



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

The Family That Endured An Historical View of African-American Families As Seen Through American Literature and Art

Curriculum Unit 90.05.10
by Jean Sutherland

In spite of a systematic attempt by much of American society to destroy the foundations of family life for African-Americans, the Black family unit in all of its varied forms has survived.

Throughout America's history, social and economic forces have worked directly and indirectly as pressures designed to weaken the African-American family and erode the strengths which can be gained through family ties. Despite these negative forces, the Black family unit developed as a stabilizing and sustaining influence, surviving and promoting the survival of individual African-Americans against tremendous odds.

Through the seemingly impossible days of slavery and up through life in modern day society, the family has been of tremendous importance in the lives of African-Americans. The image which many people hold portraying the Black family as broken or non-existent is not an accurate one. In reality, the Black family provided a strong support system that enabled, and still allows, many African-Americans to survive both physical and emotionally in the face of considerable obstacles.

Despite the theories presented by some possibly well-meaning researchers, the African-American family has not always been in a state of confusion. Though, of necessity, it was sometimes organized along what the majority population would probably term nontraditional lines, the family unit usually contained strong role models, both male and female. It was built on an inter-relationship that fostered responsibility, sharing, and a warm sense of caring for other members.

Teaching in a self-contained fifth grade classroom of twenty-three African-American pupils, I am aware of many of the strengths as well as many of the problems to be found within the families of my students. I am also keenly aware of the need for my pupils, and all pupils, to develop a strong sense of self-esteem in order to achieve success in life. In today's world this is not an easy task.

In the past I have found that pupils of this age are generally unaware of the historical development of African-Americans in this country. They are even more unaware of the realities of individual life during these periods. Their knowledge is scattered and often based on stereotypes. Though recent emphasis on African-American history has made them more knowledgeable about individual achievements, they do not see events in a historical context, which prevents them from seeing the full significance of individual events and influence of history upon them and their families today.

A study of the historical development of the African-American family in America, from its African roots forward, could help foster the kind of understandings that would allow my pupils to see themselves and their ancestors as part of an institution whose role is one to be admired. In turn, I would expect that they would be better able to recognize and take pride in the positives of their present family as well as better understand the pressures contributing to any existing problems.

In order to achieve this goal, it seems imperative that pupils be presented with materials that provide a more accurate picture of Black family life as it existed and as it now exists in America.

Through the selection and use of appropriate children's stories and poetry, as well as excerpts from some adult literature, a much clearer picture of the reality of African-American life can be gained.

Various paintings focusing on the African-American family can provide positive examples and serve as springboards for further discussion and reading. The famous *Banjo Lesson* by Henry Tanner with its nurturing grandfather figure opens many avenues of exploration. Though rather abstract in style, Charles Alstan's *Family* presents a more traditional family configuration for viewing and discussion.

It also seems important to expose pupils to American Art which depicted African-Americans in a negative or stereotypical manner. The historical changes both in who painted Blacks and how they were painted is worthy of consideration. An excellent collection of pictures together with historical information may be found in Guy C. McElroy's *Facing History—Black Images in American Art , 1790-1940*.

Photographic collections, such as those found in Middleton Harris' *The Black Book* , starting from the days of slavery, show us a rich history of craftsmen, artists, inventors, performers, and everyday men, women, and children. Also included are photos and sketches showing the harsher, often brutal, side of life. Even these, however, send out a message of strength, love, and cooperation gained through "family".

A recent photographic collection, *I Dream A World* , by Brian Lanker, presents excellent pictures of present-day African-American women with a short biographical sketch. Though only a few are shown in a family-type setting, the power of their faces begs for speculative discussion about their lives and character. Along with each picture, there is a page of comments by the woman involved. These comments often give recognition to the supportive influence of family.

Regarding the specific course of this unit, as its primary goal, it will provide varied opportunities for pupils to examine examples of American literature, painting, photographs, and representative artifacts which reinforce the concept of the African-American family as a continuing positive force.

It is designed with a self-contained fifth grade classroom in mind, but could readily be modified to fit other circumstances.

The unit easily lends itself to inclusion in a variety of subject matter areas which could be integrated naturally into one general study. Lessons in the area of social studies would provide the historical context into which the study of related literature, paintings, and artifacts would fall. In turn, these areas would be examined and expanded during reading, creative writing, and art class. During the heart of the study, it would seem wise not to make any subject matter distinctions.

Regarding length, in my self-contained classroom, the basic unit, including the historical background needed, would take at least two months of integrated social studies, reading, creative writing, and art lessons

amounting to from five to eight hours a week. Activities designed to develop an increased understanding and appreciation of one's own family might continue throughout the year. Time could easily be adjusted to meet individual classroom situations.

