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Poetry Alive! Grabbing Young Readers via the Lyrical Voice

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Introduction

We have quite a challenge in the 21st century: children today are bombarded with video games, cell phones, and Internet lingo that do not place the accent on quality writing as we once knew it--even with the most basic sentences. Quick and easy is the trend of the day! How do we creatively engage students to connect with descriptive writing, to connect with visual images depicted in written form? How do we help young learners recognize that stories can be created without zeroing in solely on the technical aspects of language? How can we help them grasp that vivid images can be portrayed with the use of words in creative form? Bringing literature to life across genre is, thus, crucial at the elementary level. By sparking interest in written art forms at this formative age, we can help children grasp that the written word is the spoken word penned in creative ways. By rousing that interest--intentionally tapping into children's audio-visual, kinesthetic, and tactile learning styles--we can ultimately set the tone for a love of language among young learners (across cultures, ages, and ability levels) to last a lifetime!

How can we effectively achieve this end? One way to creatively engage children is through the use of the poetic voice. Poetry is a blend of lyrical, rhythmic, kinesthetic motion that draws young learners in. The use of words and thoughts packaged in musical syllables and special structures helps to create a welcoming literary environment for even the most disinterested child. Poetry--whether written in sonnet form or short verses--if masterfully created, can help children dig deep into their innermost selves to understand and connect with a larger, global community. It is for this reason that I created Poetry Alive! Grabbing Young Readers Via the Lyrical Voice.

My curriculum unit, targeted at third graders, is modifiable for students in Grades 4 through 5. The poetic works of Edward Lear ("The Jumblies"), Eloise Greenfield ("Nathaniel's Rap"), Langston Hughes ("Mother to Son"), and Arnold Adoff ("Black Is Brown Is Tan") will each be explored beginning in May, to kick off National Poetry Month. Depending upon the length and intensity of the poem coupled with student engagement, each poetic work will be studied over a one-to-two week period, three times a week at 50 minutes per session. The works of our noted authors herald life encounters and emotions often embraced and experienced by people across cultures. Through the poetic voices of these authors, children across ability levels will be introduced to descriptive writing using such literary devices as simile, metaphor, onomatopoeia, and more. Story content as it applies to each poem will be accentuated with a focus on the first or third person character(s) contained

therein.

Using mime and role play, coupled with interactive writing activities, Poetry Alive! becomes an interactive teaching tool through which students make meaningful text-to-self-to-world connections. Equally important, students will be given opportunities to "meet" each author. By doing so, they will get a feel for how personal life experiences can serve as a foundation for poetic story creations and writing in general. Students will learn to identify the author's craft and will examine possible explanations behind each author's poetic creation. Equally important, students will work on a collaborative basis, making Poetry Alive! not only a language arts but also a social development experience.

The works of Lear, Hughes, Greenfield, and Adoff span culture, purpose, and rhythmic style, yet they each hold common focal points: They each possess a definitive narrator's voice--some omniscient and others as inside observers. Each poem (see attached bibliographic and on-line resource listing to access these poetic selections in their entirety) contains a repetitive line or stanza that seems to embrace what many might consider strong and/or empowering aspects of the human spirit! Also to be accentuated is the time period in which each poetic work was created. Lear's "The Jumblies" was written in or around 1866. Greenfield's "Nathaniel Talking" was created in 1982. Hughes' "Mother to Son" was written in 1922. Adoff's "Black Is Brown Is Tan" was created in 1973 but is based on social concerns that impacted America during the '60s. Despite the differing time frames in which the works were written, these literary creations and their respective messages are timeless. The rationale behind my choosing this select group of poems is thus intentional: first, they each herald an empowering message. Second, they each use rich, engaging language to bring its characters to life, forcing us to take into consideration the power of the author's voice and craft overall.

Through an up-close examination of each poetic work and its author, young learners will experience that words spark images and being able to visualize the written word helps the reader gain insight into understanding the literary creation overall. To stir the excitement, students will first have the opportunity to listen to and experience each poem. The key is for you, the instructor, to read the poetic work with such fervor and expression that our young audience is captivated by its lyricism. The Q&A process begins thereafter, during which young learners will discuss, debate, evaluate, and affirm their view of the text: "Who is the narrator in each of the poetic pieces? What message does the narrator convey to his or her reading audience? Is the narrator's view that of an omniscient outsider or that of a first-person inside viewer? Are the characters in each poetic work believable? What is the overarching message in each respective poem?...". These and other questions will be explored. At the end of the study, students will be required to demonstrate their understanding through Q & A, mimed reenactments of the work, and/or written responses.

Highlight the Author

To provide students with insight into the depth of poetry and story creation, I deem it necessary for young learners to learn about the writers of select literary creations across genre. By introducing the author, we help children recognize and experience that the author is a real, living being whose life may have in some way influenced his or her writing. Thus, after introducing the poetic works of the four authors noted herein, share a bit about them with your young learners. Be certain to have each of the authors' photos on-hand so the experience will be both visible and tangible (see on-line poetry selections by designated authors and bios in the bibliographic resource section of this unit).

In addition to introducing young learners to the author, before beginning each poetic work, introduce students to key vocabulary words as they relate to the style and content of each poem. To assist in this regard, the poetic selections that follow are prefaced with a listing of key vocabulary words. In this way, young learners

will not only build a strong word base, but will also grasp the essence of the poetry selection. Before starting this unit, be sure to generally introduce students to some attribute of poetry and basic words associated with poetic creations as follows:

couplet	figurative language	limerick	line	literal language
metaphor	onomatopoeia	prose	rhyme	rhythm
simile	stanza	verse		

Comprehension Connections Through "Mime"

Beyond learning about the poems themselves, we want students not only to articulate their understanding of the poem in oral and written form, but to demonstrate their understanding through mime. Thus, "mime" should also be included as a reinforced vocabulary word with each poetic presentation. Emphasizing it will serve as a reminder for young learners to brainstorm on how to act out the poetic work. Thus, as the poem is read, students will be required to listen intently, zeroing on words that convey images and actions.

