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Looking at Human Struggle Through The Language Arts Curriculum: The Faces of Slavery

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The Purpose of the Unit

This unit introduces students to the concept of slavery in America and puts a human face on this tragic period in American history. In doing so, the students will be reading one short story and two books; two nonfiction and one fiction. Each of these stories deals with the experience of individual slaves and their struggle under the bonds of slavery. In reading about individual characters, I hope to help my students understand what a horrific ordeal these slaves must have undergone. I feel that focusing in depth on individual slaves' stories may make the concept of slavery more readily understandable to them. Furthermore, I want my students to explore how these individuals coped and endured in the face of enslavement.

This curriculum unit has been developed for sixth graders, although it can be adapted and modified for upper elementary grades and high school use. I am a sixth grade reading and language arts teacher at the Fair Haven Middle School in New Haven, Connecticut. I teach in an inclusion classroom and therefore my students have a wide range of reading and writing abilities. My school's population is sixty-five percent Hispanic, thirty percent African American and five percent Other. Our school population is diverse racially, ethnically and economically. The majority of our students are eager to learn and delve into new topics. My job as their teacher is to provide them with background information and to lead them on their journey of discovery into topics that are difficult to comprehend.

The idea for this unit grew out of discussions I had with my class as we read an excerpt from their sixth grade McDougal-Littel literature series. The assigned reading was a story entitled "Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima" from "Now is Your Time!" by Walter Dean Myers. The story concerns a West African prince of the Fula tribe. As a young man of twenty-one, Ibrahima was sold into slavery by the Mandingo tribe for firearms. He was then brought to the Colonies and sold at auction. Many times throughout this reading my students asked me: "Why didn't he just run away?" "Why doesn't he tell someone he is an African prince and they'll let him go home?" "Why don't the slaves fight the slave owners and go back to Africa?" This story had clearly engaged their curiosity and I used this to further help them understand the institution of slavery in America. It was a rewarding unit for the class and myself.

The activities in this unit are built around the sixth grade New Haven Language Arts and Social Studies

Standards. Lesson plans in this unit are relevant to the sixth grade standards and will include activities such as reading for information and enjoyment, identifying and defining new vocabulary, interpreting what is read and comparing and contrasting books. A wide variety of reading resources will be explored. These include; fiction and nonfiction selections, a play, and first-hand historical documents. Writing will also be an integral part of this curriculum unit as students will be asked to write a journal selection and a persuasive essay. Part of the sixth grade Social Studies Standards includes the examination of how and why free Africans were captured and brought to America, the growth of slavery in the Colonies and the importance of slavery for the Southern Plantation. All of these issues will be explored in this unit. The accompanying lesson plans will encompass these standards and will serve to increase literacy skills for all students. I foresee this unit on the human struggle of slavery to take eight to ten weeks.

Unit Objectives

- To read fiction and nonfiction materials
- To identify and define new vocabulary
- To compare and contrast books
- To use graphic organizers
- To write a persuasive essay
- To demonstrate speaking skills
- To develop understanding of the issues of slavery in the United States
- To understand the economic issues of slavery in the United States
- To compare and contrast individual slave stories
- To debate issues relating to slaves and freedom

Strategy for Introducing the Unit

This part of the unit will provide students with an initial understanding as to how the slave trade arose in Africa and America. The students will explore a timeline of slavery from its inception in approximately 1433 up until 1865 when the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed. In teaching this unit, I feel there are certain steps to take in exploring the curriculum with the students. I chose to do some pre-instruction at the start of the unit to introduce the concept of slavery. Obviously, in order to fully understand the books we will be reading, and the period in which they are set, the students need to have prior understanding about the history of slavery in America and also knowledge about Africa and its culture. I feel students need to be familiarized with the African Continent, focusing on the West Coast. The indigenous people to this area were known by their tribal names: Mende, Akan, Zulu and Fula. These tribes had their own languages, laws, and culture.

Therefore, the first lessons to be taught will be about how and why slavery arose in America. The book that provides the most information for this part of the unit is "Lest We Forget" by Velma Maia Thomas. It is a book that the teacher could read aloud to the class and have them begin to develop an understanding as to the issues around slavery. Following the reading, students will have a hands-on activity in the production of maps relevant to the formation of the slave-trade routes.

