



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume V: The Blues Impulse

Building Character: Remaining Resilient, Resourceful, and Responsible in the Face of Adversity

Curriculum Unit 97.05.08
by Kelley N. Robinson

When I was a little girl, I can clearly remember running in the house one day after school bawling my eyes out because some of my classmates were talking about my clothes. My family couldn't afford the latest fashions but my parents worked as hard as they could and did the best they could. I'm appreciative of this today but on that afternoon, all I wanted to do was hide. Worse still, when I told my father what the children said he responded rather casually, "Don't worry—it builds character." It was a little too casual for me and I responded almost impudently, "What do you mean, build character?! I had been humiliated in front of everyone and that was all he had to say? He kind of looked at me out of the corner of his eye [as if to say, "Watch it.] then proceeded to explain just what building character was all about. When I confront my hardships and not only deal with them but, subsequently, move forward to endure greater issues, I become a stronger person which enhances my character—my essential being. I was impressed by that and have been working on my character ever since. This character building has been taking place not only in my life but in the lives of many other African Americans as well who have had to and continue to endure the struggles that life in America presents.

The lives of African Americans have been filled with much suffering and hardship. Since our enslavement, we have had to encounter many heartwrenching setbacks and obstacles. Even today, dreadful trials continue to beset us, yet we survive. Not only do we survive but, in the midst of our trials, we are able to experience a level of joy and laughter. How can this be? How can one be jovial when life seems to incessantly deal hard times? "In the Black experience tragedy is unavoidable. Resilience and revitalization of the human spirit are facilitated by the use of humor and by the knowledge that one is not alone; there are others who will bear witness to the profound sorrows of existence" (White, 1984). The Blues culture, which encompasses this Black experience and uses all forms of oral and written expression, speaks to this depressed yet resilient spirit. Blues is defined as a state of depression and melancholy. Those who are a part of the blues culture; however, do not swim in self-pity and sorrow but accept their situation and make the best of it. In the forward of Albert Murray's, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1989), Robert O'Meilley said this of Murray's work regarding the blues:

In these books the most commanding point is that there is a fundamental difference between the blues as a feeling of melancholia and *blues music*, which . . . functions to bring people closer together for lighthearted fun, . . . for stomping the blues. Heard in this way the music has an underlying dimension . . . that is forthrightly heroic. It's keystone strategies for perseverance are *confrontation* of the low, dirty fact . . . that things are not necessarily going to work out for the best and *improvisation* in the face of this unhappy truth . . . Even the music itself can suggest the role of a hero. And although blues and blue-steel heroes cannot always win (life is so low-

down and rotten) at least they can go down swinging.

As a result of the sharing within this culture, we connect with one another by the oral tradition which yields a power that comes from the spoken word.

“The spoken word represents a mutual participatory space in which both the speaker and listener continuously affirm each other’s presence within the context of a call-response dialogue” (White, 1984). While the earlier existences of this harmonious dialogue was found in Negro work songs sung by slaves, it has been and continues to be manifested in many different forms. This call and response form is used in spirituals, and even in Sunday morning services.

Church has historically been an outlet for the feelings of African Americans and there, they are able to release pinned up emotions. “By singing together, they also share those emotions and gain solace in their togetherness” (Haskins, 1987). In present day churches, this form of affirmation also takes place as brothers and sisters shout “Amen! , “Preach the word! , “Tell it! , and many other phrases that encourage the preacher as well as other saints. While many members of our American society and the world at large do in some way affirm one another it seems to be crucial not only to the survival of the African American race but it also seems to naturally and effortlessly transpire.

“One supporting theory suggests that there are psychological themes noted in the language, oral literature, and expressive patterns of Blacks” (White, 1984). The first theme is vitality. “It speaks to the sense of aliveness, animation, and openness to feelings expressed in our thoughts” (Redmond, 1971). This vitality serves to capture and hold the attention of the listener as colorful words and phrases are used or spoken in a way that make one’s imagination dance. Being an African American teacher, I, likewise, find myself sharing with my students in an exciting, vivacious and, as one Lance Jeffers said (1971), “wholesomely uninhibited fashion. What makes this vitality so significant is that it is life-affirming. Instead of feelings being repressed, they are freely shared with others and hopelessness and pessimism are rejected. This allows a forum for being honest and genuine—keepin’ it real.

