I Like Chocolate"

In her book, *The Sun is so Quiet*, Nikki Giovanni writes a poem in the first person about a little girl who licks her fingers after eating chocolate. This is especially delightful to her because nobody will tell her that this is not a polite thing to do. She goes on to say that she likes scary movies because she can snuggle close to her mother; she likes to cry sometimes because grown-ups will ask her what is wrong and not to cry; and, she especially likes books because they make her feel happy.

Week Three - Day Two

Young children can easily identify with Nikki Giovanni's poem. She entreats the child to enjoy their youthfulness through the simple things of life, and feel happy. Tuesday's Cup of Sugar, (Wednesday Delight's puppet friend), will be invited to assist the children in a shared reading of Giovanni's poem. The children will have fun sharing things that they like from their childhood.

Today is the day that first graders will be paired with a buddy from fourth grade. The fourth graders will help the first graders with composing a poem, "The reason I like..." They will write about something that they like on the first line, and state why they like it on the second line. For example: The reason I like Grandma; Is I get to stay up late; And nobody tells me I can't. The second stanza will tell something that they like even more than the first one. For example: I especially like the carnival; 'cause I can go on lots of rides; And eat tons of ice cream too. Together, the first and fourth graders will complete an illustration, and share their work in class.

Jamaica and Brianna

Jamaica and Brianna are friends from the same school. Jamaica is told by her parents that she must wear her older brother's boots to school. When Jamaica sees Brianna on the way to school, Brianna chides her about wearing boy's boots. Brianna is wearing her older sister's pink boots with white cuffs. Jamaica sees a little hole in her boots and pokes her fingers through it, making it larger. Now Brianna needs new boots and she chooses a pair that look like cowboy boots. The girls exchange words about each other's boots until they both realize they are acting foolishly and spoiling their friendship. The damage is repaired and the girls remain friends.

Week Three - Day Three

Willie introduces Havill's book, *Jamaica and Brianna*, and reads it in class. He helps to stimulate a discussion by asking questions: Have you ever worn anything that made you feel embarrassed? Have kids ever made fun of you, like your best friends? What did you do? How did Jamaica and Brianna react to each other's unkind words? How did they make up?

Willie will ask the children to write a poem, "My best friend is..." The children will list attributes about their best friend. The last line will tell how they feel, "My best friend makes me feel..."

Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry

Ashley Bryan's book contains many African American poems. Some of the poems are complete while others contain fragments of lines that inspire the images of Bryan's illustrations. Each page contains a word that is highlighted and follows the alphabet.

Week Three - Day Four

Willie will read the book in class, and share the illustrations with the children. The children will enjoy the bright colors used to paint the pictures. Discussion will center upon the reasons Bryan chose the images for illustrating the poems. A list of the alphabetized words from the poems will be recorded on chart paper and recited in class.

The Black Snowman

The Ashanti tribe from Africa own a colorful cloth called a kente. The cloth brings magic to the people. The African people are sold into slavery, and the kente is sold too. However, through the years, the kente keeps its power even though it is old and torn. Jacob is a poor boy who lives in urban America who hates being black, and associates bad with everything black. Mama tells him otherwise, but it takes a black snowman and the colorful kente to convince him that he is proud of who he is.

Week Three - Day Five

Mendez's book, *The Black Snowman* is read in class by Willie. Willie assists the children with a story map, citing the characters, setting, the problem, and solution in the story. In addition, discussion questions are asked: Why does Jacob become so angry when his mother tells he and his brother, Pee Wee, they cannot go to the store to buy Christmas presents? How does his mother feel when Jacob falls into a fit of rage? Why is Jacob so angry about being black? How does the black snowman help Jacob? Do you think Jacob's family will continue to be poor? Why?

Willie will invite his friend, Wednesday Delight to class, and she will read a poem by Lindamichellebaron, "Hugs and Kisses," found in *Families: Poems Celebrating the African American Experience*. Jacob's mother in the *The Black Snowman* showers him with hugs and kisses, but they have no meaning until the black snowman's magic along with the kente help Jacob realize that being black is beautiful. Lindamichellebaron's poem is about a young boy who struggles between wanting hugs and kisses from his mother because they make him feel warm inside, and at the same time wanting others to see that boys should be treated rough so that their muscles show they are tough.

