



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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African American Poetry: Family and Traditions

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Introduction

Children enjoy words, thus making them natural poets. They sense the importance of their words and delight in using them to create, whether it is a story, a rhyme, or a poem. The words they use can create images or pictures for them, through which they can understand the world around them. Poetry can be used to express their feelings, longings and thoughts; it provides total freedom for them in their writing. Also, it taps into a child's natural creativity, especially in the case of free verse poetry where regular rhythm or rhyme patterns are not required. When children are not bound to such restrictions, they can let their imaginations soar. This proves to be particularly rewarding and beneficial for those children who feel constricted by school writing requirements, such as journal entries and assigned writing. In this unit titled African American Poetry: Family and Traditions, I will focus primarily on works that relate to family and traditions. The African American culture is rich in oral traditions, such as the church and gospel music, which play an integral part in family life. The experience of an African American church is markedly different from the average Sunday experience of most American churches, in that it is a much more interactive service. The role of oral tradition is a dynamic one within the church. The poetry of language is very much evident in both the preaching and in the gospel music traditions. Such traditions are meant to raise the spirit and celebrate life. Aside from the church and gospel music, traditions are seeped deeply in oral storytelling, folktales, festivals, and rhythms.

Poetry is an excellent vehicle to express the nuances of the study of family, diversity, community, African American culture, and traditions. The student population of L.W. Beecher School is 90-95% African American, therefore, I feel this unit will be an interesting way to introduce students to poetry writing while exploring their heritage and culture at the same time. Another reason that poetry will prove to be an excellent vehicle for learning is that it can draw upon their prior knowledge and the family traditions. The writing and reading of poetry will add another dimension to the skills that the students are working with at their current level. Poetry writing can be a bridge to connect writing, reading, and expressive language all at the same time. It taps into the senses, emotions, and history of the children. Poetry writing does not always rely upon academic success. As well, it can help with social development and academic success as children become more proficient at reading and writing poetry. And most children can create a simple poem.

The unit will contain activities that will assist the students in developing their skills in using the medium of poetry. Most of the poetry that will be read in class and used as examples will be written in free verse or acrostic style. The students will create their own poetry using these formats, which allows them ownership of

what they write. They will share the poems with other students, staff, and their families. Positive feedback will encourage the students to continue using poetry as a medium to express themselves about their lives. As the children get more proficient in writing poetry they will publish their poems in book form and on the web. In sharing their poems, the students will be able to celebrate, and be congratulated on, their efforts. As well as reading and writing poetry, this unit will focus on activities that include subject areas such as Social Studies, Art, and Music.

I am a library media specialist at L.W. Beecher School in New Haven. In the library I see students from grades K-5 on a flexible schedule. Flexible scheduling does not give time constraints for working on projects in the library. For example, the students may stay with me for a block of time until their projects are completed. Flexible scheduling allows the classroom teacher and I to collaborate on themes that relate to the classroom curriculum. This unit was written primarily for second grade students, although it can easily be adapted for students in grades k-3. Students will be invited to the library along with their classroom teacher where they will listen to poetry, being read by myself, and engage in activities related to the readings. The activities will be in conjunction with the classroom teachers' curriculum goals of studying the community, celebrations, diversity, traditions, and Black History. Children of any race need to see themselves as belonging, while having a strong sense of individuality. I will start by talking about families and how the classroom is like a family. Poems from the book *Families* will be read to the students. The children will also write poems about families, feelings, and other children, using acrostic poems. We will then proceed to study the community at large and the families that live there. Taking a community walk and hearing stories and poems related to families and their cultures will accomplish this. *Tar Beach* by Faith Ringgold, is written in poetic language, and is a story about a young girl who dreams of flying over her Harlem neighborhood to claim all she sees for herself and her family. This story will be read as an introduction to neighborhoods and families.

Objectives

My curriculum unit will cover the following objectives:

1. To provide an experience through self-expression and building self-esteem
 - a. writing poetry
 - b. reciting poetry
2. To help foster children's' cognitive development about families and traditions through African American poetry
 - a. listening to poetry being recited in class
 - b. through creative art activities produced in class
3. To improve oral reading skills
 - a. through recitation of children's written works
 - b. through recitation of African American poetry
4. To provide research experience through the use of technology
 - a. through the use of the Internet
5. To provide publishing experience through the use of technology
 - a. written poems on the computer
 - b. submitting written works on a web site

6. To connect the unit with classroom curriculum
 - a. language arts - reading and writing
 - b. the arts
 - c. social studies