In an effort to maintain the level of reality, clearly the message expressed in the folk poetry of the blues and gospel music is that profound sorrow, pain, hardship, and struggle cannot be avoided. In this there is an oral tradition whose roots go back beyond written records. “In West African countries, it was the role of professional musicians known as griots to preserve and sing the history of a particular family or tribe, as well as to improvise on current affairs” (Busby, 1992). The blues singer of today closely resembles the ancient griots as they open up the window of their souls and tell it like it is. We have been historically beaten and defeated but disappointment, tragedy, and setbacks are inevitable. “This is simply the way things are” (Neal, 1972). In an effort to survive, the first step is to see life exactly as it is, but this does not lead to resignation or despondency. “Instead, the goal of a Black presence in the face of adversity , and thus the second theme, is to keep on keepin’ on, to keep the faith, to maintain a cool steadiness, and to keep on climbin’ until one has transcended” (White, 1984).

Our modern day griots, blues and gospel artists, writers and even rappers of today express the hard times that come their way but remain optimistic, always believing in a better day. Langston Hughes’s poem “Mother to Son is an example of the steadiness and perseverance that must be maintained in the he face of misfortune. In this poem, and aging Black mother is sharing the facts of life she has learned through experience with her son. This poem encourages the child and all of us to keep on going. More recently, Blacks are experiencing these tough times and dealing with them. In a *Vibe* 1997 interview with the now deceased rapper, Christopher Wallace (aka Notorious BIG), the rapper stated,

I think people need to realize that there are tests and obstacles that everyone has to go through. A lot of n— want to give up and do wrong, but they don't even think God is in their corner. What I respect about God is that he always steers you in the right direction. [with regard to a tattoo] That's why I went and got it, to reassure myself that no matter what goes wrong, no matter how bad sh— is looking, God is right here . . . all these jealous people, all these sharks, and scandalous b— and haters, He'll stop all of that. He's going to take me where it is I'm going to avoid them.

This rapper realized that hardship was a part of life and you have to hold on and persevere, no matter how difficult things get. "Psychological growth and emotional maturity cannot be completed until the person has paid his or her dues by overcoming hardship, defeat, sorrow, and grief" (Baldwin, 1963). Once people have been victorious over their trials they tend to have more respect for life and can be more compassionate when others are going through.

Thus far, I have discussed the difficulties that come with the Black experience and while these troubles are inevitable, there is more to life than your man cheatin' on you, and being 'busted and disgusted'. The third theme speaks to the other side of this sorrow—joy and laughter. "The trouble will pass, the blues won't last always, and freedom will emerge on some bright sunny day" (White, 1984). The openness to a balanced range of human emotions in Black consciousness that is not burdened by guilt, shame, and self-debasement makes it easier to tap into the powers of revitalization found in sensuousness, joy, and laughter. This was evident in the 1970 television series "Good Times . This poverty stricken family lived in the run-down, rat infested projects of Chicago, always struggled with rent, and ate oatmeal for dinner, but continued to find humor daily and they "maintained . Even the name of the show suggests a level of satisfaction and happiness. Being able to laugh was crucial for the Evans family and many other black families coming up then. "Blacks use humor as a weapon to confront adversity" (Davis, 1968). Black comedians such as Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory often used the negative social-political realities of that time to make jokes and today's comedians are continuing in that same vein. I believe it was comedian, Steve Harvey, who once responded to the offer of a free cruise by saying that the last free cruise black people took, they couldn't get back home. One of the first models of realism in Black comedy is Langston Hughes's creation of Jesse B. Simple (1950, 1953, and 1957). Better known as Simple, this is a fictional underemployed Black male living in Harlem in the 1940's and 1950's who worked for white folks in a low-status job and regularly talked about issues such as racial oppression, growing up in the South, Black pride, and struggling for survival. Langston Hughes used this comedic character to 'tell it like it was' for the lives of African Americans. The willingness to laugh in the face of misfortune without denying the seriousness of adverse reality is part of the survival equipment of African Americans. Humor grounded in reality is psychologically refreshing; it defines the situation in manageable terms and prevents the build-up of unbearable anxieties by not allowing people to take themselves too seriously. "Soul is the ability to laugh while growing with the hardships, paying dues, and transcending tragedies" (White, 1984). Through emotional vitality, sense of authenticity, and the ability to see the humor in situations, African Americans are able to encourage one another, support one another, affirm one another, thus making the journey of life worth traveling.

