



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Poetry: A Mirror in Which to See Myself

Curriculum Unit 89.02.08
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Working with a predominantly Black class of fifth grade students, ranging in age from ten to twelve, it does not seem strange that I often have found a pressing need to develop within my pupils a greater understanding of self, along with an increased feeling of self-esteem. Though this need would be present in any group of preteens facing the often conflicting pressures of adolescence, it seems a particularly urgent need of Black students who encounter the additional influences of history and modern society which often distort an individual's strengths and lower his or her self-esteem. They often choose potentially destructive goals that offer immediate gratification over more positive goals that would require them to know the world and themselves better than they do.

If they could only think better of themselves, they would start to develop other strengths, and the desire to excel. I see the use of poetry as an excellent vehicle for achieving these goals.

In my teaching, I have become increasingly aware of the "narrowness" with which my students view the world. Their knowledge of "history" consists primarily of their own experiences, or the stories they have heard about family experiences. For the most part, history is some vague school subject which the teacher often excludes or pushes into the background due to the relentless pressure to teach the "basics".

Although, with the increased emphasis on celebrating Black History Month, there is now a greater awareness of individuals who have played an important role in Black history, most pupils view these people in isolation. Since they are generally unaware of the historical development of Blacks in America, they are unable to place these individuals within the context of the historical environment in which they lived. In turn, it then becomes difficult for students to fully understand the struggles these people endured and the strengths they displayed. As a result, many important aspects of the contributions made by these individuals is missed. This lack of knowledge prevents them from drawing their own pride and resolution from those who came before. Without a clearer picture of what came before, my pupils have a distorted idea, or no idea at all, of why life is the way it is today. How can they be expected to achieve the mammoth task of understanding themselves?

Thus, my immediate goal is to improve my students' knowledge of Black history; my ultimate goal is to improve their knowledge of themselves with emphasis on the ability to see their strengths. I hope to move toward both goals through the study of poetry.

There seem to be a variety of possible approaches to including my unit within the regular curriculum. During Black History Month in February, it could easily be used as a self-contained study. It could also be introduced

as an outgrowth of the social studies curriculum when the subject of slavery in the United States is explored. It could possibly become an independent reading-language arts poetry unit. However, for me, it seems most natural to combine it with the fifth grade career education unit which focuses upon developing a greater understanding of self. No matter what the approach, the unit clearly integrates subject matter and related skills from the areas of reading, language arts, and social studies.

Though it will use it as a springboard, my unit will have a great deal of independence from the career education unit, especially in its attempt to present an historical picture of Black experiences in America.

This unit will be divided into two general areas. One will attempt to have an historical approach while the other will have a more personal focus. Naturally there will be overlapping.

I envision the basic unit lasting about four or five weeks with sessions lasting approximately thirty minutes per day. However, the general structure of using poetry as a springboard will be used periodically throughout the year during reading, language arts, and social studies lessons. At that point, students should have a stronger historical context within which to place the selected poem.

Since it seems necessary that we first explore what came before historically, developing an understanding of the adversities faced and the strengths that grew from the past, I will begin by introducing poems related to the early history of Black people in America. The words of spirituals (“No More Auction Block”, “I Thank God I’m Free at Las”, “Go Down Moses”, “We Raise de Wheat”), folk poetry (“Walk Together Children”, “Slave Marriage Supplement”), and early Black poets (“The Slave Auction”—Frances E.W. Harper, “The Unsung Heroes” Paul Lawrence Dunbar) are rich with such accounts.

Poems and songs will be placed in an historical context at some point as they are being examined. Often this will be done by the teacher prior to the oral reading of the poem. As the students become more historically knowledgeable, this will be done during discussion of the poem’s content.

Most poems will be first read orally by pupils, and/or teacher, for appreciation as a work meant to be heard. Vocabulary or historical references will be explained as necessary.

Works will then be discussed with a view toward their content and the intent of the poet. Pupil’s personal impressions will be sought at this point.

Finally, poems will be once more read orally for appreciation of their spoken form.

