

P.O.W.E.R.
Profound. Original. Words. Expressing. Resilience.

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Overview

Why do some teachers and students often view poetry as an intimidating genre? Is it because poets are sometimes conceptualized as deep thinking individuals who are isolated in their world of creativity? Or does the answer lie in the stereotypical belief that only intellectuals can understand intricate poems. Yet, in our daily life, we are surrounded by various styles of poetry, specifically in the form of musical lyrics. Students easily make the connection to the words in songs and relate them to meaning in their lives. Therefore, my ultimate goal, as we navigate through this curriculum unit is to have students begin the process of relating to Elizabeth Alexander's poetry definition.

Poetry is not meant to cheer; rather, poetry challenges, and moves us towards transformation. Language distilled and artfully arranged shifts our experience of the words – and the worldviews – we live in. Words matter. Language matters. We live in and express ourselves with language, and that is how we communicate and move through the world in community.¹

Additionally, the curriculum unit theme will focus on exposing students to African American poets in the 21st century with an emphasis on self-expression and cultural awareness. Students will discover that poetry is an enjoyable genre with countless connections to their daily life. As we read poems, students will apply critical thinking skills and engage in debates regarding poetry interpretation. I want students to critically analyze and evaluate poems instead of reading unconsciously. Furthermore, the variety of contemporary and traditional poets selected for student analysis will expand student awareness about African American contributions to literature. These reflective activities

provide an opening to improve student self-esteem because they can begin to visualize their past, present, and future role in history. I envision teaching students about African American poets as a fascinating undertaking because I will seamlessly develop a multi-disciplinary unit that integrates literature and history.

The resources to accomplish my goal will include books, music, movies, and technology. I plan to invite guest speakers to read and discuss poetry. Live recitations will help students to experience emotional feelings that emerge when an author completes a reading. Practical incorporation of the historical content occurs when students complete a research project that encompasses biographical information about the poem and the poet. For this project, students are given a choice to produce intrinsic motivation. As a culminating activity, students create and compile a book of original poetry that is sold school-wide for a nominal price. Money earned through this endeavor will be utilized to purchase materials for future poetry presentations. Extension activities may include a slam poetry assembly where students present poems and/or students submit original poems to a teen publishing magazine.

This curriculum unit intended for 6th through 8th grade students will take approximately ten 50-minute lessons. However, the unit will extend across the curriculum and include writing and history. Additional time is necessary to plan for student research and follow-up.

Rationale

“Power is broadly defined as ‘the capacity to bring about change.’ It takes many forms, comes from many places, and is measured in many ways. Understanding all the varieties of power is essential if one is to understand who has it, who doesn't, and how those who don't have it can get it.”² As a result, I believe an examination of African American poetry can be a vehicle to provide students with vast learning opportunities. Students may feel empowered to express thoughts and ideas through words. More importantly, given the historic victory of President Barack Obama, students may develop their poetic *power* to facilitate personal change.

However, before I can proceed with the development of the unit, it is crucial to examine the following essential question. What are some of the obstacles that I must overcome to guarantee student success? Often poetry is a content area, which results in low standardized test scores. In addition, poetry is one component of the literacy curriculum that does not generate enthusiasm from some students or teachers. The reasons for this lack of interest are two-fold. First, teachers do not possess the content knowledge to effectively teach poetry. Second, students are intimidated by the content, organization, and style of complex poems. Therefore, one purpose of this unit is to significantly mitigate student and teacher apprehension. Another challenge is the learners I teach encounter consistent comprehension, fluency and vocabulary development

difficulties. It is essential that my lessons acknowledge the various learning styles to ensure there is a role for diverse learners. As a result, I believe poetry is an ideal genre through which to engage students and bring forth an inner creativity that requires the proper form of stimulation in order to flourish.

Cultural Awareness

Cultural awareness helps students to embrace a positive appreciation and awareness of African American people. Because it is known that many African American students often encounter unique educational challenges, the study of poetry within a historical context can facilitate cultural pride. How do you comprehend your worth, if you are not aware of the cultural contributions your ancestors have made and continue to make in literature? Unfortunately, students do not imagine these contributions as part of their community and they are hindered by their limited historical background knowledge. Through our poetry review, I will strive to eradicate students' misconceptions and stereotypes.

Self-Expression

Adolescents are complex individuals. This is a time when students are very opinionated. They have an abundance of suggestions regarding how adults should proceed in different situations. A recent conversation with my 7th grade students highlighted this point. I believe students can write original poems to communicate thoughts and feelings. Students may find a voice to express feelings of anxiety, happiness, anger, love, or pain. It is a non-violent form of communication. It is a powerful form of expression. Also, poetic recitation will permit students to dramatize and personalize their poem. I plan to record student recitations to enable them to listen to themselves. Students may become intrigued or surprised by the musical flow, expression, and emotion in their recitation. My role is to provide students with a forum to express the inner spirit that is too often hidden from the world.