The application of these life-affirming, self-validating themes is even more crucial to the positive growth and development of the African American child. Our children are lacking determination, endurance, and self-affirmation, which negatively affects their ability to encourage and affirm others. Black children, just like all other children move through the major stages of human growth and development but there are children today who are seriously lacking the necessary support to successfully move through these stages. "During these critical developmental periods, the focus for the Black child is successively on physical closeness, survival, mastery of the oral tradition, coming to grips with oppression, and resolving the inclusion-exclusion identity

dilemma” (White, 1984). In the early years, the saying “It takes a village to raise a child is primary as the mother receives the assistance of any number of adults, grandmothers and ‘big mamas’, as well as older siblings in caring for her baby. “Because the cultural framework promotes interdependence, emotional closeness, and physical touching, young children are likely to be given considerable affection, nurturance, and comforting physical contact” (Kunkel and Kennaid, 1971). As a result of this, a sense of confidence is generated in the child that motivates that child to satisfy explorative and inquisitive drives. The child feels that he can trust his world and this allows him to feel good about himself. What makes this an unfortunate reality for Black children today, particularly urban children, is that the cultural framework is crumbling. To elaborate, younger and younger children are afraid to take risks and explore because that basic trust is absent. Family members are missing from the homes and, in some cases, from their lives and they are forced to go to the next stage without that needed level of self-confidence and respect. Having this is essential to being successful at the next stage of development which demands survival, responsibility and resilience.

In the past, children who grew up in the Black family were, generally, exposed to a cultural tradition where the emphasis was on survival through collective responsibility, resourcefulness and, and resilience. Even in Africa, this has been a practice of many tribal communities. In the observance of Kwanzaa, these principles are the foundation of the harvest celebration (Kujichagulia-self determination, Ujima-collective work and responsibility, Kuumba-creativity, and Imani-faith). In this web of interdependent human relationships, children learn by imitation, discovery and direct teaching that they are expected to work cooperatively with others to make a contribution toward the survival and well-being of not just themselves, but of the group as well. In Richard Wright’s, *Black Boy* , (1945; 1953), Richard’s mother became ill and he began to do work in the neighborhood to earn money for food. Whether it was running errands, or working a job, he realized he had to do something. Likewise in James Baldwin’s, *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1953; 1981), John had to do chores which included dusting the dining room until he choked. It didn’t matter that it was his birthday—the house needed to be cleaned and everybody had a part. In my personal experiences, I remember having chores and responsibilities to tend to before my freedoms could be exercised. I also remember going through tough times with my family and watching my parents stand amidst the storm. This has proven to be most beneficial to me in my personal and professional life. Today, however, fewer and fewer children have those models to imitate and are not learning the importance of being responsible, resourceful, creative, and determined. It is true that children do learn from first-hand experience and life is not easy. They see their family members confronting life’s hardships that may include job layoffs and other economic misfortunes, sick loved ones, incarcerated loved ones and many other trials for which there are no dreamy solutions. But instead of them observing these adult family members cope with these difficulties by remaining resilient and resourceful, they see them giving up and, in turn, the children imitate what they see as a way out—drug sale, drug use, or any other quick, get-over scheme. This does not coincide with the culture that The Blues represents. In Albert Murray’s, *Train Whistle Guitar* (1989), Red Ella killed her husband because he was seriously mistreatin her. While she was somewhat justified, she failed to realize that bad luck and disappointment (the blues) did not mean the end of the world but only that she had to endure just like everyone else. Our children are not learning this, which is affecting their ability to endure, that, in turn, affects their ability to survive. As a result, the survival of the African American race begins to crumble.

