



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2021 Volume I: The Social Struggles of Contemporary Black Art

Contemporary Black Picture Book Artists: Families of Illustrators

Curriculum Unit 21.01.02
by Carol Boynton

Introduction

I teach in a self-contained classroom at Edgewood Magnet School in New Haven. I find the neighborhood/magnet setting a rewarding environment, with students coming to school each day from a variety of home circumstances and with differences in academic levels. As a result of these variables, the children have differing levels of background knowledge and life experiences. The classroom is a mixture of varied ethnicities, economic strata and social and emotional strengths and weaknesses. The use of collaboration allows all students at all levels to learn in an inherently differentiated environment, learning new concepts and experiences through hands-on practices. Throughout the school year, the Kindergarten curriculum centers heavily on social development, which is certainly appropriate for five- and six-year old children. Our school mission and vision statements focus on equity and inclusion, acknowledging and including everyone in our learning environment. This unit will be in direct alignment with my responsibility to design curricula that helps our students learn social and community responsibility.

This unit focuses on children's book illustrators who are from families of African American artists and authors. My goal is to use a new lens and approach when bringing the picture book art to my students through literature we enjoy throughout the year. This artist/author study includes the works of Leo and Diane Dillon, a husband and wife team who have been creating art together since they met at the Parsons School of Design in 1953; Jerry and Brian Pinkney, father and son, who have earned between them dozens of awards and recognitions for their work on children's books; and, Donald Crews, Ana Jonas, and their daughter, Nina Crews, all authors and illustrators of a great variety of picture books and stories.

I find the shared talents of family members intriguing and this unit brings the work of these three families to my students as they bring life, voice and African American heritage to children through their artistry. The student activities will center on a visual literacy approach for my students to learn about the art through observation and questioning and will introduce De Bono's Six Thinking Hats strategy for viewing art and considering art pieces.

The rationale and purpose of my unit are defined through the following questions:

What do my students gain knowing about the illustrators or would miss without their work? What strategies

make the most sense for this unit and age group (primary students)? How did these families share and project and how did they decide on which projects to collaborate and synchronize? How does the work they produce veer from their picture book illustrations if it does? How does their work adhere to the conventions of the field or is it revolutionary art showing freedom of expression? What do their award speeches share about their craft as African American illustrators and what insights might they reveal? What is the synthesis between their images and the text of the books they illustrate?

Six Thinking Hats Strategy

The six thinking hats strategy is a tool to increase creative thinking by dividing up the different styles of thinking into six "hats": logic, emotion, caution, optimism, creativity, and control. (1) It fosters collaboration, creativity, and innovation with the parallel thinking process of the six metaphorical hats. You 'put on' or 'take off' one of these hats to indicate the type of thinking being used. A 'thinking hat' is a metaphor for a certain way of thinking. By mentally wearing different thinking hats people are forced to look at things from different perspectives. The discussion can go from a one-sided way of thinking to some new insights being created. This strategy can be used as students view images as they learn about the illustrators in this unit.

White hat: Data and information

Think of white paper, which is neutral and carries information. Questions include:

What information do we have here?

What information is missing?

What information would we like to have?

How are we going to get that information?

Red hat: Feelings and emotions

Think of red and fire and warm.

The red hat has to do with feelings, intuitions, hunches, emotions.

Black hat: Caution

Think of a stern judge in a black robe

The black hat is for critical thinking.

Yellow hat: Positive view

Think of sunshine

The yellow hat is the upbeat, logical view.

Green hat: Creative thinking

Think of vegetation and rich growth

The green hat is for new ideas and alternatives.

Blue hat: Thinking process

Think of the sky and the overview

The blue hat is for thinking about thinking.