A picture of more modern struggles and gains, including the anger, is given by poets of the more recent decades. Through these poems, we will attempt to focus upon both group and individual strengths, the role of family, and the support of one another for survival, along with the demand for progress that grew even in the face of tremendous obstacles.

Many works by Langston Hughes are particularly appropriate for this historical section since, besides their pertinent message, they are often short and presented in a manner that, with guidance, most fifth graders can comprehend. Poems such as “Question & Answers”, “Mother to Son”, and “Junior Addict” are a few noteworthy examples.

The same is true of Dudley Randall (“The Ballad of Birmingham” and “Ancestors”) and some poems of Nikki Giovanni (“Knoxville Tennessee” and “The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr.”)

The resources listed in my bibliography offer further possibilities for appropriate poems for both general sections of my unit as will your personal knowledge and investigation. Choices naturally will be influenced by your particular situation and the nature and abilities of your class. Since there is considerable overlapping of content and “message” in some poems, their use within the unit could vary. I also have included a list of specific poems which I feel should be particularly useful in this unit.

Coupled with this poetic account of history, my unit’s second section also will contain an examination of poetry emphasizing more personal themes such as physical characteristics, emotional needs, a desire to move forward, and an appreciation of others.

Many of these themes also can be found in poems from my historical section; thus, these themes would be an ongoing part of group discussion. Other poems direct a more personal message to the individual reader and seem to call for an isolated examination.

Langston Hughes’ “I, Too, Sing America” could provide an excellent umbrella for those poems which examine the individual and urge the reader to use his or her strengths to move forward.

Many poems by Shel Silverstein examine these serious themes in a seemingly light-hearted manner that children of this age enjoy reading and can relate to easily. “Colors”, “No Difference”, and “The Long-Haired Boy” are a few. “Black Henry” by Rockie D. Taylor, “Still Here” and “Dreams” by Langston Hughes, and “Indians” by John Fandel are poems with a more serious approach.

These poems will be presented in a manner similar to those in the historical section but without an emphasis upon their place in Black American history. More time will be devoted to relating content to students’ actual feelings and experiences, as well as evaluating how valid they feel the poet’s viewpoint is.

Throughout the unit, pupils will be motivated to express themselves poetically on topics related to the poems being presented. If pupils choose to, they will be given the option of writing on a topic similar to what is being discussed historically. However, it seems more appropriate to stress topics related to themselves-feelings, family, experiences. Those will occur most often in the “personal” section. I hope there will be an attempt to create both types. I will expect at least one poem per week.

There will be very little emphasis on teaching the elements and mechanics of poetry in isolation, though various elements will be incidental, but important, topics of discussion as poems are presented throughout the unit. Attention to similes, metaphors, personification, rhythm, and rhyming, where it exists, will be given. With examples and mild urging, I hope students will incorporate some of these devices within their own poems.

The creation of “raps” and cheers is an activity that pupils of this age enjoy. They will be encouraged to relate these creations to unit topics and will be given an opportunity to share them with an audience.

Throughout, there will be varied avenues for pupils to share their personal poetry with the group and with others in both oral and written form, with emphasis on oral reading. Bulletin board displays, illustrated booklets and readings over the school intercom are a few possibilities. Each pupil will keep a poetry journal of his or her own poetry which I will check at least once a week, making comments or asking questions designed to expand. A class anthology of student poetry will be compiled, illustrated, and “published”.

Hopefully, there will be no complete culmination to my unit and its goals of increasing self-understanding and building self-esteem will continue to be fulfilled throughout the year.

As a final note, I would like to say that although my unit is specifically designed to meet the needs of a class of all or mostly Black students, I feel that with awareness and sensitive presentation its objectives and strategies are appropriate for any classroom. Learning to understand and appreciate the struggles endured and the positives gained by others should be a positive experience for any class. Most poetry suggested in this unit could contribute towards increasing self-understanding and building self-esteem in any pupil.

Sample Lesson

Each of the following lessons is built upon the reading of a poem whose content relates to the objectives of this unit. Many other poems could be substituted appropriately for those I have chosen.

