

# Assertiveness and 'Somebodyness': Theatre strategies and resources to enhance achievement of African American girls, K-12

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## Abstract

Theatre across the curriculum, is one of the innovations with a potential for positive achievement results for African American girls and our entire diverse population of students. In our drama and theatre work, a pluralistic perspective is one of the bridges to self-affirming visibility for all students. Since the pioneering efforts of Winifred Ward in the 1930s and 1940s, scholars have utilized drama in the classroom with young people at all grade levels to enhance knowledge and skills while promoting confidence and interpersonal skills (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; McCaslin, 2006; Ward, 1952; Way, 1967). Sharon Grady in *Drama and Diversity* (2000) poses apropos questions: "What informs the choices we make as we construct drama work? How do our choices open up areas of learning or close down areas of inquiry? What is the impact of our choices on our students?" (p. xiii) After reviewing the achievement dilemma of African American girls K-12, this discussion 1) highlights the literature documenting the effectiveness of using theatre across the curriculum to engage and push forward all students, 2) describes three theatre strategies for enhancing academic skills and self-esteem (creative drama, role-playing, readers theatre), and finally, 3) presents a representative sampling of resources for developing a cultural knowledge base related to African American females and African American culture. Theatre can provide the spark that will enrich content across the curriculum for all students. It is especially needed for children of color who are at risk for lower test scores and high dropout rates, and can make a positive difference for African American females in K-12 grades.

## Keywords

creative drama, role-playing, readers theatre

## African American Girls Educational Dilemma

Innovative educators and community leaders have been exploring and implementing strategies to close the achievement gap. African American girls, despite their improved graduation rates and entrance into post-secondary education, re-

main challenged in grades K-12, testing at grade level or below and challenged by the intersection of race, class, and gender (Evans-Winter, 2011; Larke, 2013; Morris, 2013, Ross, T., 2012; The National Institute of Mental Health, 2009; The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2014; Collins, P.H., 2000, Collins, C.F., 2015), Wiltz, 2015).

Achievement studies document the need to push African American girls forward at all levels, beyond the basic and below average levels, to proficient and advanced. Despite the success of African American girls in outnumbering African American males as high school and college graduates and their entrance into a variety of professional fields and thus increased earning power as a group, too many continue to be left behind for a variety of reasons including early school drop outs, teen pregnancy, and criminal activity. Many of their challenges stem from a cycle of poverty and low self-esteem, though the issues are varied and complex and include unfortunately low expectations and cultural insensitivity (Collins, P.H., 2000; Hale, 2001; Hrabowski, Maton, Greene, & Greif, 2002).

Theatre across the curriculum is one of the innovations with a potential for positive achievement results for African American girls when faculty members learn the strategies and apply a cultural knowledge base to the work. Since the pioneering efforts of Winifred Ward in the 1930s and 1940s, scholars have utilized creative drama with young people at all grade levels to enhance knowledge and skills while promoting confidence and interpersonal skills (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995; McCaslin, 2006; Ward, 1952; Way, 1967). Theatre activities have the potential to elevate the self-esteem and academic skills of all children and, with a focus on issues of significance in the lives

of African American girls, can be especially effective with this cohort. This chapter presents a literature review of the theatre theory, practice, and resources that informs and promotes assertiveness and sense of self/somebodyness for greater achievement by 1) surveying the literature documenting the effectiveness of using theatre across the curriculum to engage and push forward all students, 2) describing the theatre practice/educational strategies for enhancing academic skills, and 3) presenting a sampling of resources to enhance the cultural knowledge base to promote higher academic achievement for African American females and a diverse population of students.

## Literature Review: Rationale for Theatre in the Curriculum

African American girls need to develop in ways all children need to develop. They need experiences that will teach them greater understanding and appreciation of themselves and their culture, greater understanding of others and other cultures, and greater understanding, and appreciation of the notion of history, science, and mathematics. African American girls, like all students, need experiences that will engage them, enhance critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, and creative thinking (Gay, 2010; Banks, 2004; Howe, 2013). As D. H. Pink (2005) notes in *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*, the future of our nation depends on the ability of our citizens to create and to be creative. In the coming decades, our most important national resources will be human resources. If our nation is to continue to meet the challenges of the future, today's schools need to develop creative leaders.

