

The Write Stuff
Memoir: An Educational Autobiography

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Overview

This unit was developed with thoughts of the special education student and teacher in mind. Specifically, this unit will be taught in a fulltime special education facility that serves grades 2-12. All of the students have an Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.) which is at the heart of all curriculum decisions for the students. The school follows the Pittsburgh Public Schools curriculum, making modifications and adaptations as necessary according to the students' I.E.P's. The highly structured school uses a school-wide behavioral management system to support each student's positive behavioral support plans. The basis for the unit is a self contained Computer Literacy classroom with one teacher delivering the instruction, but with implications for cross curricular instruction. The activities and lessons are designed for high school emotional support students in a self contained environment, but they can certainly be adapted to meet the needs of students on a variety of instructional levels. Because of extenuating circumstances that are always prevalent among this particular population, there is not a specific recommended timeframe for completing the unit, although it is hoped that it will be completed during one report period. However, success of the unit should not be judged solely on the length of time it takes to complete it.

One thing that is a given among this particular emotional support student population is that they have experienced frustration, disappointment, and failure during major points in their school history. It can also be assumed that there were high points of success, achievement, and victory. And undoubtedly these students have a story of value and of interest to tell. Their stories, when told, will help them and us to develop a better understanding of how they got to where they are educationally, and the direct connection between their past, their present and their future.

Rationale

Education, I've always been taught, is the great equalizer. So, for as long as I can remember, my family stressed the importance of schooling and the discipline of education. Education, I was told, is supposed to be a way up and out of what can be the trappings of the status quo. It should be a means to an end that moves the student above and beyond the hopes and dreams that their parents had for themselves only a generation before. But for many students in urban schools, where the high school dropout rate is sometimes dwarfed by the unemployment rate, those hopes and dreams have fallen (or been pushed) into a pit deep in the earth covered by the anticipation of a slow but sure death. For students whose history has been thoroughly documented in civil rights struggles and years of courtroom litigation, equal access to the kind of education that is the basis for upward mobility seems far out of reach, and sometimes not worth trying to reach. There are arguably some who hold fast to the centuries old notion that some students are naturally inferior and incapable of learning because they choose not to learn the lessons taught within the confines of the urban public school system.

In 1977 Alex Haley's *Roots* was first aired. The week-long mini-series is a chronicling of a part of the history of the great divide among the races. This great divide, though primarily racial, has very definite economic and cultural overtones. The series very poignantly exposes the basis of the racial underpinning of some of the incongruities that lie at the heart of our school systems. It shows the roots of the multi level system of education that we have created in these United States. But more than that, it shows the lengths that we have gone in order to relegate certain people to a particular place. *Roots* vividly demonstrates the indoctrination of attitudes, points of view and mind sets regarding the level to which certain people need to be educated. But who gets to determine who's educated and at what level?

In the opening episode, we are introduced to Kunta Kinte. Kunta is being raised in an extended family and a community that demonstrates its love and concern for him and for their beliefs as a people. He is a courageous and headstrong African captured in his African homeland shortly after going through a rite of passage into manhood, and sold as a slave in the eastern United States. Kunta remembers his homeland and tries against all odds not only to hold onto that which he has been taught and which has identified him, but to pass it on to others. On the contrary, his new "owners" work diligently to beat out of him all that he remembers, all that has made him who he has become, all that he has learned prior to being brought to his new "home." It becomes illegal for him (and all slaves) to speak in his native tongue, worship in the manner to which he had become accustomed and to keep the African name given to him by his father. Kunta's language is considered mere grunts and utterances with no real meaning, his African name is changed to a more palatable Toby, and he himself is thought of as no more than an animal fortunate to have been saved from the savage beasts of his homeland by those who know what's best. He longs for that which he and others know will be empowering and offer freedom to him and his community. Ultimately, Kunta Kinte's rebellion becomes the symbol for the uphill battle for making education and equality attainable for those who have traditionally been uneducated and undereducated. Kunta's struggle began around

1767.

