



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1990 Volume IV: American Family Portraits (Section I)

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## **Portrait of The African American Family**

Curriculum Unit 90.04.07  
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If they are to be adequately prepared for the future, all students, must gain a wider perspective and appreciation of the cultural diversity present in the pluralistic society in which they now live, and will function as adults. With projections of a fast growing minority population, it is imperative that teachers help students understand differences and view diversity more positively.

In light of the racial crisis pervading this country, it is important that we help children develop positive attitudes toward persons who are different from themselves racially and culturally. An acquaintance with different cultures and groups can enhance the development of the kind of tolerance needed in our highly polarized society.

Since the written word has the potential to greatly influence the reader, teachers can use literature to increase children's understanding of themselves and others. In addition to being one of the most effective tools, it is the tool nearest at hand.

Through literature a child may identify with the struggles and problems of children not like him/herself, and gain an insight into feelings and attitudes different from his own. Through literature, then, children may move toward more explicit concern with others.

This curriculum unit deals specifically with African American family life. Although slavery did not succeed in destroying the African American family, African American families were traumatized by slavery and by the oppressive conditions that have existed since the institution of slavery was abolished. Some of the legacy of slavery is still manifested in the black inner city. Overwhelmed by life in the margins of society, many families have transferred the harmful habits that resulted from slavery and its aftermath to several generations. Today, much of what is readily observable in inner city African American family life can be traced directly to the darkest period of American history—slavery. By analyzing the development of the African American family through literature, art and music, students can better understand themselves and others. They could learn to critically examine behaviors they would otherwise take for granted.

In one of the stories in Julius Lester's *This Strange New Feeling*, a black character, Ras, would constantly look at the ground while been spoken to by a white person. A visiting northerner could not understand this behavior. However, this could be traced to the behavior expected of blacks during slavery. Blacks could not look at a white person when spoken to, they often had to lie and cheat to save themselves or fellowmen from severe beatings or death. They had to pretend to be ignorant and stupid to save their lives. Many of these

slave habits, born of necessity, have been promoted by the larger society as an intrinsic part of innercity African American family life.

Children will be unable to fully understand and appreciate the African American experience unless they are acutely aware of the devastating effect of slavery on both the black man and his master. Although ethnic literature can help develop racial understanding and tolerance, teachers must be mindful that it may also reinforce stereotypes and misconceptions. Hence, careful and effective teacher guidance is mandatory.

This curriculum unit is a literaturebased reading and writing program using African American literature that portrays the evolution of African American family life from the time Africans first arrived in America. The unit also includes same background information on African life prior to their arrival in America, as well as current popular media portrayal of African Americans.

Cooperative learning is an integral part of this unit. With our culturally divergent student body, many students do not know how to work cooperatively with others—a skill they will need to be successful adults. Students also tend to disregard the past. They often see no relevance to their lives. They need to develop an appreciation of the past and see value in literary works that can help them understand their present lives better. Students also need to become more skillful in communication, building and maintaining trust, providing leadership, and managing conflict.

The purpose of this unit, then, is threefold: To help develop racial tolerance, to help minimize the isolation and alienation among students by developing social skills, and to show the relevance of history to their lives. Students will learn to cooperate in their lives while studying how people have or have not cooperated in the past. In so doing, students develop skills such as leadership, ability to communicate better, ability to trust one another and manage conflict, as well as a sense of history and its relevance to their lives.

Students will work extensively in cooperative groups to discuss and analyze the literary works. With cooperative learning, students get the opportunity to acquire good human relation skills, solve problems, evaluate new ideas, and build bridges from what they knew to new information, as well as between different subjects. This will help them to become active participants in their own learning as they acquire skills needed to function effectively in their adult lives. Cooperative learning is an extremely effective instructional strategy to use in multicultural education.

Essentially, cooperative learning places students of different abilities and backgrounds into situations where all participate equally in learning. Recommended for use with pairs of students up to groups of four to six, research has shown that cooperative learning improves achievement for all students.