To help students grasp the mime concept, you will demonstrate that miming the poem is like to playing a game of charades. As students listen to each poem, they should think about the way the character might respond or act when conveying a specific action, message, or ideas within the poem. As a trial exercise, call on students to role play the qualities of anger, sadness, happiness, fear, hate, love, indifference, selfishness, fright, bravery, curiosity, and other character traits. Go a step further, and have them role play verbs and prepositional phrases like sailing across the sea, listening intently to Mom, cuddling with Dad, "rapping" with friends... (My third graders enthusiastically tried their hand at this. The laughter proved contagious as they executed their moves. When you introduce this lesson, you will find that something "clicks," and the children take on a serious stance, really getting into the feel of the literary work and the characters and images contained therein.) The primary goal here is to help students internalize language, bringing words to life and conveying meaningful messages through the art of using facial and body gestures.

Ready, Set... Begin!

Poem # 1 "The Jumblies"

Duration of Study: 2 Weeks, six 50 minute sessions

Related Vocabulary

Chankly Bore	crockerly jar	drank their health	dumplings	Jack daws
Ring-bo-re	Stilton cheese	sieve	Torrible Zone	yeast

Edward Lear is a 19th century author/illustrator known for his extraordinary ability to create limericks, a type of humorous poem usually written in five lines with an AABBA rhyme scheme. At times he expanded the limerick form to create lengthier poems with as many as six stanzas. (Lear referred to this writing form as "nonsense poems.") "The Jumblies" is one of those creations. It engagingly begins:

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!
And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, "You'll all be drowned!"
They called aloud, "Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button! We don't care a fig!
In a sieve we'll go to sea!
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve. (1-14)a1aa1a

In this first stanza, a definitive image is established and questions are raised:

- Who is the narrator?
- Are there other narrators and/or characters in the poem? If so, who are they?
- In what country might this story have begun? Generally, based on the opening stanza, where might this story have taken place? Explain.
- Who might the Jumblies be? Are more than one type of Jumblies represented? Explain.
- What type of personalities do the Jumblies seem to possess?

What are
the
physical
attributes
of the
Jumblies?
Explain
why you
draw this
conclusion?
Are the
Jumblies
really blue
and green,
or might
color imply
something
else?

· What might the sea represent?

· Based on the images contained in the first stanza, what message might the author be trying to convey? What makes you draw this conclusion?

At this point, some clear speculations can be made. Three voices are evident in this poem: the narrator, who serves as an outside observer viewing the Jumblies; the friends who also serve as outside observers; and the blue and green Jumblies themselves. Zeroing in on the attributes of each of our viewers, it appears the seafaring Jumblies are a different breed of people within their population. They are not ones who necessarily follow rules; at best, they care little about what others think. This is implied in the line "we don't care a button, we don't care a fig!" There aren't many like them (as is repetitively implied in the last three lines found in each of the six stanzas). The Jumblies appear to be adventurers--risk takers. After all, who would sail across the sea in a holey sailing vessel normally used as a colander? The fact that they fit into a sieve also implies that they are small. This too may have figurative implications in that the Jumblies are not a people who can be deemed "the norm." Notice too the setting: the day on which the Jumblies set sail is storm-ridden; yet they decide to go out to sea. Based on Line 7, it appears their friends were quite worried. It can also be supposed that their friends believed the Jumblies to be an irrational, carefree lot. From the reading audience and perhaps the narrator's view, on the contrary, the Jumblies can be deemed an inquisitive, adventurous bunch who thinks outside of the box.

As stanzas II and III emerge, young readers gather that the Jumblies fearlessly venture across the ocean. The trek seems to symbolize venturing into the unknown. A treacherous storm encountered during the journey causes the Jumblies to toss and turn at sea. It seems at first that they may second-guess themselves as the storm grows in intensity. Then, fast on their feet, they think of ingenious ways to stop the sieve from sinking, as implied in Lines 3 through 10 in Stanza 3. Despite the challenge, the Jumblies maintain their stance and

persevere. They make the best of the situation and appear to continue enjoying the adventure.

By Stanza IV, the night-long journey continues. They sing joyously, seemingly proud that they chose to take the journey in spite of it all. In Stanza V, the Jumblies continue to celebrate having overcome the rigors of the voyage. They sail to the Western seas, and soon find themselves in a region where they are able to purchase "green Jack-daws," a crow-like bird indigenous to China, Mongolia, and other Asian countries. They gorge themselves on Stilton cheese, a type of cheese made in England similar in flavor to blue cheese. (Although it is never stated, the fact that the Jumblies feasted on this dairy product while guzzling Ring-bo-ree, a type of British ale, led my students to conjecture that the Jumblies are quite familiar with British products and may have "had a taste for home." They speculated that England may be The Jumblies' original homeland.)

In Stanza VI, we discover the Jumblies are homeward bound. Readers subsequently learn that although the Jumblies have been away for 20 years, they have not been forgotten by their townspeople. In fact, the narrator and/or the townspeople (it's up to the students to determine who) seem to convey a new sentiment about the Jumblies! (My students suggested that the townspeople were envious because they had never taken on such an adventure!)

