

# **Exploring African American Culture Through Literature**

*Susan King*

*Alexander Wilson Elementary School*

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## **Overview:**

My intentions are to have my autistic support students in elementary school experience African American culture through literature. Students will gain respect for Africans and African Americans, eradicate misconceptions and stereotypes, and understand that African Americans have played a role in the history of Philadelphia. Additionally, students will understand that African Americans have played important roles in the history of the United States. Students will gain a better understanding of the African American culture through a vast assortment of literature and through activities and experiences within the classroom. Students will be introduced to many African American people who have contributed to the growth and changes in America today.

## **Rationale:**

I teach at Alexander Wilson Elementary School, which is a predominantly minority and low-income inner city school. The student population is 95.2% African American, 1.4% White, 1% Asian, 1.4% Latino and 1% other. 18.4% are receiving Special Education Services and 7.1% receive ESOL Services. Alexander Wilson Elementary School has been designated as a Title-I school, which identifies students as being at-risk for educational failure. My class of 8 students is entirely African American. My students vary in age from eight to eleven. They come from similar socio-economic backgrounds but have varying home lives. Their academic ability and the level of their general knowledge also vary considerably due to their diagnosis of autism and in some cases mental retardation. I teach an autistic support classroom, so some of my students are lower functioning than others. Some are members of families with multiple problems. Very few of their lives are without difficulties. Due to a variety of factors, many lack a strong feeling of self-esteem, are deficient in basic skills, and have little confidence, or even awareness, regarding their abilities.

This curriculum unit will be prepared for use starting in September when the students arrive back at school. The theme explored will be African American culture through literature. The population targeted is a Black group of third, fourth, and fifth graders who have a limited background in Black History. The unit is intended to familiarize students with Black writers/storytellers, their works and the impact that their works have left on the Black family and society.

I sought to develop a unit in which I will use a variety of children's books, both fiction and non-fiction, to increase students' awareness and appreciation of African-American culture and history. With this unit I intend to give students the opportunity to develop comprehension skills and to read and respond to fiction stories that reflect their ethnicity. Most importantly, students will experience reading as an enjoyable activity. Through this, students will become actively involved with the text. They will learn to present their ideas in a variety of formats. Students will acquire valuable strategies to use with all of the different stories. They will gain confidence in themselves as readers and develop higher-level comprehension skills and a better understanding of the ideas of their own culture. Classroom activities will be based on state and local standards and will reflect the different learning styles in my classroom. By participating in these activities, students will become active readers and will develop life-long reading habits.

Since the majority of the students at Alexander Wilson Elementary School are of African-American descent, the study of African American writers/storytellers plays an integral part of their education because of the identification with the characters. However, because of the my students' low reading comprehension skills, I will attempt to further expand their awareness of their African American culture through allowing the use of children's picture stories. Students will be encouraged each day to pick a book from the library corner in my room in which I will put different books written by African American authors featuring African American characters. In addition to identifying and appreciating these stories, students will also be able to count these books towards their 100 Book Challenge logs. Alexander Wilson Elementary School participates in the Pizza Hut 100 Book Challenge. Each student is encouraged to read at least 100 books per school year and they are rewarded with pizza. I have found that both my students and parents love this program and incorporating African American stories into their reading logs is an added bonus.

In choosing this curriculum topic, I intend to teach my students to gain a better understanding of the African American culture through a vast assortment of literature and through activities and experiences within the classroom. The students will be introduced to many African American people who have contributed to the growth and changes in America today through different types of literature from African American authors. We will learn about African Americans who have contributed to the American culture in many different and important ways. We will also study about African American celebrations and important points in history. My students are eager to acquire new knowledge about their own history and background. My unit plan will help my students do this.

“Writers write best about things they know and care about” (Harvey 3). This statement directly ties in to my unit plan. Stephanie Harvey, the author of Strategies That Work, says that she feels fortunate to have read books that remind her of her own life. She makes a connection between books and lives. “If we connect to a book, we usually can’t put it down. Good readers make connections between the texts they read and their own lives” (4).

Readers take the written word and construct meaning based on their own ideas, thoughts, and experiences. The reader is part writer (Harvey 5). When readers interact with the texts they read, reading becomes important. Readers may be able to identify with certain characters, settings, and plots. It may help readers who are going through a hard time identify with the story and help them solve their problems, or at the very least, allow them to feel a connection and that they are not alone.

