Looking at the Black Experience in America Through African American Poetry

Joyce Arnosky
Penn-Alexander School

Abstract:

Poetry is life distilled.
-- Gwendolyn Brooks

Looking at events through different lenses offers varied perspectives that deepen our understanding of ourselves as well as the experiences of others. Though textbooks have, of late, certainly become more culturally sensitive and inclusive, the participation and contributions of African Americans are still under acknowledged. This curriculum unit chronicles and expands upon the Black experience in America through the poetry of African American writers. Throughout this unit students will look closely at a broad selection of poetry that will cast a different light on the major epochs of that history as well as on the everyday lives of the people who lived it. The works chosen for study in this unit represent, whenever possible, poems by writers living in the milieu about which they wrote. Through a close reading of the poems, along with additional reading and writing activities, students will gain meaningful insights that will elaborate upon and further elucidate the historical events depicted in the traditional textbook histories they are accustomed to reading.

This unit is written for fifth grade students, but could be adapted for older grades. It is intended to supplement the School District of Philadelphia’s core curriculum for literacy and social studies. The work students do could be accomplished over the course of approximately three week to four weeks as an independent unit of study. Students would need to be provided with additional historical background material (See appendix for suggested sources). Alternately, the activities could be inserted throughout the year as the topics arose in the curricula.