When the students have learned the background information needed, the teacher can then proceed to read with the class the three books that constitute the bulk of this curriculum unit. These books are individual slave stories that the students can then use for comparison and contrast. The three books we will be reading are:

- i) "The Amistad- Slave Revolt and American Abolition" by Karen Zeinert
- ii) "Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima" from "Now is Your Time!" by Walter Dean Myers
- iii) "The Captive" by Joyce Hansen

Along the way, to supplement the readings, the teacher can introduce the play, "La Amistad". This play will serve to foster role-playing and enhance the Amistad experience for the students. An additional reading is also included at the end of the unit, "Tell All the Children Our Story - Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America" by Tonya Bolden. It too, can be read aloud to the students and if time allows the teacher can explore parts of the book that go beyond the Civil War and touch on the African American experience in America. In the Bibliography, I have included videos that can be combined with the reading materials in this unit.

History of Slavery in America

Demand for slaves began to grow in the late 1400s. Colonists of Spain and the West Indies and later colonists in the United States needed manpower that was strong and inexpensive. Africans fulfilled this need. They were captured and sold in return for firearms, gunpowder, cloth, and rum. The traders also persuaded many African tribes to engage in the slave trade with them as the lure for guns proved to be too strong to resist.

After capture, Africans were marched to the coast in shackles and packed tightly onto sailing vessels. The journey to America took place under hellish conditions, which often ended in death for the slaves. To receive the most money from a voyage, traders packed as many captives into the hold of the ship as possible. Millions of slaves are thought to have been brought to America in this manner. Upon arrival in the United States, slaves were gotten ready for auction to be sold to the highest bidder.

Life on the plantations of the South proved to be a continuation of this horror. Slaves were thought of as chattel. They could be bought and sold at any time. Families could be separated by the plantation owner at will. In fact, families were often broken up to break the slaves' spirit. Beatings and other forms of punishment were the norm for any disobedience on the part of the slaves. They worked dawn to dusk, often seven days a week, for their owner. Escape was impossible for many, although some did try to make their way North to Freedom.

An Introduction to Slavery: “Lest We Forget” by Velma Maia Thomas

For the students to further understand the development of slavery, the first book of this unit will be, “Lest We Forget “ by Velma Maia Thomas. This is a three dimensional interactive book which includes historical documents and photographs. Contained within its pages are removable historical documents that include reproductions of maps showing the trade routes to the slave coast and insurance policies issued to protect the owner from loss of income due to pirates, fire and death of the slaves. There is a detailed diagram of an actual slave ship's cargo hold and advertisements from southern newspapers announcing the location and times of public sales of slaves. One of the most unique documents the book offers is a copy of a slave's “freedom” papers that allowed him to prove he was set free from his former owner. Students can work together in small groups to examine and discuss these documents. They can then plan a presentation for the class based upon what they have learned.

Economics and Politics of Slavery: “The Amistad- Slave Revolt and American Abolition” by Karen Zeinert

In order to gain greater insight into the politics and economics of slavery the first whole group read-aloud book of this curriculum unit will be, “The Amistad Slave Revolt and American Abolition” by Karen Zeinert. This

book tells the story of fifty-three West African slaves from Sierra Leone, who in 1839 were transported to Havana, Cuba to work on sugar plantations. There they were illegally classified as native born slaves and put onto the schooner La Amistad. Led by the slave Cinque, the fifty-three slaves revolted and tried to sail the vessel back to Africa. Misled by their Spanish captors, they instead sailed north to Long Island, New York where La Amistad was stopped and seized by the U.S. Navy and all aboard were taken to New London, Connecticut. From New London they were then brought to jail in New Haven, Connecticut. The slaves were charged with murder and piracy and could have been sentenced to be hanged if found guilty. Lawyers and Abolitionists took up their fight for freedom. Their case made its way through the court system until 1841 when John Quincy Adams successfully argued that the Africans were not slaves and should go free. One of the deciding factors in the African's favor was that international slave trade was abolished in 1820. Nineteen years later the Africans were claimed by their Spanish captors to have been slaves for many years. But how to explain that none of the Africans could speak Spanish? This raised the question as to when exactly these slaves were captured. The papers that Senors Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez presented to court were found to be falsified and it was proven that the Africans were illegally obtained. The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed this decision, and the Africans made their way, by ship, back to Sierra Leone.