After providing a brief background on the origins of slavery, we would examine societal and family traditions that existed in the African homelands from which the first African-American slaves were separated. Pictures and accounts in Valerie Bank's *Kwanzaa Coloring Book* provide one source of age appropriate material in this area. In *Zeely* by Virginia Hamilton, in which the author examines a young girl's fascination with a woman she believes to be an African Queen and the lesson she learns from her, we have a look pertinent to understanding the connection between past and present.

Turning to slavery in the United States, we would learn of the factors, as well as the deliberate techniques, which provided tremendous obstacles to the formation of strong traditional family units among African-Americans. In turn, we would see how adversity created strengths and strong ties among African-American slaves—just the opposite of what the proponents of slavery desired.

Both adult and children's literature contain many examples of African-American slaves who bonded together in both traditional and non-traditional families defying the attempts of white slave owners to keep them weak as a people and therefore easily controlled.

Excerpts throughout Alex Haley's *Roots* give us accounts of "family" strengths. Sharing these selections with the group could possibly be followed by a showing of the television movie of *Roots* which examines the entire period through the eyes of "family".

More on a fifth grade level, the book *Slave Girl* by Betsy Haynes lets us observe the intricacies of "family" support existing on a typical southern plantation. In the face of tremendous obstacles, we see this support providing the individual and group hope which fostered survival.

Although probably not suitable for reading in their entirety, Harriett Jacobs' *Incidents in Life of a Slave* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe contain a number of sections which present both the horrors of forced separation and the depths of caring existing among family members. Certainly a summarized version of Harriett Jacobs' story, including some select passages, would provide a powerful example of the sacrifices made for family. Likewise, a summary of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and reading of selected sections would breathe life into the facts of history. Children of this age would be capable of making general comparisons between the two novels and could understand the weaknesses in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as well as its historical significance.

In similar manner, we would move forward historically through Reconstruction, segregation, the civil rights movement, up to modern times examining the forces affecting African-Americans with a special focus on the role of family as a positive influence as well as an institution affected by the course of history.

Alice Childress addresses the problem of drug addiction in *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*. We are allowed to view the problem through the eyes of all those involved and see how each is affected and tries in his/her own way to help the situation. A particularly positive character is the addict's "step-father" who, though not actually married to the addict's mother, plays a crucial role in his life.

In *Alisia*, Eloise Greenfield tells the true story of a young girl who escapes death in an accident only to be left paralyzed. Through her own determination and the support of her family and friends, she is able to move forward both physically and emotionally.

In the area of poetry, Dudley Randall, in his collection of African-American poetry, *The Black Poets*, provides a chronological presentation beginning with “Folk Poetry” and carrying us up to modern times. The same is true of Langston Hughes’ *Selected Poems*. Many poems in both are appropriate to this unit and the age level involved.

In his book *Beyond Black & White*, James P. Comer not only provides a clear picture of the historical development of African-Americans in this country, but he also intertwines stories of actual individuals to show us the role played by family. Dr. Comer’s knowledge of sociology, political science, economics, and psychology make this book an excellent source of understanding for the teacher.

This should ultimately help in deciding upon appropriate material for use in the classroom. Also, there are excerpts from the text which could be used directly with pupils when presenting the historical picture.

It is important that pupils be exposed to material involving ordinary families who lived their lives in a positive manner in spite of the inequities imposed by the dominant society—families with positive values and worthwhile goals who succeeded.

All of Virginia Hamilton’s books that I have read provide excellent examples of ordinary people living together, facing problems, supporting each other, and learning together. The characters are easy for children to identify with. The interrelationship of family members is realistic and positive. Though some of the situations presented in *A Little Love* are a bit mature for fifth grade, her depiction of Sheema’s relationship to her grandparents is worthy of excerpting. (A partial list of her children’s books is included at the end of this unit.)

Children need to become aware that great accomplishments were achieved in the face of adversity long before modern times.

Here again, *The Black Book* provides pictures and text explaining contributions made by African-Americans throughout history in almost every phase of life. *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Jet* magazines often feature people whose accomplishments cover a wide spectrum. Though they are often pictured in a family setting, it would be hoped that, at this point, pupils would realize that “family” support probably played a major role in achieving success even when it is not discussed.

Throughout, attempts would be made to draw connections between early and modern families. Activities would involve pupils in examining the positives existing within their own families.

There are numerous related activities which lend themselves to both topic and age level. Here are general summaries of just a few. Three more detailed lessons will follow.

Through talking to other family members, looking at old photographs, and examining other family records, pupils might develop an individual family history.

