

A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Library

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Overview

Rationale

Objectives

Strategies

Classroom Activities

Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Appendices-Standards

Overview

Once upon a time in a land that resembles the United States of America, there existed a small nation of readers. Now these readers were not an uncommon lot. In fact they were easily found in schools, businesses and homes. They lurked in dusty libraries where they borrowed and coveted books. The readers could be seen in coffee houses and public theatres prepared to discuss or perhaps debate anything that they had read. They valued printed text and were not fearful or embarrassed about carrying a book. They subscribed to newspapers and magazines. When they could not read enough on their own, they pushed reading along to their children and grandchildren like a parent would force a reluctant child to eat his vegetables. Since many children are not fond of vegetables, the common refrain from parents was to eat them “because they are good for you”. The children read books and in turn passed the practice down to their own children. In this act, reading became an inherited behavior. Somewhere along the line however, the practice of reading slowed down to a crawl. Remarkably, today there are probably a higher number of staunch vegetarians than there are admitted bookworms and there remains a healthy payoff for both lifestyles. Let’s focus back to the readers.

The readers passed their love for reading to their children by reading to them when they were toddlers and by placing a book in their hands as soon as they were able to hold it. The young readers were sent on a literary journey filled with magical lands and characters that would stay with them forever. The readers also molded their

offspring into even more enthusiastic readers with frequent trips to the library. When a child received her first library card, it was almost as if she was given the keys to the kingdom. The readers encouraged reading.

Yet libraries and books were not always there for everyone. Many of the working class citizens may have desired the leisurely activity of reading a book but they did not have the money or time away from their labor to read for pleasure. In some cultures, including African American, reading was a pure luxury which was valued in both having the ability to read and write and also the possession of books. However, the same cultures that may have wanted to read the most were the same cultures that were denied. Not necessarily on the racial divide but more so between the separation of class. This caused a negative reaction towards reading and books for some people. Many laborers saw reading as an activity that was a waste of time. Besides, where would they find a place to read and who could afford books?

The trend of making books and libraries freely available to the general public on the largest scale came about when people like Andrew Carnegie, the steel manufacturer, established over 2,500 public libraries throughout the world.¹ If nothing else Carnegie knew the value of books and reading. He stated, "I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They never pauperize. They reach the aspiring and open to these chief treasures of the world -- those stored up in books. A taste for reading drives out lower tastes."²

Reading now became the pastime that enriched the nation's culture and pushed the literacy levels to a higher state. People of all walks were engaging in intellectual pursuits that were not en vogue beforehand. Writers who were previously obscure came out of the woodwork to become prominent in literary circles. Many classics of literature were discovered and created during this time. Places such as Harlem, New York, produced the literary and artistic movement known as the Harlem Renaissance which still has national impact upon literacy to this day. The neighborhood was backed by the city which was then backed by the state government. The government backed the libraries because the government was backed by some industrialist millionaires. In this process the readers prospered because they had a steady stream of reading material that was ready, available and anxious to be read.

It was years later when some federal, state, and local governments decided to borrow the work ethos of the fruit and vegetable huckster. Like the "Good Humor" ice cream truck without the bells and whistles, these officials put libraries on wheels and took the mountain to Muhammad. The county "bookmobiles" travelled to locations where there were no libraries and pushed reading for reading's sake. The library bookmobile

service provided people that had no transportation or means to get to the library the chance to cuddle up with a good book. The bookmobile purposely travelled the urban and country routes throughout Allegheny County to places where books were wanted if for nothing else the novelty of getting a book from a moving library. This was a free service and when the coffers of local government dried up, the book mobiles were one of the first things to go. There are still a few Bookmobiles around but they are a rare sight.

In time, the nation's zest for reading spurred a movement towards the establishment of oversized, boxy bookstores that not only sold books but also electronic media. Big bookstores mirrored big-box hardware stores where everything is available to anyone that can afford it. Bookselling transformed into a multi billion dollar business which cranked out the distribution of books in terms of their popularity rather than the book's quality.

When the e-trade businesses caught on the internet replaced the book mobile and library with providing books to the masses, but the internet books were for a price. In fact, the nation's largest book seller is not within a brick and mortar store but exists online. Amazon sold \$5.73 billion books in 2008 which made them the number one book seller in North America. Barnes and Nobles sold \$4.52 billion in 2008 which was down \$4.68 billion from 2007. Borders books is struggling.³ Surely the book lover's favorite robber baron, Andrew Carnegie, would be amazed how the book business turns profit from what he thought should be available to all people for free.

It seems now that readers are part of a sinking population. This is largely due to the disappearance of what were once reading staples. Newspapers and magazines are now becoming extinct. Almost every month another one of our country's top newspapers and magazines reveal that they are financially struggling and filing for bankruptcy. According to the Newspaper Death Watch website, no less than nine major newspapers are now out of business since March of 2007. This includes the Boston Globe.³

Magazines are not fairing any better. Magazines that catered to specific clientele are suffering from the recession economy. Advertisers are not buying ad space because the readership is down. Since the readers are not subscribing, the ads don't get to the people. The advertisers then must find a cheaper way to advertise and eventually the magazine or newspaper collapses.⁴ The advancement of electronic media also has played its role in the demise of the newspaper and magazine. Readers may still read but not at the frequency or velocity that existed before the electronic age. The electronic age has allowed a lot more information to be readily available at a much faster rate. Much of this information is delivered instantaneously to the palm of the

hand. Perhaps the nation's zest for reading has paled only to someone else's quest to get rich.

Despite this, the readers continue to prevail. Libraries are still lending books and bookstores are still selling. As long as books are being published, there will be an audience dedicated to reading them.