Willie will ask the class to compare the poem, "Hugs and Kisses" with the story, *The Black Snowman*. What similarities do you see between the story and the poem? Why doesn't the boy in the poem want others to see his mother give him a hug? Do you think the boy in the poem was troubled about being black?

There are other books with African American poetry that will be placed in our library center. During our sustained reading time each morning, the children enjoy taking these books and reading them in class. Some of the books placed in the library center will be: *African Dream* and *Daydreamers Tom Feelings* by Eloise Greenfield; *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* by Gwendolyn Brooks; *Families: Poems Celebrating the African American Experience* selected by Dorothy Strickland, and others.

Assessments

The completed poetry serves as an assessment for the unit. In addition to the poetry, the teacher uses the rubric found at the end of the unit to evaluate oral and written responses. Students use the rubric for self-evaluation.

Sample Lessons

Lesson One

Poem: "Honey I Love" by Eloise Greenfield

Objectives: Students will...

- listen to a poem read to them by Wednesday Delight, (a classroom puppet.)
- participate in a shared reading of the poem.
- give a written response by completing a poem in class.

Procedures:

1. Wednesday Delight will assist by reading the poem, "Honey I Love."
2. The children will participate in a shared reading of the poem with

Wednesday Delight.

3. Questions for discussion: What does Eloise Greenfield love in the poem?

Do you love any of the same things? What are some of the things you love that are not mentioned in the poem?

4. The children will write a poem about love. They will begin their poem with "I love..." A list will follow about all of the things they love. The last line will end with "But I really love..."

Lesson Two

Book: *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* by Ysaye Barnwell

Objectives: Student will...

-listen to a story read to them by Willie Sunday (a classroom puppet.)

-interact with a group discussion.

-complete a craft project.

-give a written response by completing a poem in class.

Procedures:

1. Willie Sunday will assist in reading, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* .

2. Questions for discussion: Why doesn't the child in the story see all of the ugly things in the apartment? What do you do when you see things that are not pretty? What does the poet mean when she says that there are no mirrors in Nana's house? Are there any mirrors in your house? Why? What would happen if you took all of the mirrors down?

3. The children will make a rag doll. They will sew a doll from a simple cutout (e.g. the cutout will look similar to a gingerbread man.) The class will stuff their dolls with left over scraps and pieces of cotton binding. We will not put any eyes on the dolls just as we saw the people in the pictures of *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*.

4. The children will write a poem about their own surroundings. The poem will begin with "Seeing through the eyes of..." (The children will insert their own names.) A descriptive list will follow about things in their environment. The last line will end with "Look deep in my eyes and see..." (The children will insert something special that they love.)

Lesson Three

Poem: "Aunt Sue's Stories" by Langston Hughes

Objectives: Students will...

-listen to a poem by Wednesday Delight, (a classroom puppet.)

-participate in a shared reading of the poem.

-interact with a group discussion.

Procedures:

1. Wednesday Delight will assist by reading the poem, "Aunt Sue's stories.
2. The children will participate in a shared reading of the poem with Wednesday Delight.
3. Questions for discussion: Why do you think Langston Hughes called the songs that the slaves were singing in the poem songs of sorrow? Why do you think the slaves were in the shadows as Aunt Sue was telling the stories? Do your relatives tell stories to you? What stories do they tell to you?
4. A story teller will be invited to the classroom.

Appendix

Extended Day Academy

The Extended Day Academy meets for approximately six to eight weeks, two days a week for an hour each session. Children may sign up for this program on a voluntary basis with their parent's permission. They are chosen on a first come basis until enrollment reaches approximately fifteen children.

The children will study the art of acting on stage, and rehearse a play suitable for production on stage. Voice projection will be taught where the children speak up so the audience can hear their lines, and at the same time maintain their voice quality. Mime will be taught through a series of activities where the children are asked to think of an event in their lives (e.g. something special that brings feelings of happiness.) As the children project facial expressions and body movements for a few moments they are asked to freeze these expressions, and then talk about their experiences. We will look at the pictures of the characters in the book, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House*, and discuss their facial expressions and body movements. After reading our play, we will use mime to express the various expressions and body movements that we think our characters should display on stage.

