



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1991 Volume III: Afro-American Autobiography

Building Dreams— Who is There to Help You?

Curriculum Unit 91.03.09
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Working with a fifth grade classroom of twenty-six African-American pupils ranging in age from ten to twelve, I am continually aware that my students have arrived at, or are entering, a period in their lives when many decisions crucial to their future will be made by them. Unfortunately, for many, the diverse forces existing in today's urban societies have made it difficult for these decisions to be positive ones.

Due to a variety of factors, too intricate to discuss and obvious to most, many of my pupils lack a strong feeling of self-esteem, are deficient in basic skills, and have little confidence in, or even awareness of, their own abilities. Generally, they find it difficult to establish long and even short term goals. Perhaps of more importance is the fact that they often fail to recognize the positive support and role models already existing in their lives, especially within their own "family". They do not realize that these segments of their lives can be sources of strength which could assist them in formulating and achieving positive goals for the future.

My experience in teaching has shown me that this inability to recognize the support around them is due, at least in part, to the limited view they have of history, especially as it relates to African-Americans. Although they are generally knowledgeable regarding specific individuals such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Jackie Robinson, etc., and know of the Underground Railroad, Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the March on Washington, these people and events are viewed as disconnected parts of a whole—a whole which they don't really see as an influence on themselves and those around them. Without some sense of the larger historical picture, it is difficult for them to fully understand and appreciate the struggles and sacrifices made by those who went before, including members of their own "family", church, and community. When this broader knowledge of African-American history is achieved, I believe it inevitable that they will view many in their lives with greater understanding and respect, seeing them as sources of strength and guidance in formulating and achieving their own "dreams".

It should be obvious that I feel my unit must be built within the framework of African-American history. Without this, the autobiographies presented will also become isolated parts of an unseen whole, losing much of their effectiveness.

The manner in which each teacher covers the factual historical points will naturally vary. For myself, I will use a combination of two units I have written previously for the Yale New Haven Teachers Institute: "Poetry: A Mirror in Which to See Myself" (1989) and "The Family That Endured" (1990). In the first, poetry is used to trace African-American historical development, while American literature and art is used in the second. To

these works, I would add excerpts from various slave narratives which have been introduced to me in my present seminar.

Along with material from the basic fifth grade social studies curriculum, these materials should give my pupils at least some of the necessary historical understandings needed to provide a setting for the two “autobiographical” works which will form the major part of my unit.

With these two works, James Comer’s, *Maggie’s American Dream* and Mildred Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, I hope that I will provide my students with models who, at least in some respects, seem familiar and who will present some positives to which my students can relate.

Although in many ways the lives of Cassie Logan and James Comer vary greatly, they both found positive support from “family”, church, community, and some aspects of school. Both had connections to the “land” which influenced their lives and future. Both had parents with “dreams” and both learned to dream for themselves, though we must speculate some regarding Cassie.

Hopefully, by using the teaching techniques I have developed, my students will be able to relate to the positives in each life and to recognize the goals or “dreams” they and those around them worked for and often achieved. My approach attempts to bring out similarities and differences between the two and tries to compare and contrast both with situations faced by my students today.

In the foreword to her novel, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Mildred Taylor speaks warmly of the legacy left by her father. “He taught me of hopes and dreams. And he taught me the love of words.” Easily these words could have been included in the introduction to James Comer’s, *Maggie’s American Dream*, as he speaks of his mother, for both works present us with individuals who possessed the strength and vision to motivate their children not just to survive but to strive for a better life. Although Mildred Taylor and her father never speak to us directly from the page, their voices are undeniably present and in harmony with those of James and Maggie Comer. It is the message spoken by these and other voices that I want my pupils to hear and understand as we examine these books together.

In preparation for this examination, I not only feel pupils need the basic exposure to African-American history which I have mentioned previously, but I also think they should have a relatively clear picture of some historical events and institutions which have a direct bearing on both stories. This might involve a simple review of material previously taught or lessons designed to emphasize the particular information needed. Some of the topics which I feel should be covered before reading both autobiographies include: Reconstruction, “night riders”, sharecropping, company store, school segregation, the Depression, the northern movement of African Americans, and the tradition of oral history. This need not entail a lengthy period of study but should provide pupils with enough information to allow them to grasp the significance of related events within each story.