In the school setting, however, the stance that an overwhelming number of students choose is simply not to read. Many high school teachers are frustrated with this attitude because they can't teach to the grade level and therefore advance the district curriculum. Some teachers realize that their students can't read and either won't or don't take the time for remedial instruction. High school teachers think that reading should have been taught at the elementary level and for the most part they are correct; however, this does not change the outcome or the expectations. In too many school systems across the country, the emphasis or at least the willingness to read is simply undesirable. In some cases, there is straight out open defiance. Reading has become a nuisance and when students turn their backs on books, the achievement gap widens and many students do not complete high school. In the urban school setting, the high school drop out rate is alarming.⁶

An evidence of this trend of non-reading becomes really obvious when looking at the test results of the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. For the last fifteen years, our state and the city of Pittsburgh has been fighting the downward spiral of academic success in the areas of Reading and Math. Unfortunately, Pittsburgh is not unique because the results are comparable to other public school districts throughout the country. Like the child who can not see the benefit from eating vegetables, there are students who can not identify the benefits of reading.

Recently, in the Pittsburgh Public School system there has been some progress at closing the achievement gap however the overall performance has been lacking. The 2004-2005 PSSA reading levels for grade 11 demonstrated that 30.5% of the students ranked in the below basic category. The 2008-2009 PSSA reading levels demonstrated that 29.6% of the students scored below basic. The 2008-2009 students also produced 23.5% that scored in the advanced reading range. This is compared to the 18.9% that scored advanced in 2004-2005.⁵

What should also be noted is that within the group of students in the Pittsburgh Public School System the students who have shown the most consistent lack of progress rests within the African American community. More specifically, the select group that is in question exists within the poor academic achievements of African American males.

There are nationwide studies that verify that this group is the most at risk. In a report published in the State of Black America 2007: Portrait of the Black Male⁶, African American males between the ages of 17 to 25 are leading the nation's statistics for incarceration, unemployment, and dropping out of school. The gospel is not new; however, the problem continues to grow. Needless to say, these problems are nothing more than the symptoms of deeper social ills. One of the most notable is the disenfranchisement of the educational system.

Rational

When a person goes to the doctor for a migraine headache the doctor does not treat the patient for athlete's foot. Much of the treatment concerning the closing of the achievement gap in America's schools fall under the same format. The misalignment of identifying the regression of African American students (in this case, African American boys) academic performance and the total ignorance of treatment is not promoting positive growth in any aspect of the situation. If the public thought that the situation would simply go away if left to its own devices then there must be disappointment in the current results. The achievement gap continues to exist and there has been no movement towards aggressively attacking the situation at the base level. The No-Child Left Behind program has left many students behind even though it was actually intended to bring all students up to speed. Since the NCLB initiative was partially based on raising test scores, it ignored any means for grounding students on the academic fundamentals of reading that are needed to take the test. Students that can not or will not read will not succeed. Who ever was thought to be left behind were already part of the generations of people that were already standing behind the door and no effort was taken to address them. This includes the efforts to raise the reading bar for African American boys.

In Pittsburgh and other cities throughout the country measures are being taken to counter the negative situation pertaining to African American Boys. There are mentoring groups that are focusing on replacing the antisocial stereotypes that exists within many urban communities. These groups embrace education and try to reach the youths where they are. These groups sometimes meet in the schools but they are not necessarily part of the school. They are not always familiar with the school curriculum and may not be trained as teachers. Since the students must go to school it would seem reasonable to build into the system a curriculum that specifically

prepares these students for success. They are a captive audience and it is possible to reach them yet it appears that no one is prepared to devise the simple solution. Sometimes political correctness becomes the hurdle that will prevent those that know better to do what is right.

Strategies to improve the reading portion of the test should be approached directly. Reading is a skill that can improve dramatically if a person simply reads. If a person wants to improve mostly any skill, time must be spent at practice. The more a student engages in the reading process, the better vocabulary skills, comprehension, and ultimately enjoyment should eventually occur. While the young student may demonstrate a willingness to read at the early age, a significant attitude towards reading drops-off as the student reaches the middle school years. The scenario that was mentioned above was generally the case for a large portion of America's readers. Though the educational process in the African American community was traditionally valued, a major drop off towards the respect of academic achievement has occurred in the last 15 years. This drop off is very visible in the realm of literacy.

When students are first introduced to reading and other academic skills, they usually take to the academic subjects like a duck to water. If the learning environment is rich with positive experiences, the young student may progress to advanced levels. Young African American males have proven to be in line with their peers and students across all demographics during their early years of education. This is despite being in the category of families that are more likely to be impoverished and underserved.

There is a current push towards using technology as the primary tool to use for the advancement of education. The worth of many school districts is measured by the usage and numbers of computer labs in the school building. Schools and districts that don't have sufficient, up to date computers are considered to be lacking. Some parents use this information as the measuring stick for the enrollment of their children. Districts that have money to spend are more aggressive about buying the most modern technology. Before technology became of age, school districts used to rely on the library book count as a means to measure the school's competency. While keeping up with the price for computerized technology, books are still affordable and can be borrowed for free from the library.

For many young African American males, and other school aged male students, the first and most lasting interaction with technology is in the form of a computer gaming system. Parents will buy computer gaming systems as a form of entertainment before they will purchase a desktop or laptop computer for their household. From experience, many students may have a computer system in their household but not have internet hookup or other accessories that are needed for research. Experience

also reflects that many teen students are prone to use the computer as a vehicle to download games, movies and music to their handheld electronic devices. Many African American Males use the computer aged advancements as a status symbol. Books and reading in general are not “cool” and to many, books and reading is synonymous to “whiteness”. Sometimes the acceptance of technology has surpassed the love of books and again the results are manifested in the standardized state tests. Electronic devices and technological advances are reduced to the status of toys and not used to their full potential. Though technology is a valuable tool in the educational process it is not being used enough as a tool to teach or promote the fundamentals of reading. Many African American males are very computer literate but read below their grade level.