Based on Lear's work, one may deduce that the message conveyed is, "Dare to be different. Fearlessly venture into the unknown, recognizing that life is filled with risks and challenges. Trials and difficulties will surely be encountered, but through it all, much knowledge is gained. Not being the crowd follower provides us with opportunities to embrace life, to live it to the fullest with no regrets!"

About Edward Lear. This poet/author/illustrator was born on May 12, 1812 in Highgate, England. During his childhood years, he suffered from epilepsy and depression. Throughout his growing years into adulthood, he often combated health issues. One of 20 children, he was cared for primarily by an older sister, Ann. His father was a stockbroker; he was, however, not a good financier. As a result, Edward's family had to adjust to a moderate-to-low-income standard of living. Nevertheless, young Edward loved classical literature and drawing. By age 15, he had already begun writing, drawing, and selling his literary and artistic creations to support himself and to assist his family. As he entered adulthood, he continued earning a living using his artistic and literary talent. He traveled to South America and created scientific books on birds. He was even hired to give drawing lessons to Queen Victoria of England. By 1846, Edward's first edition of nonsense verses was published. He loved visiting the Mediterranean and traveling to distant lands; that love was conveyed in the fact that he wrote and illustrated travel books. By 1855 and 1861, two more editions of his nonsense verses were published. By 1867, his poetic song entitled "The Owl and the Pussycat" was published. Interestingly, although born in England, Edward Lear spent most of his adult life traveling abroad. He traveled to many Mediterranean countries, to Asia, and Brazil. During his senior years, he purchased land in San Remo, Italy. Known as one who enjoyed life and quite the trickster, he died in his San Remo home on January 29, 1888 at age 75.

Author Connection Discussion Question. What aspects of Edward Lear's personal life may have influenced the creation of "The Jumblies?" Based on provided information, have students conjecture why or how the author's life may have impacted the creation of his poetic work.

Mime Activity. Have students re-enact The Jumblies using specific body gestures that they themselves develop. Select four children to portray the seafaring Jumblies, six to portray the townspeople, five or six to portray the backdrop (the ocean, the mountains, the storm...), and three to four to serve as the narrator. (My students wore blue and green face paint to portray the seafaring Jumblies. My Jumblies crew brought the characters to life using hand gestures and facial expressions that conveyed worry, excitement, fear,

happiness. They held hands and spun around as if playing a game of ring-around-the-rosy to portray spinning around in a sieve. The students portraying the background each gestured the "far and few" stanza, with the waving of hands and the narrowing of the index fingers and thumbs. Hands latched, they moved their arms fluidly in synchronized motions to portray the ocean waves. Our "storm crew" danced frantically back and forth around the seafaring Jumbies to portray the intensity of the storm. Our "trees" swayed dangled fingers to convey the wind-blown, dangerous journey. Kinesthetic energy took on a creative, literary art form in which the children were thoroughly engaged.)

Writing Activity: Compare & Contrast Making Personal Connections. (I have found that oftentimes in my school district, third graders struggle when it comes to answering questions that force them to make comparative text-to-self connections. The following writing exercise is provided to address that concern.)

Have your students reread the poem, with emphasis on the first stanza. Then, ask them to think of a time when they wanted to do something, but their friend or friends wanted them to do something different? How was the seafaring Jumbies' response to their voyage and life overall different from or similar to those of their friends? Elaborate. Use a Venn diagram to help students accentuate the similarities or differences. Additionally, inform students that when responding to this question, they should zero in on the reaction they had to an experience or situation, not to the actual situation or experience itself: the emotion evoked by the experience or situation and the response to that emotion that is being compared.

Poem #2 "Mother to Son"

(Note: Excerpted lines from Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" are not contained herein because irrespective of the number words, lines, verses, or stanzas cited, a five-year renewable, fee-based Copyright Permissions agreement must be obtained from Random House, holder of the copyright for Hughes' estate. Be mindful of this should you decide to cite any Hughes' poetic works in hard copy or on-line form. To view this poem in its entirety, please access <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=177021>.)

Duration of Study: 1 Week, three 50 minute sessions (Extend if necessary)

Related Vocabulary

climin ²	imagery	landin ² s	kinder	metaphor
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Langston Hughes wrote about his observations and personal interaction with the world community in both poetic and narrative form. His work encompasses human interaction across cultures. More often, Hughes zooms in on the African-American community, the enduring spirit of Black people despite race prejudice and socio-economic disparities and challenges. His poem, "Mother to Son," is one of many literary works that celebrates Black life and the enduring spirit of blackfolk in the United States. Hughes' poetic styles ranges from rhymed verse to metaphoric, rhythmically flowing verses: He begins by figuratively describing the challenges of life. In these opening lines, a definitive image is established and questions are raised:

- Who is the narrator?
- Does another narrator/character exist in the poem, and what message does the additional narrator/character convey? Explain.
- What might the socio-economic status of the characters be? Explain.

What
type(s) of
personalities
does each of
the
characters
seem to
possess?
Explain?

- What physical characteristics might you envision as it pertains to the characters? What words or phrases within the poem do you draw this conclusion?
- What might the description of life being like "stripped, wooden floors filled with tacks and torn-up boards" represent? Explain.
- Based on the images contained in these first nine lines, what message might the author be attempting to convey? What makes you draw this conclusion?