The actual reading of each book could vary without altering the unit’s objectives. Depending upon circumstances, the books could be read individually by part or the entire class, presented in small reading groups in a systematic chapter manner, or read orally to the entire class by the teacher. In any of these cases, it is essential that adequate discussion occurs. Lessons must be designed to help pupils recognize and appreciate the strengths and sometimes weaknesses various characters demonstrate. Drawing connections with each pupil’s own life should be fostered. Comparing and contrasting characters and events in each story also should be a focus. Sample lessons and some suggested topics are listed later in this unit.

Although I recognize that individual approaches will vary, there are a number of topics present in both works which I feel must be examined through discussion and other related activities. The order in which I discuss each does not relate to its significance since they are undeniably interrelated.

Family Support : The “family” support in both books extends to many individuals, even those who have died. In *Roll of Thunder* , the significance of each person’s contribution seems more evenly divided, but even in *Maggie’s Dream* we are very much aware of the influence of Hugh Comer, especially upon Maggie herself. In both stories, the interrelated caring of peers is always present. Stacey in a confession will omit some truth in an attempt to protect his younger sister and brothers from a beating while Norman Comer considered dropping out of college so Jim could finish after Dad died. Big Ma and the memory of her husband Paul Edward, as well as of her parents, though presenting a much clearer image, bears some similarity to the hard working black Comers past and present of Comer, Alabama. Mr. Morrison in *Roll of Thunder* shows us that family can extend further than relatives, a fact that many children can relate to today.

Although both books contain numerous examples of family support, a particular strength I see in *Roll of Thunder* is the opportunity for the teacher to point out the different form this support took depending upon the family member involved. When Cassie was humiliated by Lillian Jean and her father, everyone offered the type of support his or her temperament and experience dictated, though Cassie’s youth prevented her from recognizing it clearly at the time.

The Importance of Church : In both stories church is a vital part of life as a religious and social institution. Although Maggie’s step-father prevented the family from attending church, in East Chicago her life became mostly church oriented and continued so into her marriage to Hugh, whom she met at church. Even in choosing land for their home, the decision was made relative to the distance from church—too close would mean an over abundance of company.

In *Roll of Thunder* the church was part of the school grounds and supported its existence as best as possible. The Logans attended regularly, and the annual revival provided the only planned social event of the year where distant friends and relatives could meet.

Many of my pupils easily can relate to the supportive role of church as shown in the lives of both the Comer and Logan family.

Importance of Community : If we refer to community as those living in the same general locality whose lives in some ways interrelate, the community in each book was significantly different in a number of important aspects. Though certainly not enjoying equality with whites, the Comers of James’ generation lived in a relatively integrated community. They did not suffer under the daily threat of physical violence or even death. Neither Maggie nor Hugh were forced to compromise their principles to the extent that even the “advantaged” Logans were forced to do by the dominant white community.

Yet, both shared the support of their own “community”, those African American friends and neighbors who shared the common bond of experience. Though church and community were almost interchangeable, community could go further as seen in the character of Mr. Morrison. The community that my pupils share today often goes beyond church and for some is entirely outside of church. In either instance, it still can provide much of the same self and group affirmation as seen in *Roll of Thunder* and *Maggie’s Dream* . There still is the protection, the sharing, and the unspoken.

To a degree, community could also include those supportive white people encountered in both books, Mr.

Jameson and Jeremy in *Roll of Thunder* , as well as those positive white friends and teachers in Jim's life. I think discussion of these chapters is important as a means of drawing connections between supportive white people in my pupils' lives and those in each story.

Importance of Education : There should be no question in the reader's mind that Maggie saw education as the way to achieving one's dreams. Although circumstances and her tyrant step-father denied her an opportunity, she was determined to provide for each of her children, including Louise. Through her words, we learn that Hugh Comer had been raised with a strong respect for education and shared her goals of an educated family. Each child appears to have accepted with little resistance the path chosen by their parents.

In *Roll of Thunder* , set in different circumstances, the message is not quite as overt but is certainly there. Mama was a teacher. Though this caused Stacey considerable problems, it was a position respected at home and in the "community". Time was always allotted for study and, despite the usual complaints, the children obviously respected learning and its tools. The Christmas gifts of books and the reactions they drew clearly underlines this respect.

Although, not always as clearly evident, and contrary to the popular belief of some, the importance of education is stressed in the homes of a large majority of my students. However, I also think circumstances make it much more difficult for parents to convey this message while at the same time factors in each pupil's life often make it difficult for them to receive or accept. Accepting this point as it plays a role in these stories is therefore especially important.