Theatre activities are an important

means of engaging students and stimulating creativity. Improvisational and interactive drama activities give students the opportunity to “try on” life, to see and feel experiences from different perspectives, to experiment with different choices and solutions. Young people have the potential to develop tolerance and empathy through theatre. The activities are an avenue for exploration of emotions, thoughts, and dreams in a structured environment that encourages an examination of feelings, thoughts, and choices in a safe environment (Ward, 1957; Spolin, 1986; Courtney, 1980; Heathcote, 1994; McCaslin, 2006).

Effective communication is a basic skill that can be enhanced through theatre games. Students work in the theatre activities environment to communicate who they are, what is happening, and what they are feeling verbally and nonverbally. The activities allow a certain freedom of expression, but they are also structured enough to encourage discipline and self-control. Communication in theatre activities builds confidence, and because the play frequently is cooperative and collaborative it strengthens team-building skills (Heathcote, 1994; Heinig, 1992).

Theatre is a liberal art; its content may involve dramatization of historical and current events, literature, and even science and math concepts. S. Levey (2005) notes that the use of drama can greatly enhance and reinforce learning in environmental education.

... Drama can . . . consolidate and extend students' direct experience of the natural world and foster the empathy that is essential if students are to appreciate and ultimately protect it. (pp. 15-19).

Concepts played in theatre activities have the potential to enhance overall speaking and writing skills. Active engagement with the material enhances these skills. Improvisation and interactive theatre promote

active learning; thus, they have the potential to yield greater depths of knowing and understanding (Buchanan, n.d.).

Contemporary research on the learning styles of African American children supports the need for creative curricular activity to stimulate love of learning. W. Boykin (1978) suggests that the average African American home environment provides an abundance of stimulation, intensity, and variation. The stimulating home environment, Boykin maintains, produces a high degree of psychological and behavioral “verve” in African American children. He notes the need for an educational environment with a high level of behavioral vibrancy, stimulus change, and intensity. African American children participate in a culture that is highly dynamic; thus, a setting that uses multimedia and multimodal teaching strategies is ideal for enhancing their learning. “They favor instruction that is energetic, vigorous, and captivating (Boykin, pp. 343-354).”

Janice Hale (1986) identifies scholars whose research documents West African influences that shape African American culture (e.g., Asante, 1988; Perry and Delpit, 1988; Hilliard 1995, 1997). These studies reveal the interrelated dimensions of African culture with African American culture and inform our understanding of the uniqueness of this cultural foundation. Hale sums up the significant dimensions for African American cultural affirmation, thus learning, as follows:

The Afro-cultural themes are movement (which relates to the premium placed on the interwoven mosaic of expressiveness, dance, percussiveness, and rhythm), verve (a receptiveness toward relatively high levels of physical or sensate stimulation), and communalism (a sensitivity to the fundamental interdependence of people). (p. 119)

J.S. Catterall and a study from the National Endowment for the Arts (2012) en-

titled “Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies” is among the research documenting the effectiveness of theatre in the curriculum. Positive results include:

1. Socially and economically disadvantaged children and teenagers who have high levels of arts engagement or arts learning show more positive outcomes in a variety of areas than their low-arts engaged peers; and
2. At-risk teenagers or young adults with a history of intensive arts experience show achievement levels closer to, and in some cases exceeding the levels shown by the general population studied.

In addition, L. McFadden’s 2012 study, “Integrating Theatre Arts Techniques into your Curriculum” shares the positive impact of including theatre in the language arts and social studies curricula in grades four and five on the cognitive development of special population students. McFadden’s documents that students of the lowest socioeconomic status with theatre arts activities not only showed improved attitudes about learning but also out performed those who did not, and showed fewer declines in their grades.

