



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1995 Volume IV: Coming of Age in Ethnic America

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## **Literature and Art Through Our Eyes: The African American Children**

Curriculum Unit 95.04.02  
by Patrice Flynn

Multiculturalism in the elementary curriculum is the current focus in educational settings. Many of the public schools have developed planned courses of study to emphasize the importance of research and appreciation of minority cultures. The main objective in these curriculums is to develop awareness with a historical approach. The history of a culture is important, however, my unit will attempt to analyze the culture as it is today.

This unit, "Literature and Art Through Our Eyes: The African American Children", is designed for a third grade class at a New Haven public school. The students in the class at L. W. Beecher Elementary School are predominantly African American. They belong to low to middle socio-economic levels. The students are also diverse in academic levels, including students participating in the talented and gifted program as well as the learning disabled resource services.

My rationale for the unit topic is to increase the students' awareness of African Americans in literature and art. Specific children's literature books have been selected which illustrate many aspects of the African American culture. I have also selected collections of poems which were written by black authors and designed to evoke feelings from their culture. Finally, we will study the work of some African American artists who have influenced the students' lives today. The theme of the literature and art will focus on cultural traditions, the extended family relationships and life in urban America.

Another reason for creating this unit is to introduce the students to characters and issues that relate to them personally. Students in this early stage of development tend to be very egocentric and respond better to realistic life situations developed by characters who are in a similar developmental stage. In this early adolescent age group, the students are developing their self awareness and self concept. They are also motivated toward social development activities. Therefore, the materials chosen for the unit are not only matched to a third grade reading level but also to the maturation level of the students. This allows the students to gain an understanding of modern situations dealing with African American children and families.

A final motivation for the development of the unit is to increase the students' desire to read and appreciate art. By integrating the books and art across the curriculum the students will incorporate many skills into each lesson. Creative Writing, Art and Social Studies objectives will be met as the children respond to the literature and art work.

This form of learning is consistent with the current goals of the New Haven Public Schools Comprehensive

School Plan. Their goal of an integrated approach to reading stresses children's literature to be integrated throughout all areas of the curriculum. Furthermore, it has chosen to place an intensive focus on writing skills and creative writing. And finally, the third grade Comprehensive Arts Program promotes the enhancement of art appreciation in the elementary grades.

Integration with many areas of study and special consideration for the cognitive skills and developmental stage of the students will enhance the unit's success. Furthermore, the comprehensive study of African American culture as it is today is an ideal introduction to African American history and the study of other groups of people such as Latino and Native Americans.

The curriculum unit will be divided into four sub-themes: "My Self," "My Family," "My Neighborhood" and "My Friends." This will allow the students to focus on smaller parts of the overall theme. Art and literature will integrate successfully within each of the sub-themes. Additionally, the teacher will have the opportunity to introduce each sub-theme throughout the school year or with consecutive lessons in a shorter period of time.

Each lesson will be initiated with a story time. I will introduce the literature book, poem or art work to the students to the entire class. The materials will be presented as a teacher directed activity to allow for guided analysis and discussion during and afterwards. Then, the students will complete an individual or cooperative learning activity that directly relates to the story, poem or art. This method is especially effective for this age group because of the more focused nature of a different daily presentation. Although the main theme is adhered to with each lesson, new concepts are introduced to match the attention level and academic level of this group.

### **"My Self"**

I will introduce the unit with the poem, "By Myself," from the book, *Honey, I Love and Other Love Poems* . This is a poem in which an African American child is describing herself, including her physical features and her personality. She tells of all of the things that she could be when she is by herself. For this first lesson, I will invite Colleen Coleman, an artist from the Comprehensive Arts Program to teach the students how to draw their own physical features such as eyes, noses and hair. Then, the students will complete a self portrait. In follow-up discussions we will compare the similarities and differences between the unique faces in our classroom. These self portraits will be displayed throughout the unit.

Oral reading and listening skills are important in the third grade curriculum. *Rights of Passage: Stories About Growing Up By Black Writers From Around the World* will help to accomplish those skill goals. These stories about young people who have overcome hardships and societal boundaries will not only inspire creative writing activities but will also serve as a literary supplement to geography lessons with the introduction of writers from Jamaica, Ghana, Australia, Costa Rica and different regions in The United States.

Other books which relate to "My Self" include *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, *Daydreamers* and *Amazing Grace* .

### **My Family**

Another lesson will be initiated with the book, *When I Am Old With You* . The students will examine the main character of the story who is an African American boy who dreams of being old with his grandfather. In response to the story the students will interview their own favorite grandparent or other significant older person in their life. They will identify significant events and memories which their grandparent recalls. From these interviews, the students will write a biographical report about the person that they spoke with. I will then collaborate with the grandparent so that they may write a memorable love letter to their grandchild in

my class.