The five necessary components of cooperative learning include: Positive interdependence—strategies that force the students to cooperate; facetoface interaction; individual accountability—where students learn together but are tested individually; social skills development, where the teacher promotes the learning of skills integral to group work; and group processing, that is, discussing how the group is working so it can improve its performance.

Cooperative learning highlights an important principle about the way we learn—We build our knowledge on the knowledge of others, we think of new ideas by listening to other people’s ideas, and we need the support of others to keep us going when we’re tempted to give up. This teaching strategy is built on the belief that people learn better when they learn together. Several decades of research has proven that productivity, academic achievement, and selfesteem improve dramatically when students work together. Students are

motivated to work in groups because they can be with their peers. Cooperative learning manages their interaction by providing a solid group structure under which students work.

Although there are many schools of thought on how to structure cooperative learning groups, they all seem to agree on two key elements, namely, positive interdependence and individual accountability.

Group members must be dependent on each other to complete their task and must see this interdependence as positive. The underlying belief should be that their individual success is positively affected by the success of all group members. A positive interdependent group structure consists of several factors including members sharing the same goal, resources, and materials; and each student having a specific integral role to play in completing the task. Students are rewarded through grading or other reward systems, when everyone in the group meets a set standard. When positive interdependence is working, teachers can observe students huddled together over their work, talking about the work, quizzing each other and encouraging each other to learn.

Each group member must be held individually accountable for mastering all assigned material. A true cooperative learning group has builtin safeguards against hitchhiking in which one person does all the work and everyone else signs it.

Two of the most important life skills are the ability to think critically and the ability to work with other people. Cooperative learning addresses both these skills by making them an intrinsic part of the learning process.

This unit extends over two marking periods. Students will read any four of the books in the student bibliography. A good combination for the 8th grade will be Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave* , followed by Lester's *This Strange New Feeling* , Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mocking Bird* , and Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin In The Sun* . This combination gives students, initially, actual accounts of slaves in Lester's *To Be A Slave*, which serves as excellent background information on which to base interpretations of the subsequent books. Any combination of books may be used to tailor a unit to the student's level.

Teachers unfamiliar with the historical background of the African American family, can find a wealth of information in books outlined in the teacher bibliography at the end of this unit.

An important part of this unit is parent and community involvement. Parents and other members of the community will be invited to speak to students on racial issues and African American heritage. Teachers may also vary teaching strategies to address learning styles of their students.

A whole language approach will be used to integrate all facets of the curriculum unit. In addition to reading the four books, students will:

- ¥ View and discuss historical videos.
- ¥ Identify elements of slavery from Lester's *To Be A Slave* that are evident in the other three books.
- ¥ Identify elements of slavery, as evidenced in any of the four books, that are readily observable today in the African American family.
- ¥ Watch videos of *To Kill A Mocking Bird* and *Raisin In the Sun*.
- ¥ Write book reports on all four books.
- ¥ Write poetry using prose from each of the four books.

- ¥ Create in writing their ideal African American family.
- ¥ Critique current TV portrayal of African American family
- ¥ Observe and document any personal experiences which demonstrate racial intolerance. Class will discuss and suggest ways to deal with such incidents.
- ¥ Explore myths about African Americans.
- ¥ Listen to and discuss racial issues with visiting community members.
- ¥ Read and discuss the implications of Dr. King's "I Have A Dream," speech.
- ¥ Read selected articles from black publications such as *Black Enterprise*, *Ebony* and *Essence* .
- ¥ Write their own short stories on the general topic of racial tolerance.
- ¥ Study vocabulary from the four literary works.

In all of these activities students are actively involved in exploring a topic of relevance to their lives. They discuss and share knowledge as they expand their learning both academically and socially in cooperative learning groups.