The current status of African American children’s literature is troubling. About 2% of all children’s books are African American literature (Harris 68). In a survey of booksellers, fewer than 5% indicated a possible increase in requests for multicultural literature (Harris 68). Clearly a need for literature by and about African American’s exists. For children who reflect the diversity of the communities and homes in which they live (as my students do), effective instruction and building on their culture depends upon the use of texts that recognize these diverse backgrounds. Both students of African American decent and others deserve to learn from culturally conscious books. From these books students can benefit from the following themes explored: questions of identity, the effects of racism and legal discrimination, struggles for equality, families and their loyalties and obligations to each other, everyday rituals and events in life, extraordinary events that create unlikely heroes and heroines, and knowing, valuing, and preserving African American history and culture (Harris 74).

For more than 200 years, Africans were taken from their families, cultures, and homelands and forced into captivity while a new nation was built from their “ingenuity, toil, and suffering” (Robinson 3). One of the most disturbing aspects of this displacement was the systematic stripping away of the African Americans’ sense of heritage, culture, and pride (Robinson 3). Both black and white people were made to feel that “African ancestry tainted African Americans’ and that their color was a badge of degradation (Stamp 46). Although most schools today include the elements of African American culture, they often do this during a certain time of the year, such as Black History month in February.

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will be able to identify Africa as a continent and use a map to identify Africa.
2. Students will be able to understand that African Americans have played a role in the history of Philadelphia.
3. Students will learn about individual achievements in the history of Philadelphia

through literature.

4. Students will be able to identify characters, time, and setting of the story.
5. Students will do research to find out as much as possible about famous or well-known African Americans.
6. Students will be able to discuss different authors and find books that these authors have written and do a book report..
7. Students will be able to bring material back from the library on Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King and work in groups of three students and give a report on the person they have selected.
8. Students will be able to bring material back from the library on an African American leader in history.

### **Strategies:**

The duration of this unit will be two weeks. Students will learn something each day about African American's, as well as read at least one book a day by an African American writer. Due to the cognitive deficiencies my students have, I must use a wide variety of differentiated instruction in order to secure success with them. For those who are lower functioning than others, they will have a limited understanding of what it is to be African American, or easily comprehend passages. For these students I plan on adapting books using pictures, as well as allowing students the opportunity to draw a picture instead of doing a report. Adapted worksheets aimed at comprehension are also used. In some of the lessons, certain students will unfortunately not be able to participate due to their low cognitive functioning. However, 80% of the classroom can participate. The whole idea I am aiming for is for them to have a better understanding, how they arrive at that is different for each.

Reading research has founded that proficient readers search for connections between what they know and the new information they encounter in the texts they read (Harvey 6). This is called schema. The schema theory explains how our previous experiences have a major effect on how we learn. A person's schema is what brings each of us into our reading. When applied to reading it is possible to activate and use the schema theory to guide students to make connections between books and their own lives (Harvey 21). Proficient readers visualize and create images using different senses to better understand what they read.

During this unit the students will be working individually, as a class, in small groups and collaboratively. One strategy used will be cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is a successful teaching strategy in which small teams, each with students of different levels of ability, use a variety of learning activities to improve their understanding of a subject. Each member of a team is responsible not only for learning what is taught but also for helping teammates learn, thus creating an atmosphere of achievement. Students work through the assignment until all group members successfully understand and complete it.

Reading workshops will also be used. The reading workshop promotes thinking

when reading. In the reading workshop, the teacher models a whole-group strategy lesson and then gives students large blocks of time to read and to practice the strategy in small groups, pairs, and independently. During this time, the teacher moves about the room and helps students with their reading and comprehending the text. Most of the time the students will be reading independently books of their choice by African American Authors. They will record these books in their 100 Book Challenge logs.

### **Classroom Activities:**

#### Lesson One

*Goal:* Students will identify Africa as a continent.

Time Allotment: One class period

#### Materials and Resources:

Activity Master I

Pencils

Crayons (blue, red, and green)

1. Say the name “Africa” and encourage students to tell what they know about Africa. As students respond, make a chart of their ideas on the whiteboard, with the following questions written at the top.
  - a. What is Africa?
  - b. Where is Africa?
2. Hand out Activity Master I and read the title aloud. Have students look at the world map. Explain that the large land areas on the map are called continents. Point out the continent of Africa and explain that it is the second largest continent in the world.
3. Point out the United States and tell students that Africa is more than three times larger than the United States.
4. Have students complete the directions on the bottom of Activity Master I.

Assessment: Participation in class and completion of Activity Master I.

#### Lesson Two

*Goal:* The students will learn about Africa, their languages and how their culture is expressed through folk tales. The students will listen to a folk tale and be able to make predictions about the characters, the problem, and the solution.