Relationships with Whites : In both stories, the family's and African-American community's relationships with the white community play an important role. In both, there is a degree of accommodation necessary for survival. There are also times when a stand must be made despite the possible consequences. In *Roll of Thunder* , Uncle Hammer must control his anger at Cassie's humiliation while many are willing to risk the consequences involved in boycotting the Wallace's store. While Hugh Comer advised not to "cut the fool" to get along, he cautioned not to go out of your way looking for trouble. Though circumstances and the nature of the Comer family allowed easier acceptance by the white community, personal insults and personal conflicts of loyalty were constantly present as illustrated by Jim's relationships with white peers who accepted him but rejected African Americans as a group. Stacey faced a similar dilemma in dealing with the friendship offered by Jeremy and the caution of his father.

It seems important to help pupils understand why compromises were made and that whites with positive values did and do exist.

The Importance of Land : The importance of land as a vehicle to independence is primary in *Roll of Thunder* . It is also present in *Maggie's Dream* , Hugh's family's land, Hugh's payment of the threatening debt, and the Comer's land and homes in Chicago. Maggie's and Hugh's emphasis on education seems a parallel to land. Owning it gives you independence.

For many children who I teach owning land is a remote possibility now, but some have relatives who own or owned land in southern states. Education is certainly a viable substitute for land. The comparison should be drawn.

The Importance of Oral History : Oral history is the basis of *Maggie's Dream* as it is in *Roll of Thunder* , indirectly, through the stories of Mildred Taylor's father. Within the story itself Big Ma's remembrances of her husband Paul Edward and her parents provide the Logan children with their history. The same is true when the

family gathers at Christmas to exchange stories of fun and sorrow. Maggie and Jim provide us with the other story, but each is telling some of what was told to them.

Besides informing children of their personal past, stories in oral history often carry a lesson, a guide for future behavior. When Mr. Morrison begins his vivid recollections of his early life, Papa overrules Mama's caution by allowing the children to listen and learn from his experiences. In this case, Mr. Morrison was probably speaking more out of personal need while Papa was making a deliberate choice to have the children hear the story. Maggie's stories all seem designed to move her children along the path toward her long aspired "dream". The storyteller must be selective if the goal is to be achieved.

Children have much oral history available to them but often they need to ask. Activities fostering the discovery should be an important part of this unit. Children also need to be aware of the possible personal motivations and resulting selectiveness of the storyteller without losing the value or joy to be gained from listening.

In conclusion, we have two stories, two families, different in many ways but alike in most. By reading both and experiencing activities that promote an understanding of both, my pupils hopefully will be able to see similar positives in their own situations and perhaps better understand the problems that do exist. Armed with this deeper understanding, perhaps they will be better able to formulate and achieve their own "dreams".

Lesson One

Title Examining Personalities

Subject Matter Area Language Arts, Social Development, Reading

Objectives *Ability to draw conclusions regarding personality based upon story events, ability to evaluate personalities based upon your values, ability to speculate on the effect individuals could have upon your future.*

Procedure *This lesson plan requires at least one but ideally two sessions, the first requiring written pupil responses with the second consisting of follow-up discussion. It is better suited for use with Roll of Thunder which presents a greater number and a wider variety of characters with enough detail to allow us to feel relatively knowledgeable about them. Certainly the first part is applicable to Maggie's Dream while some of the other questions easily could be revised or new ones added such as "How might your life change if Maggie controlled your household?" Another alternative would be combining the characters from both books in this lesson.*

This lesson would be conducted only after the story had been thoroughly read and discussed. The number of topics suggested could easily be decreased depending on the group's ability. I suggest responses be written to allow everyone a chance to express his or her genuine feelings.

Pupils would first be asked to briefly discuss each of the characters listed (Board or ditto). Tell what the person was like? What did you think of them? Why? Naturally, the number of characters listed should be determined by the teacher.

After this has been completed, pupils will be asked a series of questions requiring more personal involvement in responding. The following are suggestions:

1. Which character(s) did you like most? Why?
2. Which character(s) did you like least? Why?
3. Do any characters remind you of someone in your family or someone you know?
4. Which character(s) would you most like to have as a friend? How might they change your life?
5. Which character(s) would you like to have in your family? How might they change your family and your life?
6. Which character would you most like to be? Explain.