Years ago reading was “cool” in the African American community. Programs such as the nation’s oldest non-profit literacy agency, RIF (Reading is Fundamental) promoted reading to America’s youth and encouraged the entire family unit to participate. During the 1970’s animated episodes of “School House Rock” played between Saturday morning cartoon shows. Each segment broke down and taught the basics of English, Math, and History. These programs are considered classics to this day and the catchy tunes that accompanied the lessons still ring in the ears of late baby boomers. Comic books were cheap and plentiful and provided literary entertainment to young boys. The African American community regarded comic books as part of the culture and many young African American males graduated their love for these books to the urban “street hustler” books written by the authors Donald Goines and Ice berg Slim.

In contrast, there is a present reluctant relationship between African American school aged boys and reading. Remember that this did not always exist. There are several times during the history of African American people when the act of reading or at least a willingness or eagerness to learn to read was prevalent amongst all social classes of African Americans. African Americans may not have been included in the large group of readers that are described in the earlier part of this document however the desire to become educated and even more so, the chance to learn how to read was historically important to African Americans. In fact, the African American Male that learned to read and even further, learned how to write, accomplished great feats in history. African American males that proved educational success were once regarded as heroes.

The desire to read in the African American culture can be traced back to the period of slavery. During slavery, the necessity of literacy was first realized because it could determine the fate of an individual, a family or a generation. Though the history portrays a people that were once destined to become literate, something seems to have

blocked the path in recent years.

By the time slavery became an American institution, many Americans were illiterate. Many Americans were never taught to read because there was more emphasis placed upon tasks that required physical labor. Farmers and craftsmen had little time or desire for reading and therefore saw little need for it. Besides those who were in control felt it was their birthright to be superior to the downtrodden. African American slaves were at the bottom of the food chain and therefore were not worth consideration.

Those Americans that were literate were of a privileged lot. Those individuals who could read and write understood the power that literacy afforded. Much of what was printed that was available to the general public was of the religious, business, or legal genre and the readings were left to be interpreted by those who could do so. The ownership of printed material was also a matter of finance. If an individual's disposable income afforded the procurement of books or newspapers, then these things were purchased. There was little debate about the content of printed materials. Since illiteracy was so common, the content of most printed material was regarded to be the truth.

To the enslaved African Americans, the ability to read was equal to freedom. Historic abolitionist Frederick Douglass realized the power of reading as a young slave. It was then that the wife of his slave owner took compassion in him and taught the young Douglass some of the fundamentals of reading. Though her actions were unlawful at the time, she empowered Douglass with the tools that forged his journey towards the pursuit of liberty. This liberty; if not in the figurative sense, existed at least in the hopes that the struggles of the anti-slavery movement would eventually bring an end to slavery. The harsh treatment of Blacks did everything but allow African Americans an open opportunity to education. Blacks were not regarded as humans and therefore were only entitled to slave labor and mistreatment. It was the law of the land that was born from the belief that blacks were inferior.

Frederick Douglass coined the phrase, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free." Douglass realized that reading was the solution to emancipation. His books, articles and speeches emphasized that if anyone, African Americans in particular, desired freedom, then the mastering of reading and writing must be accomplished.

Escaped slave Nat Turner learned the power of literacy as well. As a young slave he too became a secret learner and risked everything to better his reading skills by the light of the moon with smuggled books. His interpretations of the Bible gave him the inspiration to revolt. After Turner's rebellion, he was regarded as a mystic and

criminal. Little was said of his literate brilliance. Yet in his writings and interviews after his capture and imprisonment, there is evidence that he was a determined man with a well thought plan that he was able to execute.

Ironically, much is not written about Turner's rebellion with exception to the fact that over fifty white people were killed during the onslaught. What led to the rebellion is not explained. Perhaps no explanation was necessary because Turner was not only self-taught but also had the will within him to carry out his mission. His complete story has hardly been told. The ability of a Black man who taught himself to read and then led a group of Black men to take arms and revolt was unheard of. That type of history might prove too frightening to many even now. This history illustrates at least two young Black men who not only understood the importance of being literate but were men who took action.

The crucial decision that was determined through the historic case of Brown VS the Board of Education made it a guaranteed right for all Americans to receive a free and equal education. However, it is also up to every American to realize that the raw materials are in place and there should be no excuse except apathy to turn this situation around. There are probably some educational facilities that are ill-equipped throughout this nation; however, there is tax money wasted on supplies and materials that are never used to its fullest potential. There are far too many books that have never been opened.

If someone were to track the reading trends of African Americans, these facts would remain; there was a period during African American history when reading was a matter of life and death. There was a period when reading was the key towards freedom and there was a period when reading was a matter of elevating higher thought. Furthermore, it was an outlet for the unheard voice. There was also a period when reading and writing were finally part of the culture that would be cherished and passed to generations to come. It is hard to imagine that there once was a time when African Americans gave their lives for the opportunity to read.

What are young African American males reading? What will they read? Why aren't they reading?

Objectives

The objective of this unit is to provide a strategy to use for the reduction of the widening achievement gap that exists within the Pittsburgh Public School system. The goal is to identify what African American males are reading, what they will read, and why they aren't reading. The motivation for this unit is from the dismal reports

surrounding young African American male drop-out rates, incarceration, and illiteracy. It is hoped that if intervention strategies which specifically target the school aged African American male population are implemented that the gap can be eliminated. The concepts of this unit can be easily adapted to any population and the process is cost effective. Though this unit is specifically designed to address the student body that is at most at risk, the young African American Males, it should be by no means considered the total answer to the dilemma. This unit, if followed and administered correctly should create a possibility in which everybody wins.