Background

The following poems were selected based on my desire to expose students to a variety of poems that epitomize a potential for significant reflection and analysis. It was crucial to select poets that are unfamiliar to students. An introduction to a range of poetic forms, styles, and techniques will broaden their ability to interpret poetry. Students will have greater potential for mastery with an in depth reading of a small number of poems as opposed to reading a multitude of poems. Purposely, my first lesson incorporate two poems that celebrate blackness because too many of my students do not appreciate their intrinsic nature. The next two poems validate the incredible African-American heritage by celebrating men such as David Walker and Paul Robeson. During their lives, these men were compelling historical figures. To create a balance relating to personal heroic

figures in student daily life, the next two poems are tributes to ordinary mothers and fathers. Usually, student success or failure is directly tied to people they interact with on a regular basis. By including poems about “everyday” people, I hope to give my students a way to appreciate the historical figures in their own families. The final poems we will review give advice and speak to the uniqueness of young people. Therefore, the unit concludes with poems that affirm the role of youth. First, youth of other races have a responsibility to make an honest contribution to society. Second, black youth need to know they are vital.

Who Can Be Born Black --- Mari Evans ³

Every time I read this poem, I envision the faces of my students because of the powerful, yet simple words at the beginning and the end of the poem.

Who can be born black and not sing, and who can be born
black and not exult.⁴

These words invoke the highest demonstration of self-love. Experience has taught us that words can have a tremendous impact on how the world views blacks in comparison to other cultures. For this reason, it is imperative to begin the unit with a poet and a poem that is unequivocally committed to the celebration of blackness. Mari Evan’s exemplifies this principle. Evans philosophical viewpoint directly correlates to my sentiments on the need to focus on the black community. Evans is extremely lucid with her outlook about African-Americans.

Evans took her subject matter from the black community,
and who celebrated its triumphs, especially the focus on the
beauty of blackness that characterized the black arts and
civil rights movement.⁵

In addition, starting with this poem will captivate student attention, which is a strategy to get them excited about future poems. Evan’s clear poetic language will allow students to comprehend the various themes in the poem. Students will begin the process to distinguish poetry versus prose. The poem is clearly distinctive from prose; its formal qualities consist of a poem of 20 lines with no punctuation save for one exclamation mark that completes the poem. This technique alone indicates a sense of urgency. Other techniques that students may find interesting are the use of one word per line and the combining of words that are usually separated, for example “comingtogetherness.”⁶ Students will reflect on questions that might deal with the significance of the poem’s title. Also, this poem emphasizes self-love; it constitutes a key ingredient to developing positive self-esteem. Further connections can be made because, Evan’s message correlates to the posters and banners that I hang in the classroom. Specifically, my

favorite banner that I consistently re-direct student attention to states “When you believe in yourself, anything is possible.”

Mari Evans was born in Toledo, Ohio on July 16, 1923. Evans originally studied fashion at the University of Toledo but later became interested in poetry. She is a multi-talented woman whose work demonstrates her skill as a poet, dramatist, short fiction writer, children’s writer, editor, essayist, and lecturer. She has won numerous awards and honors. As students research the life of Mari Evans, I believe they will become fascinated with her extensive work related to youth.

Survival Motion: Notice ---Melvin E. Brown⁷

The reviews written by Melvin E. Brown’s contemporaries summarize the mood and tone that flows from the poem *Survival Motion: Notice*.

Lucille Clifton:

Melvin follows the tradition: griot, storyteller, musician.
His poems are straight, clear thinking.⁸

E. Ethelbert Miller:

Ooh, baby, baby—Melvin Brown, writes the way Smokey
Robinson once sang.⁹

Automatically, the title of the poem makes a profound statement, especially with a scrutiny of the individual words. “Survival” what and how do we survive? “Motion” are our children properly equipped to move in a profitable or planned direction? The word “notice” has multiple meanings. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary the following definitions are cited:

1. warning or indication of something:
ANNOUNCEMENT
2. notification of the ending of an agreement at a
specified time
3. ATTENTION 1, heed
4. a written or printed announcement
5. a brief published criticism (as of a book)¹⁰

Although I believe this poem celebrates blackness, simultaneously I think definitions one and three accurately reflect the tone of the poem. First, it is a warning in terms of how the detrimental activities our children engage in can put them into a “hypnotic animal” state. Second, Brown wants to capture the “attention” of youths and adults. However, which definition do black children gravitate towards? Brown artfully communicates the complexity of glitter that attracts teenagers like magnets.

Continuously, we need to build an awareness that encourages black children to recognize the importance of cultural love. Brown writes about the fragility of a child's life and the responsibility of adults to properly guide them. These ideas are communicated in the lines "and you can lose a child at a circus, very easy."¹¹ As a result, students will engage in thoughtful discussion as we critique the poem.

In several ways, the style and form of the poem demonstrate how poetry differs from prose. The sentence structure clearly identifies a unique style. The rhythm and the flow of the poem move fluidly. Because of the poem's brevity, students will not become intimidated by the length instead they can focus on the content. Students can analyze the poem and discover multiple messages. The use of imagery and irony can be examined. Therefore, I believe students will grasp the power of Brown's words.

Melvin Brown was born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland.