The following play was adapted from *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* by Ysaye M. Barnwell. While this is based on situations from the book with the exception of two phrases, the language is my own.

Children's Choir: There were no mirrors in my Nana's house... No mirrors in my Nana's house...

Child One: I saw loveliness in my surroundings. Cause... the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes. (Child One waves arms towards Nana. Nana stands to the side of the stage.)

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Child Two: I didn't know that my skin had bumps.

Child Three: I didn't know that my hair was too frizzled.

Child Four: I didn't know that I was supposed to wear ribbons.

Child Five: I didn't know that I was supposed to wear socks.

Child One: Cause... the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes. (Child gives Nana a big hug.)

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Child Two: I loved to put my fists into the holes in the wall.

Children's Choir: There were no mirrors in my Nana's house... No mirrors in my Nana's house...

Child One: Cause...the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes...

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Child Three: The dust and dirt were like stars in a summer night's sky. (Confetti falls onto the stage.)

Children's Choir: There were no mirrors in my Nana's house... No mirrors in my Nana's house...

Child One: Cause... the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes.

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Child Four: I loved the loud sounds in the hallway. It was like angels singing from their heavenly choir. (On stage: children play basketball; child carries a boom box; children play hopscotch.)

Children's Choir: There were no mirrors in my Nana's house... No mirrors in my Nana's house...

Child One: Cause... the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes. (Moves arms towards Nana.)

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Child Five: The garbage... it felt like a thick carpet under my feet.

Children's Choir: There were no mirrors in my Nana's house... No mirrors in my Nana's house...

Child One: Cause...the loveliness came deep within my Nana's eyes. (Waves arms towards Nana.)

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

A Group of Five Children: There was love everywhere. (Children throw flowers into the air.)

Child One: Love instead of hate!

Children's Choir: Like the rising of the sun.

Nana: Children come close to your Nana. Come close to your Nana. What do you see? (Children embrace)

Nana.)

Children's Choir: Sing, *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* .

Teacher's Bibliography

Bryan, Ashley. *I'm Going to Sing: Black American Spirituals* . New York: Dix Type, Inc., 1982. Ashley presents a collection of Black American Spirituals which are rooted deep in the past experiences of slavery, rhythms of Black Africa and a combination of western culture and music.

Cole, Harriette. *Jumping the Broom* . New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993. Cole tells the reader that slaves were denied all marriage privileges and rights. As a result of this denial the couples "tied the knot" by jumping the broom.

Hall, Diane. "Ethnic and Cultural Wedding Traditions," <http://www.weddingbells.com/unitedstates/yqa/ethnictraditions.html>, (11, Apr. 2001). Hall gives meaning to jumping a broom in an African American wedding.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1959. Hughes presents a collection of poetry for both the adult world and elementary school children.

Kapell, Dave. *The Magnetic Poetry Book* . New York: Workman Publishing, 1998. A book to teach children for becoming poetic writers. Includes a magnetic board with tabs for creating poetry. Great ideas for teachers to use in the classroom.

Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* . New York: Harper and Row, 1970. Kenneth Koch describes his methods for teaching Manhattan elementary school children to write poetry. He gives examples of students' work that are appropriate for various age levels.

Koch, Kenneth. *Rose, Where did You get That Red?* New York: Random House, Inc., 1973. Kenneth Koch gives examples of poetry by authors such as Blake, Donne, Stevens and others. Koch gives these examples as models and explains to teachers how to help children write their own poetry.

Janeczko, Paul B. *Poetry from A to Z* . New York: Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing Division, 1994. An anthology of seventy poems by such poets as: X. J. Kennedy, Gwendolyn Brooks, Eve Merriam and others.

Scheffert, Heather, "Eloise Greenfield," <http://www.unomaha.edu/~unochlit/Greenfield.html>, (4 Apr. 01). Scheffert gives a short bibliography about Eloise Greenfield, and a few short reviews of her selected works.

Stepito, Michele. *African-American Voices* . Brookfield: The Millbrook Press, 1995. An anthology of literature that is compiled of poems, songs, and stories many of which were passed along by word of mouth from the slaves of the eighteenth century.