If students are able to read, then it would make sense that the school drop out rate, test scores and overall readiness for life would improve. The students will be able to succeed in the life stages after high school and become better prepared for college. What's more is that the students will develop a sense of positive leadership and strong character that is immeasurable.

With the accomplishment of these objectives, students will become proud of their school career for positive reasons and strive to become an achiever who eventually develops into one that becomes a life long role model for the students that will come behind them. It is also hoped that the new found pride will support student attendance and promote a culture that cares about literacy and reverse the self-destructive lifestyles that is a pandemic to the African American family and community. In order for this unit to be successful, administrators, faculty, staff, parents and alumni must become stakeholders in the investment of the academic process. This execution of this unit can not be considered the answer to the complex situation that is at hand. It is also hoped that this exercise can serve as a model for other schools to emulate.

Strategies

Start Early

It starts in the home. The earlier the child is exposed to literacy the better chance the child has at success with reading or any other subject. The educational home front sets the standards for expectations and molds the building blocks for a positive attitude towards education. Though teachers have no control over a student's home life they may be able to influence parents with suggestions of appropriate aged books, games, and even electronic learning toys. During the elementary school open house meetings a teacher may place learning devices on the classroom tables. This gives the parents/students something to do while waiting for their appointment. Since open house is usually right before the holiday season, the practice may help ideas for gift giving. A book list might also be a helpful display or handout that can be given to parents.

Teachers should expose students with as much positive reading material as they can and not forget the practice of story-telling. Young children love nursery rhymes and the characters and lessons of traditional fairy tales, tall tales, myths and fables. Since many cultures have their own versions of these traditional stories, a good book collection can introduce students to various cultures and lands before the child is exposed to the Disney movie version. The spoken word from a book literally speaks volumes and emphasizes the importance of reading to the youngest child. Reading out loud also gives students the opportunity to experiment with language, rhythm and sounds.

Young African American boys love being read to just like any other child. They are not the exception to the positive benefits of being exposed to reading at an early age. For them, this is where the “magic” begins. It is evident in the Pittsburgh Public Elementary Schools and schools in other districts where the literary journey takes off.

Elementary aged African American boys enjoy reading the same books that other boys of their peer group enjoy. Tall tales, Harry Potter, Goosebumps, Dr. Seuss, and Science Fiction books such as the Animorphs series are popular. Comic type books such as Captain Underpants and the ever so popular graphic novel are also a part of the selection.

At the earliest stages of reading young African American Boys might benefit from being involved in reading groups or clubs. These groups/clubs would be organized much like adult reading clubs in which the members select a book to be read and then informally discuss the book during meetings. When performed correctly this type of activity motivates participation, fosters literacy and empowers the individual. Part of the African American traditions that have been overlooked is the communal aspect of group activities. Many children, in many cultures have learned their reading skills during Sunday school sessions. Children sat in a circle with the required reading in their hands and were required to read out loud and be prepared to discuss the topic at length. The peer pressure alone created readers and the concept works.

Starting early also implies using all available time to the student’s advantage. This includes summer vacation. Recently the librarians of the Pittsburgh Public School system created a summer reading list for all grade levels. The booklist is available on the Pittsburgh Public School website and the books can be circulated through the Carnegie Library system. The books are listed for the enjoyment of reading and also the documentation of the mandatory reading of 25 books. This unit has a classroom activity that would be perfect for the documentation piece. It is hoped that the activity

is adaptable for a variety of school settings and becomes part of the Board reading curriculum.

Talk to the Students

A lot of the research that supports the activities of African American Males academic achievement does not contain information about what the subjects themselves think or feel. It might be a wise notion to ask the young students what they read, if they read, and why or why they don't read. From this information educators may have a clue to what motivates students and may therefore set the students up for success instead of failure.

During an interview with more than 25 African American high school students it was revealed that non-fictional reading material reigned supreme. They enjoyed reading books from the sports, biographical, and historical genre. When asked what fictional materials they prefer they admitted that they enjoyed "urban" novels such as "True to the Game", "The Coldest Winter Ever," and the more school friendly and approved books from the Bluford High Series. They claimed that they liked these books because the books "kept it real". This is one of the reasons why the Donald Goines street novels of the 60's and 70's were so popular. The early street novels created the excitement and danger of the streets without supposedly getting anyone into trouble. These books are "cool" and it should not be to anyone's surprise that these are the types of novels that students read while in placement or a juvenile facility. This information was candidly admitted during the panel interview.

Not that the street novels would be approved by any school district for consideration. Many of the street novels promote crime, violence, the mistreatment of women and stereotypes that everyone should avoid. Furthermore, these books offer no balance and predictable plots and solutions. Yet, these books are what the African American male students admitted to reading. A few years ago an animated music video shouted the chorus "READ A BOOK, READ A BOOK, READ A ***** BOOK!" the video was designed in the crunk/graffiti style of the street and offered suggestions on hygiene and getting ones life together. As profane and unsettling as this video was, the message was crystal clear to many students. The video somehow turned the tables on what is considered "cool" (dropping out of school, not taking care of oneself, reading, etc) and comically but tragically used the satire to drive home the point. Many students thought that the video was hilarious but who was the joke really meant for? The video was made to embarrass anyone who did not heed the advice. The video has left many speechless.

The peer pressure that overwhelms the young African American male student to under perform is more powerful than the school system. If strategies are implemented to engage students during their early ages and the engagement is consistent throughout high school then the students will become empowered to perform better. The development of reading and the positive push towards academic performance must be as heralded as the activities of the star athlete, performer or criminal.

