



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
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## **African-American Folktales and their Use in an Integrated Curriculum**

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by Joyce Patton

Folktales take us back to the very beginnings of people's lives, to their hopes and their defeats. American black folktales originated with peoples, most of whom long ago were brought from Africa to this country against their will. These peoples were torn from their individual cultures as they left the past, their families and their languages and customs behind.

The black peoples coming to America before the end of the Civil War entered as slaves, and they were forcibly suppressed by the white slave holders. They were not supposed to speak their own languages. The slave owners made them speak American English but forbade them to read or write. They were compelled to do hard labor and exhorted never to run away. Alone and helpless, the slaves lived under conditions as brutal as any group of people has ever endured.

It is amazing that the former Africans could ever smile and laugh, let alone make up riddles, songs, jokes and tall tales. As slaves, they were forced to live without citizenship, without rights, as property—like horses and cows belonging to someone else. But no amount of hard labor and suffering could suppress their power of imagination.

Out of the contacts the plantation slaves made in their new world, combined with memories and habits from the old world of Africa, came a body of folk expressions about the slaves and their experiences. The slaves created tales in which various animals—such as the rabbit, fox, bear, wolf, turtle, or terrapin, snake, and possum—took on the characteristics of the people found in the new environment of the plantation. The rabbit, known as B'rabby and later called Brer, Buh, or Bruh Rabbit, became a particular favorite of the slave tellers. Rabbit was small and apparently helpless compared to the powerful bear, the wily fox and the ferocious wolf. But the slave teller made the rabbit smart, tricky, and clever, the winner over larger and stronger animals. Still, Bruh Rabbit sometimes got into trouble, just as the slaves did, which made him seem all the more human. To the slaves, the rabbit came to be identified with themselves, which makes these tales highly unusual in the animal folklore genre.

Later on probably after the Civil War, a slave character usually called John—often took the place of Bruh Rabbit, in the tales. John became the trickster who outwits Old Mas, the slave owner, and wins his freedom. A group of slave narratives that were true tales of escape also developed, as did tales of magic, fantasy escape tales, and supernatural tales.

In the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of West Africa, slavery was abolished in 1876. Black Portuguese fisherman freely emigrated from the islands to America and they were unique in that they, too, had a history of slavery. They brought with them their highly individual folktales.

Black folktales were first recorded in the late nineteenth century. In 1880, journalist Joel Chandler Harris collected some of the oral literature of the slaves in his book *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*. Many Americans' first exposure to Black folktales came through the character of the elderly Uncle Remus, the slave who had a favored position on the old plantation. Harris' Uncle Remus told animal tales in fractured English to the little white boy of the plantation house. But author Harris was not concerned with reproducing exactly the tales or their language. Harris and his contemporaries used phonetic dialect as a literary device. They felt that an exaggerated colloquial language best symbolized what they regarded as the quaint appeal of the lowly, rural people.

Thus, some of the folktales recorded by early collectors are much more difficult to read than the narratives in the form of letters and petitions that some slaves managed to write themselves. But gradually, collectors attempted to express the tales in a more realistic fashion. When Black English such as Gullah (Angola) English, was used a glossary was added. (Hamilton, 1985)

These tales were created out of the sorrow. But the hearts and minds of the black people who formed them and passed them on to us were full of love and hope. We must look on the tales as a celebration of the human spirit.

African-American storytelling is in a sweeping renaissance. Brought into the Americas by African captives, the art form remained largely dormant among descendants of the original captives except in family and church meetings. Now, however, primarily through the work of pioneering giants in the profession such as Brother Blue (Hugh Morgan, Ph.D.), Mary Carter, and Jackie Torrence, the art form is being resurrected.

The Black oral heritage is alive and growing among people of African blood, whose ancestors presumably originated storytelling with the creation of civilization in Africa, and among other ethnic groups as well. Calls for storytellers are crisscrossing the nation and much of the world. Audiences vary from intimate family gatherings to international festivals.

Masters of the spoken word in the true African tradition Black storytellers are forming and adapting stories that reach and teach the hearts and minds of listeners in numerous ways. It was sometimes frustrating for these contemporary artist to write the stories they tell. Nevertheless, they persevered because although it is true that oral stories can lose some of their color and liveliness when put in writing, there is a gain that makes the change worthwhile. In the past, oral stories, and the identities of their tellers, were often lost to future generations because there were no written records. Now, storytellers yet unborn will be able to breathe new life into our tales and adapt them to the needs of listeners and readers of their time.