After this written section has been completed and the teacher given a chance to read responses, a follow-up discussion session should be held. Here pupils could share and elaborate on responses. The teacher might present any general finding from the written papers and have class speculate on why that particular result was so.

Lesson Two

Title Role-Play

Subject Matter Area Language Arts, Social Studies, Social Development

Objectives *Ability to understand the personalities of various people presented in Roll of Thunder and Maggie's Dream ; ability to identify the problem solving strategies employed by each of these people and apply these strategies to a hypothetical situation as each character would apply them; ability to use material in each book to speculate on possible motivational factors behind each character' responses; ability to apply this analysis of motivation to the actions of others and self.*

Procedure *This lesson plan could consist of one or more sessions depending upon the individual situation. It could be carried out individually with each book or could combine characters from both. An advantage to combining is the opportunity to compare and contrast the reactions of people from both books.*

The success of this lesson rests heavily upon the thoroughness and quality of preparation and discussion that has accompanied the reading of each text. Besides knowing "who is who" "who did what", pupils need to have experienced some examination of personality and motivation as each character unfolds.

To begin, pupils will be presented with a problem situation set either within the environment of one story or in a modern day setting. Both can eventually be used. For my example I have selected a situation from the present: "In preparation for an upcoming competition, a group of about eight pupils meet during spring vacation at the home of a parent-advisor, along with the teacher in charge. Both adults have gone out of their way to accommodate the group. Though there has been some previous friction between the obvious leader among the pupils and the teacher present, practice generally goes well until the teacher has to leave shortly before the session is to end. The pupil leader, whom I shall call Karen, begins to act up. Karen is both well-

liked and feared by most pupils. She is bossy and manipulative but popular with both boys and girls and, when she chooses, with adults. She reads people well but sometimes is ruled by her temper. She is street-wise yet can be polished socially. At twelve she is slightly older than most pupils there who average eleven.

As the parent prepares to drive some pupils home, Karen becomes loud and verbally abusive toward the departed teacher. She then decides she wants to walk home, which the parent rejects. Gradually she begins to manipulate some of the other pupils to join her as she becomes louder and ruder, masking her behavior in a playful attitude. In the process, a lamp is broken, the parent is defied and insulted a number of times, the parent's husband is forced to discipline the pupils, and, not without further problems, everyone finally gets home.

Very soon the parents of all pupils involved are informed about the situation may cause their child's removal from the group. Despite the range in ages, the Comer and Logan children, including T.J., were all there. Both families are notified and call a family meeting to discuss the issue.

Again, each family may discuss the problem separately or the two may work together. Pupils will be assigned various roles and must assume the personality of the particular character he or she represents. Having boys play female roles and girls playing males should be a positive experience if the teacher and group can handle it smoothly. The discussion should include ascertaining the fact as each saw the situation, what role each played and why, what if any punishment should result, and finally, in retrospect, how do they feel about what happened. Naturally the adult characters will have much to say.

After some sort of resolution has been reached or time runs out, the entire class needs to enter the discussion. Do they agree with the portrayals? How would they differ? Why do you think each character acted as she/he did? How do you think you would have acted had you been there? Why? How would you feel after? What were the pressures people, including the adults, were feeling in the hypothetical situation? Why do you think Karen acts as she does?

Pupils should then be encouraged to develop their own situations to be acted out by members of the group. They need not include as many characters as the example. In fact, two people interacting could be equally appropriate.

Lesson Three

Title Communicating and Advising

Objectives Opportunity to learn through an exchange of information with school drop-outs who have returned to school; understanding that judging "intelligence" is a complicated matter not to be based solely on superficial indications; ability to communicate through a letter; ability to formulate some "dreams"

Procedure While teaching school drop-outs three nights a week at the Adult Basic Education Center, I usually have my adult pupils write a brief paper about themselves, discussing how they got where they are and where they want to go now. Often I share anecdotes with each of my classes (fifth grade and adults) about the other. They usually contain some sort of not too subtle message. (Stay in school! Help your kids at home!) This year I would like to make the exchange between the two classes a more formal one and relate it particularly to *Maggie's Dream*. For those who do not teach a GED class, as I do, I suggest contacting your local Adult Basic Education Center where I speculate you will be able to find a teacher willing to take part in the letter exchange I will outline.

To begin, with my adult class, I will discuss the fact that my fifth graders are reading *Maggie's Dream*. I will provide a brief summary of content, stressing Maggie's determination and resulting success. Perhaps some will be motivated to read the book themselves. I will then ask them to volunteer to write a letter to my class stressing the value of education.

