

Teaching Early Childhood African American Studies through Fine Arts

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Introduction

The area of fine arts evokes a different response individually, since it invites imagination through creative responses. This project *Teaching Early Childhood African American Studies through Fine Arts* was designed for early childhood aged pupils (pre-kindergarten through third grade) but can be restructured for any age group. The purpose of this grant was to introduce students to African American figures and/or African American history through the fine arts. Obviously, lessons of this nature cross reference with literature, language arts, the social sciences, music, dance, and art.

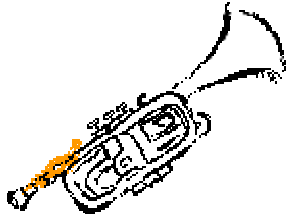
Incorporated in this publication are examples of three age varied lesson plans for each subject area and a brief annotated bibliography of additional books on the cited topic. Teachers usually have their own favorite picture books, so I tried to keep my selections to those pieces of literature that are better known for them to use as an instructional tool. I also focused on people and times in twentieth and early twenty first century history that children might not know about rather than present day figures and events.

Affective learning is built into the components of these plans as this manner of teaching helps children become self-reliant, develop confidence through their creative responses and learn to value themselves as unique individuals. Since the inclusion of families is an important component to the children and their response to school, I added some family based assignments and an art show of the student's work at the end of the year.

For those students who are African American, a year long study of this nature confirms the importance of their place in history and fosters self-esteem. For those youngsters who are of other ethnic and racial groups, this project will hopefully serve as a stepping stone to a better understanding of others.

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If I can inspire one of these youngsters to develop the talent I know they possess, then my monument will be in their work. Selma Burke, African American sculptor



**Picture Books about
African American Music and
Dance**

Music/Jazz

Carter, D. (2002). *Heaven's all star jazz band*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Grandpa has passed on and his grandson imagines him in heaven playing with his favorite jazz musicians. There are biographical citations in the back of the book about the musicians mentioned. It is interesting to note that the artwork by Mr. Carter was done with foam board. For reading aloud, this book is appropriate for age 4 and up, but for an educator who is going to use the book as a teaching tool about music and the cited people, familiarity with the subject or additional research should be completed.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. What is jazz? Is there a true definition of jazz? **Activity-** Young children can work with musical instruments to learn various musical concepts by having an adult teach them beats, high/low, fast/slow etc. as they listen to selected jazz music.

Interpretive:

1. After listening to several recordings of jazz answer the question, "What feelings does jazz evoke in you?" **Activity-** Have older children write some responses (example: happy/sad) down on a list. Later take a piece of white construction paper and have them write the words on it and then decorate the paper to make a piece of art. Young children can carry out this activity as well with the help of an adult.

Critical:

1. Did you like listening to jazz music? Why/why not? Would you like to learn more about the genre? Why/ why not? **Activity- For older children-**Write your responses in three to four sentences and illustrate your finished paper with musical interpretations.

Additional References:

Social Studies Discussion: Harlem, New York

Biographical Studies: See the back page of the book for people included in the text

Music Discussion: Listen to recordings of some of the jazz singers and musicians mentioned in the picture book.

Art Activity: Use a creative response to the music through art activities. (See above)

Music/Singer

Ryan, P.M. (2002). *When Marian sang: the true recital of Marian Anderson*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

A picture book depicting the life and times of the singer Marion Anderson beginning with her childhood to her historic concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. Lyrics from songs that she made famous are interspersed throughout the book. The extraordinary illustrations are by Brian Selznick. Suitable for ages 6 and up.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. What was the Jim Crow law? How did it affect Marion when she traveled around the U.S. to sing? Why was Europe a different place racially to perform?
2. How did President Roosevelt's wife get involved with one of Marion's concerts? What did she do to protest Marion not being allowed to perform in *Constitution Hall* in Washington, D.C.?

Interpretive:

1. Why do you think that the book opens with pictures of a stage? Why does it close with one? **Activity for all ages** - Take a large piece of white construction paper, cut it in half and then evenly fold each piece in half sideways. This will form the curtains of a stage. Paste one side of both of these folds outwards onto another piece of construction paper. The additional piece of construction paper will be the stage where the characters perform. Draw a scene from the book on the stage paper. Decorate the curtains. A stage can also be made by designing and decorating a shoebox. This activity could also be completed at home as a **family project**.