Here is how we might use the Six Hats strategy with Nina Crews' *A Girl Like Me* and some examples of possible responses from students:

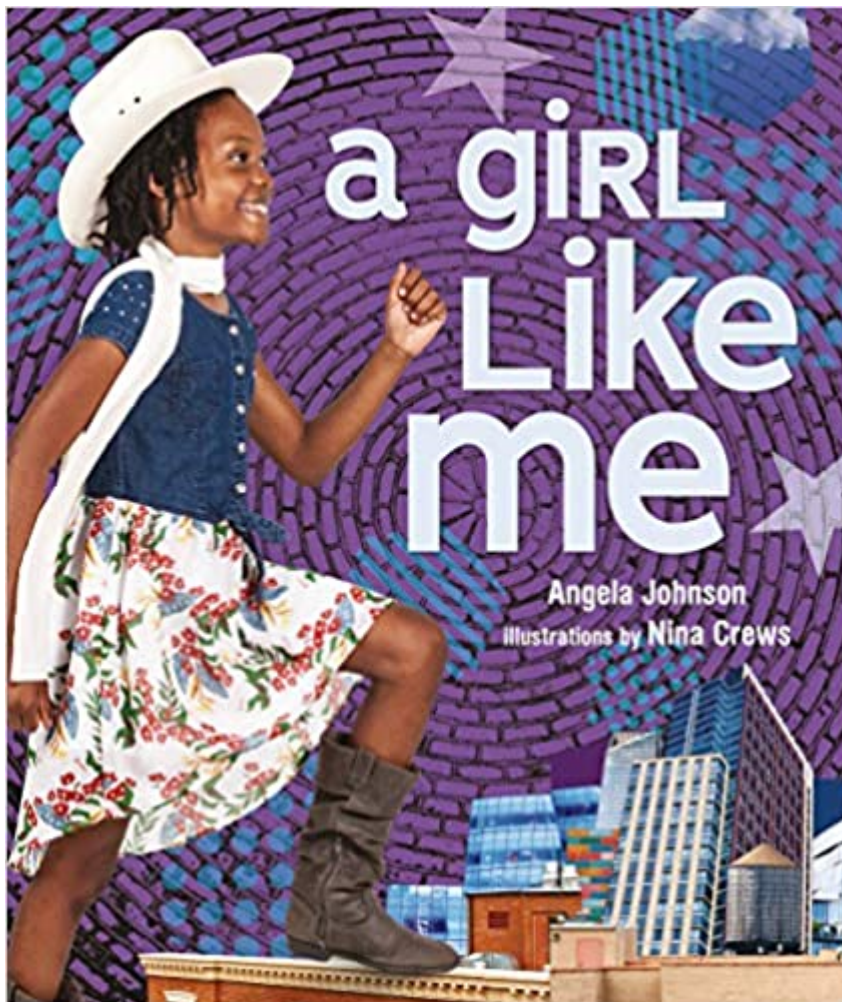


Figure 1: Cover of the book, *A Girl Like Me* by Angela Johnson and Illustrated by Nina Crews, published in 2020.

White hat: I see a girl in cowboy boots and a city in the background.

Red hat: They way she is smiling makes me feel like she is having a great time.

Black hat: I am not sure that the city is real. It looks kind of small next to the girl.

Yellow hat: The purple swirls and stars make the cover look very exciting, which means the book is probably a good one.

Green hat: I think the illustrator used all kinds of ideas. I would like to try something like that.

Blue hat: I am wondering how all these parts of the picture go together. They all seem different from each other.

Every comment or thought should be acknowledged and recognize that not every image needs to have this process. Trying to use it on the cover will help the students prepare their thinking for the contents of the books and set the stage for the discussions.