Fast forward to 2007, two hundred and forty years after Kunta's kidnapping and fifty-three years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the uphill battle for equality in education in the United States continues to be as steep as ever. Unfortunately, sizeable groups of students are continuing to be defined not based on what they can become, but on where society has relegated them. When choosing to call even our college educated African American youth by derogatory names is the status quo, our indoctrination of age old mindsets is all too real. When teachers, with the blessings of the school board and the union, move outside of the district where they work and away from the students they teach, what message is sent to those left behind? All lessons are not written in lesson plans and submitted to the principal for approval, but are taught none-the-less, not only to the students, but to their families and their communities as well.

And what about expectations? I've actually witnessed a teacher talk about "sticking it" to her students. And the end result was that a number of students failed her class. Conversations among teachers often include what students cannot do. Those very conversations could have been ripped from *Roots* where more than once slaves were told directly, and in no uncertain terms, that they were incapable of learning! That concept is one that has always fascinated and, at times, angered me, considering the magnitude and the scope of the work done by those very slaves. Likewise, urban school students who teachers say can't remember or be taught lessons from their lesson plans, do a terrific job of memorizing, reciting, understanding and writing lyrics to songs—songs that all too often teach lessons of self-denial and castration. And a small number of those same "slow" students make daily business transactions on the street corners where they reside. Students—caught in that place called no man's land between schools that don't properly educate them and a society that refuses to fully accept them—do the best they can with what they've got.

So what is it that makes our students appear competent in one arena and unable to keep up in another? What lessons are really being taught behind the doors of the classrooms? Just recently another teacher in my building told some of her male students that they needed to pay attention in her math class because one day they would have to pay child support. Does she honestly believe that is really the only reason they have to excel in math? How many times must our students be whipped and beaten before they will give up their hopes and dreams of being Kunta Kinte and simply relent to living life as Toby? How many times must they run away from those who oppress and depress them only to be dragged back in shackles and chains so that they might stand before a teacher who gets excited at the idea of "sticking it" to them?

School boards represent their interest in implementing and administering their favorite plans. Unions represent the employees primarily making sure that they are "fairly" compensated for what they do. But who stands up for our students? If no one is there to look out for their best interests, then perhaps it is no wonder that they routinely get the short end of the stick. Somewhere along the way, we have forgotten that those very students are the reason we longed to teach in the first place. As a result, those who should

be the primary stakeholders have become almost invisible.

The Supreme Court of the United States in 1954 declared that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Yet huge educational discrepancies continue to exist down racial and economic lines. And separate and unequal facilities are not a thing of the past. While many people are familiar with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the public is not clear in its understanding of the United States Supreme Court decision in that now landmark case. Despite its historical implications and far-reaching effects, it is often misunderstood. There continue to be misconceptions about the origin of the case as well as those involved. So here is a brief summary. *Brown v. Board of Education* was not the first legal case dealing with racially segregated schools in the United States. In 1850 African American parents lost in the case of *Roberts v. City of Boston, Massachusetts*, when the decision was made to maintain separate primary schools for colored and white children. The *Brown v. Board of Education* case was a class action lawsuit, a combination of five cases from various parts of the country, organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Oliver Brown’s name, on behalf of his daughter, Linda Brown, was listed first as a legal tactic to have a man named first. Lawyers also believed that the United States Supreme Court Justices would better receive Mr. Brown at the center because he had an intact traditional family, rather than someone who was a single parent head of household. Thurgood Marshall was one of a team of NAACP attorneys on the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. He was hired by Attorney Charles Hamilton Houston, former Dean of Howard University Law School. The Topeka *Brown v. Board of Education* case was not the only basis for the United States Supreme Court decision. The Supreme Court combined five cases under the heading of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Those cases were: from Delaware *Belton v. Gebhardt & Bulah v. Gebhardt*, from Kansas *Brown v. Board of Education*, from South Carolina *Briggs v. Elliott*, from Virginia *Davis v. Prince Edwards County School Board*, and from the District of Columbia *Bolling v. Sharpe*, which was considered a companion case. *Brown v. Board of Education* was the first of three *Brown* rulings. The 1954 court ruling is known as Brown I. When the Supreme Court ordered that desegregation occur “with all deliberate speed” in 1955, that case became known as Brown II. Brown III occurred in 1978 when Topeka attorneys Richard Jones, Joseph Johnson and Charles Scott Jr. asked the courts to reopen *Brown v. Board of Education*. The result was a 1994 plan to open additional magnet schools to maintain racial balance. That was achieved in 1999 forty-five years after the Supreme Court of the United States declared that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