Stick to the basics

The interviewed students stated that they enjoyed reading the classic/traditional literature that their teachers pushed them to read. They admitted that they probably would not have read the books and stories on their own and that the teachers influence sparked their interest until they eventually enjoyed the readings. Macbeth, The Crucible, The Catcher in the Rye, Fences, and several plays were mentioned as favorites.

African American teen boys also expressed that they enjoyed reading series such as the “Goosebumps” and Harry Potter series when they were younger. Though the Goosebumps series are not as popular as they once were, there are still many series like this and could be introduced to the elementary/middle school aged students.

Some of the students openly admitted that they did not read because it was boring and took too much time. They stressed that reading was not necessary because they could simply find the DVD. Yet, these same students confessed that they did enjoy reading some of the street novels because they were popular while they were in placement or a correctional facility.

Don't rule out the “Picture Books”

During the elementary years of reading, students flock to the books that have the most interesting illustrations. Award winning artists and photographers design the most clever illustrations and pictures using colors and details that are aimed specifically for young students. By the time students reach the 3rd grade they are expected to be weaned from “picture books” and expected to read full novels by the 4th grade. The push for more rigorous reading should continue but should also be balanced with books such as graphic novels that offer the student the chance to appreciate the artwork. Some students still have love for the picture books but are pressured into forsaking them. Some of the pressure comes from adults.

Today's graphic novel is the perfect cross-over for the teen reader. Teen boys, (African Americans included) admitted to enjoying the graphic novel for their

artwork and content. Many graphic novels are written at staged reading levels and the stories range from the traditional classics to newer aged fiction. The genres vary and there are even biographies and works of non-fiction. Many of the novels have deep plots and characters which oftentimes cross over to other mediums and displays of today's pop culture. Students feel special when they read a novel that is later transformed into a movie.

Another popular subject that African American males will read about is pet care. Dog breeding and information about exotic pets are just as popular as books about sports heroes, notorious rappers, and street clothes, (sports shoes, jeans, hoodys, etc.). When a student sees that there are interesting books that they can access, the readership rises.

Give them what they need

Every teacher who is concerned with the reading abilities of students might benefit if they became a literary provider. African American male students confessed that they spend a lot of time in classrooms with nothing to do. This may or not be the case however if there are enough magazines, newspapers, and books of varied interest and reading levels available to students to read during any spare time, it is probable that some students will practice reading.

Booklists

African American male students have submitted these titles of fiction and non-fiction books as some of their favorites. This list is by no means comprehensive or complete. There are probably hundreds of titles that could be added.

Elementary Primary Grades 1-3

Lester, Julius. John Henry (Picture Puffins). New York City: Puffin, 1999.

Lester, Julius. Sam and the Tigers: A Retelling of 'Little Black Sambo' (Picture Puffins). New York City: Puffin, 2000.

Souci, Robert D. San. The Talking Eggs. New York: Dial, 1989.

Soto, Gary. Chato's Kitchen. Pueblo: Live Oak Media, 2003.

Sierra, Judy. Wiley and the Hairy Man. New York: Dutton Juvenile, 1996.

Goss, Linda. The Frog Who Wanted to Be a Singer. New York: Orchard Books (Ny), 1996.

Elementary Intermediate Grades 3-5

Mckissack, Patricia. The Dark-Thirty: Southern Tales of the Supernatural: (Newbery Honor Book, Coretta Scott King Author Award, ALA Notable Children's Book) (Coretta Scott King Author Award Winner). New York: Knopf Books For Young Readers, 2006.

Mead, Alice. Junebug. New York: Yearling, 1997.

Mead, Alice. Junebug in Trouble. New York: Yearling, 2003.

Duffey, Betsy. How to Be Cool in the Third Grade. New York: Scholastic, 2009.

Middle Grades 6-8

Gratz, Alan M.. Samurai Shortstop. New York City: Puffin, 2008.

Schlosser, Eric, and Charles Wilson. Chew On This: Everything You Don't Want to Know About Fast Food. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007.

Bluford High school Series

Myers, Walter Dean. Autobiography of My Dead Brother. New York: Amistad, 2006

Myers, Walter Dean. Monster. New York: Amistad, 2001.

Myers, Walter Dean. Harlem Summer. New York: Scholastic Press, 2007.

Crouch, Stanley. One Shot Harris: The Photographs of Charles "Teenie" Harris. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002.

Williams, Sarah. 101 Facts About Iguanas. United Kingdom: Gareth Stevens Pub, 2001.

High School 9-12

Spiegelman, Art. The Complete Maus: A Survivor's Tale. New York: Pantheon, 1996.

Mcdonald, Janet. Brother Hood. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

Mcdonald, Janet. Harlem Hustle. New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux (Byr), 2006.

Gibbons, Dave, and Alan Moore. Watchmen. New York: DC Comics, 1995.

Brewer, John M.. The Room. Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2007.

Clarke, Tripp, Abby Mendelson, and C. Prentiss Orr. Pittsburgh Born, Pittsburgh Bred: 500 of the More Famous People Who Have Called Pittsburgh Home. Pittsburgh, PA: Senator John Heinz History Center, 2008.

Lester, Larry, and Sammy J. Miller. Black Baseball in Pittsburgh (PA) (Black America). Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2001.

Dee, Kool Moe. There's a God on the Mic: The True 50 Greatest MCs. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2003.

Classroom Activities

The classroom activities are designed for the students to focus their readings to get pertinent information from the materials that they read. The students' responses should be unique to their own reading experience. The worksheets can be used to assist the students when writing their English portfolios. These worksheets can also be considered practice for sustained reading and PSSA tests. This activity can be given in part or in whole. The worksheets can also be divided to particular books and assignments. These worksheets should take no longer than two weeks to complete.