While it is apparent that African American children are lacking the models in their environment to affirm them and teach them how to persevere, there are some historical figures whose life experiences taught them how to go forward in the face of adversity. Both African Americans men and women have exhibited an enduring faith and have built characters that show their strength and vitality. Far from complying with the passive, acquiescing stereotype, Black women through the centuries have been awesome leaders occupying major positions in the history of liberation struggles. People like Queen Hatesheput, whose defiant reign is

remembered by her obelisk, which is still standing at Luxor. “Queen Nzinga is another who in Angola during the 1630’s and 1640’s tried to organize resistance to Portuguese slave traders” (Busby, 1992). Other women followed, such as Harriet Tubman. As a young slave girl, she was forced to work in adverse conditions, but she held on for years until the time was right to run for freedom. Even during that time, she suffered through many calamitous situations such as leaving her family behind, and encountering sudden and untimely sleeping spells while running for her freedom. Her determination in spite of her struggle is an example of what children need to see. The line of phenomenal women of great character continued with Ida Wells Barnett who fought against lynching and racial injustice and Rosa Parks who refused to move to the back of the bus which ignited the Civil Rights Movement. It continues today with the efforts of Congresswoman, Maxine Waters, and Senator, Carol Mosely Braun who have come a long way and are working hard to remain resourceful, resilient, and responsible in life’s struggle for freedom.

There have been many men throughout the years as well who have learned how to go forward in the face of adversity. Nelson Mandela certainly stands out as one who has endured. Serving a prison sentence of twenty-seven years, he has relentlessly struggled for freedom and justice in South Africa. He had to separate himself from his family, abandon his profession, and live in poverty but as he wrote in a letter while underground, “The struggle is my life. I will continue fighting for freedom until the end of my days” (Mandela, 1961; 1990). While he and those such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. are the more well known figures, there are other men who understood the blues culture just as well. One great musician who truly knew something about the blues was Louis Armstrong. Children can learn from him that no matter how low life may seem, you have to keep going on. Children do not know that Louis Armstrong’s neighborhood was filled with so much violence in the early 1900’s that they called his neighborhood ‘the battlefield’ (Brown, 1993). The people who lived there were the poorest of the poor and were looked down on by other blacks. He lived in a shabby, run-down house and never had enough food to eat, or clothes, but he persevered and found his freedom in music. Every individual has his/her own trials but they are unavoidable. I believe that teaching the students how to accept and confront their situations will help them to better deal with life’s adversities and thus, develop good character.

In an effort to improve the moral and ethical integrity of children, the goal of this unit will be to expose students to The Blues culture and instill in them a sense of appreciation for struggle. This unit will assist children in accepting who they are and help them gain a level of self-respect. Most importantly, it will affirm children by letting them know that they have worth and are important to the survival of their race—no matter how bleak their situation may appear. More specifically, the objectives are as follows:

Through literature discussion and role playing, identify the importance of confronting challenges and overcoming them.

Discover, through research, their personal history.

Affirm personal memories by creating a history book of themselves—“Mystory.”

Discover the importance of endurance and determine ways in which to endure trying situations.

Reflect on present ‘place in life’ and future aspirations. Record them both and list ways to get from one level to the next.

Meet, through research, famous African American musicians, scientists, and other leaders whose lives have withstood long-suffering.

Write a futuristic autobiography that discusses how they overcame life’s challenges to get to their point of success (use real life hurdles).

Compare the lives of slaves to the lives of the “Buffalo Soldier” . List the similarities between the

two.

Research family genealogy and make a family tree.

Create and unveil monuments that represents who they feel they are. Dedicate monuments.

This unit will take approximately six weeks to complete and will be the beginning of the social studies curriculum unit for the fourth graders.

Unit Lessons

Lesson 1—The blues

Lesson 2—“Mystory

Lesson 3—Metamorphic Memoirs

Lesson 4—African Americans with Good Character

Lesson 5—Soldiers on the Battlefield

Lessons 6 and 7— I am Somebody

Lesson #1—Goal:

Begin to understand and appreciate the meaning of “blues culture.

Objective:

Through literature discussion and role playing, identify the importance of confronting fears and challenges. Discover also ways in which to overcome.