*David Walker (1785-1830) --- Rita Dove*¹²

My initial introduction to David Walker was at a 2008 history workshop hosted by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The historian provided an overview of David Walker's life as an abolitionist. Next, we analyzed and discussed the infamous Walker's Appeal. Informally, I polled several 6th through 8th grade students and they were not aware of either David Walker or Rita Dove. I believe students historical interest will peak by reading a tributary poem about David Walker's life, the abolitionist movement and the incredible literary contributions of Rita Dove. David Walker a prominent figure in the abolitionist movement was born in either 1796 or 1797 in Wilmington, North Carolina to a free mother and an enslaved father. Children born to a free mother during this time period were automatically considered free. However, Walker witnessed the cruelty of slavery, which formulated his anti-slavery sentiments. Walker eventually settled in Boston and ran a used clothing store during the 1820s. Walker became involved in the nation's first African-American newspaper published in New York City the *Freedom's Journal*. What I find particular fascinating about Walker is the publication of *Walker's Appeal* in September of 1829. According to some historians such as Eric Foner, this document is critical for several reasons.

Walker broke with the anti-slavery sentiment that was very moderate and cautious. So, Walker, in a very radical language, uncompromising, not cautious at all, condemned the institution of slavery wholeheartedly, condemned the complicity of the entire institutional structure of the United States in history, and called for immediate abolition.¹³

Curiously, after the "publication of the third edition of his *Appeal* in June 1830, two months later he was found dead in his home, many believed he had been poisoned."¹⁴

Walker's radical ideas presented during slavery are a fundamental reason why the examination of this poem is crucial. Reading this poem, illustrates to students that the idea of racism has been commonplace in American society for generations. Nevertheless, we cannot perpetuate racist concepts, rather we should empower students with complete accurate information to actualize transformations through education. Students need to know, through positive choices societal change occurs. As we critique the poem, students will understand the correlations that although physical slavery does not exist today, mental slavery continue. Evidence of mental slavery exists in various forms. For example, considerable numbers of African-Americans are enslaved since they choose to actively participate in detrimental activities such as drugs, crime, dropping out of school, and other negative activities. An added thought for students to reflect upon is Walker's unwavering anti-slavery conviction. He was willing to risk his life.

Dove cleverly highlighted the momentous contribution David Walker has made to American history. Students will realize how succinctly Dove was able to tell Walker's story in four stanzas. When students read the poem, I expect them to study the following concepts: poetic form; incorporation of italics; vocabulary; and Dove's motivation to write about Walker. According to literary critics, Dove likes to write poetry that tells a story.

Tells the stories of those left out of history simultaneously particularizes and universalizes her themes. Dove refuses to stereotype, eschewing both the idealized good black and the popular culture ghetto black. Instead her poetry evinces her resolve to develop full realized human beings who are black¹⁵

She was born in Akron, Ohio in 1952 and is the daughter of the first black research chemist who in the 1950's broke the race barrier in the tire industry. Given her family background it is not surprising that Dove has aspired to incredible achievements. Her publications, honors, and awards are remarkable.

In 1993, Rita Dove was appointed Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant in Poetry at the Library of Congress, making her the youngest person and the first African-American to receive this highest official honor in American letters.¹⁶

Robeson At Rutgers ---Elizabeth Alexander¹⁷

Elizabeth Alexander was born in Harlem, New York in 1962 and grew up in Washington, D.C. She is admired by her peers, due to the ability to remember the sentiments of past

poets while simultaneously writing poetry that reflects current and future poets. According to Rita Dove, “Alexander’s poems bristle with the irresistible quality of a world seen fresh.”¹⁸ In addition, Alexander was selected by President Barak Obama to deliver and compose a poem for the January 20, 2009 Presidential Inauguration.

Alexander’s poem is notable on several levels. One can argue that the poem is about photographs to preserve African-American history. It is the process of writing ourselves in history because, often we have been minimized in the history books. Even worse, we have been inaccurately reflected and/or demoralized. Although, this is a lyric poem, meant to freeze a moment in time, it can be viewed as a narrative. Students will encounter a challenge due to the poetic form, vocabulary, historical context, imagery, and complex multiple themes. On the other hand, students may be intrigued by the beauty and love implied by the words.

What an iconic historical figure, Paul Robeson, who obtained innumerable accomplishments at a time of pervasive racial challenges. In his own words, Robeson had a deep desire to eradicate racial injustice for all Americans: “Like every true artist, I have longed to see my talent contributing in an unmistakably clear manner to the cause of humanity.”¹⁹ His steadfast attitude to succeed against all odds is evidenced by both his commitment to academic and athletic excellence. For instance, in 1915 he was awarded a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers University and was valedictorian of his 1919 graduating class. In essence, he was a man of principle. Through his political activism, Robeson was willing to reveal the prejudices suffered by black people. A major goal for students to realize that through all the terrible injustices, Robeson made no excuses.