Importance of Illustrations

In her Coretta Scott King Award acceptance speech, Virginia Hamilton said, "Literature gives us images with which to think." This is literally true for the illustrations which fill many children's picture books. (2)

The Israeli scholar Joseph Schwarcz proposed that illustrations have a psychological effect on children, that the illustrations that children encounter teach them how to deal with problems in their lives, how to model their lives, how to become adults. (3)

Illustrations that children encounter in their early literature can become important parts of their understanding of the world, part of the building blocks of their thinking, something to which they will refer in their actions as they grow up. As Jacque Roether states in her essay, one of the ways in which black children in America create their thinking and understanding is through the illustrations they encounter in the literature to which they are exposed as children. Children, especially young children, are sensitive to illustrations. They concentrate on illustrations while another person reads the words to them. In this way, they are subject to the impressions that illustrations create. The images children absorb can remain with them for the rest of their lives. (4)

Schwarcz named two phenomena that children experience through images - emotive response and cumulative effect. The effect of illustrations is especially important in telling the story. Since illustrations are visual, the response they elicit is emotive, and the influence can be very subtle. In *The Picture Book Comes of Age*, Schwarcz says illustrated stories bring to the child's subconsciousness ideas which would be difficult to present at a conscious level (5). "Pictures are never ... simple. Their structure, proportions, configurations, colors, angles of lighting, perspective, and many other components hold allusions, associations, and overtones, which may eventually turn into metaphors and symbols expressing points of view . . ." (6) . Children are not mature enough in the conventions of art to know that certain colors and shapes create certain moods and meanings. They can easily be swept along by the emotion that first overtakes them, and not quite understand its meaning.

Cumulative effect is just as it implies. Repeated exposure to images can create a lasting impression; negative or positive images will become part of the child's understanding. But the effect can also be more subtle than this. Sustained absence can take on meaning as well. (7)

What might happen to children of minority cultures reading illustrations in children's books? If negative

images of black people appear in children's literature, it is bound to do damage to children trying to understand their place in society. For minority children, the negative images will partially inform their understanding of themselves. (8) Using the six hats strategy is a way to begin to discuss these issues, thinking about the pictures from different goals in mind.

But negative portrayal isn't the only problem, however. If African American children are absent from the illustrations in the picture books they see, again, how are they to judge their place in this society? If they see no black faces in hospitals, courthouses, homes, department stores, even in crowds, will this not affect them?

The focus for this unit is contemporary African American artists who create books for young children. The images these artists draw, paint, photograph and more place African American children and families at the center in their work. They are the main characters who experience wonderful, exciting adventures. These amazing, talented artists bring rich, award-winning images to their young audiences through folktales, fantasy, real-life and non-fiction.

Illustrator Biographies

The Dillon Family

The Dillons are among the most talented and versatile children's book illustrators in the United States. They have earned many awards throughout their prolific career including two back-to-back Caldecott Medals for "*Why Mosquitos Buzz in People's Ears*" and "*Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*."

Leo Dillon and Diane Sorber were born eleven days apart in 1933 - Leo in Brooklyn, New York, and Diane near Los Angeles, California. They met at Parsons School of Design in New York City in 1954 and both aimed toward a life of art. The dynamic Dillon duo were actually rivals upon first meeting, but their common interests and passion for art quickly brought them together. "Meeting first through one another's artwork, they immediately recognized the talent and mastery of the other. Over the years, their competitive friendship evolved into a lasting marriage and artistic partnership." (9) "We're an interracial couple, and we decided early in our career that we wanted to represent all races and show people that were rarely seen in children's books at the time," Leo said in a 2002 joint interview.

Diane explains the development of what they call the "third artist," saying, "We could look at ourselves as one artist rather than two individuals, and that third artist was doing something neither one of us would do. We let it flow the way it flows when an artist is working by themselves and a color goes down that they didn't quite expect and that affects the next colors they use, and it seems to have a life of its own." This collaborative process results in the couple's trademark clean lines, innovative color use and attention to detail as well as a warmth which radiates through each image, filling their characters with life. (10)

An example of their focus on universal experiences are the illustrations for "*Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*." The alphabet book focuses on the diversity of different African populations, representing each group with each different letter of the alphabet. "We wanted to portray in "*Ashanti to Zulu*" that there are many different cultures and it's just not Africa as one big place, but that like the rest of the world, there are many, many cultures," said Leo Dillon. Each picture includes a home, a family, an animal, a bird and a landscape. (11)