M. Pappas Varelas et al. (2010) in “Drama activities as ideational resources for primary-grade children in urban science classrooms” explored drama activities in two integrated science-literacy units developed and implemented in six urban primary school classrooms (grades one through three). In this work, the dramatic enactment of scientific phenomena and concepts successfully mediated children’s learning of scientific meanings along material, social, and representative dimensions. Also, E. Walker and G. Weltsek (2011) detailed their study of drama integration and achievement in “When Achievement Data Meet Drama and Arts Integration.” The Walker and Weltsek

(2011) study explored to what extent the learning gains, from a theatre-integrated classroom curriculum, sustains when students return to usual language arts instruction. Their data analysis confirmed positive student learning outcomes in both language arts and mathematics performance from arts instruction. S. Levey (2005) is among the researchers documenting the benefits by noting drama techniques that enhanced student learning in environmental education. The strategies included were guided imagery, in-role drama, literature based writing and performing of play, creation of skits and raps, and research of a person or animal than playing the role.

## **Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)**

In Texas, Fine Arts instruction is an essential part of the curriculum with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) defining Fine Arts guidelines that are monitored and updated by the Texas Educational Agency of the Texas Department of Education. The TEKS describe what every student should know and be able to do at each grade level. The Fine Arts TEKS provide instructional objectives for art, dance, music, and theatre. School districts must ensure that sufficient time is provided for teachers to teach and for students to learn Fine Arts. A more detailed look at the benefits described in the TEKS indicates the variety of skills that Fine Arts instruction aims to engender in the students and, more significantly, how this defined plan to develop knowledge and skills aligns with the goals and objectives promoted by creative drama scholars. Expected outcomes for Texas Public Schools, 19 TAC Chapter 117, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for the Fine Arts, were updated in 2012, approved in 2013,

and implemented in 2015-2016 school year. Four clearly delineated basic strands for theatre are identified in Texas for elementary, middle, and high school students. The goals are consistent across grade levels, but vary in implementation for each grade level. The statement below for the middle school level is representative of the goals at all grade school levels.

117.211. Theater, Middle School 1:

(a) General Requirements. When Theatre Middle School 1 is part of a departmentalized middle school; students may select the following theater course: Theater Middle School

(b) Introduction

(1) The fine arts incorporate the study of dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts to offer unique experiences and empower students to explore realities, relationships, and ideas. These disciplines engage and motivate all students through active learning, critical thinking, and innovative problem solving. The fine arts develop cognitive functioning and increase student academic achievement, high-order thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, making the fine arts applicable to college readiness, career opportunities, workplace environments, social skills, and everyday life. Students develop aesthetic and cultural awareness through exploration leading to creative expression. Creativity, encouraged through the study of fine arts, is essential to nurture and develop the whole child.

(2) Four basic strands—foundation: inquiry an understanding, creative expression, historical and cultural relevance; and critical evaluation and response—provide broad, unifying structures for organizing knowledge and skills students are expected to acquire. Through the foundations: inquiry and understanding strand, students develop a perception of self, human relationships

and the world using elements of drama and conventions of theater. Through the creative expression strand, students communicate in a dramatic form, engage in artistic thinking, build positive self-concepts, relate interpersonally and integrate knowledge with other content areas in a relevant manner. 3. Historical and cultural relevance strand: Through the historical and cultural relevance strand, students increase their understanding of heritage and traditions in theater and the diversity of world cultures as expressed in theater. Through the critical evaluation and response strand: Through the critical evaluation and response strand, students engage in inquiry and dialogue, accept constructive criticism, revise personal views to promote creative and critical thinking, and develop the ability to appreciate and evaluate live theatre. (2013)

Thus, in Texas, educators have all the authority they need to implement theatre strategies that will engage a diverse population of students to enhance overall learning.

## From Theory to Practice: Representative Theatre Strategies

The most prominent and effective theatre tools available to educators to help empower young African American females include 1) creative drama, 2) role-playing, and 3) readers theatre.

### Creative Drama

Creative Drama is an approach to interactive process dramatic activity pioneered by Winifred Ward (1930), a former professor of Northwestern University (*Creative Dramatics*). Ward created a holistic approach to teaching and learning for young children with theatre activities at the center. Ward's strategies focus on movement, pantomime, and improvisation with the addition of di-

ologue as young people develop and present characters in their own language. Story dramatization is a hallmark of the work. It is an activity in which students dramatize literature, popular culture, poems, and fairy tales. The aim is teaching life lessons in a nonthreatening environment, not for formal presentation but the development of the learner. With leader guidance, students reflect on human experiences through imaginative enactments.