Unfortunately, the majority of my students are unfamiliar with Robeson’s contributions to African-American history. They are unaware of Robeson’s legacy and local presence, which can be enjoyed in our very own city. Students’ lack of historical knowledge is a repetitive occurrence of history in our neighborhoods that have become non-existent to the black community. As a result, the lesson will include a field trip to the Paul Robeson’s house to maintain his priceless legacy.

Poem For My Father for Quincy T. Troupe, Sr. ---Quincy Troupe²⁰

I aspire for students to realize Quincy Troupe’s vast repertoire of experience fascinating. Also, I would like students to become cognizant of multiple ways of non-violent self-expression. They have options to use their voice in creative outlets. Troupe’s personal reasons for writing are profound statements that may resonate with students.

I write because I have to communicate with my self—a
chronicle of thoughtful insanity...to leave a record for
whatever it will do and to whomever it will help and to get
on with the business of living.²¹

This poem is key because daily students encounter the ordinary male. These men directly or indirectly help shape their lives. The idea of the father in the black community is a dominant concern. According to national statistics, the absentee father is consistently increasing in African-American households. In addition, the number of single-family households is staggering. Therefore, a tributary poem to a father is of paramount importance. Students need to know that an active father was a norm in the black community. Only in recent years, has the rise of single-parent households substantially increased and negatively affected the black community. In the past, the black father was the central figure in the household. He was the maintainer and provider of the family. Respect for the father was a natural and expected occurrence. Emphasis on the importance of becoming a responsible father is critical to both boys and girls. As a result, the poem will be presented, so that students can see reflections of their fathers and/or positive male role models.

Furthermore, it is evident that Troupe loved and valued his father because he writes about his experience with words of adoration and respect. Students will write about a father, grandfather, uncle, cousin, or male role model that has impacted their life. My preference is for students to write a tributary poem, however to stimulate the healing process, some students may need to write a poem to a male figure that express disappointment, hurt, or pain.

Additionally, the poem is rich with historical references and robust vocabulary. Students will explore the content discussed from the United States to Africa. Examination of the connotative meanings is another element students will review to understand the tone. The stylistic approach Troupe uses to weave the information in the poem will require an intense and thorough analysis for students to synthesize meaning. For example, the entire poem is written in lowercase letters without any ending punctuation marks, such as periods, question marks, or exclamation marks. The stanzas are organized in the following manner: stanza one is fifty lines; stanza two is four lines; and the final stanza is two lines.

Momma Sayings ---Harryette Mullen²²

I believe this poem will generate rich discussions around words and language. Children can relate to sayings that have been repeated by women in their family or community. The poem style provides a pathway to discuss black traditions in terms of family dynamics and the conversations that take place in the home. Students will create personal poems of the famous sayings from their own family. Moreover, the use of metaphors, idioms, hyperboles, and imagery makes the poem very interesting. Christine Miner Minderovic writes that Mullen is called the “Queen of Hip Hyperbole by Hispanic writer, Sandra Cisneros.”²³ Mullen’s unique style is evident in the following lines “Saying, ‘I’m

not made of money, you know, and the man at the Safeway don't give away groceries for free.”²⁴

Mullen's creative use of homophones, metaphors, puns, and aphorisms, even her short poems are densely layered with meaning and imagery. She writes from a vantage point of being African-American female, and a feminist. Her poetic style is influenced by Black Arts Movement, feminist, and formally innovative writer.²⁵

The poem is longer in length than other poems students will study in this unit. Initially, students may think *Momma Sayings* is a short story instead of a poem. Here is another opportunity to review poetic styles and forms. Students will scrutinize Mullen's extensive use of quotation marks. Kate Percy mentions, “Mullen is particularly interested in the mnemonic power of rhyme and rhythm, advertising jingles, song lyrics, poetry recitation, kid's chants, nursery rhyme etc.”²⁶ Also, the poem has humorous elements, for instance “she called our feet ant mashers”²⁷ A further aspect that makes Mullen an appealing poet are the following comments.

Mullen's poetry continually challenges the reader, and does so on many levels. As Yancy wrote, Mullen is a word warrior, she preachers, poeticizes, and raps us, indeed, envelops us, into a tropological maze. She invites us to enjoy the logic of discursive possibilities, emotional entanglements, and the force of language.²⁸

Though not overtly political, the poems embody the then-revolutionary assertion that ‘Black is beautiful’ by depicting the dignity intimacy, and creativity of African American women and men intra- racially, especially in their domestic lives²⁹

Harryette Mullen born on July 1, 1953, in Florence, Alabama, was raised in Fort Worth, Texas. Early in her life she was encouraged to focus on literacy and education, yet in the neighborhood the emphasis was on creativity and storytelling. Evidence of Mullen's extensive list of published books and poems proves that she excelled at both. According to Minderovic, this use of language results from “Mullen's poetry, rich with dialect and word play, reflects her diverse environment.”³⁰ Another point of interest to share with students is that Mullen, as a young person, loved to write and a high school teacher submitted one of her poems, which was published in a local newspaper. Also, she has received numerous honors for her literary talent. Based on an interview Mullen conducted with *Contemporary Literature* she states that:

I am writing for the eye and the ear at once, at that intersection of orality and literacy, wanting to make sure that there is a troubled, disturbing aspect to the work so that it is never just a 'speakerly' or a 'writerly' text.³¹

Young Soul ---Amiri Baraka³²

Imamu Amiri Baraka born in 1934 as Everett LeRoi Jones was raised in Newark, New Jersey. I find Baraka's poetry consciously stimulating; hence the subsequent statement about him concurs with my opinion. "The most startling feature of Baraka's literary work is his arresting vocabulary, which communicates shocking states of emotions as well as ideas that indicate new intellectual dimensions and frontiers of the mind."³³ "Baraka is considered a poet icon and the founder of the 1960s Blacks Arts Movement in Harlem. In addition, he is the author of over 40 books of essays, poems, drama, and music history and criticism."³⁴ It will be important for students to understand that Baraka is not afraid, like others before him such as David Walker and Paul Roberson, to divulge the racial attitudes and actions of some United States citizens. Baraka uses his literary voice to enlighten those who are unconsciously ignorant to vast injustices that exist in the United States.

This poem's hidden meaning represents an ideal way to augment student comprehension. I think students will be surprised that the poem was written to encourage young white males to take a stand for humanity's benefit. Prior to my research, I thought the poem was written to motivate black children to value education, family, and themselves. Another reason I selected this poem, is Baraka writes controversial, thought provoking, racial consciousness poems. Basically, his poems can take you out of your comfort zone. Student comprehension will continuously expand with multiple experiences with different poetic styles and forms. For example, the placement of the lines in which Baraka starts on the left side of the page and ends on the right side. What is his rationale for using this technique? Another grammatical idea that stands out is the use of commas and not ending the poem with punctuation marks. A final point to examine is the rhythm of his poetry, because jazz is known to influence the style of his poetry.

Listen Children ---Lucille Clifton³⁵

Lucille Clifton was born in Depew, New York and began her poetry career around 1955. Typically, during this time black families instilled the importance of education. "Although neither parent was formally educated, they provided their large family with an appreciation and an abundance of books, especially those by African Americans."³⁶ Evidently, this foundation prepared Clifton for future success.

In terms of the tone, mood, and message, Clifton's poem *Listen Children* directly contrast to Baraka's *Young Soul*. Clifton plainly speaks to children. Her emphasis is on

love being black and the need to preserve self-love through generations. Clifton makes the assertion that historically; black people have always demonstrated love towards one another regardless of the dire circumstances. Clifton implies that the modern day pervasive hatred is a new phenomenon in the black community. Because my rationale embraces the idea of self-love, the following line resonates with me. More importantly, this line will allow students to divulge in reflective and expressive thoughts.

we have never hated black³⁷

For instance, students can debate the meaning of the word hate. Why do we hate black? What are the stereotypes surrounding black hate? Do you think cops hate black people? Do we exhibit self-hate based on our actions? After reflecting on the negative, how can students combat the destructive nature through writing positive self-expression poetry?

Students will examine the line breaks of the poem. Why does the poet use this technique? At this point in the unit, students should notice interesting techniques, such as the entire poem is written in lower case letters without any punctuation marks. Clifton is known to intentionally use this technique.

The wide-ranging appeal of her characteristically short poems may also be attributed to her deliberate effort to write in an accessible style-using unadorned diction and uncapitalized-words-without compromising the complexity of the ideas³⁸

Also, the title of the poem reminded me about a recent conversation I had with a friend. She advises her children to practice the art of listening regularly. She believes if you try to listen then you can gain invaluable insight. Do we really listen to our children? Do our children really listen to us? The intentional use of *Listen Children* as the summary poem will make a powerful statement. Students are not only looking at the problem, but I want them to use their voice to identify solutions.

Objectives

The overall goal of the unit is to expand student critical thinking skills, improve reading comprehension and written expression. My objective is supported by Carol Clark who writes, “Studying poetry can be a source of enhancing reading and analytical skills. Understanding poetry demands that one pay close attention to text, especially diction, grammar, and syntax; this process naturally strengthens reading comprehension skills.”³⁹

Students will be able to gain insightful information about the progression of poetry from an African-American perspective. According to Kalamu va Salaam when we study

black poetry we also need to examine black speech and music, which he argues, is a “distinct and distinguished oral and aural tradition, which predate America and stretches back to Africa.” Therefore, I believe students will discover cultural pride through a contribution to their own learning and through the examination of various poems that communicate positive messages. Student research about the poet will increase their background regarding historical events and require them to read informational and nonfiction text. Because the study of poetry often requires the reader to make inferences, re-read orally and silently, students will improve the skills that good readers naturally practice. Students will improve their vocabulary skills, especially with the idea that words have multiple meanings. Students will become active listeners and participators in social awareness through critical analysis of the poems. As a result, this curriculum unit will serve as an integrated unit that includes activities connected to the content areas of literacy and social studies. I will collaborate with the social studies teacher for implementation of applicable activities. Students will have numerous practice opportunities to expand critical thinking skills, improve reading comprehension, recitation, and written expression.