The Pinkney Family

“Jerry and Gloria. Brian and Andrea. The Pinkney family is unique in African American children's literature, perhaps in all of American children's literature: four members of the family — two generations, two couples, two artists (one an author-illustrator), two writers — all currently producers of award-winning children's literature. And other family members are in the wings. How has this come about? What is there about this family that led to children's books becoming the family business?” (12)

In 1964, Pinkney illustrated his first book entitled, *The Adventures of Spider*, and went on to illustrate more than one hundred more over the course of fifty-three years. His work includes fairytales, folktales, fables, legends, historical and contemporary fiction, informational books, biographies, and poetry. Though he focuses on capturing and conveying the African American experience, he has embraced the opportunity to illustrate works that represent a variety of other cultures. Each book he illustrates with intricately detailed watercolor images that vividly portray the emotions and nuances of human and animal characters. His books have received every major U.S. award and accolade for children's books, and he has been honored with several lifetime achievement awards for his substantial and significant contributions to children's literature.

Jerry Pinkney was born in Philadelphia in 1939 and raised and educated in the city. “There were no African American Studies classes back then. However, my mother thoughtfully enrolled me in an all-Black elementary school, and because of limited opportunities for people of color, Hill Elementary attracted the best Black teachers. I had the good fortune to be taught by an elite faculty of dedicated educators. They would help me navigate the rough waters of being a person of color in Philadelphia in the 1940s and, most importantly, teach me about Black pride.” (13)

Brian Pinkney and Andrea Davis Pinkney are the couple that met at the copy machine. They attended business events, went out to lunch, and from there, “we started sharing about our lives,” Brian says. He was an illustrator, she was a writer, and “We thought, wow, we could really do some amazing things together.” (14) The Pinkneys have now been together for 30 years and have collaborated on nearly 20 children books including baby board books, biography picture books, and narrative non-fiction books for older kids.

The Crews Family

Donald Crews was born in 1938 in Newark, New Jersey. He graduated from Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City in 1959, where he met his wife, picture book artist Ana Jonas. His education, training, and experience were in graphics and design, using sharp lines, geometric shapes, and primary colors, the design of most of his illustrations. He pursued a career as a graphic artist in New York before he was drafted into the Army and sent to Frankfurt, Germany in 1963. Crews's career as an author began with a piece, he had created for his graphic design portfolio - an alphabet book. He was encouraged to submit his work to publishers as a children's book, which he did. In 1967, Donald Crews published his first children's book, *A to Z*.

Donald Crews's training and experience as a graphic artist is evident in his sharp-edged images of urban life, especially transportation. He emphasizes picture over story and presents the urban environment, in buildings, buses, planes, ships, and most of all trains, but often shows very few people. Most of his stories are brief, using the pattern of a counting book or an alphabet, listing the elements that he is presenting with a twist to bring the book to an end. In fact, his picture-book form presents minimalist text and relies upon his visuals to move the book forward, in Caldecott- and ALA-honored books written from the late 1960s like *Freight Train* (1978), *Truck* (1980), and *Carousel* (1982). However, in the 1990s, he started to expand and elaborate his

texts, broadening his style of drawing and reaching into autobiography, to dramatically describe his African American childhood, in *Bigmamas* (1991) and *Shortcut* (1992). (15)

Nina Crews, the daughter of Donald Crews and Ana Jonas, creates energetic stories about young children. Nina is a graduate of Yale University, where she received a BA in art. Her career as an author and illustrator began in 1995 with *One Hot Summer Day* as “the debut of a welcome new voice and vision.” She has worked with several collaborators on books that include *Seeing into Tomorrow: Haiku* by Richard Wright, *The Neighborhood Mother Goose* and *Below*. Her most recent book is *A Girl Like Me*, written by Angela Johnson.