Dramatic play, another strategy, refers to the earliest form of unscripted free play in which participants explore the world around them and in their books, in addition to exploring their own lives. Hartley, Lawrence and Goldenson (1964) in *Understanding Children's Play* observes that “play allows the participants opportunities to imitate adults, play out real-life roles, dramatize relationships and experiences, express their own pressing needs, release unacceptable impulses, reverse the roles usually taken to try to solve problems, and experiment with solutions” (p. 19). The terms “creative drama” and “playmaking” both refer to drama created informally by the participants. However, playmaking goes beyond the informal play to suggest improvised development of stories with a beginning, middle, and end with participants playing well known or invented stories in their own words; frequently called story dramatization or literature based dramatic play. Creative drama activities also take the form of pantomime (acting without words); this activity progresses from simple movement exercises. It is play that is not intended for an audience, but for the development of the participants.

McCaslin (1990) states, “Creative Drama, whether in the classroom or in the camp or community program, may be regarded as learning, a means of self-expression, a therapeutic technique, a social activity, or an art

form” (p. 19). The imaginative play may be stimulated by visuals, music, literature, and a variety of curricula content areas.

A few techniques include:

- Side coaching: teacher offers suggestions from the sidelines to keep the improvisation going,
- Teaching-in-role: teacher takes an active part in the activity to help participants enhance the experience and deepen understanding of the established situation or scenario,
- Parallel work: participants work at the same time, working with the same activity in different groups (individual, pairs, two or more in a group).

Techniques for African American girls can be part of a variety of activities for a diverse population. The educator ensures that the African American females, as well as other groups, see themselves in the culture specific examples. Thus, the educator offers stimuli for play from a variety of experiences, but especially inclusive of the cultural history and context of those served. Let students help identify music for movement exercises. Encourage them to play characters from their neighborhood and families. Introduce them to literature with characters from their world and historical narratives with heroes from their culture. Encourage participants to talk about experiences, play them, then discuss their play, and even give them opportunities when they are upper elementary or older to write about what they have played—ideas and feelings in poems or narratives.

With an African American population of elementary level students or a diverse group of learners, chanting statements of pride (e.g., I am Somebody; I am Proud; I am Strong) is an effective culturally specific warm-up activity. The students are encouraged to move as they chant. Play culturally

specific music with a “move, freeze, and then express.” They move freely to the music, then freeze on cue. Then one by one based on who is in the down center position, they express a thought that makes them happy or proud. The statement is chosen to get them thinking proudly about their identities. A question often works as a good prompt (e.g., “Who am I? I am . . .”) They fill in the blank with a positive word or expression about themselves. In homogenous African American groups the statement could begin with “What is Black? Black is. . .” They fill in the blank. With a younger group the activities move forward to miming of certain objects and things (usually animals). Then, having fun playing working—as teachers, cross road guards, weather reporters, nurses, doctors—this is based on an experience list the instructor helps them to generate and helps them see themselves in positive community role models. From mime, the activities move to story dramatization. Picture books with African and African American characters to stimulate discussion, and then facilitated playing of the story in the student’s own words. E. J. Keat’s *Goggles* (1970) is a favorite of K-3rd graders because of its Black images and uplifting story. African folktales are rich sources for story dramatization and teaching life’s lessons. Walker’s folktale (1968), “The Dancing Palm Tree,” inspires movement, mime, and storytelling, especially with the addition of African music. The story teaches a valuable life lesson about cooperation and collaboration.

### Role-Playing

Role-playing is a term often used in creative drama as participants “try on” characters. It is effective as therapy, though special training and preparation are necessary, especially when related to intense sensitive issues.