Lesson One

Poem : "Frederick Douglass: 1817-1895"

Poet : Langston Hughes

Summary : Langston Hughes praises Douglass for his boldness in speaking out against slavery

Vocabulary : wary, tread, indecision

Procedure : Begin by reading poem to class. Go over vocabulary together. Depending upon knowledge possessed by class, provide pertinent facts from the life of Frederick Douglass. Read poem again. Explore message: Why does the poet say Douglass is not dead? What do you think he means when he says—

"Had he walked with wary foot
And frightened tread,"
"Might have lost his soul,"
"And capture every street"
"To route each path
Towards freedom's goal"?

Bring out how the poet feels about Douglass. Why does he think he's a hero?

Through further discussion, list heroes of class and today's society in general. Focus on athlete and our means of expressing admiration. Establish the cheer as a method. Give example of this traditional cheer.

“_____, _____, he’s our man.
If he can’t do it, nobody can.”

Give example of expanded version praising a Black American (Sample written by unit author.)

“Wheatley, Wheatley, she’s the one.
Shining brightly like the sun.
Writing poetry was her thing.
Phillis Wheatley, your words sing.”

Point out simile, personification, rhyming, and rhythm. Allow class or individuals to chant cheer. Compose another cheer together. Motivate each pupil to compose own cheer.

Depending upon your class, it may be necessary to provide a list of Black Americans, with biographical information, from which to choose. The class could also be required to research their individual before writing.

If your school has a cheerleading squad or if individuals in your class possess the required skill, the final cheers could be presented with appropriate movements before an audience.

Lesson Two

Poem : “To James”

Poet : Frank Horn

Summary : A father, coach, or other significant adult asks a young boy to remember the efforts and joys he experienced as he won a significant race. He then asks the boy to live his life with the same energy and determination he used to achieve his victory on the track.

Vocabulary : catapulted, sinews, ecstatic, ecstasy, lurch, starting holes, straightaway, tape

Procedure : Begin by reading poem to class. Go over vocabulary together. Discuss message of the poem. Discuss colorful words, especially verbs. Discuss pupil’s individual goals and how the poet’s advice could apply to them.

Return to discuss the section on remembering the race. Motivate pupils to remember steps in their life and to make comparisons expressing what it was like. Urge freedom in making these comparisons. Set up a form for expressing these in written form.

“I remember _____”

“It was like _____”

The number of comparisons should be unlimited, but they should write at least three.

Conclude by sharing results.

Kenneth Koch in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* offers a more detailed account of such an approach, along with some excellent examples by pupils.

Lesson Three

Poem : “Ballad of Birmingham”

Poet : Dudley Randall

Summary : Set in the midst of the civil rights struggle when marches and protests spread throughout the South, this poem tells of a Black mother, in Birmingham, Alabama, trying to convince her young daughter to attend church rather than join other children in a protest march downtown. The mother’s relief, as her child goes off to church, is soon shattered as a bomb rips through a Sunday school class killing four young children, including her little girl.

Vocabulary : None

Procedure : Begin by reading poem to class. Have pupils discuss poem first without any factual background. Provide information on bombing of Birmingham church. Read poem again. Discuss poem further.

Possible questions : What does the young girl wish to do? Why is her mother fearful? Why is the child not afraid? Where does the mother send her instead? Why? How is the way the child looks as she leaves a contrast to what happens later? Should the mother have let her go to the demonstration? What would you have done if you were the mother/child? Who was “right”? Contrast the words of peace with the words of violence used by the poet. How do you feel about what was done in Birmingham? Did the children die in vain?

After the poem has been discussed and understood in its historical context, motivate pupils to research, individually or in groups, other significant events in the more recent civil rights struggle.

Suggestions:

Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott.

The deaths of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner.

Medgar Evars.

Any significant event in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The integration of schools and colleges in the South.

Pupils may present the results of their research orally, through illustrations, and/or in written form. Though I

would not stress composing poetry in this particular lesson, I would suggest it as an *additional* option along with their research.

SUGGESTED POEMS AND POETS

Here is a list of the poems and poets mentioned in this unit along with others I feel are particularly appropriate. There are many more to be found in the books listed in my bibliography as well as others with which you may be familiar.