After determining the symbols that best represent the spirit of their family, each pupil could create a family coat-of-arms.

If older family members or friends are available, pupils might conduct interviews centering around recollections of the past. Interviews could be tape recorded or written and then shared with the class. In some cases, these individuals might be willing to speak to the class.

Pupils might collect various things that have been in their family for a number of years. If these are not

available, they could select things that are important to the family now. Depending on the nature of the articles, these “treasures” could be shared or photographed for sharing with the class.

A gallery of photographs both from the past and the present could be arranged in the classroom.

A “rap” about their family or an individual family member could be created and presented to the class or another audience.

A list of suggested children’s literature provided in this unit includes only a small number of the appropriate works available for use in achieving the desired goals.

Though planned primarily for African-American students, the unit also could develop understanding and sensitivity in pupils of any racial group.

Lesson One

Title : Analysis of Advertisements—Old, New, and Personal

Subject Matter Area : Social Studies, Language Arts, Art

Objective: To develop the ability to identify racial stereotypes in advertisements from the past and to have a fuller understanding of their sources and implications; to be able to compare advertisements from the past with those of today using similar approaches; to create an original advertisement and subject it to the same analysis.

Procedure : Pupils will be shown a series of advertisements from the past. Though there are other sources, I have chosen a series from *The Black Book* , edited by Middleton Harris.

These advertisements portray African-Americans in the typical stereotyped form. Almost any stereotype imaginable is to be found in one of these examples. There are no realistic family situations portrayed, and most products are associated with cooking or cleaning.

After viewing these advertisements, pupils will be asked a series of questions designed to motivate thoughtful discussion. questions such as the following will be included:

Who do you think created these advertisements?

To what people do you think they are appealing?

Are the people in the ads drawn realistically?

Do you see any similarity in the type of products that are being advertised?

How do you think their ad will help sell their product?

How are African-Americans portrayed in these ads?

Are African-American families portrayed in any of the ads?

How would people of today and then react to these ads?

Do you see anything positive and/or negative in these ads?

Pupils will then be shown a collection of modern day ads portraying African-Americans. Pupils might also be asked to bring in their own from magazines at home.

After they have seen this group of ads, they will be asked the same series of questions with discussion culminating in an analysis of how they are alike and how they are different.

Each class member will then be asked to create an imaginary product or service. They will write a brief description naming the product or service and explaining what it claims to do. They must then create an advertisement that they feel would sell this product or service today. There will be a discussion of the possible elements which may be involved in an effective advertisement: lettering, picture, slogan, adequate information.

When these advertisements are completed, the same list of questions will be applied to the pupils' ads. This might be done by each pupil, through exchanges in small groups, or by the entire class.

Finally, pupil advertisements will be displayed along with those from the past and present.

This "lesson" should probably consist of a series of smaller lessons. It divides easily into three sections, but with some groups further division may be necessary.

Lesson Two

Title : Role-play

Subject Matter Area : Social Studies, Language Arts

Objective : To be able to identify with the problems faced by family members in African-American families from the past and of today; to develop a means of possible solution to difficult family situations; to be able to assume the role and feelings of another.

Procedure : After the class is familiar with the conditions facing the African-American family during the time of slavery, through discussion, the class will list some of the problems they feel were most oppressive. A partial list might include: family members forcibly separated, physical cruelty, deprived of education, decisions regarding escape.

The class will then list the most crucial problems they feel are facing the African-American family of today. A partial list might include: prejudice and discrimination, drugs, gaining a good education, crime.

A problem situation will then be presented from the past for role-play. As an example: "You are a fifteen year old slave on a Southern plantation. You have a chance to attempt an escape on the Underground Railroad. It would mean leaving other family members behind. Someone attempted escape last month, was captured, and

was beaten close to death when returned. You decide to discuss this matter with your mother, uncle, and two close friends, one who is going with you and one who refused out of fear.”

Slips of paper will be given to pupils who volunteer for each role. These will provide a general statement of the character’s general attitude to guide the pupil’s portrayal.

Example: “You want to be free more than anything, but you fear the consequences of failure. You saw the runaway beaten last month. You don’t think you could bear this happening to your friend who is deciding whether to attempt escape.”

After pupils have portrayed enough of the situation to reach some sort of resolution or to give the group a feel for each character’s dilemma, the actors and audience will be given a chance to react to the presentation. Pupils might be asked for alternative ways in which the characters might have reacted.

The same will be done with a problem faced by families of today. “You don’t like the people your child is hanging with. You think they’re a bad influence. You decide to bring it up at the dinner table in front of your wife and two younger children.”

The same procedure would be followed.