Since the beginning of time folks have always wanted to spread the word. The ones who can spread the word most effectively have the ability to "talk dat talk" and "walk dat walk". In other words they can grab the imagination of the listeners and hold on to it for as long as they like, conjuring up images of the good and the bad, the weak and the strong, and the trickster and the fool. They have the ability to make you laugh until you cry, cry until you laugh, stand up and shout, or stare in amazement at their gestures and characterizations.

In the African-American culture, past and present, these folks have gone by many names. Today, they are called preachers, healers, teachers, comedians, blues singers, poets, dancers, rappers, liars, painters, and

historians. In a performance, all storytellers will use whatever it takes to get the story across. To hear them is to hear the drum, the heartbeat of Africa. To see them tell the story is to experience highlights of an African ritual at its best, a total theatrical performance.

The storyteller, the story and the audience are of equal importance. The drummers or musicians set the tone. The dancers or singers warm up the audience. The audience gives their approval by clapping their hands, swaying to the beat, and shouting comments or praises. The storyteller enters, dressed for the occasion in attire that may be colorful and exciting to arouse the curiosity or formal to create a serious mood. The storyteller senses the vibrations of the audience and begins to deliver the story, using his or her voice to mimic the characters. The storyteller may chant or scream. The storyteller sweats, and the audience loves it, because this means that the storyteller is doing all that he or she possibly can to please them. The story is full of emotions, full of humor, full of rhythmic language, and full of wisdom.

The storyteller and the audience are flexible. No one worries about making a mistake. No mistakes are made. Something new is being created. The story has fired up the audience. The storyteller has succeeded, and he or she exits in a fashion that will be remembered. The story has not ended. The audience has taken it home with them, and the next day they spread the word to the ones who were not there to witness the event.  
(Barnes,1989)

In this unit I will research to find African-American folktales which may be used to address the interest and reading levels of students in the elementary grades. These folktales will be used in conjunction with their reading series Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Treasury of Literature. These folktales can be used in all curriculum areas of study: reading, math, listening, speaking, vocabulary, writing, art, social studies, science and music. It is my intention to develop students' listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills through the use of African-American folktales. It is my hope that students will become better listeners, better readers, better writers, and better storytellers of folktales.

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich suggest we teach folktales in a three-part process. The first part of the process is to read a folktale to students and ask questions about the characters and the part of the tale they liked best. Then the teacher or reader tells students what a folktale is and asks them to be storytellers. The theme for the unit is discussed. Then the author is discussed along with other books he or she has written. After this is completed the main part of the series comes into focus. Part one, Reading Literature, which includes Building Background, ( to access students prior knowledge of the subject of the folktale). Vocabulary Strategies is the next component of study (to introduce key words and their meanings) and relate any part of speech being integrated with the key words and spelling words. Strategic Reading is the focus (students preview and predict what they think the story is about and they write their predictions in their personal Journals). They set a purpose for reading to help them focus on important facts in the tale. The tale is then read to students. Part two, is Responding to Literature (discuss the important facts of the tale) or Story Follow-Up. Summarizing the Literature (students retell the story and write a summary). Appreciating Literature (students share their responses to question given). Critical Thinking Activities are done at this time (an activity is done related to the subject of the folktale). Part three, Learning Through Literature is the next phase of the process (comprehension skills are taught). This is a four-part process which teaches Focus( to discuss skill being taught), Teach/Model (to teach a strategy to use the skill), Practice/Apply (to have students use the skill), and to Summarize (students relate what they learned). Poetry Elements of the folktale are discussed. Focus(to identify poetry techniques), Teach/Model (identify poetry techniques), Practice/Apply (students apply what they learned) and then Summarize (to assess the learning). Workbook pages are also done during this time for skills taught. Multicultural Perspectives (discusses the subject matter of the folktale), it is compared to other

countries of folktales we will study. Poetry related to subject of folktales is read and discussed. If all parts of this process is taught we would never have time to study other folktales. This process is quite time consuming, repetitive and teaches too many skills which students may or may not master. The average student may lose interest quickly. The teacher choices which integrate science, music, art, math and social studies to the subject of the folktale would never be taught because of the time factor.