Vocabulary:

the blues, confront, persevere, character

Materials:

white paper, pencils

Background

The read aloud story for this lesson is *A Love Song for Seven Little Boys Called Sam*, by C. H. Fuller, Jr.* This story deals with the racial hardships that seven African American elementary school boys had to encounter in an all white school. The boys were verbally harassed and physically tormented daily. What made it worse was that their teacher was also an African American but treated them just as harshly. C. H. Fuller, Jr. has done a great job with showing how trouble can be backbreaking and persistent as well as unavoidable. He also shows, however, that it must be dealt with if one expects to make gains in life. The seven boys are triumphant in the end and their personal character is enhanced (“They seem different now. Stronger. Taller.). They learn to stare adversity in the face, accept it and solve their problem. Of course not all problems are solved the way these boys chose to solve their problem but a plan must be established and some sort of struggle, more often than not, is inevitable. This is reality.

One caveat to this story is the language. The author did a wonderful job at writing a realistic story. Unfortunately, with this came some terms that one may consider inappropriate. Before doing this lesson, I would seek permission from the principal and parents.

*If this story proves to be unacceptable for your class, an alternative story is *The Gift-Giver* by Joyce Hansen. This story looks at the problems that two children, Amir and Doris, are faced with living in an impoverished area of the Bronx and how they survive without falling apart. Please see the bibliography for complete citation.

Activity:

The teacher will introduce vocabulary and read aloud the story.

The teacher will give each student one piece of white paper. Students will write a problem from the story on one side and how it was solved on the other.

The teacher will open a discussion on what the story teaches.

The students will get in groups and create 5 minute skits in which one or more characters are faced with a problem. Encourage them to be as creative as they wish but make sure the problem finally has a solution.

Discussion Questions:

What did you think of the story? Explain.

What were Reuben and his friends “blue about?

What were your thoughts on the behaviors of the white boys? The teacher? Reuben’s parents?

Do you think the mother was really angry with Reuben for tearing his coat?

Do you think the parent’s action was right? If you were Reuben’s parent what would you have done?

How did the seven boys “confront their dilemma?

Do you agree with the way Reuben and his friends solved their problem? What else might they have done to solve their problem?

Would you say that Reuben and his persevered to the end? How?

What did the action of Reuben and his friends do for their “character ?

What do you think the author’s purpose was in using the language he used? Do all stories have to be written this way?

Evaluation:

Write one lesson learned from this story and share it with the class.

* This story is part of a compilation of modern stories edited by Arnold Adoff. See number 1 in the annotated bibliography for complete citation.

Lesson #2—Goal:

Recognize and affirm personal memories as an intimate and important part of self.

Vocabulary:

same as lesson 1.

Materials:

11 x 14 construction paper (various colors), 11x14 white paper, book binding ribbon, hole puncher, scissors, rubber cement, markers, pencils, crayons.

Background

In all of us, there is something good. In an effort to build ourselves up, we need to not only encounter struggles, but we also need to recognize the good in our life and reflect on it. As I stated before, it is the good that often helps us get through rough times. This is why pictures and photo albums are cherished so much. People can go back and reminisce on events, places and people. Pictures provide a source of encouragement for all of us that ‘trouble don’t las always’. In this lesson, the students will create memory books of their history (instead of “His story it becomes “My story). In their books, they can put pictures from birth to present age, first words, toys, trips, etc. This experience will not only affirm the students but may enhance the relationship they have with their family members. To elaborate, in researching their information, the students will need to

talk with mothers, fathers, and any other family members that can provide them with the information they need, thus enhancing, if not facilitating, communication. Lastly, this book gives them ownership over something they created which always makes one feel better about themselves.

Activity:

Students will gather information they would like to include in their books (if children are in need of ideas, a “Baby’s Book of First’s” is a great source) and bring the information to class (you may want to have them to start collecting information earlier in the unit).

Place art materials on tables and allow students to begin putting their book together. Make sure for each object placed in book, a caption is written with it.

Before binding book, write an essay explaining how putting this book together has made them feel.

Put books together and allow students to share if they want.

Display books and reflect upon them.

Note—some students may have painful memories. If they want to include them I would allow it because through this, healing and growth could occur.

Evaluation:

Completed book

Written piece about work

Lesson #3—Goal:

Reflect on personal dreams for the future and recognize the importance of endurance while striving for them.