Baraka, Imamu Amiri: "SOS"
Brooks, Gwendolyn: "We Real Cool"
Davis, Frank Marshall: "Giles Johnson, Ph.D."
Douglass, Frederick: "We Raise de Wheat"
Dunbar, Paul Laurence: "Soliloquy to a Turkey"
"The Unsung Heroes"
Fandel, John: "Indians"
Giovanni, Nikki: "Basketball"
"Ego-tripping (there may be a reason why)"
"The Funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr."
"Knoxville, Tennessee"
"Nikki-Rosa"
"Trips"
Harper, Frances E.W.: "The Slave Auction"
Hayden, Robert: "Frederick Douglass"
Home, Frank: "To James"
Hughes, Langston: "Africa"
"Dream Deferred"
"Frederick Douglass: 1817-1895"
"I, Too"
"Junior Addict"
"Ku Klux"
"Mother to Son"
"My People"
"Negro"
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"
"October 16"
"Question and Answer"
"Still Here"
"Words Like Freedom"
Iman, Yusef: "Love Your Enemy"
Randall, Dudley: "Ancestors"
"Ballad of Birmingham"
"George"
Raven, John: "An Inconvenience"

Silverstein, Shel: "Colors"
"For Sale"
"The Long-Haired Boy"
"No Difference"
Taylor, Rockie D.: "Black Henry"
Walker, Margaret: "Girl Held Without Bail"
"Street Demonstration"
Folk Poetry: "Blessing Without Company"
"Slave Marriage Ceremony Supplement"
"Walk Together Children"
Spirituals: "Get on Board, Little Chillen"
"Go Down Moses"
"I Thank God I'm Free at Las"
"No More Auction Block"
"Steal Away to Jesus"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I have listed just a few of the books consulted in the preparation of this unit. Though other books contained appropriate poetry and/or information, I began to encounter considerable repetition of what I had read before. For me, those listed were the most valuable. Those marked with an asterisk (*) contain material especially relevant and appropriate for elementary grade students. Most material for the classroom will come from poetry selected by the teacher from different sources.

Chapman, Abraham. *New Black Voices*. New York: New American Library, 1972. Contains a fairly large section on the more "angry" Black poetry of recent times. Poems are not appropriate for elementary children but broaden the teacher's perspective.

Evans, Mari. *Black Woman Writers (1950-1980)*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984. This book is a

critical evaluation of modern Black women writers, including the editor, all noted for their poetry and some for their fiction as well. Each section presents a commentary by the poet on her own work, fairly broad evaluations by two critics, a bibliography, and biographical data.

*Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems* . New York: Random House, Inc., 1959. A wide variety of poems by Hughes appropriate for both students and teacher. Many relate closely to this unit.

*Koch, Kenneth. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry* . New York: Harper and Row, 1970. Kenneth Koch describes his methods of teaching elementary children in Manhattan to write poetry. Contains many examples of pupils' work and approaches that are age appropriate for younger children. Has excellent examples to show pupils what others their age can write.

Koch, Kenneth and Farrell, Kate. *Sleeping on the Wing* . New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1981. An anthology of poetry with helpful comments on each poet and the selections presented. Also includes suggestions for motivating adult students.

Randall, Dudley. *The Black Poets* . New York: Bantam Books, 1971. An anthology of poems by Black poets beginning with "Folk Poetry" and progressing to poets of the 1960's. Presents an excellent historical picture of the Black experience in America through poetry. Some selections are not appropriate for most elementary aged students.

Scholes, Robert. *Elements of Poetry* . New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1969. A book which helps the teacher to read and teach poetry. Presents poetic elements with examples that illustrate these devices.

*Silverstein, Shell *Where the Sidewalk Ends* . New York: Harper and Row, 1974. Contains poems most elementary children love to read.

Curriculum Guide Career Education Grades 5 and 6 . New Haven Public Schools: New Haven, 1986. The publication contains the section "All About Me" which could possibly provide a springboard for this unit.

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