Time Allotment: One class period

#### Materials and Resources:

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe

Map

Globe

Whiteboard

Dry Erase Markers

Paper

Pencils

Name book

Procedures:

1. Pull down the world map and set out the globe. Ask the students to identify where Africa is.
  - a. Who lives there?
  - b.. What language do they speak
2. Select some of the vocabulary words from the storybook and have them written on the board. Let the students read a word to the class and define it if they can. Have them use the word in a sentence to see if they have the correct meaning. If it isn't correct, have the student look the word up in the dictionary and give the correct definition to the class.  
Words: Yams, Bountiful, Transfixed, Silhouetted, Descended, Foretold, Chamber, Chanted, Enclosure (These words are for the cognitively higher students in my class)
3. Ask the students if they remember what a folk tale is. Discuss how folk tales express values of a particular culture and how some of these values are common to many cultures. Tell them that some folk tales are similar to ones of our own, and that this one is similar to Cinderella in our culture.
4. Show the students the cover of Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. Have them make oral predictions about the setting, characters, and story. Write these predictions on the board so they can be referred to later. Read the story to them, or have them read it if you have more than one copy available to you. Discuss predictions that were made. Were they correct? Refer back to the board.
5. Write the names Manyara and Nyasha on the board. Ask the students, "Do our names mean something that might tell us something about ourselves?" Have a name book handy or have the definition of their names ready to read to them. Then, ask if that meaning tells something about them? Is it a characteristic of theirs? The two girls in the story were very different. If their names meant something that described their characters, what would it be? Have the students list characteristics about each one on the board below their names, as the students give them to you. Talk about the many different languages that come from

Africa.

Explain that there are words we still use today that were African American.

Examples: Yam, Canoe, and Banjo.

Assessment: Observation, Participation

### Lesson Three

*Goal:* Students will be able to understand that African Americans have played a role in the history of Philadelphia. The students will learn about the individual achievements of the Forten family in the history of Philadelphia.

Time Allotment: One period

Materials and Resources:

Activity Master 12  
 Activity Master 13  
 Activity Master 14  
 Paper  
 Crayons

1. Ask the children where they live? What country? What state? What city?
2. Explain to students that over the years many people have helped to make the city of Philadelphia the great city it is today. Tell students they are going to learn about a famous African American family who lived in Philadelphia a long time ago. Explain that many members of this family worked very hard to help people get the rights and freedoms they deserved.
3. Hand out Activity Masters 12 and 13.
4. Read the title aloud. Ask students to tell you what a hero is. If they do not know, tell them. (a person who has done something brave or important).
5. Explain that these worksheets will give them information about a remarkable man who lived in Philadelphia long ago. Tell students that James Forten spent his life working to make life better for people everywhere.
6. Have students tell you what they see in the pictures.
7. Read the story aloud for students. Explain that the Revolutionary War was fought so our nation could be an independent country, free from rule by England.
8. After you read the story, ask the students to tell you in their own words how James Forten became one of the richest men in Philadelphia and how he worked to make life better for other people.
9. Hand out paper and crayons and ask students to draw a picture from the story.

Assessment: Class participation and pictures drawn.

### Lesson Four

*Goal:* Through application and illustration the students will create their own "freedom quilt" as part of a bulletin board display.

Time Allotment: One class period

Materials and Resources Needed:

Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt by Deborah Hopkinson

Markers

Crayons

Pencils

Rulers

Scissors

Construction paper in a variety of colors.

White board

Dry erase markers

1. Introduce the book, Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt to the students. Show them the title and author.
2. Ask them to make predictions about the story. Write down predictions on white board to refer to later.
3. Read the story out loud to the students. After reading ask the students to review their predictions.
  - a. Did they come true?
  - b. What didn't come true?
  - c. Talk about the process of making the "freedom quilt" from the story.
4. Tell the students they are going to make their own "freedom quilt" using construction paper.
5. Hand out one piece of construction paper to each student (they can choose the color they want). Have a previously made square decorated to show them what they are to do. Explain that each of them will be measuring a square with a ruler and cutting it out. Then let them design their own square to be put up on the bulletin board as a quilt.

Assessment: Application of the story to their artwork. Use of math skills to determine size of squares so that everyone had room on the bulletin board for their square.

Lesson Five

*Goal:* The students will be able to discuss different authors and find books that these authors have written and complete worksheet based on book they have chosen.