The movie *Trading Places* starring Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd gives a comedic dramatization of what can happen when a real investment and nurturing process takes place in the life of an individual. Eddie Murphy plays a homeless man living on the street, who on a bet is given money, position and opportunity. His life makes a sudden and marked improvement. His whole outlook changes as he is exposed to a new way of thinking. On the flip side of the bet is a man who loses money, position and opportunity. Not surprisingly, his life too changes dramatically, as his grip slips on his once sure advantage because of a decision made about him, for him, but not with his best interest in mind. Dare I think of the possibilities if we applied that process of nurturing received by

Eddie Murphy to all school students?

One such life where that process takes place is described in the *Memoir of James Jackson*, edited by Lois Brown. “Everybody who knew James, loved him; and he was often praised for his love of study, and obedience to his teachers... Those who used to see him do so much while he was so young, to make those about him happy, often thought that he would do a great deal of good when he became a man. His mother often pleased herself with thinking how happy she should be when her little James became a man... She too saw every day more and more of his lovely disposition, and daily received increasing pleasure from discovering an increasing strength of intellectual power” (95-96). This passage describes the excitement and promise of a new student. But what happens when those promises are emptied of their meaning, tempered by our misconceptions and tainted with unending, overwhelming and unfathomable fraud? We must, regardless of our positions or whether or not we consider ourselves leaders or teachers, allow ourselves to be challenged to be uncomfortable with our weaknesses and those of society at large. It is only in our discomfort that we will be moved to change. If the Pittsburgh Public Schools truly want to make a difference and bring about real change, then they cannot conduct business as usual. We have to break away from what has become normal and traditional. We cannot be stopped by the unfamiliar. To truly go where we have not gone, we must do what we have not done.

Curriculum units are usually written by committees of teachers, by and for the convenience of teachers. They are based on the committee’s frame of reference, include what the committee thinks is important, and are taught in a timeframe that best suits the way teachers teach. How often, if ever, are students asked or permitted to be a part of such committees? Do curriculum committees exist to define or establish what’s best for the student, or are they merely a way of maintaining what already is in place? If we truly believe that our students can and want to learn, why do we resist efforts to include them in the planning of their own educations?

Of the twenty-seven members of the Pittsburgh Public Schools new *High School Reform Task Force* not one of them is a student. If our schools are failing our students as many parents, educators, business leaders and students themselves agree, does it not seem logical to ask the students for their input as to what they think is wrong and how it can best be fixed? Advertisers frequently conduct market surveys to determine what it is that consumers want—what it is that will entice them to continue to buy their products. While I realize that the public school system is not a business, why not take a page out of their business world and find out why only 64% of our district’s students graduate?

A chain is as strong as its weakest link. We are all invariably linked or tied together. My very future depends on the level of success of the students I’m teaching today, so it is in my best interest to make sure that I share my strength with those who have not been as fortunate as I. In yet another movie, *Amistad*, Cinque, the main character, in much the same manner as Kunta Kinte, is stolen from his homeland in Africa. Fortunately for him he ends up in Boston, where former president, abolitionist and lawyer, John Quincy Adams, takes up his case in a lawsuit to help Cinque and others win their freedom. In a

very poignant moment while he is awaiting the trial, Cinque proclaims to his lawyer that he is standing on the backs of all those who have gone before him. And that's how it is with our students. As educators, it is our responsibility to lift them up so high that they have every opportunity to succeed. And if they don't, it should not be because we failed to do our very best.

Although this curriculum unit is intended to be student friendly and focus mainly on the student, it should also stir the teacher to remember her / his own educational history, as a student and as a teacher. Do we intentionally or absent-mindedly repeat some of the same behaviors that repelled us when we sat on the other side? Or do we do the things that made us excited to learn? Perhaps we can conquer the great divide between teaching and learning by allowing students to help create their own knowledge base and accomplish their own goals, thereby enhancing their own learning. What better way to help our students learn to stand on their own?

Objectives

There is no shortage of research telling us what factors influence how students learn and their attitudes toward school or education in general. What would happen if students were allowed to tell their own story—in their own voices? What would happen if students—as real stakeholders—were able to use their stories to direct a path in their own education and their own learning? What would happen if the roles of teachers and students became intertwined so that both became teachers and both became students?