At this point, the evaluative process begins. Students should immediately note that the title of the poem provides insight into who the narrator is. The opening line reveals that the mother is the narrator. Hughes' use of dialogue is instrumental in helping the reader draw visual images regarding the mother and son interaction. From Hughes' strategic use of metaphors, one envisions a woman who has struggled perhaps socially and economically. The vernacular used in Lines 1 through 7 draws the reader to conclude that mom works for low-income wages. Images of a cleaning woman or domestic are evoked. The colloquial use of language permeates Hughes' poem and leads readers to believe the mother may have grown up in the South, or may be a person who has had little if any formal schooling. In Lines 10 to 14, the mother reveals that at times, moments in life might be so difficult one may not know where to turn. In Lines 8-9, her wisdom-filled words reveal that she knows this reality--and the importance of persevering--quite well! In line 15, it is sensed that her son has encountered some sort of obstacle--perhaps a life circumstance that may have caused him to want to give up. She pleads with him, encouraging him not to concede because the task or challenge at hand seems insurmountable. She asks that he observe her life struggle, learn from her example, and ultimately persevere.

Interestingly, two of my third graders came up with fascinating observations. The first, Janaysia, noted she had grandparents whose language usage was similar to that of the mother in Hughes' poem. Another, Teresa, noted that even though Langston Hughes may have been describing a relationship between an African-American mother and her son, the experience does not have to be limited to Black people. I accentuate this point because it shows that we cannot take for granted that young learners in the 21st century do not have primary source experiences with the past. Some of our students live in house-holds that are very much connected with the past through the elders. Teachers must not take this reality for granted; rather, engage students to connect with their personal experiences to enhance their knowledge base.

Several other students pointed out that although we do not actually "hear" the son speak, his voice is also

present. In Line 14, one of my third graders brought out that "it feels like the boy might have said something to his mother that made her strongly reply not to give up." My students agreed that the poet indirectly leads the reader to embrace what seems to be the son's downtrodden viewpoint and speechless response.

As held true in "The Jumblies," Hughes' repetitive line comparing life not being like a crystal stair brings power to the work, reminding the reader that life is not easy--expect to encounter challenges. When confronted by them, muster up courage, hold on, and forge ahead.

About James Langston Hughes. World-renowned for his literary genius, Langston Hughes became widely known during the Harlem Renaissance era. Born on February 1, 1902, he was initially raised by his parents, Carrie and James Nathaniel Hughes. Hughes' parents divorced during his childhood years. During his formative years, he was shuffled between them. Although he lived with his mother, she oftentimes had difficulty finding work to sustain them both.

During his childhood years, Langston resided primarily with his maternal grandmother, Mary Patterson Leary Langston. As a child, he often felt alone. He attended segregated schools and knew well the injustices of segregation. Despite the existence of Jim Crow laws, he was allowed to attend an all-white school during his first grade year at school in Topeka, Kansas. He was taught and encouraged by his grandmother to take a stand whenever confronted by racism.

Young Langston spent countless hours in libraries and often wrote about his experiences and those of other disenfranchised Blacks. By age 12, he had already lived in six different American cities, from Kansas to Chicago to Harlem. By the time he turned 18, his first book was published. During his adolescent and early adult years, Langston assumed various occupations--from working as a waiter to being a Columbia University student to being a sailor to serving as a doorman at a nightclub in Paris, France. A world traveler, he experienced Mexico, China, Japan, Cuba, and Haiti. His visits to West Africa and other distant lands, coupled with life experiences, are reflected in his poetic and narrative writings. Langston Hughes penned rhythm and truth with his words, using them to help us experience the spirit and lives of blackfolk in America, as evidenced in such works as "Mother To Son," "I've Known Rivers," "My People," and "Merry-Go-Round." He too encouraged people to embrace one another as members of the human family, as evidenced in his poetic creation, "I Dream A World."

Author Connection Discussion Question: How might Langston Hughes' personal life have influenced his creation of "Mother to Son?" Explain. Students will experience that Hughes was a careful observer of life. He too experienced race prejudice and its impact on African-American life overall. Using background information on Hughes' life, have students speculate on why Hughes may have chosen to create this work.

Mime Activity. Select student pairs to re-enact "Mother-to-Son." Have students work in paired groups to craft their mimed interpretation. Encourage them to use specific body gestures that they themselves develop to portray emotions felt throughout the poem. (My students worked in paired, collaborative groups to come up with mimed gestures for this poem. Using aprons, mops, and brooms as props when portraying the mother, they incorporated facial expressions, hand gestures, and body movements to convey such emotions as worry, concern, nurturing, attentiveness, reprimand, and hope, and understanding.) As two students mime the poem, the remaining students can engagingly read and/or recite Hughes poetic work in chorale fashion.

Writing Activity: A Letter from Momma. Using images evoked from Langston Hughes' poem, have your students create a persuasive letter to encourage "their son" not to give up. Have your children brainstorm on a problem that a son could have encountered. (My students formulated two ideas: the first constituted the son

not wanting to go to school because he struggled with Math; he was too ashamed to tell the teacher, and he did not want his classmates to know he did not understand the subject matter. The second was the son not wanting to attend college because he wanted to go straight to work after high school to help support his single-parent Mom financially. My third graders unanimously agreed go with their first choice and subsequently wrote letters based on that theme!) In this regard, encourage students to write as if they are actually the mother in the poem. Urge them to help the reader feel, hear, and see the emotion contained therein. Doing so helps to lay the foundation for powerful persuasive writing.