Objective:

Students will discover and list “endurance traits they think they need to reach their personal goals.

Vocabulary:

aspiration, endure, perseverance

Materials:

Copy of reading selection, cut-outs for each student of a caterpillar and a butterfly, dried flowers, small stones, cardboard, glue gun, white and colored construction paper, scissors.

Background

Endurance is paramount to survival. If we want to make it in this world, we must endure. The focus of this lesson is to show students that where we start does not have to be where we end up. There are many famous actors, sports figures, and musicians who did not find their beginnings in the lap of luxury. Two things that aided them in being successful were dreaming and enduring. It is my hope that through this lesson, children will begin to realize that reaching those goals requires hard work but also patience.

A brilliant story entitled *The Butterfly*, by Hugh Morgan Hill*, tells of a depressed caterpillar who truly had “the blues”. He was blue because he was tired of crawling around and greatly desired to “boogie up the sky”. His dream was to become a butterfly. He kept trying all kinds of “quick tactics to get there but none of them worked. He was encouraged by another (the tree) to hang in there because it was the caterpillar’s “destiny to become a butterfly. This is profound in that in life, we all have a destiny to be something great. The caterpillar made a home (cocoon) which got pretty difficult for him to live in and he began to panic. Another encourager (the moon) comes along and tells him to hang on. The caterpillar struggled to go through and in the end, he overcame—he reached his destiny. This story allows children to see that there is something wonderful in all of us and no one can ever take that away. I love this story.

This is a story that needs to be read with an abundance of expression. Therefore, if you don’t feel comfortable enough reading it yourself, a suggestion may be to bring in a storyteller or drama student to read the selection.

Activity:

Teacher will read aloud, *The Butterfly*, by Hugh Morgan Hill.

As a class, discuss the problem the caterpillar had and how he overcame.

Students will make wall hangings—metamorphic memoirs—showing how they would like to change from a caterpillar to a butterfly:

On the cut-out of the caterpillar, they will list those things that say who/where they are now in life.

On the cut-out of the butterfly, they will list their future aspirations.

Between these two pictures they will list between five and ten things they will need to do to reach their goals.

After putting their memoir together, they will create a frame for them and share them (use cardboard, flowers, and stones).

The students will display their memoirs and reflect upon them.

Evaluation:

Finished Metamorphic Memoir

* This story is part of the anthology, *Talk that Talk* , compiled by Linda Goss and Marian Barnes. For complete citation, please see number nine on the annotated bibliography.

Lesson #4—Goal:

Expose students to famous African Americans that have endured tribulation.

Objective:

Meet, through research, famous African American musicians, scientists, and other leaders whose lives have withstood long-suffering.

Vocabulary: tribulation, triumphant

Materials: pencil, paper, library, computer, cardboard for book covers.

Background

Most often we discover our dreams based on what we have seen others do. If we enjoy studying the planets and we see someone go to the moon, we may say, "I'd like to go the moon someday. Likewise, if we enjoy studying the parts of the body and we visit our doctor, we may say, "I think I'll become a doctor. It's great to dream but so often our dreams stop there, particularly for African American children. The doctors and astronauts, they tend to see may not be African American and this can be a little disheartening. This dream then, remains a dream and becomes harder to conceptualize because the majority of the brothers and sisters they know are struggling like them. Growing up in an urban environment where negative patterns of life are ever-present makes it hard to see yourself "becoming the butterfly . There have been, however, many African Americans to rise up through their oppression and become prominent figures in the community and, on a larger scale, the world.

In this lesson, children will discover some of these famous people and see that hard times did not start with themselves but extends back into history. As mentioned earlier in the paper, there were people such as Louis Armstrong and Richard Wright who grew up very poor. It is important for the children to know how those before them made the best of what they had and remained optimistic.

Activity:

Choose one African American leader from the list below and read about their life:

Frederick Douglass

Sojourner Truth

Louis Armstrong

B.B. King

Oprah Winfrey

Wilma Rudolph

Use a Venn diagram to compare themselves and their lives to that famous person.

Pretend they are now famous people in society (can use aspirations from previous lesson). Write

an autobiography about their life and include the hurdles they had to overcome (try to use real life hurdles).