One of my earliest role models was my first grade teacher. Besides being a role model Mrs. Sharp gave me a voice. And she encouraged me to use it. One of the things that seems to be absent in schools today is the voice of the student. Students seem disinterested in learning. And there appears to be a disconnect between the student and the teacher. My goal is to guide my students through the process of documenting their educational histories and writing their educational autobiographies. My aim is to take them back through their years of schooling and to help them remember the things, the people and the attitudes that have influenced them educationally. I would like to help them to remember what they liked or disliked about kindergarten, first grade, and so on. I would like to help them to remember why they excelled or why they failed in specific areas or grades. It is my desire to help my students gain a better understanding of their strengths and their weaknesses, thereby gaining a better understanding of themselves as students, so that they will not be afraid to move beyond their status quo.

There's a West African proverb that has its roots in the Akan or the Ashanti people in Ghana that says, "You don't know where you're going unless you know where you've been." It comes from the concept of Sankofa which when translated literally means "it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot." The Adinkra symbol is a bird with its body facing forward and its head looking back and holding an egg in its mouth. Sankofa is widely used today in the African Diaspora, to promote self and collective identity within a larger cultural group. The bird symbolizes an understanding of your cultural roots as you move forward into your future. It shows the connection between one's past,

present and future.

The reason I chose memoir writing is because it will give a voice to those who generally don't have one, and help them to examine a period of their lives and their history that is often difficult for students within this population to face. According to South African novelist and Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer, "Writing is making sense of life. You work your whole life and perhaps you've made sense of one small area." Memoir writing will also promote the Pittsburgh Public Schools initiative to increase and improve writing across the curriculum.

Strategies:

Since the unit is being designed primarily for students in an emotional support classroom, the teacher must first determine how best to structure the class. Having an alternative assignment available for students who choose not to divulge personal information is a necessity. The skill level within the class will undoubtedly vary, so the teacher must determine what will be acceptable according to each student's Individualized Education Plan (I.E.P.). It would also be a good idea to check the student's reading and writing levels if you have access to them. The main strategy for this unit obviously involves student writing. However, preliminary activities will be used to get students engaged in conversation and prewriting activities. Students love to talk especially when they think the conversation is in place of the assignment. Before students can even begin the process of creating educational memoirs they must first begin to remember their educational history. A part of that conversation will also involve brainstorming ways of getting their family on board with what they will be doing in school. For some students family recollections may become an essential part of their memoir.

Group sharing will also be built in to this unit. Some of us feel more comfortable talking about our own histories when we know we have something in common with others. It also makes us feel a part of a community. If possible this sharing should include both the teacher and the educational assistant, if any, assigned to that particular class. Teachers must be cautioned that sharing does not mean comparing. All students must be praised for the work they do on their own level, and all success must be acknowledged. The teacher must remember to meet the student where he or she is with the expectation of moving to a higher level.

Students will use the computer to respond to various brainstorming activities, to create a family tree, to compose and design their memoirs and to research what other students have done in memoir writing.

I have a small wooden nameplate that students many years ago—without my approval, permission and sometimes knowledge—began using as a place to carve their names. After discovering it in a closet, I once again displayed it on my desk. Students immediately began asking about the names carved into the nameplate. As I began telling stories about former students and my years of teaching, I realized what a treasure that nameplate had become. And of course it didn't take long before my current students

began adding their names alongside or over those that had, after many years, begun to fade. Years ago it was very popular for students to pass around signature or autograph books at the end of the school year for their classmates to write messages and sign. So combining those two ideas, students will also create what I'm calling a memory plate.

Classroom Activities:

This unit includes seven parts: introduction, brainstorming / remembering, research, writing / re-writing, history, organizing / creating / designing, and reflections / follow-up. I am not giving a day-by-day lesson plan because for me attendance and invariably behavior issues will come into play. Students may start at the same point but will probably very quickly begin working at their own pace and ability levels. Any part of this unit may take a week or more depending on attendance, the climate of the classroom, and the ability levels of the students. The main thing is to have students complete each part of the "Educational Autobiography."