Poem #3 "Nathaniel's Rap"

Duration of Study: 1 Week, three 50 minute sessions (Extend if necessary)

Related Vocabulary

“cypher”	earflaps	rap	rhythm	rhyme
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Quality rap is poetry in motion: it has rhythm, rhyme and meter. It often employs onomatopoeia, metaphor, simile, and other engaging and colorful words to bring vivid messages and images to life. Many in today's young generation across cultures tend to connect with this literary art form: my third graders were no exception, for they immediately grasped the rhythm and fluidity of the Nathaniel's verses and quickly drew conclusions about the little boy who rapped his heart out, as evidenced in the excerpt from Greenfield's poem below:

I'm Nathaniel talking
and Nathaniel's me
I'm talking about
my philosophy...
About the things I do
And the people I see
All told in the words
of Nathaniel B. Free--
That's me!... (1-9)a2a

By way of this opening line and the rhythm of Greenfield's poetic work overall, one can envision how and why the magic begins. Questions herein are also raised:

- Who is the narrator?
- Do any other characters exist in the poem? Explain.
- What word(s) would you use to describe the main character's personality? Explain?
- What physical characteristics might you envision as it pertains to the main character? Explain why you draw this conclusion?
- Based on narrator's voice used throughout this poem, what message might the author be attempting to convey? What makes you draw this conclusion?

"Nathaniel's Rap" is the first of a series of poems contained in Eloise Greenfield's poetic compilation, "Nathaniel Talking." Nathaniel, the narrator, is a nine-year old with much to say with regard to his view of himself, his family, his community, and the world. Upon first encountering Nathaniel through this poetic form, it appears this young man is on top of the world. He appears to be a confident little fellow, with a countenance like he can handle anything that befalls him. It also appears that this youngster has many questions to ask and several points of view that he embraces.

As the verse progresses, Nathaniel's spirit becomes more pronounced: "...I can rap, I can rap, rap, rap! I can rap, rap, rap, till your earflaps flap... (10-13)a3a" It becomes apparent that Nathaniel wants others to listen to his point of view and to take them seriously into consideration. The way he dresses and the way he interacts with family and friends seem to give Nathaniel a sense of identity. It appears Nathaniel is an integral, connected member within his community. Not until you delve into the remaining poems--which span genre in Greenfield's poetic compilation--do readers get detailed perspective of Nathaniel's personality, i.e., there is more to him than the initial surface view. Nevertheless, confidence is one of many first impressions exuded when Nathaniel raps, and the way he conveys that confidence entices young readers to jump right in to his rhythmic message!

About Eloise Greenfield. Born and raised in Parmele, North Carolina, during the early days of the Great Depression, Eloise Greenfield was the second oldest of five children. Despite a childhood in which poverty was no stranger, her family provided a rich, nurturing environment for their children. Her writings are influenced by her childhood years and interactions with family and community members. One who embraces the concept of extended family, Greenfield believes that family and friendships are the sustaining factor in life survival. That viewpoint is reflected in her children's book creations, as evidenced in such works as "She Come Brining' Me That Little Baby Girl," "Grandpa's Face," "Honey, I Love," and of course "Nathaniel Talking." Greenfield lived through those eras where combating race prejudice was at the forefront. During her growing years, she experienced the stereotypical, negative images often used to depict people of African descent. Recognizing the need to counter such negative images served as a focus of her children's book story creations.

Author Connection Discussion Question: How might Eloise Greenfield's life experiences have influenced her creation of "Nathaniel Talking?" Explain. Using background information of the author's life, students will experience that Eloise Greenfield lived during the civil rights era, and was a careful observer of her surroundings--particularly as it impacted relationships within her community. Realizing that the accomplishments of African-American peoples were rarely heralded, she set out to present positive, accurate images regarding African-American heritage, and the African-American community, with emphasis on social

interaction particularly as it related to black youth.

Mime Activity. Students will be assigned to memorize and recite "Nathaniel Talking." Dressed in caps, sunglasses, and jackets, students will be given the freedom to express themselves, using body gestures to emulate the spirit of Nathaniel.

Writing Assignment: Rap On Independent & Collaborative Team Writing Session

In the world of rap, to "cypher" is to gather together to join in the creative rapping experience. It's like a friendly competition in which one person begins with rap verses, and as soon as it's done, another jumps in to pump it up a notch! Each person takes a turn to showcase his or her creative style.

This writing/shared reading assignment will slightly differ from the usual ciphery effort. In this instance, students will be given opportunities to craft their own rap creations or to work in collaborative groups to help one another create their very own rap verses. The title of their poetic work will be simply stated, "(student's first name) Talking." Students are encouraged to brainstorm on rhyming words, to use repetitive rhythm and rhyme, infusing a bit about themselves into the syncopated beat. The challenge: no random use of rhymes can be employed; the rap creation must make convey a positive message.

I introduced this poetic work coupled with writing assignment to my third graders and fourth grade after-school students. My children across grade levels had a ball penning their individual rap creations using Nathaniel's format as a model. Based on the initial reading the poetry selection, I had my blossoming rappers brainstorm on a list of character traits to describe Nathaniel. Among the words used to describe him were confident, open-minded, proud, persevering, talented, unappreciated, talkative, cool, loquacious, independent, self-centered, playful, friendly, braggart, curious, and inquisitive. Subsequently, my students were asked to brainstorm on words that best described their spirit. Based on their personal listing coupled with Greenfield's poetic works, the students began their writing effort. One of my fourth graders wrote:

Kahlilah Talkin'
It's Kahlilah talkin' and Kahlilah's me
I'm giving my best--academically
I've got a lot to say, I've been thinkin' all day
Gonna run it on down Kahlilah's way--hey, hey!
I'm gonna clap, gonna snap, gonna clap, snap, tap
Gonna snap, clap, tap, till I fill in the gaps
Gonna learn all I can, 'cause I've made up my mind
Gonna give it my best-shout it out in this rhyme!
Studying daily, feeling fine
Giving my best, letting my light shine!
Homegirls, G's, and family
Giving my best most definitely
It's Kahlilah talkin' and Kahlilah's me
Gonna get those A's--most definitely.
I've got a lot to say, I've been studyin' all day
Gonna run it on down Kahlilah's way--hey, hey!
I'm gonna clap, yeah! Gonna snap, yeah! Gonna tap, yeah!