Nina’s work explores a variety of themes, such as creating updated classic material in *The Neighborhood Mother Goose*, *The Neighborhood Sing-Along* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*; writing stories of children’s imaginary adventures in *Below*, *Sky-High Guy*, *You Are Here* and *I’ll Catch the Moon*; and exploring simple experiences of urban childhood in *One Hot Summer Day* and *Snowball*.

“I chose to make photographic books because photography was and is my favorite medium to work in. I write the story first, though most often a visual idea motivates me to start a book. Once the story is in place, I start to work with my models. The interaction between us always adds something to the project; their performances often generate new ideas. As I’ve read my work to children, I have found that they really respond enthusiastically to “real” pictures. They love hearing about the children who pose for the books – their names, ages and where they live. All of my subjects are family, friends and friends of friends. The books tell stories I’ve created, but also record these children at certain ages – they are stars.” (16)

Teaching Strategies

The core idea of project-based learning is that real-world concerns capture students' interest and provoke serious thinking as the students acquire and apply new knowledge in a problem-solving context. The teacher plays the role of facilitator, working with students to frame worthwhile questions, structuring meaningful tasks, coaching both knowledge development and social skills, and carefully assessing what students have learned from the experience. Project-based learning helps prepare students for the thinking and collaboration skills.

Organized around an open-ended questioning, project-based learning helps focus the students' work and deepen their learning by centering on significant issues or problems. Projects begin by presenting students with knowledge and concepts and then, once learned, give them the opportunity to apply them. It requires inquiry to learn and/or create something new - an idea, an interpretation, or a new way of displaying what they have learned.

Most importantly, it requires critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, and various forms of communication. Students need to do much more than remember information—they need to use higher-order thinking skills. They also must learn to work as a team and contribute to a group effort. They must listen to others and make their own ideas clear when speaking, be able to read a variety of material, write or otherwise express themselves in various modes, and make effective presentations. The format of this approach allows for student voice and choice. Students learn to work independently and take responsibility when they are asked to make choices. The opportunity to make choices, and to express their learning in their own voice, also

helps to increase students' educational engagement.

Within the activities in this unit, literacy strategies and approaches include reading comprehension designed to help students understand what they see (and hear). They will identify how language, structure, and presentation contribute to meaning; draw inferences such as characters' feelings, thoughts, and motives from their actions and image; and justify inferences with evidence. Writing strategies will focus on students planning their writing by identifying the audience for and purpose of the writing (creating illustrations to support a story), selecting the appropriate form and using other similar writing as models for their own drawing and painting as they share their ideas, experiences, and imagination.

Classroom Activities

The broad objective of this unit is for students to learn about each other's unique families and the skills these particular families have shared with us through the picture books we read together. Students will communicate an important aspect of their lives visually by creating art pieces with their own family. They will learn about their classmates' families through the students' art and family memory stories. Students will choose a story to illustrate, a story they are familiar with, such as a fairy tale, or a story from their own family. Family members can choose to contribute to the project by collaborating with their child to produce a finished picture book together.

In each illustrator study, students will learn biographical information about each artist through a variety of media and learn their illustrating styles by experiencing their books and other works. The study will cover two to three days, allowing enough time to introduce the book collection and discuss the materials and artistic medium dominant in each illustrator's career. Students will have any opportunity to explore and practice an illustration form with each author study. Each illustrator study has a suggested text to highlight an art medium. Use the six hats thinking strategy to help students look at the covers and the paintings and drawings in each book. Choice should be based on student and/or class level. The illustrators do not need to be introduced in the order listed below but keep the particular families together to connect their lives and work.