As participants try on characters from their lives they may naturally move into sensitive areas in role-playing that need discussion and problem solving development strategies. Most scholars recommend avoiding this kind of playing without the help of psychologist or sociologist or your own careful preparation. Done well, this kind of play can promote social and emotional learning (Blatner & Weiner, 2007). Improvised role-playing has the potential to promote developing skills, not only problem solving but also communication and self-awareness (Blatner, 1995). According to Blatner & Weiner, role-playing can be especially effective when participants step back from the situation and reflect on the play (105). This reflection, with feedback from others, helps the participant consider other ways of effectively responding and set up opportunities to try out these new responses—the goal may be to respond in the most uplifting fashion. Spontaneity is a key factor in promoting creativity, in addition to a safe environment. Role-playing is an effective strategy with high school and college level participants as it is another support for teaching social and emotional skills to promote interpersonal competence and personal maturation that is needed to deal with increased media and peer pressures for the use of alcohol, drugs, sex, problems with bullying, prejudice, as well as coping with other problems of adolescence. Businesses use role-playing as a strategy for enhancing the interpersonal skills of their employees (Shaw, Corsini, Blake, & Mouton, 1980).

Role-playing scenarios may include:

1. A female figure from literature or history who must make a choice, students try out different options
2. A young woman not invited to a birthday gathering
3. An underage female encouraged to drink, take drugs, or smoke

4. A young woman who must face bullying about her size, color, or hair
5. A young woman faces the issue of how to continue her education after giving birth as a teen
6. A mixed race female student grapples with race identification for the census

Role-playing activities have the potential to support a variety of curricular goals. When students are given the opportunities to discuss and play issues through role-playing the activities have the potential to promote critical thinking that is empowering—for African American girls and a diverse group of students.

Role-playing activities for African American girls should emphasize positive role models, giving them opportunities to become aware of positive mentors. They should experience roles from the environment close to home with the option to make choices about values and actions. Especially for girls, have them “try on” a variety of roles African American women and all women play in our society and around the world remembering they will be affirmed by homemaking roles as well as astronaut roles; the key is to promote productive activities in which women are engaged. Playing figures from history and literature, as well as their own environment, also has the potential to build understanding and empathy. See section on knowledge base for ideas for role models. The pioneering creative work of J. L. Moreno (1994) in role theory, improvisational theatre, social psychology, and psychodrama informs this area of the work (Blatner, p. 175).

### Readers Theatre

Finally, Readers Theatre is a drama technique used effectively to teach across the curriculum, and especially in literature in grades 6-12. In Readers Theatre, just as the

title indicates, the play or scene is read. The participants use vocal expressions, facial expressions, and sometimes small gestures to project meaning. Readers Theatre is also known as Chamber Theatre or Interpretive Theatre. Readers Theatre has no apostrophe in the name because it is not a theatre owned by readers, rather it is an interpretive art form by readers. Participants are traditionally organized in a straight line or semi-circle with script in hand—no costumes, sets, or intricate blocking. Most curriculum content areas may be adapted to a Readers Theatre format. R. Flynn (2011), *Dramatizing the Content with Curriculum-Based Readers Theatre, Grade 6-12*, demonstrates techniques for educators to develop content based scripts and shares a diverse collection of disciplines that have had success with the strategy (p. 8). Also, Jones et al. (n.d.) in “Acting out: Reader’s theatre across the curriculum” documents the success of using Readers Theatre to teach a variety of content areas (p. 175). Readers Theatre has the potential to increase student’s reading fluency, comprehension, and retention of information in any content area (Flynn, 2011; Cogger and White, 1993).

Readers Theatre selections for African American girls in a diverse student population should come from a diverse selection of literature for, about, and by African Americans. Sanders and Sanders (2008) offer productive ideas in their book, *Readers Theatre for African American History*. One example of an inspirational piece for upper level high school and college students for Readers Theatre and choral reading activities is Grant’s (1971) “They Keep Coming” from the musical *Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope*. It is a chant that cites African Americans. The poetic frame can be a template for inserting favorite or local achievements with an emphasis on African American females. The selection begins: “See that back/See that hand/



You think I can tote a barge/Well I can/And sing Verdi and Puccini/And write books and plays/And become heavyweight champion of the world.”

## Culturally Specific Implementation: Knowledge Base and Resources

Cultural competence of our educators is a salient key to success with diverse populations and girls, including African American girls. J. Moule (2011) describes cultural competence as a “set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (*Cultural Competence*, p.10). G. Gay (2010) calls it “culturally responsive” in *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. To effectively use theatre to create a dynamic learning environment, educators need to learn the theatre strategies outlined above, but most importantly learn to see the opportunities for using the strategies in their teaching/learning environment. W. Howe and P. L. Lisi (2012) agree that the work involves developing awareness, gaining skills, and taking action--starting with culturally specific resources.