Cinque is the main character in the story of the Amistad revolt. He is the one who encouraged the captured slaves to revolt while aboard the La Amistad. Cinque was a Mende tribe member who was captured while strolling along a road in Sierra Leone. It was Cinque who united the Amistad captives and became their leader. After winning their freedom, Cinque and thirty-five of the original fifty-three mutineers set sail back to Freeport, Sierra Leone in Africa. Cinque, however, was never reunited with his wife and children and he was sure that they too had fallen captive to the slave trade. It is purported that Cinque died in 1879 on the Island of Sherbro off the coast of Africa and that he may be buried beside the Christian Mission there. But the Connecticut Historical Society asserts that Cinque left for the island of Jamaica never to be heard from again.

With my sixth graders, I find that whole group oral reading sessions are the best way to approach reading a story of this length. These oral reading sessions can vary day to day with the teacher reading some passages and the students reading aloud others. This type of format allows for group discussion, interpreting what has been read and identifying and defining unfamiliar vocabulary.

This book also opens up many avenues for written work. Students could be asked to write a persuasive essay based upon how they feel the situation with the Amistad "cargo" should have been settled. Speaking skills can also come into play as the students could be asked to choose sides to debate the issue.

Further exploration of the Amistad problem could include a play written for students by Susan Bassler Pickford entitled "The Drama of the Amistad". It is issued by Discovery Press and may be copied for classroom use. The play could serve as one of the culminating activities to the Amistad book. Classroom writing lessons could be explored with the students writing alternative endings to the play: answering the question "What would have happened if?".

Another activity that will help clarify the Amistad rebellion for the students is to watch the video entitled "The Amistad Revolt - All We Want Is To Make Us Free". The video will make clear to students exactly what happened and why. Upon completion of watching the video, whole group activities may involve making a timeline of what transpired and each student can write a narrative based upon what they learned.

Because we are a school in the City of New Haven, I feel it is very important to further explore the history of the Amistad with my students. One of the ways in which to do this is to visit the historically accurate recreation of the ship that is on display in the New Haven harbor. I consider the ship to be a valuable teaching

tool and a field trip to the Amistad replica at the harbor would be an enriching activity for the students in conjunction with this unit.

Furthermore, the City of Hartford offers additional field trip opportunities to engage the students' interests. The first site is the Connecticut Historical Society located on Elizabeth Street in Hartford. Currently on exhibit is "Amistad - A True Story of Freedom" which is an in-depth look at the Africans' revolt, and the events that surrounded it. The museum offers interactive and multi-media exhibits along with many historical documents relating to the Amistad incident. Also located in Hartford is the Old State House that was the location of the actual Amistad trial. This location would offer the students a unique experience to actually walk in the steps of the original participants, thus transporting themselves into the setting of the book.

An Individual Slave Story: "Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima" from "Now is Your Time!" by Walter Dean Myers

The next two books of this unit can also be read together as a class. The first one is an excerpt from the McDougal-Littel literature series that all sixth grade New Haven students use in their classroom. It is entitled "Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima" from the book, "Now is Your Time" by Walter Dean Myers. It is the true story of an African prince who was sold into slavery. In the reading, students come to know that Ibrahima was born in 1762 in Fouta Djallon, which is now Guinea. He was raised as an educated son of a Tribal Chieftain. At twelve, he was sent to Timbuktu to study and learn more about the religion of Islam.

In his twenties, Ibrahima led his cavalry in a war against the Mandingo tribe. Unfortunately for Ibrahima, the Mandingo tribe had joined with white slave traders to exchange men for firearms. Thus, Ibrahima found himself on a slave ship bound for America. Once in America, he was sold at auction to a small plantation owner from the Mississippi Territory. During class discussion, there are many issues to explore: how Africans turned against each other when confronted with the power of guns, the confusion Ibrahima felt in being betrayed by his fellow Africans, and how in the United States he was treated as being less than human. As a Fula tribe leader, he was an educated man and discussion could follow about how he must have felt to now be a captive in a strange land where he did not speak the language and did not know the customs. Because there is a poignant section of the story that deals with Ibrahima and his fellow captives being put into shackles and loaded onto slave ships, it is here that the teacher can introduce a lesson exploring what the slave ships were like.