Time Allotment: Two class periods in a row (about two hours)

Materials and Resources:

Paper

Pencil

Library

List of black authors

Adapted worksheet "Story Chart"

## Adapted worksheet “Story Summary”

1. Ask the students if there are any black authors that they know and find out books that the authors may have written. Discuss as a class some of the different black authors.
2. The students will go over to the library and find authors and one book that they have written. Give students a list of black authors, and show them where else they can find authors and book title. The students will bring back one book written by a black author.
3. The students will read over the books that they have brought back from the library for the remainder of the period.
4. For homework let the students take the books home and read them again with their parents. They are to fill out the worksheet about the story.

Assessment: Homework worksheet on book that they have chosen. Participation in class activity.

## Lesson Six

*Goal*: The students will be able to answer questions and sequence the story of Flossie and the Fox.

Time Allotment: Two class periods

Materials and Resources:

Flossie and the Fox by Patricia McKissack

Adapted worksheet “Story Chart”

Adapted worksheet “Story Summary”

Pencils

Markers

Scissors

## Class One

1. Show the students the cover of the book and read the title. Have the students make predictions about the story based on the title and illustrations on the cover. Ask questions like:

- a. What do you think the story is about?
- b. Look at illustrations and tell me what the students you see.
- c. What might happen?

2. Read the story of Flossie & The Fox. Remind the students to listen carefully so they can determine whether their predictions were accurate.

3. Use questions like the following to encourage class discussion:

- a. How did Flossie trick the Fox?
- b. What words describe how hard the fox tried to convince Flossie?

- c. Where do you think Flossie lives?
- d. How would you describe Flossie?
- e. How would you describe the fox?
- f. Talk about Flossie and the Fox as a folk-tale and what other stories are like this story?

Assessment: Participation and answers to questions asked in class.

### Class Two

1. Review the book Flossie and the Fox. Ask students to retell the story to you. If students are having difficulty with retelling, reread the book.
2. Explain that today we are going to be sequencing the events that happened in the story.
3. Provide a list of events in the story on a piece of paper.
4. Have the students cut out each event.
5. Have the students put the cards in order in which the events occurred.
6. Make sure that each student has a copy of the book to correct the order if necessary.

Adaptation: For lower functioning students who have difficulty with reading, provide pictures from the story for sequencing.

Assessment: Participation in class and sequencing activity.

### Lesson Seven

*Goal:* The students will be able to bring material back from the library on Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King and work in groups of three students and give an oral report on the person they have selected.

Time Allotment: 2 hours

### Materials and Resources:

Library

Material on Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King

Paper

Pencil

Computer

1. Split the students into groups of (you choose number based on class).
2. Before the students go over to the library they will select whom they want to research. (Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King Jr.)
3. The students will be told that they need to give the class a five -minute presentation on the topic.
4. Head over to the library at school. The students will research the topic they have chosen. The librarian and teacher will be around if the students have any problems or

- need help finding any information.
5. The students will work on their report after they find their information. Remind the students to look for the black authors that they researched at the beginning of this unit.
  6. The students will give their report and as a class we will discuss the information that all the students will report on.

Assessment: The students will give an oral report on the topic that they have chosen. For those without that ability, a picture drawn is sufficient.

### **Bibliography: Teachers**

- “African American Literature.” Encyclopedia Britannica. 2007. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. 20 Feb. 2007  
Provides readers with information on African American literature, such as why we need it, suggestions for types of books for all ages, and how culture is expressed through African American literature.
- Banks, J.A. Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1991  
This book emphasizes that the main goal of the multicultural curriculum should be to help readers develop the ability to make reflective decisions so that they can, through thoughtful action, influence their personal, social and civic worlds and help to make them more democratic and just.
- Barksdale-Ladd, Mary Alice R. “African American Children's Literature that Helps Students Find Themselves: Selection Guidelines for Grade K-3.” Reading Teacher 54 (1996).  
A superb article on selecting books for African American children’s literature.
- Harris, Violet J. Teaching Multicultural Literature. Norwood: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, Inc., 1993.  
A book on making informed choices for literature for teaching multicultural education. Provides research based strategies and examples for teaching.
- Harvey, Stephanie. Strategies That Work. Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2000.  
This book is a great resource on different strategies that you can use to teach your students.
- Robinson, Edward. “Why Teach African and African American History?” African and African American History. Philadelphia.  
A wonderful article that explains in detail why African American history is important for all to learn.
- Rollock, Barbara. Black Authors and Illustrators of Children’s Books: A Biographical Dictionary. United States: Garland Publishing, 1992.  
A thorough resource of African American authors who write children’s books.

Rollack, Barbara. Black Experience in Children's Books. New York: New York Public Library, 1984.