Introduction:

PART ONE: The teacher will begin by having a discussion of what is meant by autobiography. It would be helpful to have two or three sample books available, i.e. Michael Jordan, Ben Carson, Maya Angelou or other books that may be of interest to you and your students. The teacher will then explain the unit, what it entails and how it will be completed. The letter to the parent / guardians will be handed out, discussed and taken home. Discussion will then be guided towards the importance of telling your own stories and the difference between autobiography and biography. If time permits, a sample of the questionnaire prompt will then be handed out only to review its contents. It will be redistributed later.

Sample letter to Parents / Guardians

To Whom It May Concern:

Your child, _____, will be participating in an exciting curriculum unit during this report period. The outcome will be the creation of an "Educational Autobiography" detailing his / her educational history. We will be working on and completing a number of activities, but _____ (your child) will be solely responsible for choosing what is included in his / her "Educational Autobiography". The intent is to create a booklet that can be taken home and shared.

I'm asking for your assistance and cooperation in order for this unit to be a great success. In addition to helping your child 'remember' important school events, activities and milestones, I'm also asking you to work with your child to choose appropriate pictures that may be scanned into their booklets.

I hope that you are willing to help make this activity fun and successful for your child. If you have any questions about this project or any school-related issues, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

Sample of the Questionnaire Prompt

YOUR NAME:

DATE PROJECT BEGAN OR TODAY'S DATE:

1. GRADE:
2. SCHOOL:
3. AGE:
4. OTHER STUDENTS:
5. BEST THING THAT HAPPENED:
6. WORST THING THAT HAPPENED:
7. WHAT YOU LEARNED FOR THE FIRST TIME:
8. HOW YOUR TEACHER TREATED YOU:
9. HOW OTHER STUDENTS TREATED YOU:
10. HOW INVOLVED WERE YOUR PARENTS:
11. WHAT DID YOU LIKE BEST:
12. WHAT DID YOU LIKE LEAST:
13. WHAT TALENT DID YOU DISCOVER:
14. DID YOU LIKE YOUR SCHOOL (WHY / WHY NOT):
15. DID YOU LIKE YOUR TEACHER (WHY / WHY NOT):
16. DID YOU LIKE YOUR CLASS (WHY / WHY NOT):
17. WHAT TRADITIONS WERE PASSED DOWN:
18. WHAT WAS YOUR MOST EMBARRASSING OR FUNNIEST MOMENT?

STUDENTS ARE ENCOURAGED TO INCLUDE MEMORIES / STORIES THAT WOULD NOT BE INCLUDED BY ONLY RESPONDING TO THESE PROMPTS.

Brainstorming / Remembering:

PART TWO: The questionnaire prompt will again be handed out for students to begin completing it. This questionnaire can also be used electronically and saved to a CD. Each student will also receive a journal to keep notes. The teacher must decide whether or not to allow students to take the journals home or to keep them in the classroom. The teacher may also want to have a conversation about choosing carefully what information is included in the journal or questionnaire. This is a school-based project. Now would also be a good time to discuss what may remain confidential and what can not. Some students may divulge information about their home situation. Be aware of your school policies and procedures for handling troublesome home situations. You must also decide whether to hand out multiple copies of the questionnaire or one at a time. I would suggest that the teacher have at least one completed questionnaire prompt prior to the start of the class. Students may also start by writing a name poem using the letters of their own first and last names. This lesson should help them to begin to think about themselves in a positive way. This activity can also be adapted for each year of school. Another activity could involve a personal profile such as the one included here or grade poems written in much the same manner as the name poems. This is an especially thought-provoking activity that can be done in any grade order. Students may also have their own ideas about

brainstorming activities. I would be open to them as long as the activities keep them focused on the work at hand. Reading selections from a memoir such as the *Memoir of James Jackson* lets them see and hear what its like to have your life organized and written about. Choose selections based on your particular student population and their level of understanding. You might even consider having students create a timeline of important school events, honors and activities. All of these exercises should begin to generate conversation, discussion and hopefully, fun! Remember, school does not have to be boring for students—or for teachers. The more fun students have the more likely they will stay focused.