DOCUMENTATION SHEET # 1

Author's name: Walter Dean Myers

Title: Harlem Summer

Genre: Young Adult Historical Fiction Novel-Urban 1920's

Number of pages: 176

Part 1

SYNOPSIS/SUMMARY:

Setting: (Where and when the story takes place—be specific; for example, this story takes place in the 1940's in the segregated South in a town called Bayonne, Louisiana)

This story takes place in Harlem, New York during a very hot summer of the 1920's. The times are tough but the African American people find both good times and bad times during their struggles. Everyone is trying to make ends meet and there are some who are trying to develop the

"New Negro". There are also some people that are about to make history in Jazz music and also the development of the NAACP.

Plot: (The events that occur in a story)

Young Mark is a typical teenager. He is at the point in his life when making the right decision will determine his fate. On one hand he is attracted to the hustle and bustle of the street life. He likes jazz music and wants to become a saxophone player. The problem is that he does not like to practice and therefore is not as good as he could be. He and his running buddy get wrapped up with "FATS", who is a quick-talking street hustler who always has a scheme up his sleeve. Mark knows this but does not always make the right decision because the idea of getting rich quick is too powerful. On the other side is Marks family who puts pressure on him to stay in school and get a decent job at the rising newspaper published by the NAACP. Marc is oftentimes in the company of greatness and he does not even realize it. After a booze selling scheme goes wrong, Mark finds himself in the heated trouble of mobster

Conflict: (A struggle /problem a character must overcome)

The main character, Mark, must consistently make decisions about what he wants to do with his life. He must decide to either embrace the fast paced, hustle-bustle of the streets of Harlem which provide plenty of excitement but also gives opportunity for trouble.

On the other hand Marc is also attracted to the more positively rewarding struggle and recognition of the "New Negro." Marc meets and interacts with pillars of African American history such as W.E.B.

DuBois and Langston Hughes. While in the company of such greatness, Mark can't help to reflect upon his own life and what he is willing to positively contribute to this struggle of his people.

Theme: (The central idea or lesson about life conveyed in this story)

The central idea of this story surrounds the decisions that we all must make in life. Are we to chase the risky, fun but dangerous life of the street or are we to take the sometimes boring, safe, but intellectual route to better ourselves. Though this book is written in the thematic setting of the 1920's many of the lessons about decision making is timeless. Many teens can directly relate to the dilemmas that the main character Mark gets himself into. The author, Walter Dean Myers never fails to educate, entertain, and promote critical thinking in his works.

Characterization: (A description of and a development of the characters in this story)

The character, "Fats", as in the legendary "FATS WALLER", is a major force in this story. Fats is a fast talking, charming, talented risk taker who always has a scheme up his sleeve. Its hard not to like Fats because he is a rascal. He may not be good for Mark in the long run but he is a fun ride. When I learned that Fats Waller was an actual person I became intrigued about what made him famous. Fats Waller is legendary as a jazz piano player. His music was innovative in it's day and is now considered timeless. What's unique about his style is that it is unpredictable, rolling and amusing. This fits Waller's lifestyle to a "t". when I first saw him singing and playing his piano, I knew then that he had a way of flirting with the audience and keeping them in his power. Walter Dean Myers portrays Fats Waller as the character that he was.

Part 2

COMMENTARY: In this part, include: your reaction to events, your feelings about the characters, your rating of the book and why.

YOUR REACTION TO EVENTS:

This is a great story. Walter Dean Myers intertwines actual people with actual places and what might have happened if they all came in contact with each other. This piece of historical fiction creates an atmosphere that is believable because Myers taps into our emotions. The characters have depth and the mysterious element of "What is going to happen next?" makes the reader cheer for the underdog. This book should be a recommended read for students between 7th and 9th grades. I think this book is excellent.

YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THE CHARACTERS:

The characters in this book are interesting because many of them were real people. This is the type of book that makes the reader want to learn more about the characters, the setting, and the history of the time period. It was easy to determine which characters that I would like to know as friends and which characters that I would surely stay away from.

YOUR RATING OF THE BOOK

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
8 9 10

WHY

This book deserves a "10" because it was entertaining and educational. There are not many fiction books about Harlem written at this grade level. Walter Dean Myers used this story to introduce me to this part of African American history and I enjoyed the story.

PART 3

LETTER OF ADVICE: Write a **LETTER OF ADVICE** to one of the characters/people in the story. Be sure to comment on **specific** events that occurred in his/her life. Also, be sure your writing is in proper letter format. (Your letter should be at least six (6) sentences.)

 Dear Mark

What's happening Bro? I hope that everything is cool and that you are staying out of trouble. I know that keeping out of trouble and staying on a positive flow is tough for us young Bros. For real for real, there is simply too much temptation out there and it's hard to turn away from it. We don't want to be lame and totally disrespected by everyone of our peers. At the same time we don't want to end up in jail or dead in the streets. It's a tough road but we gotta make it.

I know your boy Fats brings a whole lotta drama with his street game. Fat's is a straight out hustler and if you get with him on any type of mission, you got to be careful because Fats is going to look out for number 1 and that's himself. He's cool and fun to be with but trust me when I say, "Be Careful". Notice that I'm not going to

tell you not to be friends with him. He's your boy. Just remember that he may not have your back like you think he does.

On the other tip, It ain't a bad thing for you to stay connected with the positive "old heads" that you are meeting. Yeah I'm sure that Mr. DuBois, and Mr. Hughes are caught up in that "New Negro" stuff and that they are probably boring half the time but as you already know, they got mad respect and they make it happen. Get off your butt and get to work early. Don't slack off or daydream like you got something better to do. Represent!