I'm gonna rap!

Our third and fourth graders had an opportunity to experience Khalilah's "rap." They agreed that like Nathaniel's rap, Kahlilah's poetic creation helped us get a feel for this fourth grader's spirit and personality. They too noted that Khalilah brought in her own rhythmic style while establishing a meaningful connection inspired by Greenfield's work.

Note that Khalilah's work was a first-draft effort. (This student is an avid reader and one who loves to write short stories and poems.) All students were given opportunities to share their initial draft rap creations. Collaborative peer critique sessions took place thereafter. Constructive criticism was provided and welcomed. Students were given the freedom to reveal that they struggled with creating their rap verses. Students across academic-ability levels brainstormed on how to "tighten" the verses. The energy proved contagious. Students revisited and recrafted their poetic creations. Each put his or her best foot forward, and eagerly joined in our culminating shared-reading/cypher experience.

Poem #4 Black Is Brown Is Tan

Duration of Study: 2 Weeks, six 50 minute sessions

Related Vocabulary

culture	diversity	family	<i>miscegenation</i>	multicultural
onomatopoeia	progressive	race	segregation	simile

Arnold Adoff's poetic works teaches us that race and color are irrelevant when it comes to caring for one another from the inside out. The poem begins:

black is brown is tan
is girl is boy
is nose is
face
is all
the
colors
of the race...
this is the way it is for us
this is the way we are...(1-8, 15)a4a

Through these flowing words, young readers soon experience that human relationships grounded in love know no color boundaries. As the poetic work progresses, students discover figurative language and metaphors are used to highlight this reality, e.g., Mom is described as "a brown sugar gown a tasty tan and coffee pumpkin pie..."(40-41)a5a Dad is the "big belly and the loud voice whose face becomes tomato red when [he] yells [his children] into bed." Again, definitive images are established and questions are raised:

- Who is the narrator?
- What types of people are portrayed in this poetic work? Explain.
- What type(s) of personalities does each of the characters seem to possess? Explain?
- Why does the author use a lower case "i" throughout the poem?
- Why does the author use figurative language and descriptive colors to describe the characters? Explain.
- Based on the images contained throughout Adoff's poetic work, what message might the author be attempting to convey? What makes you draw this conclusion?

As the poem progresses, it is discovered that "Black Is Brown Is Tan" is about an interracial family. Dad and Mom serve as "inside" narrators; their voices are heard clearly in key portions of the poem. The author serves as an additional narrator--the omniscient observer. He invites readers to take a peek into one aspect of his life, to join in a color-blind interactive love experience between parents, offspring, and other family members.

Powerful comparisons are made between objects and/or feelings often affiliated or contrasted with color: being white, for example, is portrayed as not having a skin tone that is the color of milk. Reference to the first person singular is symbolized in lower-case form throughout the work, as too are the words "black" and "white." My students suggested that "i" and "color" are not important when we think of family, that "i" is really "we"--a collective, interactive unit without racial boundaries. In this regard, Adoff seems to strategically accentuate the oneness of all participants in the portrayed relationship, drawing the reader in with descriptive images. My students were able to connect with the culturally inclusive humanity in Adoff's work.

About Arnold Adoff: Ever since elementary school, author-anthologist-editor Arnold Adoff loved to write. Born July 16, 1935, he was raised in the Bronx, New York and grew up in a Russian immigrant household. He attended the City College of New York and served as a teacher and guidance counselor in the New York City public school system, working in Harlem and the Upper West Side. A graduate of Columbia University and the New School for Social Research, his teaching and counseling experience helped him gain insight into the lives of his students, their socio-economic challenges, and their struggle for equal rights.

During 1960, while attending the New School, Arnold married Virginia Hamilton. A renowned, African-American children's book author in her own right (she wrote such children's book literary works as "The House of Dries Drear," National Book Award and Newbery Award winning M. C. Higgins The Great, Many Thousands Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom, and a folkloric anthology entitled The People Could Fly), Virginia played an active role in the civil rights movement. During the year in which the two were wed, 28 states in America outlawed interracial marriages--then derogatorily referred to as "miscegenation." Despite social challenges that surely confronted the inter-racial couple at the time, Arnold and Virginia remained happily married until his wife's passing in 2002.

Like his wife, Adoff too was one steeped in civil rights activism. His work as an educator revealed that, but for a few heralded writers, little was mentioned regarding the contribution of black people to America's literary world. In his opinion, race prejudice contributed to that omission. In this regard, Adoff took a stand: he wanted the literary and poetic creations of black writers to be equally embraced in the American mainstream. In 1968, he compiled and edited his first anthology entitled, I Am the Darker Brother: An Anthology of Modern Poems by Negro Americans published by the McMillan Company. By 1973, Harper Collins published his poetic work, Black Is Brown Is Tan. His goal was fulfilled, for today, his anthologies and poetic creations that celebrate the acceptance and inclusion of people across cultures continue to be widely read.

Author Connection Discussion Question: How might Arnold Adoff's personal life have influenced his creation of "Black Is Brown Is Tan?" Explain. Using background information on Adoff's life, have students speculate on why he chose to create this work.

Students will discover that the author's life experiences contributed greatly to his poetic compilations and writing style.

Mime Activity. Students will be assigned to memorize and recite select character parts in "Black Is Brown Is Tan." Students have the option of using props to accompany their mimed interpretation of those parts. Each will be given the freedom to express himself/herself, using body gestures to emulate the spirit of the mother,

father, sister, brother, grandmother, aunt, and uncle depicted in this story poem.