Art will be integrated with literature with the book, *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie* . This story, based on the paintings of William Johnson, is about a young African American girl who is visited by her uncle. Uncle Willie shows and explains his paintings to his curious niece. The paintings in the book are William Johnson's. After reading the story, the students will share comparable visits of their own relatives. This will generate comparisons about the extended family. The students will examine the paintings of William Johnson and review the inspiration for each art work. They will then look at other paintings by the author. Based on what they have learned about Johnson, they will write their own creative renditions of inspirations for these pieces.

"Sunday Morning," a painting by Jonathan Green will be studied to promote further analysis on family structure. In this painting, children and adults are sitting in a crowded church. The children will study the painting by listing what they see. They should list facts like there are only mother figures in the painting, the people are dressed more formally than usual attire, and the interactions between the people in the church. The students will then respond to the painting by writing an essay about a family event that their family participates in. The students will focus on an activity that has specific participants. For example, the students may choose church, which they attend with mom and grandma, or possibly sporting events with a specific uncle and cousins. We will follow this activity with a discussion about why these events are special because they involve these people.

Another painting by Jonathan Green, "Family Wading," depicts a beach scene with two women and their children wading in the water. We will discuss the title of the painting, first. Who are these people? How are they related? These are some sample questions that I will use to generate discussion. We will examine the maternal dominance in the black culture, the extended family and things that families do together. This will inspire topics of "Who is your family?" and "Is it a single parent, two parent or other type of family?". The students will then create a family portrait of the people who they consider "family."

Additional literature books in "My Family" include *Daddy and Me* , *Peter's Chair* and *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* .

### **"My Neighborhood"**

*Tar Beach* , by Faith Ringgold, is another children's literature book that I will use. In this book, a young African American girl dreams of flying above her community. After discussion of her travels, the students will take flight over their community. We will compile lists of the diverse sights, sounds and people in the community where the children live. While enhancing the Social Studies curriculum, the students will explore and map residential and business buildings in their neighborhood. They will also identify the people who live and work in their community neighborhood.

Ezra Jack Keats' book, *Apt. 3* , will further develop the concept of apartment living in the city. This is a tale of an African American boy's journey through his huge apartment building in search of the origin of the harmonica music that he hears. The students, most of whom live in some kind of multi-family housing, will listen to the story and compare their homes to the apartment building in Keats' book. We will then draw a story web of the sounds of home: voices, footsteps, sirens, creaks and others. The students will then be given the assignment for creating an audio collage of the sounds in their own homes which will be presented in class.

The students will continue "My Neighborhood" with literature books that include *City From A to Z*, *Night on*

*Neighborhood Street* and the collection of poems, *Street Music* .

### **“My Friends”**

*Pass It On: African Poetry for Children* , includes a poem which will be introduced in this sub-topic. “Wait Little Joe” is a poem about a ten year old boy, Thomas, who is looking after his four year old neighbor, Joe. Joe tries to jump across a ditch which he is far too little to jump. Bill, who is older, tries to stop him, but in the end, Little Joe lands in the ditch and promises that he will not jump until he is as big as Thomas. After we read and discuss the poem, the students will create a chart with three sections. In the first section, the students will list and draw activities that young children (age three-four) can do. The second section will include activities that they can do now (age nine-ten). Finally, the students will complete the third section with the things that older kids are able to do (age fifteen-sixteen). We will then use the charts to discuss the advantages and limitations of each age group of children.

*Bein’ This Way With You* is a book about multicultural friendships that will be featured in this sub-theme, “My Friends.”

The chapter book, *Sister* , by Eloise Greenfield, will be used to illustrate a girl’s relationship with her mother and grandmother after her father’s death. The main character in the story is a girl who is about the same age as my students and is faced with issues that are familiar to many of them. Due to the length and readability of the book, it will be reserved for the more advanced readers in the class. The students will be asked to read chapters of the book independently. Then, they will engage in related art, writing and comprehension activities at the learning center in the classroom. This will provide enrichment lessons for students who are able to read a book of this reading level. It will also, ideally, motivate other students to read the story or have it read to them in cooperative reading later in the school year.

Throughout the unit, the students will keep a personal “Critic’s Journal.” In this, they will be expected to write a critical review of the story, poem or art work and the lesson. The students will be encouraged to share their feelings about the lesson topics and compare their similarities and differences with the characters. This will increase writing and analytical thinking skills and serve as one form of evaluation.