 I'm about to be out. When I come past your way I will give you a holla. One

 **Part 4**

PERSUASIVE LETTER: Write a multi-sentence **PERSUASIVE LETTER** to a peer persuading him/her to read this book **OR** write a multi-sentence letter to a peer persuading him/her not to read this book. Use specific details and references to the book to support your argument. Your response should be about 6-8 sentences long.

What up "G"

Hope all is well. I just finished reading this book called Harlem Summer. It is written by the award winning teen author Walter Dean Myers. As you know, Walter Dean Myers writes books that we can relate to. His writing style speaks our language and we can identify with his characters and settings. In this book, a young teen named Marc is sort of confused about what he wants to do with his life. On one side he wants to become a sax player. The problem is that he

does not like to practice. He gets caught up with a friend of his who is a street hustler named "Fat." Fats is always out to get over with a money making scheme. Fat's is a character that keeps this book interesting and entertaining and at some point in this story, you will realize that "Fats" is actually the famous jazz piano player, Fats Waller. This even makes this book more enticing to read.

Fats is not the only historical character in this book. Walter Dean Myers uses notable historical figures such as W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Huges, and the notorious gangster, Dutch Shultz. Each of these characters is a history lesson on own right.

I think that you would really enjoy this book because it is amusing and sometimes down right hilarious. It also teaches life long lessons that everyone must face. It is never boring.

Let me know when you want to read it and I will loan you my copy. Take care.

Part 5

CHARACTER ANALYSIS: Complete the **character analysis chart** for **one** of the characters. Fill in each grid with information about the character's words and actions. Do not fill in any spaces with N/A, or your grade will result in an N/A or ZERO.

Character's Name: Fats Waller

Adjectives to describe the character	Character's words and phrases *include page numbers	Character's actions *include page numbers	What others say about the character *include page numbers
	"Hey	Fat's	"You tell your friend that if

Slick, Fast talking, charming,	Groovy, you're in the movie." "White folks is good if they're the right folks." Pg. 59	convinces Marc to approach a man in a movie theatre. The man is stalking Fats because Fats is late on his child support payments. When the man turns around, Fat's mysteriously disappears. Pg. 59	he doesn't show up in court next week about his child support payments, I'm going to personally remove some parts of his body to make sure he doesn't have any more children. You understand that?" Pg 59
talented	"Maybe if we combine prayer and evolution something good will happen." Pg. 68	Fats is at a high society party. He is drunk and is asked to play piano. Pg. 68-69	"Fats? <i>Fats</i> ? What kind of a name is Fats? And did you know he was drunk when he came in the door? And do you know who he was insulting with his little song? Only the wife of one of the NAACP's biggest contributors!"

Part 6

TRADING PLACES: Write a paragraph explaining why you **would** or **would not** like to change places with one of the characters in the novel. Comment on specific events that occurred in his/her life. Support your reasons with evidence from the novel and include page numbers. (This paragraph should contain 4 to 6 sentences.)

Of all characters in this story I would like to trade places with the main character Mark. First of all I have yet to visit Harlem and I think that every African American person should visit Harlem at least once in their lives. I will do everything that I can to get there because I think that Harlem was and perhaps still is the birthplace of many historical events in the African American culture. The setting of this novel is Harlem in its hey-day. Mark is right there in the wonderment of it all and since he is caught in the moment, he doesn't recognize the significance. If I am able to go into the story with the knowledge of what I presently know about Harlem and the historical figures that are mentioned in the book then I could see myself as the teen-aged Mark. I guess that since I know the book and the history of the whole thing it would feel like I am cheating. It would be very interesting to rub shoulders with the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, The Harlem Rens, Jimmy Durante, and others who are mentioned in the book.

Part 7

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

STEP 1: Pretend you are a reporter for *ESPN*, *Vibe*, *Newsweek*, or *Rolling Stone* magazine. Prepare a list of questions—(no fewer than 7, and no more than 10) to **interview one of the characters**. Questions should be relative to the character's life and experiences.

STEP 2: Now that the interview questions have been developed, pretend **you ARE the character**, and respond to the questions.

Sample Interview questions: (To the main character Mark)

1. How do you feel about growing up in Harlem, NY?

2. What makes Fats Waller such an interesting person?
3. Why do you allow yourself to get into crazy situations?
4. What do you think your parents would do if they knew about your exploits?
5. What do you feel about the "New Negro"?
6. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
7. How do you think Harlem will be 50 years from now?

(if you need more space, use the back of this paper)

PART 8—TALK, TALK, TALK: Develop a dialogue between the **PROTAGONIST** and the **ANTAGONIST** during a moment of **CONFLICT** (tension). Be sure to identify each of the characters, and provide at least 4 exchanges between the characters during the conversation. Use the back of this page if you need more space.

example: from *Harlem Summer*

Mark : (protagonist) Henry, I really think we need to be cool about doing these off the wall jobs for your boy Fats.

Henry: (antagonist) You are probably right but where else can we make this easy money?

Besides, Fats got pull in directions that we have never seen.

Mark: Yeah but we ain't seen no money yet. I'm still broke and my folks are ready to kill me!

Henry: I feel you. My raise is ready to kick me out too.

Mark: And even though Fats is as shady as a palm tree, he is the best jazz man around.

Henry: Well he did not get that way by not practicing! When is the last time you blew your horn?

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Cosby, Bill, and Alvin F. Poussaint. Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors. Waco, TX: Thomas Nelson, 2007.

Entertainer Bill Cosby and noted Psychologist Alvin Poussant give sound advice to African Americans to upgrade their quality of life.

The Covenant with Black America. LA: Third World Press, 2006.