Writing Activity: Beautiful Me/Handsome Me Poetic Writing Exercise. This activity allows young learners to examine race from an open-ended perspective and to celebrate themselves through figurative and metaphoric lenses. This writing activity can be taught during a whole group session or in small, independent center groups. Two frameworks should be used with this activity (see Attachments A and B. When using Attachment A, have students fill in the "color" descriptor beneath the heading "race"). Additionally, revisit the definition of figurative versus literal language, accentuating how figurative language bright brings descriptive power to a written work.

Before delving into this reading selection and writing exercise, have a discussion about race: classify race like we do plant species. For example, if we were to categorize five specific types of woody plants, we could select hemlocks, maples, oaks, ginkgos, and sycamores. Despite their differing attributes, each of these woody plants falls under the heading of trees. Similarly, provide students with listing of the five racial group classifications often used within American society, i.e., black (American-born blacks and other members of the Africa Diaspora), brown (Latino/Hispanic), red (first native-peoples), white (Euro-Americans), and yellow (Asian American). Also, collectively have your class brainstorm on colors of objects based on positive and negative attributes connoted with those colors; e.g., yellow can be associated with a destructive, raging fire or a fragrant daffodil blooming on a sunlit morn. My students came up with a wealth of figurative phrases and metaphoric images, a sample of which is noted below created by my ELL (English Language Learner) third grader, Martin:

WONDERFUL ME!

I am brown. I am brown.

I am not the color of thick mud on the ground after a rainy day.

I am brown. I am brown.

I am not the color of a broken brown crayon smashed on crumpled paper.

I am tortillas and salsa to make you dance.

Handsome. Funny. Intelligente.

That's me--wonderful me!

As evidenced herein, a definitive connection was made.

Conclusion

Through mime and role play, coupled with interactive writing activities, my young learners embraced poetry and made meaningful text-to-self-to-world connections. My young learners tapped into the kinesthetic, tactile, and audio-visual experience, making the learning experience both engaging and empowering. My third and fourth-grade after school students grasped that writing is often steeped in personal experiences embraced by the author. By delving into our poetry selections, students responded to engaging questions through which they experienced the author's voice. Each reading selection opened windows for my students to view, embrace, and identify the author's craft: Students were eager to share their collective mimed interpretations and individual poetic creations. Equally important, my children embraced and applauded one another because of being given freedom to immerse themselves in literature through the use of creative, collaborative effort. The activities proved engaging, social-developmentally empowering, and are surely worth replicating. Experiment with the four poems contained within this unit and other poetic works. Give your young learners artistic freedom to explore them. By so doing, you will lay the foundation for a love of literature and writing literature by way of the poetic voice to be embraced by young learners for a lifetime!

TEACHER RESOURCES

McCormick Calkins, Lucy. *The Art of Teaching Reading*. Addison-Wesley Educational Publishers. New York, NY (2001) Provides creative, research-based approaches re: sparking a love of reading in the hearts of young learners.

_____. *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Heinemann. Portsmouth, NY. Provides creative, research-based approaches re: motivating to become engaged, blossoming writers.

Livingston, Myra Cohn. *Poem-making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry*. Harper Collins, New York (1991). A how-to resource that introduces children to the different voices and elements of poetry, from limericks to free verse and open form to haikus.

Kipnes, Claude. *The Mime Book*. Meriwether Publishers, Colorado Springs, CO Sheds light on the art of mime. Good resource in helping to narration through body movement. Reveals how to use body parts and facial features to show range of expression, and ultimately create anatomical vocabulary.

Koch, Kenneth. *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?: Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. Vintage Books, New York (1990). For the leery-about-teaching-poetry instructor, this is a must-have resource! Filled with a variety of poetry different time periods with background info about the poem coupled with suggested classroom applications in the classroom.

Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature Seventh Edition*. Pearson/Merrill-Prentice Hall. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, and Columbus, Ohio (2007). What constitutes a poem? What types of messages can poetry convey? How does this writing form convey emotion? How does it differ from narrative writings? These questions and more are addressed within this extraordinary teacher resource.

Student Resources

Adoff, Arnold. *Black Is Brown Is Tan*. Amistad/Harper-Collins Publishing Company, New York (2003) An inspiring poetic creation that celebrates the family and love that knows no racial boundaries.

Greenfield, Eloise. *Nathaniel Talking*. Writers & Readers Publishing, New York (1993). An energetic, feisty nine year old named Nathaniel "raps" about his perception of his world.

Heard, George *Songs of Myself: An Anthology of Poems and Art*. Mondo Publishing, New York (2000). A wonderful anthology of poems with which all children can identify.

Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Vintage Press, New York (1995) A wonderful collection of poetic works created by this Harlem Renaissance, award-winning author.

Rampersad, Arnold and Roessel, Editors. *Poetry for Young People: Langston Hughes*. Sterling Publishing Company, New York (April 2006). More collected works by this world-renowned, African-American author. Conscientiously compiled for young learners by Stamford University professor Arnold Rampersad and co-editor Roessel, the poetry collection is accompanied by a biographic sketch of the literary artist.

Mendehilson, Editor. *Poetry for Young People: Edward Lear*. Sterling Publishing Company, New York (April 2010). A poetic collection filled with Lear's catchy rhythms and style; includes a biographic sketch about the 19th century poet/illustrator, along with background information about each of the 35 poems contained therein.

On-Line Resources

Graziosi, Marco. *Edward Lear Home Page* <http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear> 2> (March 2008) Many of Edward Lear's enjoyable poetic verses are contained herein, ready for downloadable use.