My Profile

Name

Age:

Birth date:

On the day I was born:

Family members:

My favorite color:

The song that I sing the most:

My best friend:

In my free time I like to:

My favorite sport:

Places I like to go:

My favorite store:

My favorite food / dessert:

My favorite artist:

Books I like:

You'd be surprised to know that:

My favorite:

The person I admire the most:

Things I like to write about:

Grade Poems

Frightening	S
Injured my hand	E
Recess	C
Slow	O
Tied my shoe	N
Got real tired	D
Rest periods	G
Ate candy	R
Drew a lot	A
Everybody was scared	D
	E

Research

PART THREE: Time for a movie break. Watch selected parts of *Roots* with discussions centering on how education is defined. Since class time is already limited, and even more-so with the time it takes to get settled, you may want to plan on showing no more than twenty to twenty-five minutes in one sitting. How your students respond to the movie should influence how much of it you will show. However, I would not even consider showing it in its entirety. It would be helpful to give your students some background on this historic and epic mini-series. After watching excerpts, students should complete the handout on questions pertaining to the movie. This is also where the students can go online to research other memoirs.

Sample Roots Questions

1. Were any of the slaves educated?
2. How do you define education?
3. Are there other definitions of education?
4. Did you notice anyone reading anything? What was it?
5. Who was doing the reading?
6. Why was it illegal for slaves to read and write?
7. How old were you when you learned to write your name? Explain how you felt.
8. How would you feel now if you could not read or write your name?
9. Have you ever taught anybody to read or write their name? Explain.
10. How do the events in the movie relate to what is going on in our schools today?
11. How do you feel about reading and writing?
12. What is your favorite book?

Writing / Re-writing:

PART FOUR: Because this is essentially a writing activity, the questionnaires are only prompts and guidelines to assist the students in remembering prior school years. They must be turned into narrative writings. For most students this will probably be the biggest hurdle. It is probably a good idea to have students re-write each questionnaire as it is completed so that they are not stuck with a lot of writing all at once. A suggestion would be to use your own prompt from the day before and work together with the class on the blackboard to change it into a narrative writing. Try to make sure every student gives feedback and stop frequently to check for understanding. Then have the students work in pairs (preferably) or alone to practice. Both you and the educational assistant should move around the classroom monitoring and assisting students as needed. I would not worry about punctuation and spelling at this point. That can be done once students have successfully transferred the questionnaire to the correct narrative form. Be sure to explain the concept of drafts. Most of my students think that once something has been written down that's it. All students need to practice writing and re-writing. Most students will probably need more prompts and help getting started or continuing their writing. This is also where you may have to teach several lessons on writing various types of paragraphs.

All writing should be done on a computer in Microsoft Word if your students have access to them. This will make their work and yours much more efficient and easier for them and you to make necessary changes. Plus, most students are fairly computer literate and enjoy working on them. Some students may need a basic review since most of their time on the computer is probably not spent writing. Make sure you monitor them closely so that they do not go into any inappropriate or non-approved websites.

History

PART FIVE: Students have had several days to digest and begin working on their projects. Ask them why they think it is important to remember. Have them brainstorm a list of things they remember. This can be written in their journals. Introduce the concept of Sankofa—it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot. Ask students to give a one sentence interpretation of that definition. Explain the Adinkra symbols of West Africa—symbols that represent concepts. Have students go to the following website to view various symbols. Encourage students to choose a symbol or make up their own to represent them. The symbol they choose will eventually be incorporated into their “Educational Autobiographies.” They are free to change their minds about which symbol to use. Make sure they include the meaning of the symbol they choose even if they create and design their own. All symbols and meanings must be school appropriate.
<http://www.welltempered.net/adinkra/htmls/adinkra/funt.htm>

Organizing / Creating / Designing:

PART SIX: This is the really fun part. But I warn you it can be a lot of computer work for you and the students, particularly for those students who are very picky. Now is when they begin to ‘play’ with the different formats, i.e. fonts, font size, WordArt, coloring, layout and all of the options in Microsoft Word and Microsoft Publisher. Once you expose them to the various options, your students will probably think of things that had not occurred to you. Let them make those creative decisions. Make sure you are fully stocked on printer ink, both black and color. This is another opportunity for students to share and openly discuss their ideas with each other. Encourage students to bring in personal pictures which can be scanned into their documents. Now is also a good time to redistribute the letter you sent home earlier. Be sure to emphasize repeatedly the need to save their work. This actually should be done throughout the entire process of creating their “Educational Autobiographies.” Once students (and you) are satisfied with their work they may begin the process of printing out their pages. I would not recommend printing before they finish so that all of the pages can stay intact. Let your students help determine how they will keep the pages together, depending on what you have available at your school or what you are willing to pay for. The art teacher at your school may have some useful ideas.