Critical:

1. Discuss with any age group how it must feel to be prevented from following your dream because you are not considered good enough. **Activity** - Older children might want to find a biography of someone who they admire and write about any adversity that person might have encountered to pursue their dream.

Additional References:

Music References:

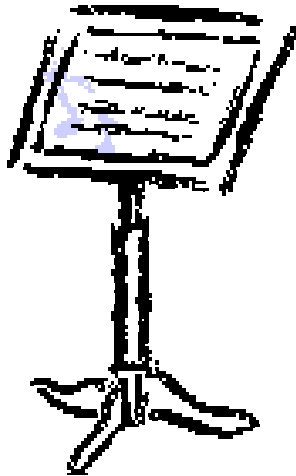
There are many recordings by Marion Anderson, as she sang different types of songs. Listen to examples of some. In the back of the book is a suggested list under "Selected Discography."

Biographical References:

The back of the book contains detailed information about Marion Anderson and the artist Brian Selznick. It also contains information on the famous concert of 1939.

Social Studies References:

Older children can complete research on the D.A.R, President and Mrs. Roosevelt, or Marion's famous Constitution Hall concert to name a few topics.



Music/ Dance

Schroeder, A. (1993). *Ragtime Trumpie*. New York: Little, Brown & Company.

A story about the famous Josephine Baker nicknamed, *Trumpie* and her life from her poor early days in St. Louis to her later success as a world famous dancer. Josephine Baker eventually moved to Paris where she felt that racial issues were less intense than in the United States and adopted many multiracial children who were known as the “Rainbow tribe.” This book won the Parent’s Choice Award and the ALA Notable Book Award. Ages 6-9.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. What kind of music did Josephine Baker prefer to perform to during her shows?
2. What country did she move to later in her career and why?

Interpretive:

1. Do you think that winning a dance contest at a young age gave her the drive that she needed to continue performing? Why/ why not?
2. Have you ever done anything that gave you the courage or drive to try and complete a special desire? **Activity for all ages**-Explain by writing a response. If not, write a response that details what you would like to do someday. Young children can draw a picture and have adults write their personal information on it.

Critical:

1. Josephine Baker believed that she could succeed in fulfilling her dreams for fame. How might that have helped her get along in life?

Additional References:

Social Studies Discussion: St. Louis, Missouri, Harlem, New York, Paris, France

Biographical Study: Josephine Baker, The Rainbow Tribe, Scott Joplin

Musical/Film Discussion:

This picture book contains references to both musical terms and song titles. (Example: Ragtime, Blues, and syncopation are musical terms and a song title example mentioned is *Cotton Bolls*) Check your local library for film clips of Baker as well as examples of the recordings mentioned in the text. Preview your film selections first as she often danced in a suggestive manner.

Additional picture books about African American music and dance

Campbell, B.M. (2006). *Stompin' at the Savoy*. New York: Penguin Group.

A young girl is nervous before her first dance recital. She magically finds herself transported to the Savoy ballroom in Harlem, New York, where she watches many famous dancers of the swing era perform. This picture book was written by the best-selling adult author Bebe Moore Campbell. Ages 4-8.

Dillon, D. & Dillon, L. (2002). *Rap a tap tap: Here's Bojangles: Think of that!* New York: Scholastic, Inc.

A picture book for early learners that portrays the life of the famous tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. It was an honor book for the 2003 Coretta Scott King illustrator award. It has a rhyming text and is illustrated by the authors in watercolor.

Hudson, W. & C. (1996). *How sweet the sound: African American songs for children*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

This picture book is an excellent reference for a teacher to the musicians and dances included in this annotated bibliography. Suitable for all ages.

Pinkney, A. D. & Pinkney, B. (1995). *Alvin Ailey*. Beecher, Illinois: Sagebrush Education Resources.

The story of the life of the African American dancer and choreographer Alvin Ailey is depicted in this picture book for ages 4-9 written by the husband and wife team Brian and Andrea Davis Pinkney and was illustrated by Brian Pinkney with scratch drawings.

Pinkney, A. D. (2002). *Ella Fitzgerald: The tale of a vocal virtuoso*. New York: Hyperion books for children.

The biography of singer Ella Fitzgerald is narrated by a cat. The biographical aspects are correct and there are additional notes at the back of the text that fill in facts about her life and times. This book contains some musical terms that will need to be explained to children such as "scat" singing. The book is fine to read aloud to younger ones with a recording or two included.