Naturally the actual content of each letter will vary, but I will urge them to include some personal information on themselves, reasons why they dropped out of schools, problems they encountered because they dropped out, their motivation for returning, their personal "dreams" for the future, and any advice they wish to give. Would they have done things any differently if given the chance? Before presenting the resulting letters to my pupils. I will review the need not to make a superficial judgment on one's basic intelligence. I will remind them that there are often reasons why a person is unable to speak or write "correctly". I will remind them of the slave poetry we will have read and the wisdom of Big Ma. If not mentioned previously, I will discuss some of the strengths in my adult students such as managing a family, job, and school.

After the letters have been read, a general discussion will be held. The exact content depends upon the letters but will emphasize both the value of staying in school and the values these former dropouts now place on education. The "dreams" especially as they relate to education will be a focal point.

I will then urge the fifth graders to write letters back to the adults reacting to their advice and encouraging their pursuits. Besides including some personal information, I will ask them to share something about their own "dreams".

Other Possible Related Activities

I have included a brief list of possible activities which seem appropriate to this unit's content and objectives. With the exception of number one, their inclusion, timing, details, and length should be determined by each classroom situation.

1. Discussion: It is essential that discussion occur throughout the reading of both books no matter how they are presented. It is primarily through discussion that the topics I have listed should be examined. Children constantly should be urged to give opinions, speculate, and examine people's motivation. Where applicable, relationships should be made to the present.
2. Read *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, Mildred Taylor.
3. Look at family photographs in other texts such as *The Black Book* and *A World Unsuspected*.
4. Examine and share their own family photographs—Write related stories, real or imagined.
5. Take photographs. Create stories for the future.
6. Select oral history story from text and examine motivation and/or lesson of the storyteller.
7. Interview older members of family and/or neighborhood.
8. Retell a favorite story a relative has told. Why do you think it was told?
9. Tell a story from your life you might tell when you are older.
10. Discuss a white person from your life or that you know whom you feel is a positive individual.
11. List some "dreams" you have for your future. What can be done to help them happen?
12. Teacher presents class with a negative character sketch. Have them speculate on causes. How could this person be helped?
13. Do you think the Comers and Logans would have been friends? Why?
14. Read excerpts from other autobiographies. See bibliography for some suggestions.
15. Have pupils with desire start own autobiography on all or a portion of their life.

Bibliography

Although all books in my bibliography contain material valuable to both teacher and pupils, in many the teacher must select those excerpts appropriate to this unit and the maturity of the class.

Comer, James. *Beyond Black and White* . New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972.

While exploring the roots and effects of racism in America, Comer includes many applicable anecdotes from his life.

Comer, James. *Black Child Care* . (Misplaced book—info in final) Contains applicable anecdotes from Dr. Comer's life.

Comer, James. *Maggie's American Dream* . New York: New American Library, 1988.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk* . New York: Viking Press, 1990.

Discussion of sharecropping and description of rural school and his experiences there are particularly appropriate.

Gutman, Herbert. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Excellent reference on African American family for teachers.

Harris, Alex, ed. *A World Unsuspected* . New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

Contains anecdotes from childhood of African American born around 1940 or later. Excellent family photographs for discussion.

Harris, Middleton. *The Black Book* . New York: Random House, 1974.

A collection of photographs, sketches, and text relating to African American history and accomplishments. Contains some excellent photographs but harshness of others calls for teacher selectivity with younger pupils.

Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea* . New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1940.

Contains useful anecdotes from childhood appropriate to younger children. Since many of his poems also are appropriate for this level, some knowledge of his life could enhance understanding.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* . Cambridge: Howard University Press, 1987.

Story of a woman's flight to freedom especially illustrates the support of family and friends.

Mebane, Mary. *Mary* . New York: Viking Press. Excellent images from childhood in Durham County, North Carolina. If explored in more detail, provides interesting contrast to Jim and Cassie's family. Contrasting Mary and Cassie could be interesting.

Sherrod, Barbara. "A Conversation With Mildred Taylor," *Writing* , Vol. 7, No. 5. January 1985.

Interview gives us brief insights into the life, especially childhood, of Mildred Taylor.

Taylor, Mildred. *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* . New York: Bantam Starfire, 1981.

Follows Cassie through ages ten and eleven.

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

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