Some students may even want to include photos of their “old” schools or places in their neighborhoods. To really expand this unit you can add several lessons on geography, having students ‘walk’ you through his or her neighborhood. For some of the staff this might serve as a huge eye-opener into some of the attitudes their students bring into

school with them each day.

This is also where you can talk up the idea of the memory plate. If you have access to a woodshop class, as I do, you can get that teacher to assist you in donating small pieces of scrap wood. Various shapes might work best so that students have more choices. I would not recommend anything bigger than four by six inches. If the wood is not smooth you may need some sandpaper to smooth out the rough edges. Again know your students and your school policy before handing out pieces of small wood to non woodshop students. Make sure you give students an opportunity to get their memory plates signed. Remind students that these are keepsake items and any notes written on them should be school appropriate.

Reflections / Follow-up

PART SEVEN: This is the time to review with your supervisor and your students whether or not the unit was successful—and to what degree. Were the objectives met? How long did it take to complete the unit? Were the students actively engaged throughout the teaching of the unit? What adaptations were necessary? What part of the unit was best received? What part bombed? Were the parents receptive? How involved were the parents? Was the unit too long? Was it too short? I would suggest creating an evaluation form for the students to complete.

Sample of a Student Evaluation Form

1. In your own words please explain the purpose of this unit.
2. Did the unit take too long to complete?
3. Was it too short?
4. What part was the most interesting? Why?
5. What part was the most boring? Why?
6. Which section did you enjoy the most? Explain.
7. Which section did you have the most difficulty completing? Explain.
8. If you could change one thing about how this unit was taught, what would it be? Why?
9. What lesson(s) did you learn or relearn while studying this unit?
10. Are you happy with the way you completed your “Educational Autobiography” and your memory plate?
11. What do you like best about them?
12. Would you recommend that other students create an “Educational Autobiography”? Why?
13. Did you learn anything about yourself while studying this unit? Explain.
14. If school was a restaurant where students were served, what would your ‘Education Menu’ look like?

Materials for Classroom Use

- A computer, projector and screen, or a television with VCR / DVD player

- Access to a computer lab
- Microsoft Word
- Microsoft Publisher
- Access to the Internet
- Blank CD's
- Journal notebooks
- Black and color ink
- Printing paper
- Wood scraps
- Color markers
- Writing utensils (ink pens, pencils)
- Sample autobiographies

Annotated Bibliography / Resources

Works Cited / Teacher Resource List

Books

- Bomer, Katherine. Writing a Life: Teaching Memoir to Sharpen Insight, Shape Meaning—and Triumph Over Tests. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005.
Strategies, ideas, and activities for helping students to generate ideas and then write about them.
- Dalton, Mary M. The Hollywood Curriculum: Teachers in the Movies. Revised Edition. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004.
An analysis of how teachers have been depicted in film over a seventy-five year period. In addition, the book also includes a list of the films that were used in the analysis.
- Engberg, John and Brian Gill, “*Estimating Graduation and Dropout Rates with Longitudinal Data: A Case Study in the Pittsburgh Public Schools*” (*Working Paper*), Prepared for the Pittsburgh Public Schools; RAND Education working paper series WR-372-PPS July 2006.
A case study of the difficulties of analyzing longitudinal data to calculate graduation and dropout rates.
- Fletcher, Ralph. A Writer’s Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You. New York, NY: Harper Trophy, 1996.
Suggestions on how to begin the process of creating a place to record, collect and store thoughts and ideas about writing.
- . What a Writer Needs. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
Strategies and suggestions for helping students to improve and refine the writing.
- Greiner Alice. The Write Tools: Active Reading Strategies. Englewood, CO: Advanced Learning Press, 2006.
This resource has been adopted by the Pittsburgh Public Schools to help students become better writers across various content areas.
- Haley, Alex. Roots. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1976.
Epic story of the genealogy of the author dating back to 1767.