I feel in order to maintain a high motivational level of folktales, they should be taught in this suggested manner. Instead of doing all phases of the Harcourt Brace Jovanovich use this method. First, choose the tale you want to read. You may choose to do a warm-up exercise to get students focused on the tale you are about to read or tell. This should take no more than five minutes. After the warm-up exercise is completed, read or tell the folktale you have chosen. Have a brief discussion of the characters and their roles. Or talk about the important facts of the tale. Then you may choose to do one activity to integrate one of the other subject areas. Other activities can be done daily for about twenty minutes to integrate the other areas of study. At the end of the week you can summarize or informally assess what students have retained about the tale. It can be an oral discussion.

Choosing folktales to read or tell children should address the students interest and reading levels. Tales with animal characters tend to be the best for younger children. However, tales that contain fanciful characters are also good to use with younger students as I have found out by doing this research. I found that there are hundreds of tales with animal characters such as Anansi the Spider, which most children are familiar, also the Brier Rabbit character, the Frog, the Tortoise, the Elephant, and the Monkey. These tales have been suggested from the book *Talk That Talk, An Anthology of African-American Storytelling* by Linda Gross and Marian E. Barnes: "Anansi Riding Horse", "Brier Rabbit and Buh King", "Frog Who Wanted to Be a Singer", "How Trouble Made Monkey Eat Pepper", "Why Anansi Hides in Corners", and "Why the Rabbit is Alert".

I recommend these tales from the book *The People Could Fly: "He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit", "Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby", "Tappin, the Land Turtle", "Bruh Lizard and Bruh Rabbit", and a fanciful tale "The Beautiful Girl in the Moon Tower". Other tales I recommend are the books: "A Story, A Story" by Gail E. Haley, "Why the Sun and the Moon Lived in the sky" by Elphinstone Dayrell, and the "Princess and the Full .Moon" by Frederic Guirma. Obviously, you should read a lot of folktales in order to choose tales that suit the needs of the students you teach. Once the folktales have been chosen, discuss with students the origins of the tales. Even though I recommend another way to teach folktales before that method is taught this is how students could be introduced to folktales.*

For the first few sessions folktales should be read to students. They should discuss the characters and the roles they play in the tales. The setting, main idea and language should be discussed at this time. At this time you may wish to integrate an art activity and students can use their creative skills. This will give you some idea of how the students will do in lessons to be taught later. After several readings the teacher should tell students tales. This is when the way I suggested to teach folktales should be incorporated.

I have taken the folktale "A Story, A Story " by Gail E. Healy to demonstrate how a folktale can be taught. I have done some activities to show how I would use the tale in teaching. Warm-up exercises are good to use to get the students' attention in preparing to read or tell a folktale to them. After I read the tale I felt a good warm-up exercise to do was to use the words and phrases that were repeated two times or more in the same line in the tale. The teacher would say so small, so small and the students would repeat what the teacher says. other words or phrases to be repeated are: will happen, will happen or binding, binding, by his foot, by his foot, by his foot, by his foot, raining, raining, and thank you, thank you. This lesson integrates two areas of

study listening and speaking. Therefore it is not necessary to do two different lesson. Other games or rhymes may be used to teach these same skills refer to the book *Talk that Talk* for other rhymes or games. Students may know some games, rhymes or chants they may wish to lead and teach the class.

A vocabulary and spelling lesson that can be done using the same folktale are words chosen from the story the teacher feels the students may not know. If these words are taught and their meanings given students' comprehension of the tale about to be read will be better. The words I choose are: binding, calabash, gourd, latex, yams, flamboyant, furious, assembled, nobles, and proclaimed. The vocabulary lesson is taught when words are defined and discussed. A spelling lesson to see if students comprehend their meanings is to have students use words in sentences orally. This integrates two more areas of study which saves time in the teaching of the folktale. You can do one part of this lesson or all of it or something totally different.

A math lesson which can be used from this same folktale is to create word problems from the words or phrases repeated in the tale. For instance, how many words or phrases were repeated in this tale? or how many words were repeated four times in one line in the tale? How many characters were there in the story? Students should be encouraged to use complete sentences in answering the questions. This integrates writing with math skills. The students will have to read to find the words. They will have to count the words or phrases to find the answers. Therefore reading is also being integrated in the lesson.

Social Studies can be used in this same folktale by discussing the country the tale originated in which was Africa, how it came from the Caribbean isles to America Students will use a map to see these places and trace the route the tale took to get here. We will discuss the people who brought the tale to America. This will help students to use a map and learn about people from other places. It would be a good idea to discuss the people or African tribe the tale was based upon. This helps develop students' research skills which incorporates another area of study.