Prepare a chart as follows:

Illustrator(s)	What books did we read? Bibliography	How did they make the illustrations? Art Media
Leo and Diane Dillon		
Jerry Pinkney		
Brian Pinkney		
Donald Crews		
Nina Crews		

Complete the chart over the course of teaching the unit. Explain the purpose – to keep track of our learning, to be able to compare, to refer to now and later. Introduce the terms Bibliography and Art Media as tier three vocabulary.

Read the names of the illustrators. Ask, "what do you notice about their names?" The students will recognize

that some last names are the same. This is the opportunity to let the students know that they will be learning about family members that create art together and have learned from each other. “This is a unit about families that have amazing artistic skills, and they use them to make books for us! We will learn about how they do that.”

Illustrator Study One: Leo and Diane Dillon

Why Mosquitos Buzz in People’s Ears – Caldecott Winner

Art media: pastels, ink

Texts to include in the illustrator study: *Brother to the Wind*, *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions*, *Who’s in Rabbit’s House: A Masai Tale*, *Rap a Tap Tap: Here’s Bojangles—Think of That*, *Songs and Stories from Uganda*, *Jazz on a Saturday Night*

Introduce Leo and Diane Dillon to the students through photos on the jacket of one or more of their books. Use this experience as an example to show students that the back of the book or the inside flap of the book jacket is where you can often locate who made the books for us to read and enjoy. Find a variety of images online of the husband-and-wife team and show them at work together and at different stages of their careers. This should begin the discussion about their biographies, the story of their lives and work. At the close of the illustrator study, provide the students with an opportunity to use oil pastels and fine tip markers to explore and learn about how Leo and Diane Dillon created their images.

Illustrator Study Two: Jerry Pinkney

Mirandy and Brother Wind – Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Illustration Awards

Art Medium: watercolor

Texts to include in the illustrator study: *John Henry*, *Goin’ Someplace Special*, *Mirandy and Brother Wind*

Fable Series: *The Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Little Red Hen*, *Aesop’s Fables*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *The Grasshopper and the Ants*

Introduce Jerry Pinkney in the same manner as the first illustrator study. Again, use images to show the artist at work, prompting the discussion of his illustrating style. At the close of the illustrator study, provide the students with an opportunity to use watercolors to explore and learn about how Jerry Pinkney created his images.

Illustrator Study Three: Brian Pinkney

Duke Ellington - Caldecott Honor and Coretta Scott King Illustration Awards

Art Medium: scratchboard

Texts to include in the illustrator study: *Sojourner Truth’s Step-Stomp Stride*, *Jojo’s Flying Side Kick*, *Max Found Two Sticks*, *Ella Fitzgerald*, *Duke Ellington*, *Dear Benjamin Banneker*, *Alvin Ailey*, *Bill Pickett: Rodeo-Ridin’ Cowboy*

Continue the introduction approach with images and Brian Pinkney’s biography. Highlight that his inspiration

to become an artist came from his family. Show the students his website and share the stories and quotes he has posted. Students will then have the chance to learn how scratchboard illustration works. Scratchboard art is a way to create an image using a special board with a black surface layer and white under layer. You scratch into the black to reveal the white layer below. The resulting image is a series of light lines against a dark background. Scratchboard art is considered a type of engraving. Students will use scratchboards (purchased) to experience how to create a picture by removing the dark top layer with a plastic tool. There are a variety of scratchboards, some with only one color underneath the top layer or some with many colors to expose.

Illustrator Study Four: Donald Crews

Freight Train – Caldecott Honor Book

Art Approach: graphic design

Texts to include in the illustrator study: *School Bus, Flying, Sail Away, Big Mama's, Harbor, Night at the Fair, Parade, Shortcut, Freight Train, Truck, Ten Black Dots, Bicycle Race, Carousel*

Introduce Donald Crews with his book, *Freight Train*. Have students notice the bright colors and simple shapes – lots of straight lines and small and large circles. Throughout the illustrator study, point out that a number of his books are about forms of transportation. Students will explore with colorful markers to make geometric shapes using bold colors.