Pupils then will be encouraged to create their own situations to be role-played. Situations could range in “severity” from the less serious to the critical. They might be from any period in African-American history.

To be done adequately, this lesson should take at least two class sessions.

Lesson Three

Title : “You Are the Wind Beneath My Feet”

Subject Matter Area : Integrated

Objective : To promote positive feelings and appreciation towards adult family members or other adults who have assumed that role. To provide children with an avenue for communicating those positive feelings to the adults involved.

Procedure : After an adequate understanding of the history of the African-American family has been acquired by the class and pupils have been involved in a number of other activities designed to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own family, it will be suggested that they communicate these results to family through a group presentation and display.

The display would consist of projects collected throughout their study: family histories, interviews, photographs (old and new), original coat-of-arms, drawings, written material, poetry, family “treasures”, tape recordings, and others that their study may have suggested.

Most of the exact content of the presentation will be planned by the class, but it will probably include music, dance, readings, and skits in whatever combination the group desires and talents determine.

The conclusion of the program will be a slide show which will include pictures of each child with a significant adult or adults in their “family”. A child might have more than one slide taken depending upon his/her family situation. Pupils will be given their own slide after the program.

After being introduced appropriately, the slides will be shown to the background music of “You Are the Wind Beneath My Wings” (sung by Bette Midler—from the movie *Beaches* .)

The program might include refreshments, depending on the circumstances of the group.

Suggested Children’s Literature

Here is a list of books mentioned in this unit along with others I feel are particularly appropriate. There are many more available which are pertinent to the topic.

Those marked with an asterisk contain language or situations which might be more appropriate for the more mature student.

1. Boyd, Candy Dawson. *Breadsticks & Blessing Places*
2. Childress, Alice. * *A Hero Ain’t Nothin’ But A Sandwich*
3. Greenfield, Eloise. *Grandpa’s Face*
Alesia
4. Hamilton, Virginia. *M.C. Higgins, the Great*
**A Little Love*
The Bells of Christmas
The House of Dies Drear
Zeely
The Planet of Junior Brown
5. Haynes, Betsy. *Slave Girl*
6. Howard, Elizabeth Fitzgerald. *A Train For Lulu’s & Chita’s Christmas*
7. Hunter, Kristin. *The Soul Brothers & Sister Lou*
8. McKissach. *Mirandy & Brother Wind*
9. Myers, Walter Dean . *Where Does the Day Go?*
10. Taylor, Mildred. *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*

Bibliography

Banks, Valerie. *Kwanzaa coloring Book* . Los Angeles: Sala Enterprises, 1985. Contains a variety of pictures relating to the African celebration of Kwanzaa along with appropriate explanations. Valuable for learning of African traditions and building of positive values.

Comer, James. *Beyond Black and White* . New York: Quandrangle Books, 1972. Provides clear picture of development of racism in the United States with an analysis of its effect on both black and white Americans.

Gutman, Herbert G. *The Black Family in Slavery & Freedom 1750-1925* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1976. Gives a more accurate picture of the African-American family and the forces affecting it. Excellent reference for teacher.

Harris, Middleton. *The Black Book* . New York: Random House, 1974. A pertinent collection of photographs, sketches, and text. Traces the history of African-Americans showing us the accomplishments of craftsmen, artists, performers, inventors, and everyday people. Also, shows the harsher side of life in forceful manner.

Hughes, Langston. *Selected Poems* . New York: Random House, 1959. Contains a wide selection of poems by Langston Hughes relating to the family and African-American history. Appropriate for teacher and students.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1987. This autobiography traces the heroic flight of Harriet Jacobs from slavery to freedom. Of particular importance to this unit, Ms. Jacobs' story illustrates the support of family and friends, even in the face of tremendous danger.

Lanker, Brian. *I Dream a World* . New York: Stewart, Tabori & Cheng, 1989. A photographic collection of African-American women "who changed America". Each picture is accompanied by a brief biographical sketch along with a page of comments by each woman, often referring to her family roots. A must for any school and/or classroom library.

McElroy, Guy C. Washington, DC: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1990. *Facing History—Black Image in American Art 1790-1940* . Presents historical view of African-Americans as they are portrayed in American Art. Accompanying text gives appropriate historical background. Should be part of school and/or classroom library.

Randall, Dudley. *The Black Poets* . New York: Bantam Books, 1971. An anthology of poems by African-American poets beginning with "Folk Poetry" and progressing to poets of the 1960's. Presents an excellent historical picture through poetry.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . New York: Harper & Row, 1958. Historically significant novel. Despite the many stereotypes presented, there are many sections that present positive situations and could bring the facts of history alive for fifth graders if presented objectively.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>