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=177021>> Includes Langston Hughes "Mother to Son" poem. Retrieved: May 4, 2010

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=3340>> Langston Hughes biographic sketch with photo. Retrieved: May 4, 2010.

<http://www.pearsonsuccessnet.com/snapp/iText/products/0-328-35332-9/unit6/352-353.html>> Nathaniel Talking on line excerpt by Scott Foresman, Publishers. Retrieved: May 11, 2010.

http://books.google.com/books?id=yjoEi4etEaQC&pg=PA12&lpg=PA12&dq=I'm+Nathaniel+talking,+and+nathaniel's+me&source=bl&ots=Ih6Y_OFFdR&sig=ciTGRtcWrXdWANDSzcsihXFSik&hl=en&ei=WIkCTJi5NIH98Aaj2OCeDQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=4&ved=0CCEQ6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=I'm%20Nathaniel%20talking%2C%20and%20nathaniel's%20me&f=false> Excerpt from *In The Land of Words: New and Select Poems* by Eloise Greenfield. Retrieved: May 1, 2010.

<http://www.nonsenselit.org/Lear/ns/jumblies.html>> The complete poetic work of Edward Lear's poem entitled "The Jumblies" accompanied by illustrations created by the author. Retrieved: May 7, 2010.

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0903237.html>> A glossary of poetry terms.<http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl012.html>. Copyright rules as they relate to excerpting and making reference to portions of previously published literary works, e.g., the 1961 Report of the Register of Copyrights on the General Revision of the U.S. Copyright Law cites examples of activities that courts have regarded as fair use: "quotation of excerpts in a review or criticism for purposes of illustration or comment; quotation of short passages in a scholarly or technical work, for illustration or clarification of the author's observations; use in a parody of some of the content of the parodied; summary of an address or article, with brief quotations, in a news report; reproduction by a library of a portion of a work to replace part of a damaged copy; reproduction by a teacher or student of a small part of a work to illustrate a lesson; reproduction of a work in legislative or judicial proceedings or reports; incidental and fortuitous reproduction, in a newsreel or broadcast, of a work located in the scene of an event being reported."

"BLACK IS BROWN IS TAN" POETRY WORKSHEET

Circle your race(s). Then write **2 *Literal*** Color Comparisons and **2 *Figurative*** Color Comparisons for each race selection.

Race Choice (Circle)

White Black Brown Red Yellow
Euro-American African-American Latino/Hispanic Native-American Asian-American

RACE

LITERAL COLOR COMPARISON

_____ I am not the color of _____

_____ I am not the color of _____

SKIN TONE

FIGURATIVE COLOR COMPARISON

_____ I am _____

_____ I am _____

Attachment A

(Title reflective of student name or student descriptor.) ME! POETRY FORMAT

I am _____ . I am _____ .
(race) (race)

I am not the color of _____ .
(literal color comparison)

I am _____ . I am _____ .
(race) (race)

I am not the color of _____ .
(literal color comparison)

I am _____ .
(figurative color comparison)

I am _____ .
(figurative color comparison)

Three *WOW* words that best describe you! _____

Four word maximum declarative closing. _____

Attachment B

Appendix

Meeting Connecticut Educational Standards

This unit correlates with the Connecticut Framework K-12 Curricular Goals and Standards for Language Arts and the Arts. Generally, students will read literary works across genre with understanding and respond thoughtfully to text; create works using the language arts in visual, oral, and written text; understand and appreciate texts from many literary periods and cultures; choose and apply strategies that enhance the fluent and proficient use of language arts; write and speak English proficiently to clearly communicate ideas; use different media, techniques and processes to communicate ideas, feelings, experiences and stories; express their understanding of written text through developing, communicating, and sustaining characters in mime; and employ the language arts and the arts for lifelong learning, work, and enjoyment.

As it pertains to specific content standards, students will be engaged in the following:

Language Arts - Content Standard 1: Reading and Responding. Students will describe their thoughts, opinions, and questions that arise as they read and listen to a text and use relevant information from the text to summarize the content. Students will use what they know to identify characters, settings, themes, events, ideas, relationships, and details found within the text.

Language Arts - Content Standard 2: Producing Texts. Students will work both individually and on a collaborative basis in collecting and examining an array of their literary creations and accompanying illustrations, discussing the features they like, and what they might do differently next time. Students will read/share their creative writings with partners, who will constructively critique the work, highlighting elements in the literary piece that work along with questions they have about the writing.

Language Arts - Content Standard 3: Applying English Language Conventions. Students will understand that words and expressions with which they are familiar convey meaning and in many instances have evolved and/or changed over time.

Language Arts - Content Standard 4: Exploring and Responding to Text. Students will declare their opinions about each of the works read, listened to, and viewed, subsequently evaluating them according to such features as character development, narrator's voice, conflict and theme.

The Arts - Content Standard 2: Acting. Students will imagine and clearly describe characters and their relationship to their environment through mime and locomotive and non-locomotive expression.

The Arts - Content Standard 3: Technical Production. Students will collaboratively plan and prepare improvisations and demonstrate various ways of staging classroom dramatizations for select text. Students will collaborate to constructively organize costumes, make-up, and setting.

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Endnotes

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2. "Nathaniel's Rap" from NATHANIEL TALKING by Eloise Greenfield, copyright 1988. Used by permission of HarperCollins.
3. Greenfield, "Nathaniel's Rap," (Lines 10-13)
4. "Black Is Brown Is Tan" by Arnold Adoff, copyright 1973 (Lines 1-8 and 15). Used by permission of HarperCollins.
5. Adoff, "Black Is Brown Is Tan, (Lines 40-41)

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