Paul, Miss Susan. Memoir of James Jackson: The Attentive and Obedient Scholar Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833. Lois Brown, Ed. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, Eng., 2000.
Memoir of a young free African American student written by his teacher.

Reports

Pittsburgh Public Schools, “*High School Reform*.” Excellence for All Plan. January 9, 2007.
A presentation of a portion of the Pittsburgh Public Schools *Excellence for All Plan* focusing on High School reform.

Movies

Amistad. David Franzoni. Videocassette. Dreamworks Pictures, 1997.
Movie following the trial of several Africans, who were captured and traded illegally. Their case reached the Supreme Court of the United States, which on March 9, 1841 ruled in their favor.

Blackboard Jungle. Richard Brooks. Videocassette. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1955.
A powerful depiction of the indoctrination of a new teacher into the ranks of the public school system during the 1950’s.

Nightjohn. Charles Burnett. Videocassette. Harvest of Fire, 1996.
The story of the courage and determination of one man to teach slaves to read and write, and the powers that exist behind the written word.

Roots. William Blinn, M. Charles Cohen, Alex Haley, Ernest Kinoy, James Lee Videocassette. ABC TV, 1977.
Epic story chronicling the genealogy of author Alex Haley, dating back to 1767 Africa.

Trading Places. Timothy Harris, Herschel Weingrod. Videocassette. Cinema Group Ventures, 1983.
Comedic dramatization of what can happen when a real investment and nurturing process takes place in the life of an individual.

Websites

“Brown v. Board of Education.” April 3, 2006.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_v_board_of_ed
Webpage that chronicles the actions and cases leading up to the historic 1954 United States Supreme Court decision.

“Myths v. Truths.” April 11, 2004. Brown Foundation. April 3, 2006.
<http://brownvboard.org/mythsandtruths/index.php>.
Website dedicated to investing in the community, particularly children, and promoting equal educational opportunities and multicultural understanding.

Student Reading List

- Fletcher, Ralph. A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You. New York, NY: Harper Trophy, 1996.
Suggestions on how to begin the process of creating a place to record, collect and store thoughts and ideas about writing.
- Paul, Miss Susan. Memoir of James Jackson: The Attentive and Obedient Scholar Who Died in Boston, October 31, 1833. Lois Brown, Ed. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, Mass., London, Eng., 2000.
Memoir of a young free African American student written by his teacher.

Appendix A

Pennsylvania State Standards for: Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

- 1.1. Learning to Read Independently
 - B. Analyze the structure of informational materials explaining how authors used these to achieve their purposes.
- 1.2. Reading Critically in All Content Areas
 - A. Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.
 - B. Use and understand a variety of media and evaluate the quality of material produced.
- 1.3. Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature
 - A. Analyze the relationships, uses and effectiveness of literary elements used by one or more authors in similar genres including characterization, setting, plot, theme, point of view, tone and style.
- 1.4. Types of Writing
 - A. Maintain a written record of activities, course work, experience, honors and interests.
- 1.5. Quality of Writing
 - A. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic.
 - Gather, determine validity and reliability of, analyze and organize information.
 - Employ the most effective format for purpose and audience.
 - F. Edit writing using the conventions of language.
 - Spell all words correctly.
 - Use capital letters correctly.
 - Punctuate correctly (periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, parentheses, hyphens, brackets, ellipses).
 - Use nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections properly.
 - Use complete sentences (simple, compound, complex, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and imperative).
- 1.6. Speaking and Listening
 - A. Listen to others.
 - Ask clarifying questions.
 - Synthesize information, ideas and opinions to determine relevancy.

- Take notes.

Pennsylvania State Standards for: Academic Standards for Science and Technology

3.6. Technology Education

A. Apply knowledge of information technologies of encoding, transmitting, receiving, storing, retrieving and decoding.

- Describe the proper use of graphic and electronic communication systems.
- Apply a variety of advanced mechanical and electronic drafting methods to communicate a solution to a specific problem.
- Apply and analyze advanced communication techniques to produce an image that effectively conveys a message (e.g., desktop publishing, audio and/or video production).

D. Utilize computer software to solve specific problems.

- Identify legal restrictions in the use of software and the output of data.
- Apply advanced graphic manipulation and desktop publishing techniques.
- Apply basic multimedia applications.
- Apply advanced word processing, database and spreadsheet skills.