As students read the story, the teacher and students can pick out unfamiliar vocabulary words and explore their definitions. Plot development is an important aspect to include in any classroom discussions while reading. Reading standards for sixth graders includes identifying setting, being able to summarize a story and to learn to use graphic organizers.

For this story, the class can use a Narrative map and sequence form that lists characters, setting, problem, and events leading to resolution. An important strategy that leads to student comprehension is to use maps to pinpoint where the main character Ibrahima lived in Africa, the route he traveled to America and his final destination in Natchez, Mississippi.

Another interesting activity to do as a class would involve having the students write an imaginary journal

passage exploring the time when Ibrahima ran away from his master and escaped into the backwoods of Natchez. He hides there eating berries and fruits. He sees men with dogs knowing they are looking for him. He feels helpless knowing that he has no way of returning to Africa, he has no one to help him and suicide is forbidden by his religion. This opens the door to students projecting themselves into Ibrahima's place and writing what they would have done.

An Individual Slave Story: "The Captive" by Joyce Hansen

The final part of this unit is a fictional story "The Captive" by Joyce Hansen. I chose this book in particular because the slave, Kofi, is about the same age as my students. I thought they could readily identify with his plight. The story takes place in the year 1788. Kofi is a member of Ashanti tribe. He is taken into bondage and sold at auction in Boston, Massachusetts. At the age of twelve, Kofi is traveling with his tribe to the City of Kumasi for an annual ceremony honoring the Ashanti Kings of the past and present. Kofi's father is an Ashanti Chieftain. During the ceremony, Kofi is surprised to see white men in attendance. He has never seen white men before and listens to his father's warning to never walk alone as there is talk of an attack. On the second day of the ceremony, the white men kill his father and other tribal leaders and Kofi is taken captive and marched to the coast along with hundreds of other captives. All of the slaves are shackled together with great iron bars placed around their necks and ankles. The slaves are branded with a white-hot iron between their shoulder blades.

Kofi is loaded onto a crowded slave ship with one hundred other slaves, many of whom are children. Aboard ship they are starved, sickened with disease and beaten regularly. He arrives in Boston, Massachusetts in the year 1788, where he is bought by an elderly couple. He longs to tell them that he is the son of a great Ashanti Chief, but not knowing the language he can not make himself understood. On the farm he is made to do many chores such as carrying wood, sweeping the house and tending the live stock.

Gradually Kofi learns to speak English and with the help of a young indentured servant and another slave he runs away to seek his freedom in the City of Lynn, Massachusetts. They go there because they have heard of a man who helps runaway slaves. In Lynn the three boys are almost recaptured by their master, but manage to get away. The group hides out on a sailing vessel. There a sympathetic Captain who is a Black Freeman discovers them. When they tell him of their mistreatment at the hands of their owner the Captain, Paul Cuffe, decides that the courts should settle the matter. In Massachusetts at this time it is illegal to own slaves. At the trial, Kofi's master claims he took in the boys as paid servants, not slaves. The boys tell their side of the story and the court decides that Kofi is to be put into the care of Captain Cuffe, who hires him as a deck hand. The remainder of his life is spent as a first mate to Captain Cuffe and he travels the world helping other slaves escape to freedom.

The story "The Captive" illustrates how a life can be altered by certain events. Class discussion could revolve around those instances in the story when Kofi's life took a turn. Higher order thinking skills will be called into play by students answering questions such as, "What do you think Kofi's life would have been like if he had not been captured on the day of the tribal ceremony?" Students can also be asked to write how they would feel if they had been in Kofi's situation; kidnapped and taken to a strange land where he does not even know the language. How would they have coped? Would they have taken the path Kofi chose, which was to run away from his abusive slave owner? When the students have written their paragraphs they may share them

with the class and discussion could follow about the different ways in which the students answered the question.

Now that the students have read all three book selections, lessons can follow comparing and contrasting the lives of Cinque, Ibrahima and Kofi. This can be done using graphic organizers or by writing expository. Students can then choose one of the characters they were most intrigued by and write why they chose that character. They may present their choice to the class.

In addition, because we live in a highly visual world, I feel that videos greatly enhance the learning process for students. Videos that can be used with this unit can be found in the bibliography. I will mention that I viewed the first two hours of the miniseries "Roots" with my class and they were very moved by the plight of the main character Kunta Kinte. This video included scenes of Kunta Kinte's life in Africa, his capture and the hardships he endured aboard the slave ship. It fully conveyed the feelings of helplessness and fear that can only enhance the knowledge the students have gained through their reading.