Strategies

I will begin my unit in the month of April, which is designated as poetry month. The unit will be taught in the library for four weeks with the children coming to me three days a week. The students will be introduced to the concept of poetry by demonstrations from their teacher and myself. They will be exposed to various rhythms and nursery rhymes that they are familiar with, in order to build their confidence in the use of words to express their feelings emotions. The initial sessions will last about an hour while subsequent sessions may be shorter as they will be use for producing. To help the students to get acquainted with each other, they will be taught how to write an acrostic poem to describe themselves. The poems will be shared and posted on a bulletin board for all to view. Subsequent lessons will follow about families and what makes up a family. Students will interview their families to learn about their relatives. The information that they acquired will be

used as a springboard to learn the culture and traditions of the families that make up the population of the classroom. Books will be shared about family members, such as *Daddy Poems* by John Micklos Jr. Explorations of family and traditions will lead to the study of the surrounding community. This will be accomplished through the reading of poems and books pertaining to communities.

The students will explore the surrounding community of our school and express what they learned by making a diorama showing what they saw and compose a poem that will tell what they saw. These will be displayed in the library for other to view.

The study of Kwanzaa will be approached in a similar manner. Students will research the origins of this holiday by using resources that are available in the library. They will demonstrate what they have learned by writing poems explaining what the holiday is and why it is celebrated.

In April, the students will compile all of their poems into a book and will share their favorite ones during a hot chocolate party to help celebrate Poetry Month. Other classes and parents will be invited to hear the poetry. The students will also participate in a poetry program that will be put on for the whole school by Mrs. Martin and Ms. Sutherland's classes.

Example or Strategies

Week One

I will approach the teaching of this unit by first reviewing with the students some simple rhymes that they remember from Kindergarten and Pre-School, such as "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe" and "The Itsy Bitsy Spider". I will then pose the question "What is a poem?" As a group, we will brainstorm what we think a poem is and chart our answers. I will read different types of poems by a variety of authors. An example of a poem that I would use would be "Eddie Edwards" by Carol Diggory. This is a poem about a bow named Eddie who is wild and a pest, but is admired by others. "Wavy Hair" by Shel Silverstein and "Something Big Has Been Here" by Jack Prelutsky would be other examples that would be read to the students. Through hearing, reading, and discussing examples of poetry, the students will realize that poems come in different types and sizes. As much time will be spent on this step as is needed in order to have the students feel comfortable with the rhythm and verse of poetry. The next step will be to familiarize the students with acrostic poems. This would be accomplished by first explaining the format. The selected topic is one word or name and each letter in this word or name is elaborated on with other words or phrases. For example, if a student chose the name Sue, the acrostic would look something like this:

Sweet
Unpredictable
Exciting

A good source of acrostic examples is *Autumn, An Alphabet Acrostic* by Steven Schur, where the poem "Dog" can be found. *Poetry from A to Z*, by Paul B. Janeczko, contains the poems "Daniel", "Sister", and "PL" which will be used to illustrate acrostic poems using someone's name. After hearing the poetry the students will write their own name, brainstorm and list words that describe or relate to them, and then will write their own personal acrostic to illustrate it.

Week Two

The students will be introduced to the subject of families in the second week of the unit. But before the students begin to write, read and discuss poetry based on family, we will need to discuss the structures of family in America. The students will be asked what they think a family is, and their answers will be written on a chart. I will then read the story *Family* by Carol A. Johnson, and the poem "Families" by Dorothy and Michael Strickland. In the story *Family*, Carol A. Johnson describes how members are related and fit into the family circle. The poem by Dorothy and Michael Strickland list various members of a family. These will help children to start thinking of their own families and how each person is related together. We will then compare the members mentioned in the story and poem to those on our chart. Through discussion, we will see families can consist of two parents, a single parent, siblings, grandparents, and extended members such as aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. A new chart will be started so the children can collaborate on a sample poem. I will ask for words that describe a specific family member, such as a grandparent. Once the children have compiled their list of words that relate to a grandparent, we will begin to put together two sample poems. These poems will be written in either free verse or acrostic style. After we finish the sample poems, we will refer back to our chart so the children may choose which family member they will write their first poem about. Using the example list for the grandparent, the children will make up their own list of describing words for the family member they have chosen and write their own poem. The students will continue to read and hear poems about families in their classroom. Their teacher will provide time and resources for them to continue working on their poetry. One of the resources the students will have access to will be a book that contains family poems by various authors, titled *I Want Another Little Brother - Poems About Families*, illustrated by Anna Currey. The students will also be able to access poetry web sites found on the Internet in order to read the published poems of other children. During the students Art time, the Art teacher will do a lesson in which the students make an illustration to go with a final draft of a family poem of their choosing. The finished poems will be placed in each student's individual file to be brought out at a later time during this project. The concept of community is part of the second grade curriculum and is therefore a natural progression to follow the study of families, which are one of the components of a community. The classroom teacher will introduce this part in their classroom as part of their curriculum. The students will explore what a community is, who and what make up a community, and what the functions of a community are. The teacher will accomplish this by using the materials that are in their Social Studies unit. I will build upon the knowledge that the students acquired in class by sharing poetry that talks about communities and neighborhoods. One of the books that I will be using to accomplish this will be *Night on Neighborhood Street* by Eloise Greenfield. In this book, Greenfield writes poems that recall life on Neighborhood Street. After hearing and discussing poems about neighborhoods and communities, the second grade teacher and I will take the students for an observational walk around the community that surrounds the school. The students will make observations about how the part of the community around the school is structured and who might be living there. After we have completed our walk, we will make a chart of our observations and compare it to what we have already learned to see what differences and similarities there might be. The students will then be asked to give contribute one sentence describing what they saw or learned. As a group, we will then make up one poem using the sentences that were given by each student. We will practice reading the group poem together and individually. The students will then pick one sentence of the poem and will make an illustration to go along with it. The group poem and