Raschka, C. (2004). *Charlie Parker played be bop*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

A board book for early learners that has jazz phrases and light information on the famed saxophone player Charlie Parker. The reoccurring theme is that his cat sits on

every page seemingly waiting for Parker to appear. What other book in this music and dance bibliography also features a cat?

Stauffacher, S. (2006). *Bessie Smith and the night riders*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

This picture book for older readers is based on a true incident that happened during one of Bessie Smith's concerts in the south. An explanation of the era should be given before this book is read to a group of students.

Taylor, D. (2004). *Sweet music in Harlem*. New York: Lee & Low Books, Inc.

Art Kane created a photograph in 1958 of nearly 60 jazz musicians in Harlem. Built around that famous day is this story of a young boy who looks for his uncle's hat for him so that he can be part of the photo shoot. Instead he finds many other lost objects. A copy of the photograph drawn by the illustrator is included in the back and notations of who the jazz artists are referred to as well. Taylor's text is a good book to use with older children to explore examples of different jazz musicians or instruments.



Picture Books about African American Artists



Art/Sculpture

Biography:

Although books about the famous sculptors Augusta Savage and Dr. Selma Burke are currently out of print, pertinent information about their lives can be found on line as well as in some of the collections mentioned in the art bibliography. For instance, did you know that Dr. Selma Burke received her Doctoral degree at age 70 and created the portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt seen on our dime? (AOL Internet site on Dr. Selma Burke) Did you know that Augusta Savage was born in Florida and grew up to be a very famous sculptor and art teacher? (AOL Internet site on Augusta Savage)

Additional References:

Art Activity:

For any age group- Artist's clay, clay dough or homemade clay can be used to make sculptures of their own. Some art supply stores and educational supply stores sell clay that you can bake and paint. Also, check with the art teacher at your school. If you have kilns the children can make their own ceramics to save.

It is important to teach children how to take care of clay when they are using it. They should be taught not to mix the colors, to firmly press pieces of clay together and the importance of covering the clay so that it doesn't dry out.

For any age group- Go to a Home Depot or a similar store and purchase different sized pieces of wood. You might also go to a craft store where they usually sell bagged pieces of wood. Have the children plan what they are going to create and make sure that they have enough wood to make something of substance. Have them glue their selected pieces together and then paint the sculpture when it is solidly glued and dry. Have them name and label their piece as well. Save their work for an art show at the end of the year.

Social Studies References:

Look up information online about these women and other interesting African American facts at *The Schomburg Collection* and *Encarta Africana*.



Artist/Collage and other mediums

Greenberg, J. (2003). *Romare Bearden: Collage of memories*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Books.

This text is advertised as the only picture book biography of Bearden available for children. He used the world around him as well as his heritage to create his colorful and expressive art. As a cross reference, he illustrated Ntozake Shange's poem book, *I live in music*, (cited in the writer's bibliography) which depicts the music, neighborhood and people in an African American community. *Romare Bearden: Collage of memories*, is suitable for all ages as even younger children could use it to look at the pictures.

Art Activity:

When studying the collage artwork of Romare Bearden students of all ages will



enjoy designing their own collages.

various materials such as wallpaper, tissue paper, gift wrap paper and construction paper to create their own collages. In the case of older children this project can be expanded as they could write and illustrate their own books.

Children can use

Art Activity:

For a homework project I assign a family collage. I send a large stiff piece of paper home with directions for their family to collect photographs and make a collage together. I save these and other works they've created throughout the year and then I display them for an art show at the end of the year.

Social Studies:

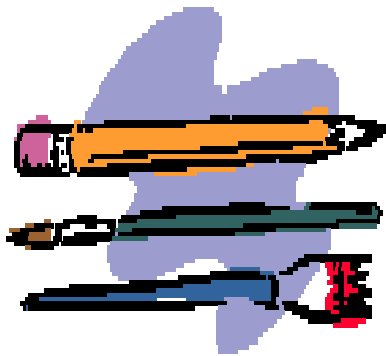
Information in this text should be a stepping stone to what is developmentally appropriate for your children to study.

Art/Reference

Haywood, J. Jr. (2005). *Come look with me: Discovering African American art for children*. Watertown, Massachusetts: Charlesbridge Publishing.

Come look with me, is a wonderful book for teachers and a great addition to a classroom or library. The book is one in a series of themed art books written specifically for young children.

