



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

American Families: Portraits of African-American Members

Guide for Curriculum Unit 90.05.09
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“American Families: Portraits of African-American Members” is designed to explore the concept of the American family. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the unit begins with a personalized study of different aspects of the family. After a general study of the family, the unit focuses on the factual and fictional African-American family.

The study of the African-American family begins by reviewing the historical perspective. Through research and study of the African-American heritage, the students will gain insights that will provide basic understandings of the culture. These factual understandings will lead to a greater appreciation for the African-American family-related literature selections to be studied in this unit.

The study of literature begins with the study of the oral tradition, the first literature of the culture. “The People Could Fly,” by Virginia Hamilton, a book of African-American folktales will be used as a springboard for varied oral literature activities that include listening, reading, role playing, and creative writing.

After studying the oral tradition, the students will look at various family-related poems by noted African-American poets, such as Langston Hughes, William Dunbar, and Gwendolyn Brooks. The study of poems, selected from anthologies such as “I Am the Darker Brother,” “Black Out Loud,” “Bronzeville Boys and Girls,” does not emphasize the study of literary devices. The primary objective, in the study of poetry, is to develop an appreciation for this form of literature.

Next, this African-American unit focuses on Newberry-Award literature with a family-related theme. The Newberry books have been chosen for middle school students because they are recognized as excellent literature. Several books, such as “Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry,” by Mildred Taylor, and the prolific works of Virginia Hamilton fit this category. The major literary work chosen for study in this unit is “Sounder,” by William H. Armstrong. “Sounder,” translated in eight languages, is a simple story about a poor Black sharecropper and his family who lived in the South. The story eloquently depicts the closeness and warmth in a small family that endured very harsh treatment from the outside world.

Varied strategies in this unit will encourage middle school students to develop a greater appreciation and understanding of others. Hopefully, each student will develop a greater sense of personal awareness and understanding through the personalized study of the family, from different perspectives and approaches.

(Recommended for Language Arts, grades 6-7)

Key Words

Afro-Americans Family Life Literature

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