### Picture Books for the Young

Children’s picture books offer a rich source of material for young people, especially those with positive images of African American females and stories that build character. Onondaga County Public Library offers a rich collection entitled “Black Female Authors of Children’s Books,” organized by juvenile books and picture books. Sandra Pinkney’s (2006) *Read and Rise* is an inspirational picture book in the collection with sparks for improvisational drama activ-

ities for African American children is. The book includes an inspirational poem by Angelou, beautiful illustrations, minimal text, and snippets that describe adventures that young readers can embark upon.

Arrowhead Library System in Janesville, Wisconsin has also compiled a list of books to inspire positive and productive theatre activities for African American girls. Their collection entitled, *African American Voices in Children's Fiction*, is divided into picture books, middle readers, and older readers. Examples include:

- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing Grace*. Dial. (Grace proves she can be the best Peter Pan despite classmates telling her she can't because she's female and Black.)
- Howard, E. F. (1991). *Aunt Flossie's Hats (and Crab Cakes Later)*. Clarion: (Susan and Sarah visit their great-great Aunt Flossie to try on her wonderful hats, eat crab cakes for dinner, and hear stories of her life.)
- Ringgold, F. (1992). *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. Crown. (A fantasy about a girl who meets Harriet Tubman and a mysterious train in the sky.)

### Websites

History websites and books chronicling the achievements of Black women, past and present are another rich source for theatre activities for African American girls. The National Women’s History Month Project web site has many options. Each year the organization honors a diverse group of women and feature their stories on their site. Their collection of books on women’s accomplishments is useful. They also have an intriguing resource entitled, *African American Knowledge Cards*. The cards introduce forty-eight amazing African American women from the poet Phillis Wheatley (born c.1753 in West Africa; brought to America enslaved) to the

phenomenal athlete Jackie Joyner-Kersey (born in 1962 in Illinois, a multiple Olympic gold medalist).

Some websites can be especially useful in creating pageants that survey the contributions of black women over the years or focus on a historical moment with a female achiever at the center. For an example of the pageant possibilities, see Francis Gunner's pageant "The Light of the Women" in W. Richardson's *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro* (1930). Among the representative sites for historical overview are:

- African American History Timeline: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/bhmtimeline.htm>
- African American History for Kids: <http://urbanext.illinois.edu/bhm/historyforkids.htm>

Websites also document unique achievements as in Black female accomplishments in math and science:

- *Black Women in Mathematics and the Sciences*:  
<http://www.math.buffalo.edu/mad/wowhist.html>
- Black Women Scientists Making History:  
<https://advanceatbrown.wordpress.com/2011/02/07/black-women-scientists-making-history/>

The biographical information on these achievers offers content for improvisational play, role-playing, and even reader's theatre.

### Folktales and other stories

African American folktales and other stories for children and youth that inspire pride and joy Virginia Hamilton's *Her Stories: African American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* (1995) and *The People Could Fly* (twenty-four Black American folk tales in a diverse variety for K-12 with animal

tales, supernatural tales, fanciful and cautionary tales, and slave tales of freedom). The Smithsonian Young Readers Resource online shares a collection of stories for Black children and youth entitled:

- "Down through the Years:" [http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia\\_SI/nmah/young-rdr.htm](http://www.si.edu/Encyclopedia_SI/nmah/young-rdr.htm)

Examples for ages three to ten include:

- Bryan, Ashley. (1992). *Sing to the Sun*. New York: HarperTrophy. (It features poems and paintings celebrating the ups and downs of life)
- Flournoy, Valerie. (1985). *The Patchwork Quilt*. Illus. by Jerry Pinkney. New York: Dial. (Using scraps cut from the family's old clothing, the central character helps her grandmother make a beautiful quilt that tells the story of her family's life.)
- Greenfield, Eloise. (1977). *Africa Dream*. Illus. by Carole Byard. New York: HarperTrophy. (A Black child's dreams are filled with the images of the people and places of Africa.)
- Nikola-Lisa, W. (1994). *Bein' with You This Way*. illustrated by Michael Bryant. New York: Lee & Low. (As the children play in the park they discover that despite their physical differences-straight hair/curly hair; brown eyes/blue eyes; light skin/dark skin--they are all really the same.)
- William Loren Katz's (1995) *Black Women of the Old West* and Mary E. Lyons' (1998) *Painting Dreams: Minnie Evans, Visionary Artist* are also exemplary pieces for inspirational dramatic play.