pictures will then become part of a bulletin board display about communities. The students will also be asked to make a diorama of what they saw and to write a poem consisting of four sentences to describe their diorama. The dioramas will then be displayed in the library for everyone to see.

Week Three

This week will be devoted to studying the celebration of Kwanzaa and family traditions. The students will learn about Kwanzaa and family traditions by hearing and reading stories about it and doing simple research using library resources and the Internet. Kwanzaa is a celebration that was started in the United States by an African American teacher by the name of Dr. Maulana Karenga. The first celebration took place in 1966 to honor African American people and their past. Kwanzaa starts on December 26 and lasts for seven days. Dr. Karenga took the word Kwanzaa from the Swahili language, meaning first fruits of harvest. In Africa, it is customary to celebrate the harvest before the dry season begins. This holiday was started so that African Americans could learn about their African history and customs. It also helped African Americans to create their own customs. Many celebrate this holiday by getting together with family and friends to share food and exchange presents.

I will read the story *Kwanzaa An African American Holiday* by Sharon Gayle, to familiarize the students with this celebration. I will ask the students to give me words that would describe what Kwanzaa is and how it is celebrated. We will then discuss the seven principles or reasons for Kwanzaa. The principles will be listed on a chart and the students will give me descriptive words to explain each principle. I will then ask the students to choose one principle and to write an acrostic poem about the principle they have chosen. We will then compile the poems into a booklet about Kwanzaa. The students will also use the Internet to research more findings about Kwanzaa.

Many customs are handed down from generation to generation. The African American culture is full of oral traditions as is evident in their gospel music, folktales and songs. African American slaves, for the most part, were not allowed to read or write, and therefore they relied heavily on oral traditions. The students will hear some of the stories that started as oral traditions, such as the one found in *A Story A Story* and African tale retold and illustrated by Gail E. Haley. They will also hear stories from the book *Her Stories African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Stories* as told by Virginia Hamilton. The students will become acquainted with trickster tales from the stories found in this book and this will lead them to explore other trickster stories that are found in the library.

The students will then explore their own family traditions and customs. The students will be asked, "What is a tradition?" They will learn through discussion and hearing stories that a tradition is an act that is done by all members of a group, such as a family, and is repeated regularly and is something that adults teach to their children and in turn the children teach to their children. To gain a better understanding of this concept, I will read the story *Mirandy and Brother Wind* by Patricia C. McKissack. This is a story about a little girl named Mirandy who tries to capture the wind as her partner in order to win first prize in the junior cakewalk dance. This story is based on the cakewalk dance that was introduced by slaves and is rooted in African American culture. The dance is done by couples that strut and prance around a large square while keeping time to the music. The couples were judged on their dancing appearance and their grace, by a group of elders. The winning couple got to take the cake home. After hearing the story, the students will participate in their own cakewalk dance. Our cakewalk dance will be done more like musical chairs, with couples that are at a corner of the table at the stop of the music receiving a cupcake. This will continue until every couple has had a chance to win a cupcake.

This will lead us to explore the traditions and customs that are practiced in each student's family. The

students will do this by interviewing the member of their own family. Each student will ask a set group of questions when conducting their interview.