Strategies

Cook-Wissahickon Elementary School is an urban public school that features a small learning environment. I teach several resource level classes for grades 6th through 8th with a focus on literacy. These classes are organized into five 50 minutes periods per day. This literacy block will enable me to incorporate the poetry unit over the course of 6 to 8 weeks, which is equivalent to one grading period. Therefore, the unit will be taught primarily during my literacy block. It will extend across the content areas to complete the goals and objectives.

I want to teach lessons that have students utilize meta-cognitive skills. I will incorporate hands-on interactive lessons to reach the various categories of learners that Howard Gardner describes in his book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic.⁴⁰ The unit incorporates a range of learning styles and abilities, which is an educational approach that was developed by Howard Gardner. Students arrive in the classroom with numerous strengths and deficits; educators are encouraged to incorporate differentiated instruction as part of the routine learning environment.

Reading Comprehension

Mastery of the numerous reading comprehension skills is an extremely difficult task for my struggling learners to achieve. Usually, these students are at least one to three years below grade level. My responsibility is to provide students with strategies that will help them close the achievement gap. To facilitate student success in this unit, I will focus on the following reading comprehension strategies, which are defined in the following paragraphs: vocabulary development, monitoring comprehension/meta-cognition, and responding to text (TAG it a 3).

The three building blocks for developing a successful reader are fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. For this poetry unit, my focus will extend to vocabulary development. Currently, I experienced students who are able to decode and recall words, however, their comprehension is significantly impacted by the inability to understand both the literal and implied meaning. As a result, the context clues are ineffective. Reading is understanding what you read and it is important that students construct meaning. Reading poetry will allow me to use shorter text, whereby students will concentrate on the study of complex words. Reading research supports this idea. Teachers “should employ a variety of techniques to ensure that students have repeated exposures to words and to present opportunities for students to make connections between words and concepts.”⁴¹

At the same time, monitoring comprehension is essential given that students need to be aware of what they understand and identify what they do not understand. This strategy correlates to meta-cognition since students need to think about why they do what they do. This is not an easy skill for students to accomplish because often they are unsure of the requirements. In order for students to reach a level of proficiency there is a method that I must implement for student success. First, there is direct instruction to explain and clarify the task. Second, modeling is an integral component of my special education class where I demonstrate how to apply the strategy. Third, guided practice means it is necessary for me to direct and assist students as they become reacquainted with the skill. Lastly, I continue to assist students until they can independently apply the skill. Generally, monitoring comprehension is a repetitive skill in the unit since students will read and respond to an array of poems.

Responding to text utilizing the TAG it a 3 strategy has resulted in one of the most powerful impacts on overall improve content knowledge. The acronym is defined in the following manner: Students are instructed to turn (T) the question into statement, which forces the student to make sure they understand the question requirements. Students then must answer (A) the question with accurate information. Students are reminded to appropriately answer the question. Next, they are required to give (G) at least three details or examples to support their answer. This means those students are expected to extend and explain their answers using evidence from the text. Students are advised to first obtain evidence from the text and fully develop their written response. After they have fulfilled this obligation they can extend their answer to make personal connections depending on the type of question.

PowerPoint/Video

Students will complete a K-W-L before the PowerPoint presentation. What do students know (K) about the topic as it relates to their prior knowledge? What do you want (W) to know are the questions the students will create. At the end of the unit, students will answers questions to assess what they have learned (L). This strategy will allow students to review prior knowledge, create questions, and discover answers throughout the unit. Do they know the difference between poetry and prose? What poem or poet was the most meaningful to them? Also, they will answer the essential questions posed

throughout the unit. Students will continue to review and update the K-W-L. Next, I will introduce a brief history of African-American poets utilizing PowerPoint slides to generate student interest in the topic. The focus on technology will be an important part of my unit for several reasons. The majority of my students are normally interested in technology and they are a generation that is accustomed to interactive visuals and graphics. Students will watch a video and/or excerpts of African-American poets to reinforce the PowerPoint presentation. The video and PowerPoint will be ideal for auditory and visual learners.

In addition, students will access the Internet to view or listen to poetry readings. Students will hear the emotions and expressions of the poet. Actual poetry readings will bring alive the feelings evoked from hearing the poem.

Journal

Students will maintain a three-part reflection journal to document thoughts as we complete the curriculum unit. In part one, students will respond to teacher generated journal prompts that relate to poetry discussions. Over a specific time period, students will maintain a poetry journal to record thoughts and feelings. Also, students will respond to journal prompts to reflect on their progress towards vocabulary development and comprehension. Part two is when students will write original poems. Students will improve written expression and communication skills. They will make a personal connection to areas of interest. Reflective journals will help them to grasp the power of their voice. Students will discover that writing can be a therapeutic mechanism to express ideas. Part three is designated for students to maintain a glossary of poetry terms and facts covered in the course of reading and analyzing the selected poems. Students will complete activities to demonstrate their comprehension of terms. Students will write the formal definition and then include a written definition or illustration to help them take ownership for the term. The purpose of this strategy is to improve students' vocabulary.