Provides first hand knowledge on experiencing culture through books.

Stamp, Kenneth. Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South. New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1989.

Provides history of slavery and gives reasons for teaching African American history in the classroom.

Stewart, Loraine Moses. "Integrating African-American Literature in the Elementary Social Studies Classroom" Reading Horizons 35 (1995): 414-421.

A wonderful resource for integrating African-American literature into the elementary school classroom. Provides lists of suggested reading materials as well as specific examples on how to teach.

### **Bibliography: Students**

Coles, Robert. The Story of Ruby Bridges. New York: Scholastic, Incorporated, 1995.

This is the story of Ruby Bridges who was the sole African American child to attend a New Orleans elementary school after court-ordered desegregation in 1960.

Grant, Larry. One in a Million: My Story of the Million-Man March. Philadelphia: The Talented Tenth Library Syndicate, 1996.

One mans account of the Million Man March and the emotions that he felt.

Greenfield, Eloise. Grandpa's Face. New York: Philomel Books, 1989.

This is a picture book story of a young girl who grows emotionally through love. Tamika loves her Grandpa, and at the theater she watches him turn ``into another person." While he is practicing in a mirror, however, she sees a part of his personality that she does not understand, and it frightens her.

Havell, Juanita. Jamaica Tag-Along. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.

A sweet story featuring a young African American girl and her older brother. Jamaica wants to tag along to Ossie's pick-up basketball game, but he forbids it. After all, it's not cool to have a younger sister hanging around. She sneaks along anyway, and causes her brother and another player to fall down on the court when she springs from nowhere and grabs the ball. She exits to another section of playground. Castle building proves diverting, but soon she has a little visitor. A Hispanic American toddler named Berto wants to play, too, and is soon messing up the castle. Initially, Jamaica protests, but then sees the similarity between them. They both want to hang out with older kids.

Hoffman, Mary. Amazing Grace. New York: Scholastic, Incorporated, 1991.

Grace loves stories, and with a boundless imagination she acts them all out. One day, her teacher asks who would like to play the lead in the play Peter Pan. Grace eagerly raises her hand, but Raj tells her she isn't a boy, and Natalie tells her she can't because she is black. Nana sets Grace straight: she can do anything she sets her mind to!

Hopkinson, Deborah. Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993.

As a seamstress in the Big House, Clara dreams of a reunion with her Momma, who lives on another plantation--and even of running away to freedom. Then she overhears two slaves talking about the Underground Railroad. In a flash of inspiration, Clara sees how she can use the cloth in her scrap bag to make a map of the land, a freedom quilt, which no master will ever suspect.

Hubbell, Patricia. Black All Around. New York: Lee and Low Books, 2003.

An African American girl contemplates the many wonderful black things around her, from the inside of a pocket, where surprises hide, to the cozy night where there is no light.

Keats, Ezra. John Henry: An American Legend. New York: Scholastic, Incorporated, 1965

Describes the life of the legendary steel-driving man who was born and who died with a hammer in his hand.

McKissack, Patricia. Flossie and the Fox. New York: Dual Books for Young Readers, 1986.

A wily fox, notorious for stealing eggs, meets his match when he encounters a bold little girl in the woods who insists upon proof that he is a fox before she will be frightened.

Steptoe, John. Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters. New York: Lothrop, Lee, and Shepard Books, 1987.

Mufaro has two beautiful daughters. Nyasha is kind and considerate, but Manyara is selfish and spoiled. When the king decides to choose a bride from among "The Most Worthy and Beautiful Daughters in the Land," both Mufaro's girls travel to the capital city. But only one can be chosen to marry the king

Onyefulu, Ifeoma. A is for Africa. New York: Penguin Group, 1993.

The beautifully composed color photos, arranged alphabetically by subject, feature objects or practices representing various facets of African customs and culture.

## **Appendix: Standards**

Geography 7.1.3. Identify geographic tools and their uses. Identify and locate places and regions.

Geography 7.3.3. Identify the human characteristics of places and regions by their settlement characteristics.

History 8.1.3. Understand chronological thinking and distinguish between past, present, and future time. Understand fundamentals of historical interpretation. Understand historical research.

History 8.2.3. Understand the political and cultural contributions of individuals and groups to Pennsylvania history.

History 8.3.3 Identify contributions of individuals and groups to United States history.

Reading 1.1.3. Identify the types of text before reading. Preview the text concepts. Read text using comprehension strategies. Acquire a reading vocabulary. Retell or summarize.

Reading 1.3.3. Identify literary elements in stories describing characters, setting and plot.