Young Children as Slaves: "Tell All the Children Our Story - Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America" by Tonya Bolden.

As I was teaching my class about the issue of slavery there was much discussion about what it might have been like to be a slave as a young child. I was not able to offer much information to them about this subject until I came upon a book entitled "Tell All the Children Our Story - Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America" by Tonya Bolden. This enlightening book explores how young children survived the ordeal of slavery. It tells about the ways in which children were used for labor and the many jobs that young slaves were forced to do. It tells of their pain upon being forced to separate from their families. This book offers many firsthand historical accounts of how life was for children under the oppression of slavery. I feel this book will be a valuable resource to use with my students and it will serve to answer many of their concerns about what the life of young slaves was like.

Unit Summary

My curriculum unit serves to convey to students that the institution of slavery was made up of individual stories. The three book selections I chose introduced the students to three Africans who all endured the hardships of the slave experience. How he or she survived and coped with their plight is one way that each student can gain some insight into what the slave experience must have been like. My personal goal in teaching this unit to my students is to have them recognize that history is not just made up of dates and places but that it was actually real people surviving and coping under conditions that we will never experience for ourselves.

LESSON PLAN ONE

SOURCE: "The Amistad - Slave Revolt and American Abolition"

MATERIALS: Large white paper and markers.

OBJECTIVES: Students will draw a map of Africa, America and Cuba to recreate the route of the Tecora and the Amistad voyages.

PROCEDURES:

1. Students may work in pairs / use different color markers for each leg of the journey.
2. Students will draw and label their map, finding these locations:

Africa	America	Cuba
Lomboko Harbor	Connecticut	Havana
Sierra Leone	Long Island, New York	
West Africa	New London, Connecticut	

Bodies of Water
Atlantic Ocean
Caribbean Sea
3. Starting in Lomboko Harbor students will label the route of the Tecora to Havana, Cuba.
4. Students will trace the route the Amistad took from Cuba until its seizure off the coast of Long Island, New York.
5. Students will trace the journey of the Amistad from Long Island to the port of New London, Connecticut.
6. Display maps around the classroom.

LESSON PLAN TWO

SOURCE: Newspaper quotes from the 1839-1840 Amistad trial.

OBJECTIVES: Students will write a persuasive essay using these three quotes to debate the issue of whether or not the Africans should go free.

1. The slaves are ours

The pound of flesh, which I demand,
Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it:
If you deny me, fie upon your law!
I stand for justice: answer, shall I have it?

From Colored American, June 6, 1840 poem by Jose Ruiz, dated 1/10/1840.

2. *Can it be that America which has been a "promised land" of security and peace to the oppressed of all the earth . . . will turn a deaf ear to the cries that reach us from the shores of Africa.*

From New London Gazette and General Adviser dated September 4, 1839.

3. *A slave is in the power of a master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, his labor; he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what may belong to his master.*

From the Louisiana Civil Code, Article 35, published in the Charter Oak, Hartford, Connecticut, dated September, 1839.

LESSON PLAN THREE

SOURCE: "Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima from Now is Your Time!"

OBJECTIVE: To create an imaginary journal page.

PROCEDURE:

1. As a class reread the part of the story where Ibrahima has run away into the backwoods of Natchez.
2. Students will write an imaginary journal passage that Ibrahima may have written that night.
3. The students should address these issues in their writing:
 - a. Why did you run away?
 - b. How do you feel now that you are a runaway?
 - c. What are your thoughts on this night?
 - d. Write about the choices you can make: keep running, go back to your master or suicide.
 - e. What do you decide to do now?
 - i) If you go back, tell why?
 - ii) If you choose to keep running what might you encounter, and where will you go.
 - f. Suicide is against your religion. Do you see this as an option?
 - i) Why or why not?

LESSON PLAN FOUR

SOURCE: “The Amistad - Slave Revolt and American Abolition”

“Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima from Now is Your Time!”

“The Captive”

OBJECTIVE: Students will write a summary of one of the stories read.

PROCEDURE:

1. Ask the students to choose one of the books that they liked most.
2. They will summarize the book and write it in the format of a children’s book or a cartoon.
3. Share the results with the class.

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