It is arranged around the work of 12 famous African American artists from the twentieth century and contains a brief biography of the cited artists as well as information on their featured painting's theme. "Discussion starters" are also included for teachers to use with their students. There are very good ideas for additional lessons on these famous pieces of art that teachers can expand from to create their own. Many of the artists cited in this bibliography are also in this text. Suitable for ages 5- on.



Additional picture books about African American artists

Bolden, T. (2003). *Wake up your souls: A celebration of African American artists*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.

Although this book is categorized as one suitable for age 10 and above, it can be used as a reference for all ages to look at artwork of those mentioned in other texts included in this bibliography.

Duggleby, J., Lawrence, J. (1998). *Story Painter: the life of Jacob Lawrence*. San Francisco, California: Chronicle Books.

A biography of the life of the painter Jacob Lawrence who often created pictures that carried a theme of a particular topic through them. (Examples: The great migration, John Brown). This book is suitable for ages 6 and up.

Everett, G. (1994). *Li'l Sis and Uncle Willie: A story based on the life and paintings of William H. Johnson*. New York: Hyperion Books.

This is the story of young writer/art historian Gwen Everett and her uncle, William H. Johnson and is based on actual facts in their lives together. The picture book is illustrated with artwork by Johnson and is appropriate for all early childhood aged children.

Ringgold, F. Freeman, L., Roucher, N. (1996). *Talking to Faith Ringgold*. New York: Crown books for young readers.

A biography of the artist and children's book writer which includes her life experiences, how she has been inspired to do her art, examples of her art and many ideas for continued conversation and projects with students. This is a good example of a read aloud book older early childhood aged children.

Venezia, M. (2000). *Jacob Lawrence*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Jacob Lawrence is one of the "Getting to know the greatest artists" series of books. Black and white photographs are spread throughout the text, along with full-color reproductions of the artist's work. It is appropriate as a read aloud for ages 6 and older.

Picture Books about African American Writers



Johnson, J. W. (1995). *Lift ev'ry voice and sing*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Written by the famous civil rights leader, jazz musician and author, James Weldon Johnson, this poem has come to be known as the "Black National Anthem." His brother, J. Rosamond Johnson set it to music. The song is included in the Hudson's book *How sweet the sound*. (See music bibliography). All ages. *

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. In what state did Mr. Johnson go to school and later become a principal there?
2. What people of Africa are depicted in the illustrations? (See picture book notes)

Interpretive:

1. Why do you think that the artist Jan Spivey Gilchrest wove together pictures of Africa and the history of African Americans in this country?
2. What images does this song and accompanying illustrations bring to mind?

Critical:

1. Critical thinking questions can be based on information given on- line or in additional bibliographies depending on the grade level of the students.

Additional References:

Social Studies Discussion: Florida history, Florida geography

Biographical Study:

James Weldon Johnson was an amazing man. He was a poet, novelist, teacher, lawyer and US consul to Nicaragua and Venezuela to name a few professions.

Fine Arts Activity:

Have your class learn this song. Perhaps you might combine with other classes to have more children involved. Ask your school music teacher to either play piano with you to practice or else record the song to practice with. Have the students draw a picture of their own interpretation of this poem/song. Use markers so that the pictures are dark and take photographs of each one. Have them perform the song at an assembly for their families with the photos of their drawings going on and off behind them.

* Portions of this page were taken from The Ed Fund Idea packet entitled, *Life Ev'ry Voice and Sing* 2002 written by Stephanie Lee-Harris, Ph.D.

Miller, W. (1996). *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry tree*. New York: Lee& Low books, Inc.

Miller's book briefly covers Zora Neale Hurston's early life and the subsequent death of her mother. The Chinaberry tree is where she would go to look out at the whole world that her mother assured her was just waiting for her. This text can be used along with other Hurston books tailored for young children such as *The Three Witches*, adapted by Joyce Carol Thomas and illustrated by Faith Ringgold. (See art bibliography) Both books are suitable for ages 5-10.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. What is a Chinaberry tree? Where does it grow?
2. After reading this book, use a map with your class to find where in Florida Hurston lived.

Interpretive:

1. **Activity for all ages** - Read your class *The Three Witches* by Hurston and adapted by Joyce Carol Thomas (see above) and then have them write and illustrate a response. Younger children can draw a picture as a response instead. Children might also listen to a reading of Hurston's stories.
2. Ask your class if they felt that the Chinaberry tree represented Zora's look out over the world that lay ahead of her. What do they feel that they aspire to do with their lives?