Discussing the climates of Africa and America will provide you with the means to teach a science lesson. I would compare the climates of both countries and discuss their differences. A chart can be made to show the differences in the two climates. We could also talk about the things that are similar about the two climates. Plant life in Africa and America can also be discussed mainly, to see if any of the same plants that grow in Africa can be found in America. We would focus on the most popular plants found in Africa. This lesson integrates reading, science and art for visuals.

Art can be integrated when you have students create a mural of the African village that the tale was told. This will allow students to work in small and large groups. They can use the book the tale was read from or create their own village. They can discuss this village in conjunction with their own neighborhoods. Students can write and tell what they like about the village and tell why they like the village. This helps them use their creative skills in more than one way.

Writing skills can be improved when students can express their feelings about a character they liked in the story. Encourage them to tell why they like the character they chose. Have them write and tell what their character looks like and the role the character played in the tale. Was the character a positive role model or a negative one? This is how writing can be integrated in the lesson using the folktale " A Story, A Story".

Most of these ideas were created to show how all subject matter can be integrated into the reading program. I suggest you use one activity per day. Most of the lessons or activities can be taught in thirty minutes or less. They are motivational and interesting things to do and will meet the needs of all students. All lessons are based on the same folktale.

I will do one activity for several folktales to give you an idea how easily this can be done. These lessons will cover all areas of study but it will relate to that particular folktale.

The folktale "Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain" by Verna Aardema is a tale concerning a drought. A lesson in science about a drought can be developed. Ask students if they know what a drought is? Discuss the reasons why a drought occurs. Ask students to describe how an area looks because a drought has taken place. Have students tell how they would end the drought. This lesson allows students to use critical thinking skills and to use the computer to find information on droughts. This lesson can be developed further if we research to find areas where droughts occur frequently.

The tale "Brier Rabbit and the Briar Patch" is a folktale not fully translated into standard English. A vocabulary lesson I would use is to have students become translators. All words from the tale that need to be translated will be written on a chart. Students will give orally their answers and their answers will be written on the board. The correct translations will be on the opposite side of the chart. This helps students to increase their vocabulary. I will reread the folktale with all words translated. This lesson helps to develop students listening and oral language skills.

The folktale "Half a Ball of Kenki" retold by Verna Aardema is about a half of a cornmeal mush cake. I would teach a math lesson on halves. Since the focus of the tale is about a half of a cake. I would discuss with students what half of something is and show them half of an apple. Students would be asked to take different objects and show how they can be divided in half. This lesson can also be used to show other parts of a whole. This lesson integrates math with reading.

"The Great Race" is a Liberian folktale about a deer and a turtle. I would focus on the place the tale comes from to teach a social studies lesson. We would study important facts about Liberia such as where it is located in Africa. We could talk about the size of Liberia in land and its people. Races could also be discussed with students. They could find out what kind of races are held in Liberia. Integrating math into this lesson can be done if we make a bar graph. The graph can be used to show the kinds of races held in Liberia and how many times a year these races are held.

The West African tale "The Boom-Boom-Y Beast" is a tale about a huge animal with a strange tail. No one has ever seen the beast so I would read the folktale to students. I would then ask them to draw a picture to show what they think the beast looks like to them. This art lesson helps students to develop their creative skills. The name of the beast also suggests to me the sounds drums make so, we would discuss the kinds of drums used in West Africa. The sounds the drums make will also be a part of the lesson.

Other tales I would recommend for use in the study of folktales are from the book: *African Wonder Tales* by Frances Carpenter. The tales are "The Tortoise And The magic Drum", "Who Can Break a Bad Habit", "The Monkeys and the Little Red Hats", "The Proud Camel and the Rude Monkey", and "The Enchanted Tortoise".

From the book: *Folk Tales of Liberia* by J. Luke Creel I would recommend these tales "The Great Race", "Cunning Rabbit and Speedy Spider", "The Spider and the Firefly", "The Two Sentinels" and "The Boy and the Lion". There are hundreds of tales you can use to help students enjoy reading for fun.

Black animal tales resemble the tales of other lore in their employment of the trickster, but the social condition of the folk producing them gives an added dimension, a certain physical component which the slave narrator surely supplied and which the slave audience readily recognized.



The subliminal component of black animal tales is apparent in the delineation of the trickster as a cunning figure who tricks others into doing his work. A second trait of the black animal tale is how the hero could disguise and deceive his counterparts. A third trait of black animal tales is the ambivalent attitude toward the trickster. This trait is shared by all animal tales of all lore. Black animal tales contain both the universal aspects of the animal tale genre and certain characteristic aspects that mark them as the product of the black American folk experience.