Bind the document and make it a book.

Evaluation:

Completed autobiographies

Lesson #5—Goal:

Continue to expose students to those that have endured tribulation.

Objective:

Compare the lives of slaves to the lives of the “Buffalo Soldier” .

Vocabulary:

Buffalo soldier, slave, *bloodletting, gumbo box, heroic medicine, Johnkannaus, Jumping the Broom, pattyrollers, peck, peru-bark.

Materials:

audio recording of Buffalo soldier (Bob Marley), copies of *Letters From a Slave Girl* , paper, pencils.

Background

This lesson will allow students to learn of other not so well known African Americans who may have had it harder than most. In this lesson, students will read letters written by Mary Lyons but based on the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs. Harriet Jacobs was a women enslaved from birth. Going through many ups and downs (times where she thought she would be freed but wasn't), Harriet finally experiences freedom.

Like the war that Harriet had to fight, the Buffalo soldiers were in war too. In the late 1800's, thousands of black calvarymen were recruited by the United States government to open the West. They had many jobs but among them were the battles fought against the Native Americans to strip them of their freedom. This story shows how Blacks and Native Americans were put against each other in an effort to survive.

In the vast land of the West, men of two outcast races met in battle for more than twenty years, while the

government that hated them both imposed white dominion over them and their people (Cox, 1993). It is depressing to think of what their lives were like but even in defeat, they acted with incredible heroism. This is what will be recognized in both of the stories as we look for their similarities.

The former reggae singer, Bob Marley, recorded a song entitled “Buffalo Soldier”. The relationship will also be observed between this song and the two stories.

Activity:

Discover role and importance of the Buffalo soldier in the late 1800’s (teacher directed) then read (individually) narrative, *Letters From a Slave Girl* . Discuss the story and write an essay comparing Harriet Jacobs’s life to the life of a Buffalo soldier.

Listen to Bob Marley’s “Buffalo Soldier” and analyze the lyrics. Take the first eight lines of the song and rewrite them to fit the life of Harriet Jacobs (work in groups). Sing song for the class.

Note—source of information for Buffalo Soldiers is the book, *Unforgotten Heroes* by Clinton Cox. For complete citation, please see bibliography.

Evaluation:

Essay

Song

* The meanings for these vocabulary terms can be found in the back of *Letters From a Slave Girl* .

Lessons #6 and 7—Goal:

Recognize the history in African American cemeteries.

Objectives:

Students will research their own genealogy and build monuments that represent who they are.

Vocabulary:

family tree, monument

Materials:

toothpicks, oaktag, woodglue, white glue, utility knife, boxes of different sizes, scissors, hole puncher, string, duct tape, masking tape, construction paper, crayons, markers, and other art supplies you want to use.

I have chosen to put the two lessons together, but they can be separated.

Background

We cannot go forward unless we realize that we are important and have worth. We have to feel good about ourselves in some aspect if we intend to make it. Suicides occur because people have lost all hope in the world and themselves. This attitude of “giving up” is not indicative of the blues culture and it is certainly not the attitude we want our youth to have.

The first activity will show children how to find out about their family beyond their grandparents. In completing this activity, it is my hope that an increased level of self pride will occur. I strongly believe that so many other nationalities and races generally succeed because they know their past. Their relatives sat them down and told them of Aunt So-and-So who survived the Holocaust. They share with their children how an uncle was physically and mentally tormented during the Vietnam War. Those people know their family history and we need to know ours. Creating a family tree is a way in which to begin (this lesson can also be a segueway into a unit on families).

What better way to end the unit than by building a monument dedicated to you. Historically, funerary procedures for African Americans were very important. Many of those enslaved believed that after their death they would return home—to Africa, so burial customs included making the resting place (cemetery/grave) just right, so the spirit could move in peace. Objects such as lamps, coins, broken possessions, and even bed frames were placed on the graves to “help the spirit on its journey home. These artistic expressions survived for years and may still live in the hearts and minds of some. Whether in death or life, however, it is important to have peace. We need to be at peace with ourselves—who we are—so we can move forward.

In the second part of this lesson, students will build monuments (instead of tombstones) and put on it things that say who they are; things that bring them peace. They can make it any size they want but it must be their own work. They will be dedicated at a closing ceremony.