Additional References:

Social Studies References: WPA works, Florida, Harlem Renaissance

Art Activity: (All ages)

Faith Ringgold (see art bibliography) is known for her elaborate quilts. Using stiff felt pieces have children design a quilt square to represent their favorite part of *The Chinaberry Tree* or *The Three Witches*. (Stiff felt pieces are easy to draw on in pencil). Paste other fabric on the squares to create a picture or color over the pencil drawings. Punch holes around the outside of the felt piece and sew each quilt piece together using yarn and a plastic needle.

Writers/Poetry

Shange, N. (2204). *Ellington was not a street*, New York: Simon and Schuster Books for young readers.

The text of this picture book is one of Shange's poems entitled, *Mood Indigo*. The beautifully illustrated book (illustrator, Kadir A. Nelson) depicts another era in Harlem, New York. Famous people visit the young narrator's house as Shange (who wrote the play, *For colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf: A choreopoem*) recounts some childhood memories. Brief biographical sketches are included and should be used as a teaching tool for greater understanding of the theme of the book. See additional information on the author in the section of this booklet under Romare Bearden. The book can be read aloud and discussed with 6 year olds and up. Winner of the Coretta Scott King illustrator award.

Critical Thinking Questions:

Literal:

1. After reading this book, talk about the various famous people depicted in this picture book. Some other points that might be taught include: The Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement and Musical History.
2. The poem upon which this picture book is based is titled, *Mood Indigo*. **Activity for older children** - Research who wrote and first performed the song by the same name. Are they similar? Why/why not?
3. Why do you think the little girl is holding a record in the picture on the front cover?

Interpretive:

1. What do you think the title means?
2. What does the word "indigo" mean?
3. Who do you think the little girl throughout the picture book is supposed to be?

Critical:

1. **Activity** - Listen to the poem without the illustrations for the first reading. Read it again showing the book. Does the poem make sense without the illustrations? Was it better with them?

Additional References:

Music History:

Listen to the song *Mood Indigo*. Discuss the type of music it is. Who was Paul Robeson? Play some of his music as well.

Social Studies Discussion:

Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, The Niagara Movement
Biographical study of each famous person cited in the book

Language Arts Activity:

Activity for older children- Read other poetry by African Americans poets (Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Phillis Wheatley) and compare and contrast the themes. Another poetry picture book by Shange is *I hear music*, illustrated by Romare Bearden. Use that as an example as well to compare and contrast Shange's writing. This text is suitable for younger children as well as older ones.



Additional picture books about/by African American Writers

Dunbar, P.L. (1999). *Jump back, honey*. New York: Hyperion books for children.

This book includes fourteen poems by the late Dunbar. Each is illustrated by well known African American children's book illustrators. The text itself should be read carefully by an adult before sharing it aloud as the poems are written in dialect. Ages 5-up.

Thomas, J.C. (adapted) (2006). *The three witches*. New York: HarperCollins Children's books.

This text is an adaptation of a collected folktale by Zora Neale Hurston. It involves a grandmother, her grandchildren and three witches. The book is illustrated by Faith Ringgold (see art bibliography). The book is suitable for ages 5-on.

McKissack, P., McKissack, F. (1990). *James Weldon Johnson: Lift every voice and sing*. New York: Scholastic, Inc.

Black and white photographs enhance this biography of Johnson's life. Suitable for 7-10 year olds.

Perdomo, W. (2005). *Visiting Langston*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, Incorporated.

This picture book written in rhymes depicts the excitement that a young girl feels as she goes with her daddy to the house where the famous poet Langston Hughes lived in Harlem. The last page has a list of many of Langston's poems printed in different fonts. Winner of the Coretta Scott King illustrator award (Bryan Collier). Ages 4-9.

Rochelle, B. (ed.) (2001). *Words with wings: A treasury of African American poetry and art*. New York: HarperCollins.

This book is an excellent introduction to African American poets and artists. These selections are from the nineteenth century through the present. The thread that carries through this book though is that of universal topics as well as African American ones. It is a good reference book to have in your classroom no matter what the age is of your students.

Shange, N. (1994). *I live in music*. New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang.

This poem written by Shange and illustrated by Romare Bearden is an example of one of the African American writers and artists cited in this bibliography. It includes references to musical notes, instruments, and rhymes. Although it is not about Shange or Bearden specifically, it does contain extensive bibliographic notes on them both. Ages 4-9.