### Poetry

In addition to stories, poetry can serve as a window into the world and a source of inspiration for playmaking and movement activities. An offering that has excellent images to spark acting and moving and overcoming

life's challenges is:

- *Life Doesn't Frighten Me: Maya Angelou's Courageous Children's Verses* (2013)

<http://www.brainpickings.org/index.php/2013/05/03/life-doesnt-frighten-me-maya-angelou-basquiat/>

The collection is astutely promoted as a priceless primer on contemporary art for little ones with a timeless reminder of the power of courage in all of us.

Nikki Giovanni (1987) weaves magic that will inspire African American girls in her collection *Spin a Soft Black Song: Poems for Children* for ages 8-12, grade level 2-7. A few additional titles from Giovanni's inspirational collection include: *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People* (1973) and *The Girls in the Circle (Just for You!)* (2004).

## Plays

Although plays for children to perform for an audience are not recommended in the lower grades, they make inspirational sources for improvisation and story dramatization, and can be useful Readers Theatre projects for older youth. Among them is:

- "Positive African American Plays for Children"

<http://www.africanamericanchildrenplays.com/>

This a resource by Britt Ekland Miller and Jeffery Bradley (n.d.), both veteran children's book authors, includes three collections of plays with supporting documents.

Among the resources available for a diverse group of students in middle and high school is the multicultural collections edited by R. Ellis, *Multicultural Theatre: Scenes and Monologs from New Hispanic, Asian, and African American Plays* (1996) and *Multicultural Theatre II: Scenes and Monologs from New Hispanic, Asian, and African-American Plays* (1998). A similar resource, Slaight and

Sharrar's *Multicultural Monologues for Young Actors*, provides culturally relevant opportunities for readers theatre or other performance projects for older students. In addition, the Pioneer Drama Service offers plays to inform and promote cultural learning—a few examples include *Anansi the Spider and Middle Passage*, *Peanutman: A Visit from George Washington Carver*, and *A Land Beyond the River*.

## Conclusion

Theatre can provide the spark that will enrich content across the curriculum for all students and spark higher levels of achievement for African American females in K-12 grade levels. Needed is a pluralistic approach (in content and strategies) empowering all students who are at risk for lower test scores and high dropout rates. With attention to developing a database of cultural specific and diverse resource, and utilization of proven techniques for engagement that builds confidence, greater success is possible. Theatre activities (creative drama, role-playing, and readers theatre) can promote outcomes for black girls to compete and succeed academically with enhanced assertiveness and "somebodyness." ■

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## Appendix

### Sample Lesson Plan: Creative Drama Grades: 3-6

**Subject Areas:** history, literature, astronomy, botany, geography

**Objectives/Outcomes:**

Develop skill with creative movement

and mime

Experience feelings of fear, determination, courage, and happiness Gain knowledge of edible plant life

Gain knowledge of southern states, routes to the North /geography

**Preparation:**

Read children's picture book about Harriet Tubman (literature) Explain the meaning of the Underground Railroad (history) Discuss highlights of Harriet Tubman's life (history/biography)

Show map of US pointing out states that Harriet had to cross to reach the North (geography) Show pictures of edible plants that may have provided food on the way (botany)

Show students how to find the North Star in the sky (astronomy)

**Activity:**

Review the details of the scenario (storyline). Children then take turns leading a group of slaves north via the underground railroad, stopping to determine location (by the stars and land marks), to eat, and to hide in barns of friendly Quakers, and finally reaching North with signs up relief and thankfulness. They are given the option to express moments of the action verbally if they feel comfortable doing so.

**Follow-up:**

After discussion and replaying the scenario, each student is asked to express in writing or in an art work their experience with the activity: a poem, a few sentences of thought or a visual picture.

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