The unit could run for any two consecutive marking periods. Or, a teacher may elect to extend it over a full year. If used over two marking periods, during the first marking period students could be introduced to the unit by watching a video or just listening to Dr. King's "I Have A Dream," speech. Most students are already quite familiar with this speech. The teacher may then pose questions to promote class discussion. For example: Why is this speech important? Or is it important? Why or why not? Why is Dr. King's Birthday celebrated as a holiday? Who exactly was Dr. King? What is the essence of his message? If viewed on videotape, students may be asked to comment on Dr. King's oratorical style. At this point, the teacher may choose to have students read parts of the speech using Dr. King's oral skill as a model. This may be also a good time to teach a mini lesson on effective oral communication and/or persuasive writing. Myriad questions could follow this speech. From here on the teacher could explain to students that they will be studying the circumstances that created the need for a speech such as Dr. King's.

Students are introduced to the four literary works and the sequence in which they will be read. Some historical background information on the rise of the slave trade would be quite pertinent here to prepare students for Lester's *To Be A Slave*. This book, as the name implies, is about how it felt to be a slave, and contains actual accounts of people who lived through slavery. Hence, it could be quite emotional for some students, and teacher guidance is important.

*That Strange New Feeling* would follow very nicely after *To Be A Slave* since it contains three great stories about how it felt to taste freedom. *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, could be read next as it gives vivid details of life in the South soon after the Civil War. *A Raisin In The Sun* , written in the 1958, gives students a more contemporary view of African American life in the inner city. Of course teachers may choose any four works and devise a sequence that will fit the needs of his/her students.

## LESSON PLAN #1

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**Objective** *Students will analyze Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and identify reasons why Dr. King and his speech have been so important in American history.*

**Material** *Printed copy and video of Dr. King’s “I Have A Dream” speech.*

**Procedure** *The teacher will introduce the unit by giving an overview of the unit including the books to be read, student activities and purpose of the unit. Students will read Dr. King’s speech silently. Then the teacher or a student volunteer will read it aloud. Students watch the videotaped speech, after which the teacher initiates discussion by asking openended questions such as: What is the essence of Dr. King’s message or Why does America need the message?*

As students generate ideas, the teacher writes them on the chalkboard in a cluster or web. After a substantial number of ideas have been generated and recorded, the teacher may add some of his/her own, and proceed to inform students that the information on the board is important because they will be referring to it periodically throughout the unit. Students will then write down the information on the board.

**Closure** *Teacher will summarize the lesson and explain its relevance to the entire unit. For homework, students will use the ideas generated in class to write a short analytical essay of Dr. King’s speech.*

## LESSON PLAN #2

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**Objective** *Students will evaluate Dr. King’s speech in relation to their lives to determine what progress African Americans have made since the speech.*

**Material** *Students’ essays from previous assignment. Julius Lester’s To Be A Slave.*

**Procedure** *Students will read and discuss their essays in small heterogeneous groups. Teacher will write the major ideas from Dr. King’s speech on the board. Working in groups students will discuss each idea and write their answers to the question whether each aspect of the dream has been achieved, and if not how can it be achieved? Each group will share its responses with the entire class.*

The teacher will then introduce the book *To Be A Slave*, and explain that slavery and its legacy, the major forces that necessitated Dr. King’s speech, will be examined through Lester’s work. The teacher will lead a discussion on the origins of slavery before reading the prologue of the book. The teacher should also explain that this book will help students understand the significance of Dr. King’s speech, and let students know that they may find some parts of the book to be disturbing. However, the classroom atmosphere should be one in which students will feel comfortable sharing their feelings.

**Closure** *In preparation for the text, the teacher will ask students to write one page on what they imagine slavery was like for a slave family.*

## LESSON PLAN #3

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**Objective** Students will compare actual accounts of slavery with their ideas of what slavery was like. Students will begin writing in response journals.