The students will also participate in a learning center designed for the unit. It will include the books included in the unit as well as books on related topics and other books by the authors studied. Additionally, the activities for the chapter books will be housed here. This will increase their awareness of African Americans in literature and serve as a motivation for recreational reading. The center will also include additional activities relating to the literature. Finally, an art area will enable the students to view reproductions, slides and books of modern African American Art. Art supplies will be provided for students to create original art work based on these famous pieces.

This unit, “Literature and Art Through Our Eyes: The African American Children,” will increase the students’ awareness of themselves, their families and their culture as it is today.

## Lesson Plan

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### **Objectives:**

1. To identify and analyze poetry by an African American poet.
2. To develop a list of individual fears and concerns.
3. To create an original poem in response to literature.
4. To study of the life and accomplishments of Maya Angelou.

### **Procedures:**

1. Discuss the poet, Maya Angelou.
  - a. Maya Angelou was born in 1928, in St. Louis Missouri. During her childhood she experienced many difficult times including her parent's divorce, rape, poverty, racial hatred and separation from her parents. Because she is a black woman she was denied a college education and various jobs when she was young. Angelou went to San Francisco with her brother where she was able to graduate from high school. She worked hard as a cook, waitress, singer and an actress in hopes of a better life. Then, she became involved in civil rights. She became the Northern Coordinator in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference and traveled to England, Egypt and Ghana. She became the first woman editor of a newspaper in Africa. Currently, Angelou is a professor of American studies in the U.S. She has won many awards and presidential appointments for her poetry, songs and stories.
  - b. Discuss Maya Angelou's accomplishments and courage.
2. Read *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, by Maya Angelou.
3. Discuss the fears mentioned in the poem.
4. Identify the style of the poem.
  - a. Two fears are listed, then "life doesn't frighten me at all" line in a reassuring tone.
  - b. examples:

Shadows on the wall  
Noises down the hall  
Life doesn't frighten me at all  
and  
Tough guys fight All alone at night  
Life doesn't frighten me at all
5. Students create an original poem in the same style as the author using at least four stanzas.  
\* As a follow-up collaborative lesson, students would illustrate each other's poems.
6. Orally read individual poems in class and display at learning center.

## Lesson Plan

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### **Objectives:**

1. To read and respond to literature.
2. To compare and graph physical differences among people.
3. To identify similarities among people.
4. To learn and sing a song from a literature book.
5. To graph and analyze data.

### **Procedures:**

1. Study title page and cover of the book, *Bein' With You This Way*, by W. Nikola-Lisa.
  - a. Identify the different children by race, age and what they are doing.
  - b. Identify the setting of the story.
  - c. Predict what the story's plot will be based on the title and the cover and title page illustrations.
2. Read *Bein' With You This Way*, by N. Nikola-Lisa.
  - a. Summary: a young African American girl visits the park to play with her friends. She realizes that her friends have many physical differences such as straight hair, curly hair, light skin, dark skin, blue eyes and brown eyes. The story which is set to a playground rap, celebrates diversity and recognizes the important similarities.
3. Discuss the story.
  - a. How were her friends different from each other?
  - b. How were they similar?
4. Make a graph of the physical diversity in our class.
  - a. Choose categories to graph: light skin, dark skin, tall, short, curly hair, straight hair.
  - b. Using big block graph paper, list numerals vertically and categories horizontally.
  - c. Fill in blocks in each category to match with the number of students who possess the characteristic in our classroom.
  - d. Remind students that individuals may fall into more than one category.
5. Students will individually explain their charts and their findings.
6. Discuss reasons for variation of conclusions from one chart to another (such as differences in individual perception or inaccurate data)
7. Display at learning center.

## Lesson Plan

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### **Objectives:**

1. To identify art in response to literature.
2. To study the style of painter, Jean-Michael Basquiat.
3. To create a mural using graffiti style.

### **Procedures:**

1. Re-read the book, *Life Doesn't Frighten Me* , which includes the poem by Maya Angelou and paintings of Jean-Michael Basquait.
  - a. Remind students to focus on the illustrations in the book and how they reflect the poem.
2. Discuss the painter, Basquait.
  - a. Basquait was born in 1960 in Brooklyn, New York. He always loved drawing and painting. He became famous for his graffiti style drawings. His large paintings could be seen on walls all over Brooklyn and featured images from television, jazz, politics and books. His abstract style was recognized to have poetic meaning. Finally, his work was appreciated and was, in 1984, displayed at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. His work is described as scary, funny, crowded and real.
3. Using large mural paper, collaboratively create a class mural using Basquait's graffiti style.
  - a. Tape mural paper to outside wall of school.
  - b. Students choose a space as a work place.
  - c. Students paint a graffiti style mural painting.
4. Display mural.

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