Children's Bibliography

Barnwell, Ysaye M. *No Mirrors in My Nana's House* . New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998. The author is a member of the singing group, "Sweet Honey in the Rock," an acapella quintet comprised of African women. Not only did she write the text, but she reads and helps to sing the song on a CD that is enclosed with the book. The book challenges young people to look for beauty even though their surroundings may be less than ideal.

Bryan, Ashley. *Ashley Bryan's ABC of African American Poetry* . New York: Simon and Schuster Children's Publishing Division, 1997. A beautiful collection of African poetry. Bryan took complete poems and fragments from others, capturing many feelings from the African American culture. She includes one African American spiritual.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* . New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1956. A book of poetry written about life's familiar experiences of inner-city children.

Gillerlain, Gayle. *The Reverend Thomas's False Teeth* . Mahwah: BridgeWater Books, 1995. Gillerlain writes about a warm-hearted community by the Chesapeake Bay where everyone has an idea of how to rescue the Reverend's false teeth when they fall into the Bay.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Spin a Soft Black Song* . New York: Hill and Wang, 1985. A beautiful book of poetry written about common experiences shared by the African American child.

Giovanni, Nikki. *The Sun is so Quiet* . New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1996. A book of poetry where Nikki Giovanni writes about riding rainbows, licking chocolaty fingers, snuggling under covers and many other childhood memories.

Giovanni, Nikki. *Vacation Time* . New York: William Morrow and Co., 1980. A beautiful book of poetry for the young child.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Africa Dream* . New York: Harper Collins, 1977. Written in Poetic style, Greenfield takes the reader on a journey to Africa.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Daydreamers Tom Feelings* . New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1981. Greenfield's poems express feelings of young people as they grow and blossom toward womanhood and manhood.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Grandpa's Face* . New York: The Putman and Grosset Group, 1986. A lovely story about a little girl named Tamika who adores her grandfather until she sees him rehearsing for a play. Tamika is frightened as she sees a different face, one that causes her to question Grandfather's love.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Honey, I Love* . New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986. A delightful book of 16 poems describing everyday life as seen through the eyes of a young elementary school age child.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Night on Neighborhood Street* . New York: Penguin Books USA, Inc., 1996. A delightful book of poems written by Greenfield in memory of her mother who lived on Neighborhood Street.

Greenfield, Eloise. *She Comes Bringing Me that Little Baby Girl* . New York: Harper Collins, 1974. A story of love about an African American family and a little boy who wanted a baby brother rather than a sister.

Havill, Juanita. *Jamaica and Brianna* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.,1993. A beautiful story of how two girls became friends after a misunderstanding about boots.

Lawrence, Jacob. *Harriet and the Promised Land* . New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. This writing in prose is done in poetic style. It tells the story of Harriet Tubman and her perilous journeys to help slaves reach their freedom.

Mendez, Phil. *The Black Snowman* . New York: Scholastic, 1989. In the story, Jacob hates to be black. Through a black snowman and the kente cloth, Jacob becomes proud of who he is.

Ringgold, Faith. *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* . New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992. Ringgold writes in poetic style as she tells the story of Harriet Tubman through Cassie and Be Be. The book gives an account of the chilling realities of slavery and the joyful celebrations of freedom.

Ringgold, Faith. *If a Bus Could Talk* . New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1999. Ringgold's book tells the story of Rosa Parks through Marcie's magical ride on a talking bus, the Rosa Parks bus. At the end of the story,

Marcie meets Rosa Parks at a birthday party. In this story the reader discovers why Rosa Parks is the mother of the Civil Rights Movement. Ringgold weaves a Black Spiritual into the story.

Rochelle, Belinda. *Words with Wings* . Harper Collins Publishers, 2001. A beautiful book of African American poetry and art. Art is bright and beautiful, appealing to young children.

Strickland, Dorothy S. *Families: Poems Celebrating the African American Experience* . A book of beautiful poetry written by famous African American poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Nikki Giovanni, Eloise Greenfield, Langston Hughes, and others.

Teacher Resources

"Fun With Character Voices" The video gives examples of using various character voices with puppets.

Contact:

One Way Street, Inc.

P.O. Box 2398

Littleton, CO 80161

Phone: (303)790-1188

(figure and chart available in print form)

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>