Activity:

Family trees—

Talk with family members, go to the library and gather information on their family as far back as they can go.

Bring information to school and organize it from the oldest relative.

Using toothpicks and glue, design a tree on oaktag with many levels (branches) for family members.

Record the names of family members starting with the oldest at the roots. Pictures may be added after the names have been recorded.

Share trees and reflect on the effort put into finding information and making the tree. Punch a hole in the top of the oaktag and hang them for display.

Monuments—

Bring in boxes of different sizes/shapes.

Use the boxes and other art supplies to design and build personal monuments. Put on it whatever makes them feel special and important (pictures, words, songs, sayings, etc.). Encourage students to make their monument the way they want it—not the way someone else wants theirs. Teacher will organize an official dedication ceremony where everyone will unveil their monument and explain (if they wish) what they did. Note: teachers may want to invite parents to the unveiling.

Unit Evaluation

As an assessment/evaluation of the unit, students can use any expressive form they feel (poem, essay, song, dance, etc.) to illustrate what they learned from the six week unit. Because improvisation is a large part of the Blues culture, the students could be asked to produce this expressive piece within a limited time period (i.e. 25-30 minutes).

Writing this unit has been an immense learning experience for me. I have chosen one way in which to present the Blues culture to students. However, while using this unit, you may be inclined to include different activities. I encourage this diversity in ideas and hope that, through this, students will develop a heightened awareness and appreciation for life and will, consequently, become more diligent in their efforts to build good character.

Bibliography

1. Adoff, Arnold. *Brothers and Sisters: Modern Stories by Black Americans* . New York: Macmillan Co., 1970.*
2. Baldwin, James. *Go Tell It On The Mountain* . New York: Laurel, 1981.
3. Brown, Sanford. *Louis Armstrong: Swinging Singing Satchmo* . New York: Franklin Watts, 1993.*
4. Busby, Margaret. *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent from the Ancient Egypt to the Present* . New York: Pantheon Books, 1996.
5. Coker, Cheo Hodari. "Chronicle of a Death Foretold," *Vibe Magazine*, May 1997, pp. 47-50.
6. Cox, Clinton. *The Unforgotten Heroes: The Story of the Buffalo Soldiers* . New York: Scholastic Inc., 1993.*
7. Dallard, Shirley. *Ella Baker: A Leader Behind The Scenes* . New Jersey: Silver Burdett Press, 1990.*
8. Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom* . New York: Dover Publications, 1969.

9. Ferris, Jeri. *Go Free or Die, A Story About Harriet Tubman* . Minnesota: Carolrhoda Books, Inc., 1988.*
10. Goss, Linda & Marian Barnes. *Talk that Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* . New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1989.*
11. Gregson, Bob. *Take Part Art* . New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1991.
12. Haskins, James. *Black Music In America* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1987.*
13. Hughes, Langston. *Simple Speaks His Mind* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1950.
14. ———. *Simple Takes A Wife* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953.
15. ———. *Simple Takes A Claim* . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Rinehart, 1957.
16. Jeffers, Lance. "Afro-American Literature: The Conscience of Man," *The Black Scholar*, January 1971, pp.47-53.
17. Kunkel, P., and A. Kennaid. *Sprout Spring, A Black Community* . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971.
18. Lewis, Claude. *Benjamin Banneker, The Man Who Saved Washington* . New York: McGraw Hill, 1970.*
19. Lyons, Mary E. *Letters from a Slave Girl: The Story of Harriet Jacobs* . New York: Macmillan, 1992.*
20. Mandela, Nelson. *The Struggle Is My Life* . New York: Pathfinder, 1990.
21. Murray, Albert. *Train Whistle Guitar* . Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989.
22. Rubel, David. *Fannie Lou Hamer, From Sharecropping to Politics* . New Jersey: Silver Burdett Press, 1990.*
23. White, Joseph. *The Psychology of Blacks: An Afro-American Perspective* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984.
24. Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* . New York: Harper Perennial, 1993.
25. Wright, Hughes Roberta. *Lay Down Body: Living History in African American Cemeteries* . Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1996.

* Denotes children's book.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

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

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