**Material** Students' onepage essays from previous lesson. Julius Lester's *To Be A Slave*.

**Procedure** The teacher may call on volunteers to read aloud their essays on what they imagined slavery was like. These essays will be kept in students' writing folders to be used later in comparison with accounts from the book. The teacher then begins reading *To Be A Slave* . Depending on the class, the teacher may choose to do the reading or ask for volunteers.

**Closure** Time should be allowed before the end of class for discussion and for students to begin writing in their response journals as they compare their previously held notions of slavery with the actual accounts from the text. As they write their response to the text, students should be guided to include any feelings they have at this point as well as any new, interesting or disturbing information they gleaned from the text.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS

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Armstrong, William H. *Souder*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969.

A strong determination to survive keeps this family from being destroyed in the face of poverty. An intriguing story whose central characters are a young boy and the family dog.

Fox, Paula. *The Slave Dancer* . New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1973.

This view of slavery is from the perspective of a young white boy who is shanghaied on a slave ship and forced to make music for its human cargo.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin In The Sun*. New York: New American Library, 1958.

A vivid dramatic presentation of a black family in Chicago planning to move into a white neighborhood.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill A Mocking Bird*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1960. This book is about life in the South soon after Civil War. A major incident in the plot is the unsuccessful attempt of a Black man to obtain justice on a false rape charge.

Lester, Julius. *This Strange New Feeling* . New York: Scholastic Inc., 1981.

This book contains three great stories about African Americans who faced danger and survived, and how it feels to taste the first moments of freedom.

\_\_\_\_\_. *To Be A Slave* . New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1968.

In the words of men and women who lived through the institution of slavery, this book, as the name implies, tells

how it was to be a slave.

Parks, Gordon. *The Learning Tree* . New York: Ballantine Books, 1963.

A novel that shows the inner life of an African American family as its members struggle to understand and accept their world without malice.

Tate, Eleanora E. *The Secret of Gumbo Grove*. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.

In this novel an 11-year-old girl, Raisin Stackhouse, traces her black community's history through stories about people buried in the local South Carolina graveyard. It touches on some important aspects of black identity.

Taylor, Mildred. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1976.

An African American family is determined to maintain its integrity, dignity and independence in Mississippi during the Depression.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS**

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Bennett, Lerone. Jr. *Before The Mayflower*. 5th ed. Chicago: Johnson Publishing Co., 1961.

Very comprehensive and scholarly, this book dramatically traces black history from its origins in the great memories of Western Africa and the transatlantic journey to slavery, through Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Interwoven throughout the book are portraits of figures in the struggle for freedom, and numerous illustrations that support major points and highlight personalities discussed in the text.

Comer, James P. *Maggie's American Dream: The Life and Times of A Black Family*.

This book tells the story of how a poor African American woman, determined to secure the best opportunities for her five children, succeeded against the odds. The author, a child psychologist at Yale University, is one of those five children. The book exemplified what thousands of black families experience as they struggle to keep their families together and educate their children.

Grambs, Jean Dresden & John C. Carr. Editors. *Black Image: Education Copes With Color*. Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co. Publishers. 1972.

This is a series of essays on the black experience. Essayists include James A. Banks, Phyllis Franklin, Barbara Glancy and Juel M. Janis. They confront the issue of negative or nonexistent images, the oversimplification, distortions and omissions in textbooks, and the impact on the self-concept of both black and white students. Strong recommendations are made for teachers to use their initiative in demanding from publishers, books that reflect their students' diversity.

Redding, Jay Saunders. *They Came In Chains* . Pa: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1950. This book gives excellent background information of the history of Africans from the time they were captured and brought to the "New World." It includes detailed description of the middle passage as well as slave life in America and the Caribbean.

Kunjufu, Jawanza. *Developing Positive Selfimages and Discipline in Black Children* . Illinois: African-American Images, 1984.

The author, an educational consultant and author of several other books on educating African American youth, explains, in this book, the relationship between educating African American children and the problems in the larger society. He gives practical solutions to the problems faced by educators and African American children as they interact in the school setting.

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