- What is one family tradition that we celebrate?
- How do we celebrate this tradition?
- How did this tradition start?
- When did it start?
- What is another tradition that we have?
- How and when did it start?

After completing their interviews, the students will share their findings with their classmates. They will then write a poem telling about their favorite family custom or tradition. During their Music time, the Music teacher will introduce the students to some of the work songs of slaves, spirituals, gospels, and jazz pieces. She will choose these songs from the book *How Sweet the Sound* that was compiled by Wade and Cheryl Hudson. The students will select one song that they will practice to use in the program that will be presented to the school with Mrs. Martin and Ms. Sutherland's classes at our ending program.

Week Four

This week will bring us to the close of our unit and our "Hot Chocolate House" presentation. During this week, the students will be selecting poems from their folders that they will be using to read during our poetry reading at the Hot Chocolate House. They will practice reading their selection and make revisions if any are necessary to make. They will make their final copy using Microsoft Word. They will also make invitations to send to their parents, Mrs. Martin and Ms. Sutherland's classes, the Art teacher, the Music teacher, and the Principal. The invitations will be made on the computer using the Sierra program. The students will plan the program and refreshments to be served. They will work together to make decorations and to make the Library over to look like a coffee house. During this week the students will also choose one of their poems that they would like to post on a children's poetry website. Their teachers and I will assist small groups at a time to post their poem on the Internet.

This week will also be used to evaluate the students' progress, and to see what worked with them and what didn't. The student evaluation will consist of checking to see if the students accomplished all the steps during the unit that were required, such as:

- Does their folder contain at least two or three examples of an acrostic poem?
- Are the examples done correctly?
- Are there examples of free form poetry?

- Are there poems for the various topics covered: family, community, customs or traditions?
- Are there illustrations to accompany those poems that needed to be illustrated?
- Did they participate in discussions?
- Did they recite a poem out loud?
- Did they read a poem out loud?
- Were they able to write their poem using Microsoft Word?
- Did they post a poem on the Internet?
- Did they make a diorama?

The classroom teacher and myself will perform this evaluation. The students will do a self-evaluation on how they thought they did. This evaluation will consist of the following:

- I listened to my classmates' poems
- I completed all my work
- I did a neat job
- I did a good job writing and reading my poem

The students will be asked to circle a number that represents how they think they have performed. The scale will range from the number one, which will represent the least effort/could have worked harder to the number four, which will represent the best effort/terrific job done.

Extensions

This unit could be expanded to upper grades by introducing other forms of poetry and using stories and novels that go into more detail. A more in depth study could be done of African American History and how it has affected present day African Americans. Upper elementary students could also to poet studies and they try to write poetry in the style of that poet.

Example of Lessons

Lesson One

Poems: "Eddie Edwards", "Something Big Has Been Here", and "Wavy Hair" Objectives: Students will ...

- listen to various types of short story poetry
- become aware of various styles of poetry

Procedures:

1. Students will be asked what they think a poem is
2. Their answers will be written on the board.
3. Students will listen to various poems and discuss how these poems differ from their original perceptions of poetry
4. Students will generate a list of words that describe poetry.
5. Short poems by Shel Silverstein, Carol Diggory, and Jack Perlusky will be read to the students as examples of poetry
6. Students will peruse a selection of poetry books to become familiar with the different authors and styles

Lesson Two

Poem: "Daniel" from Poetry from A to Z by Paul B. Janeczko Objectives: Students will ...

- listen to acrostic poems

- brainstorm a list of descriptive words
- write an acrostic poem using their name
- share their poem with the other students

Procedures:

1. Composition of an acrostic poem will be explained and demonstrated for the students.
2. Students will be read examples of acrostic poems
3. Students will brainstorm to make a list of descriptive words that will describe qualities about themselves
4. The class will write their own acrostic poems using their names
5. The students will then share their poems with the class
6. The poems will be displayed on the bulletin board under the title "Look at Us"

Lesson Three

Poems: Student Generated Objectives:

- demonstrate their knowledge of simple word processing
- demonstrate their knowledge of accessing a web page
- be able to write their poem using Word
- be able to submit a poem to a poetry web site

Procedure:

1. The students will compose a poem of their choosing from the various topics covered in the unit
2. The student will then use the Microsoft Word program on the computer to type their final

copy

3. The students will select a poem to submit to a poetry website. They will check for errors and completeness of their poem.
4. They will access the book-marked site and follow directions on how to submit their poem.
5. They will check the website to view their published poem.

Teacher's Bibliography

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