Graphic Organizers

A picture is worth a thousand words. Graphic organizers illustrate the concepts and it helps students to read and understand difficult text. Consistently, I use graphic organizers to enhance my lessons. My students use graphic organizers to help them focus on specific comprehension skills as opposed to becoming overwhelmed with a multitude of expectations. Graphic organizers provide two benefits. First, they allow them to work in shorter chunks. Second, they allow time to digest new or difficult concepts. Students will use the organizers to review figurative language common elements, for example metaphor, personification, onomatopoeia, imagery, simile, hyperbole, alliteration, idioms, and irony.

Discussion

Large and small group discussion is an integral element of this unit. First, students will listen to teacher-selected poems and the teacher will model how to analyze the poem. The

teacher will provide students with a list of the comprehension, writing, and specific figurative language skills that will be emphasized. Second, in small groups students will read and analyze poems. Third, independently students will select and defend their rationale regarding a poem critique. An added bonus would be to invite a guest speaker to read and discuss poetry. Potential guest may include the author of a poem, parent, and/or principal.

Cooperative Groups

Establishing cooperative groups as part of this unit will offer positive outcomes for my students. Cooperative Groups will provide a learning environment where students can help, assist, encourage, and support each other's efforts to learn. Student will engage in cooperative groups when they create a poem. For example, students will develop their criteria of essential lines that a positive poem should include. Every student will be responsible for five lines of the poem. In small groups, students will collaborate to compose a single class poem.

Assessments

Students overall assessments will be based on a portfolio of a collection of the above assignments and completion of the lesson plans that follow. The assessment criteria will include rubrics with a score of five indicating outstanding work, and a score of one indicating the assignment needs improvement. Typically, my students have extreme difficulty following directions based on countless reasons. Therefore, to help them remain focused they will consistently need to refer to the checklist to ensure adherence. A score of five indicates the student followed directions, stayed on task and helped other students while a score of one informs the student that they did not listen to the directions, so they did not know what to do. Student scores for independent work are essential because seventh and eighth grades students will soon transition to high school. Sometimes this transition is difficult because my school is a small learning community; as a result it is paramount that my students gain confidence and independence with the use of resources. A score of five means that the student was able to complete the work independently, on the other hand a score of 1 means that the student was unable to find the assigned information and failed to accept or ask for any assistance. It should be noted that there is a range with five being the highest and one is the lowest score a student can earn.

Classroom Activities/Lesson Plans

Presented here are 3 sample lesson plans to be used in this unit. Teachers can use the ideas for a single lesson or plan the entire integrated unit based upon the objectives and strategies aforementioned.

Lesson 1: Poetry versus Prose

Objective: Students will understand the difference between these terms. Students will use a graphic organizer to evaluate the similarities and differences. Students will start the process to ponder questions to analyze poems. Students will complete an activity to think about self-esteem.

Materials: Obtain copies of the following two poems: *Who Can Be Born Black* by Mari Evans and *Survival Motion: Notice* by Melvin E. Brown

Procedures:

Critical Thinking Question: What is the significance of the poem's title? Explain.

Teacher starts the lesson with a whole class KWL format. Teacher encourages student participation by asking general questions to determine their prior knowledge regarding types of poetry and figurative language. Teacher uses chart paper to record student responses. The chart paper is posted in the classroom for ongoing review and update. At this point, the focus is on the know (K) and what do you want (W) to know portion of the KWL strategy.

Teacher reviews the correct definition of the terms poetry, prose, and figurative language (metaphor, imagery, idioms, hyperbole, etc). Study of these terms will not occur in isolation, however students will master these concepts as poems are analyzed throughout the unit.

Teacher will engage students in a discussion regarding the similarities and differences between poetry and prose. Students will work in groups using a compare contrast graphic organizer to document responses.

Teacher will distribute a copy of *Who Can Be Born Black* and complete a read aloud. After reading the poem several times, the teacher will discuss the meanings and messages. Teacher will use the following questions to initiate and model the process to critique poems.⁴²

1. Who is the speaker?
2. What is the basic situation?
3. Are there conflicts in the poem? If so, what are they?
4. What kind(s) of imagery do you see most often in the poem? Give some examples.
5. What is the author's tone (his or her attitude toward the subject)?
6. Are you represented in the poem? Explain.

Teacher will repeat the above step for *Survival Motion: Notice*.

Students will design a collage with pictures, words, or quotes that represents black beauty to them. Students will present their rationale for the final design. The teacher will refer to the collages throughout the unit.

Extension Activity: Show students artwork and/or movie that emphasize positive affirmations of black is beautiful. Also, play music that express positive cultural lyrics from a variety of artist.

Lesson 2: What's In A Poem?

Objective: Students will discover that poetry interpretation will help them to become reflective and skilled at improving their critical thinking skills. Students will research the poem's historical background.

Materials: Obtain copies of the following four poems: *David Walker (1785-1830)* by Rita Dove; *Robeson At Rutgers* by Elizabeth Alexander; *Poem For My Father for Quincy T. Troupe, Sr.* by Quincy Troupe; and *Momma Sayings* by Harryette Mullen

Procedures:

Critical Thinking Questions: Why did the author write the poem? What is the theme?