Illustrator Study Five: Nina Crews

A Girl Like Me – New York Library Best Books for Kids 2020, Brow Bookshelf African American Children's Book Project's Best Picture Books of 2020

Art Medium: digital photcollage

Texts to include in the illustrator study: *The Neighborhood Mother Goose, The Neighborhood Sing-Along and Jack and the Beanstalk, Below, Sky-High Guy, You Are Here, I'll Catch the Moon, One Hot Summer Day and Snowball.*

Introduce Nina Crews and her newest book, *A Girl Like Me*. Use the example of Six Hats strategy to talk about Crews' photcollage cover. How did she create this image? How would we use her illustrating style? Use magazines, crayons, markers, and a variety of colored construction paper as supplies for students to create their own photo collage. Encourage students to use "real" people in their collage to follow Nina Crews' style. How can they create a picture around that person? What is the story of your picture?

Culminating Project: Illustrate a Story

Students will choose a story to illustrate, a story they are familiar with, such as a fairy tale, or a story from their own family. Family members can choose to contribute to the project by collaborating with their child to produce a finished picture book together. Students will use the methods of illustrations they have learned through the study of the families of artists. The unit will end with a publishing party, presenting the completed books at a gathering of students and families.

Endnotes

1. Six Thinking Hats, <https://www.debono.com/six-thinking-hats-summary>
2. Jacque Roethler. "Reading in Color: Children's Book Illustrations and Identity Formation for Black Children in the United States, 95.
3. Ibid.
4. Roethler, 96.
5. Joseph Schwarcz. *The Picture Book Comes of Age*, 110.
6. Ibid.
7. Roethler, 97.
8. Ibid.
9. <https://www.rmichelson.com>.
10. *The Global Artistry of Leo and Diane Dillon*.
11. Ibid.
12. Rudine Sims Bishop. *The Pinkney Family: In the tradition*.
13. Jerry Pinkney's 2016 Coretta Scott King-Virginia Hamilton Lifetime Achievement Award Speech.
14. Lulu Garcia-Navarro, et al. "The Pinkneys Are a Picture Book Perfect, Author-Illustrator Couple
15. George Bodmer. "Donald Crews: The Signs and Times of an American Childhood--Essay and Interview, 107.
16. ninacrews.com

Resources

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Bodmer, George. "Donald Crews: The Signs and Times of an American Childhood--Essay and Interview." *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1998, p. 107., doi:10.2307/3042273. Comprehensive article on Crews' life.

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"The Global Artistry of Leo and Diane Dillon." *Akron Art Museum*, akronartmuseum.org. Discussion of an exhibit of their work at the museum

Wilder Award Acceptance Speech 2015 - ala.org

Appendix - Implementing District Standards

CCSS.ELA - LITERACY.RL.K.3 With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

Through the visual literacy approach to understanding the story through images, students will be able to name who, where and what from the artists' work.

CCSS.ELA - LITERACY.RL.K.6

With prompting and support, name the author and illustrator of a story and define the role of each in telling the story.

With each illustrator study, students will be learning the name and creative style of each artist. Through the class discussions, students will understand who made the pictures and who wrote the story.

CCSS.ELA - LITERACY.RL.K.7 With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the story in which they appear (e.g., what moment in a story an illustration depicts).

As the students progress through the various artists' work, they will notice that each individual artist has a style and a medium that helps us recognize their work. The artists often work with an author to make the book together.

CCSS.ELA - LITERACY.RL.K.9 With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

One of the illustrators, Jerry Pinkney, created a number of images or folk tales and fairy tales. Students will use these genres to discuss the similarities across stories and talk about the characters' adventures.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.2 Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.

The culminating project requires students to apply their learning from the illustrator studies and create a book of their own, designing the images to go with the story. They will do this as a group project.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.K.3 Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.

By creating their own books, the students will be putting the story they choose to tell in sequence and show their understanding through the images they make for the retelling.

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