Folk poetry can also be mentioned in this unit because of its importance in storytelling and its relationship to folktales. No art form reflects the tremendous impact of our presence in America more powerfully or eloquently than does folk poetry in the storytelling tradition. Perhaps because it is the earliest poetry we heard in our homes and our churches, folk poetry became for us the fundamental lyrics for folk music and the door to our own appreciation of the stories, tales, proverbs, and raps that came from the ancestors.

Woven together in a pattern of verbal brilliance, because the word is generative and productive, are the most telling folk poetry examples of our culture, arts, crafts, secrets, ceremonies, and rites of passage. At the beginning of our sojourn on this side of the ocean, our ancestors brought forth the most remarkable poetry from Asante, Mandingo, Yoruba, Wolof, Serere, Baule, Hausa, Congo, Angola, and Ibo, poured the essence of this poetry into the African-American folk tradition. Spoken power has a tradition going back to the ancient Africans of the Nile Valley saw Mdu Neter, the language of the ancient Egyptians, as sacred words. In West Africa the use of word games, stories, and folk poetry became an integral part of all societies. magic itself was word magic.

Transforming words were placed in the mouths of folk poets from the earliest times in America. Africans in the Americas remembered the storytellers, who stood in the midst of the children and adults and told them rhythmic stories that possessed the special quality of moral and verbal resolution. These memories were to be the memories that would guide the rhymes, rhythms, and raps of the African American. The words were to provide the transformations, social and moral, to the hearers. The best speakers would surely know how to reach the spirit of the ancestors through language.

There are many elements that compose the folk poetry tradition, but there are three principal aspects: rhyming, moralizing, and telling a story. Rhyming must be accompanied by some solution to a human or communal problem. In most instances the author is attempting to resolve a personal or communal conflict, but if it is a personal conflict, its resolution must be made in the interest of harmony in the entire community.

Moralizing without the rhyme is preaching, and rhyming without moralizing is mere versification. The American poet, whether playing the dozens, reciting folk poetry, or rapping, knows precisely the boundaries of the art form. the story is the most important characteristic of the folk poetry. Without the story there is no folk poetry. Paul Laurence Dunbar, the most able writer in this category, established the standard form of this poetry and made it acceptable to a wide audience. Dunbar's genius was the quick, sharp pun that turned a story on its head and made its point forcefully. But he was always in charge of the rhyme and the moral, despite the fact he was such a major storyteller. (Barnes, 1989)

These jump rope rhymes may be used as warm up exercises in the teaching of folktales and folk poetry:" Aunt Dinah Died", "All Hid", Pizza, Pizza, Daddy-o!", "Miss Sue", "I'm a Star",and "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang!". They can be found in the book "Talk That Talk" by Linda Gross.

In conclusion, I hope I have given some insight to those who may read or use this unit. As educators we are constantly looking for new ideas to help students read more for enjoyment and also for seeking information.

Folk tales are a means to that end.

## LESSON PLANS

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**Lesson Plan 1** Warm-Up Activity objective: To help students focus on one thing and respond to a chant or game rhyme.

Using the rhyme “Pizza, Pizza, Daddy-o!” will require student to listen and respond to rhyme being spoken. The teacher should read the entire rhyme and tell students what parts they must say. They should go through it two times before trying to do their parts of the rhyme. Once this is done the students will be ready to participate in chanting the rhyme. When this is completed the students will be ready to listen to the rhyme.

### Lesson Plan 2 Telling the Tale

**Objective To improve students listening skills.**

The folk tale to be read is “Why The Rabbit Is Alert”. Use pictures to show the different kinds of rabbits. Tell students the tale they are about to be told is about a rabbit. Give them a purpose question. This helps students to remember important facts. For instance, what lesson did the rabbit learn in the tale? Or who were the other important characters in the tale? Why are their roles important. Any questions of this nature relating to the tale can be used. Then proceed to tell the tale. Summarize the tale by discussing the lesson the rabbit learned and how the legs of the rabbit were formed.

### Lesson Plan 3 Art Activity objective: To help students create the main character of the tale.

Read the folk tale “Bringing The Rain To Kapiti Plain” and have students create how they think Kapiti looks. Encourage students to use fabrics and or paper to make Kapiti come to life. You may want to develop a pattern students can use if they are having difficulty. This will help reinforce the role of Kapiti in the tale.

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