Teacher will introduce one poem at time utilizing the following format.

Session One: Teacher reads the poem. Select two student volunteers to re-read the poem.

Session Two: Teacher and students will review the vocabulary. Teacher will help students understand both the literal and connotative meanings by isolating the lines and/or stanzas.

Session Three: Teacher will use the following questions to continue modeling the process to critique poems.⁴³

1. What is the poem's setting?
2. Are there conflicts in the poem? If so, what are they?
3. What is the mood of this poem? Explain your answer.
4. What figures of speech are included (metaphor, simile, personification, hyperbole, etc.)?
5. What interesting techniques does the author include?

Students will write a paragraph to briefly summarize the poem. Students will include an illustration to provide a visual connection.

Teacher will review the historical information that correlates to the poem. Students will select either David Walker or Paul Robeson to complete a PowerPoint biographical sketch. In addition, students will include three facts that resonates with them and how they can use the information to make positive changes.

Students will present the summary and PowerPoint projects.

Students will complete a “scoring rubric”⁴⁴ to enhance poetry comprehension. See Appendix B: *Scoring Rubric*.

Extension Activity: While reading the poem, play instrumental background music to invoke a mellow atmosphere. Students listen to live audio recordings of Paul Robeson and the poets.

Lesson 3: Important Voices

Objective: Students will independently analyze poems individually and small groups. Students will write original poetry as an outlet for self-expression.

Materials: Obtain copies of the following two poems: *Young Soul* by Amiri Baraka and *Listen Children* by Lucille Clifton

Procedures:

Critical Thinking Questions: Describe your reaction to the poem? Do you agree or disagree with the poet’s message(s)?

Teacher will introduce poems utilizing the following format.

Session One: Teacher reads the poem. Select two student volunteers to re-read the poem.

Session Two: Teacher will assign a poem to students in small groups.

Session Three: In small groups, students will critique the assigned poem. Students will discuss responses to discover through teacher questioning if the analysis was accurate.

Students will participate in a modified “text rendering” activity. The purpose of text rendering is to collaboratively construct meaning, clarify, and expand student thinking. Individually, students will re-read the above poems and select one word, one phrase, and one line that resonate with them. Students will share selections with the whole class to listen for commonalities.

Students will write original poetry. Organize the classroom to represent a café setting. Students will recite an original poem or a favorite poem from the unit.

Note: Students answer critical thinking questions in their journal.

Annotated Bibliography, Citations and Resources

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Implementing Pennsylvania District Standards

Standard 1.1: Learning to Read Independently

1.1F Understand the meaning of and apply key vocabulary across the various subject areas.

1.1H Demonstrate fluency and comprehension in reading.

Standard 1.2: Reading Critically in all Content Areas

1.2C Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of the genre.

Standard 1.3: Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

1.3C Analyze the effect of various literary devices.

1.3F Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

Standard 1.4: Types of Writing

1.4A Write short stories, poems, and plays

1.4B Write multi-paragraph information pieces (e.g. letters, descriptions, reports, instructions, essays, articles, interviews).

Standard 1.5: Quality of Writing

1.5A Write with a sharp, distinct focus.

Standard 1.6: Speaking and Listening

1.6B Listen to selections of literature (fiction and/or nonfiction).

1.6F Use media for learning processes.

Standard 1.8: Research

- 1.8B Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.
- 1.8C Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.

Standard 8.1: History (Global Connections)

8.1B1 Primary, Document, Materials, Artifacts, and Historical Places

Standard 8.3: United States History

8.3A6 Political and Cultural contributions of Individual Groups

8.3B6 Primary, Document, Materials, Artifacts, and Historical Places

Appendix B: Scoring Rubric ⁴⁵

_____ (5) Language (Does it add to the meaning of the poem? Are there repeated sounds that caught your ear or eye? Do the choice of words lend to the meaning of the poem? Do any word choices hinder the effectiveness of the poem?)

_____ (5) Imagery (How clearly could you visualize images from this poem? What did you see? Does it give you pictures in your mind?)

_____ (5) Personal Attachment (Does this poem or specific lines in it remind you of anything? Does it relate to a situation in your life? Did it make you feel a specific emotion that you have felt before? Did it give you goosebumps?)

_____ (5) Understand-ability (Were you able to interpret the poem in some manner? Could you relate to it, and therefore make sense of it? Was it hard to understand?)

_____ (10) Overall appreciation of the poem (So.. did you like the poem? Did it elicit strong feelings for you? Did you receive a lot of enjoyment or mental stimulation from this poem?)

_____ (30) Final Score

_____ Group Average Score (add all scores for each member and divide by the number of members in group)

¹ Elizabeth Alexander, Home Page

² Beyond Intractability Version IV

³ E. Ethelbert Miller, *In Search of Color Everywhere A Collection Of African-American Poetry*, 62

⁴ Miller, 62

⁵ BookRags

⁶ Miller, 62

⁷ Miller, 70

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42 Poetry Analysis Worksheet
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