Tavis Smiley and selected sociologist look at vital statistics concerning the lives of African Americans of all demographics. Offers solutions to issues in health, education, business, home ownership, and the economy

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Autobiographic memoirs of African American statesman and abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Douglass explains the evils of slavery and the need for freedom of African Americans

Dudley, Mark E.. Brown Vs the Board Of Education (Supreme Court Decisions). Brookfield: 21st Century, 1997

Details concerning the historic Brown Vs the Board of Education Trial which enables all Americans to a free and equal education.

Freeman, Kassie. African Americans and College Choice: The Influence of Family and School. Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 2005.

Freeman demonstrates the importance of family support for African American teens that are entering college.

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Goines, Donald. Inner City Hoodlum. Los Angeles, California: Holloway House, 1975.

Street novel about inner city crime during the 1970's

Jackson, Jesse . "Young African American Boys Are In Crises-And America Is Silent." Chicago Sun Times 27 Mar. 2007: 28.

Rev. Jesse Jackson points out the situation about the growing number of underachieving, incarceration bound, unemployed

League, National Urban. The State of Black America 2007: Portrait of the Black Male. Silver Springs: Beckham Publications Group, 2007.

Detailed and statistical account about the state of African American Males in America. This source suggests methods to create change.

McWhorter, John H. Losing the race; self-sabotage in black America.. New York: Harper Perennial, 2000.

McWhorter gives personal accounts as a college professor who reflects upon the academic shortcomings of the African American students that he teaches.

Price, Hugh B. Achievement matters; getting your child the best education possible.. unknown: Unknown, 2002.

Price emphasizes the importance of a solid educational background for all children and how parents need to support this effort.

Slim, Iceberg. Trick Baby: The Biography of a Con Man. Los Angeles, California: Holloway House, 1970.

Street novel about inner city crime during the 1970's

Souljah, Sister. The Coldest Winter Ever: A Novel. New York: Washington Square Press, 1999.

Modern Street novel about inner city drug dealing. Written from the perspective of an African American teenaged girl.

Styron, William. The Confessions of Nat Turner. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Woods, Teri. True to the Game: A Teri Woods Fable. New York: Teri Woods Publishing, 1999.

Street novel that takes place during the 90's. Young girl is caught up in the glamorous street level, drug dealing life of her boyfriend.

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Woodson's classic book that explains the importance of African Americans honoring their own history and education.

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PENNSYLVANIA STATE STANDARDS

Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1.3. Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature

1.3.8–F Read and Respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama

1.3.8-C Sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliteration).

Figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, Allusion).

1.4 Types of Writing

1.4.8-

A. Write short stories, poems and plays. **APPLY** varying organizational methods. Use relevant illustrations. Utilize dialogue Apply literary conflict. Include literary elements. Use literary devices

B. Write multi-paragraph informational pieces (e.g., letters, descriptions, reports, instructions, essays, articles, interviews) Include cause and effect. Develop a problem and solution when appropriate to the topic. Use relevant graphics (e.g., tables, illustrations, photographs). Use primary and secondary sources.

C. Write persuasive pieces. Include a clearly stated position or opinion. Include convincing, elaborated and properly cited evidence. Develop reader interest. Anticipate and counter reader concerns and arguments.

D. Maintain a written record of activities, course work, experience, honors and interests.

1.5 Quality of Writing

1.5.8

A. Write with a sharp, distinct focus.

- Identify topic, task and audience.
- Establish a single point of view.

B. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic.

- Gather, determine validity and reliability of and organize information.
- Employ the most effective format for purpose and audience.
- Write paragraphs that have details and information specific to the topic and relevant to the focus.

C. Write with controlled and/or subtle organization.

- Sustain a logical order within sentences and between paragraphs using meaningful transitions.
- Establish topic and purpose in the introduction.
- Reiterate the topic and purpose in the conclusion.

- D. Write with a sharp, distinct focus.
- Identify topic, task and audience.
 - Establish a single point of view.
- E. Write using well-developed content appropriate for the topic.
- Gather, determine validity and reliability of and organize information.
 - Employ the most effective format for purpose and audience.
 - Write paragraphs that have details and information specific to the topic and relevant to the focus.
- F. Write with controlled and/or subtle organization.
- Sustain a logical order within sentences and between paragraphs using meaningful transitions.
 - Establish topic and purpose in the introduction.
 - Reiterate the topic and purpose in the conclusion.
- G. Write with an understanding of the stylistic aspects of composition.
- Use different types and lengths of sentences.
 - Use tone and voice through the use of precise language.
- E. Revise writing after rethinking logic of organization and rechecking central idea, content, paragraph development, level of detail, style, tone and word choice.
- F. Edit writing using the conventions of language.
- Spell common, frequently used words correctly.
 - Use capital letters correctly.
 - Punctuate correctly (periods, exclamation points, question marks, commas, quotation marks, apostrophes, colons, semicolons, parentheses).
 - Use nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions and interjections properly.
 - Use complete sentences (simple, compound, complex, declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and imperative).
- G. Present and/or defend written work for publication when appropriate.

1.6.8 Speaking and Listening

- A. Listen to others.
- Ask probing questions.
 - Analyze information, ideas and opinions to determine relevancy.
 - Take notes when needed.
- B. Listen to selections of literature (fiction and/or nonfiction).
- Relate them to previous knowledge.
 - Predict content/events.
 - Summarize events and identify the significant points.
 - Identify and define new words and concepts.
 - Analyze the selections.
- C. Speak using skills appropriate to formal speech situations.
- Use complete sentences.
 - Pronounce words correctly.
 - Adjust volume to purpose and audience.

 - Adjust pace to convey meaning.
 - Add stress (emphasis) and inflection to enhance meaning.
- D. Contribute to discussions.
- Ask relevant, probing questions.
 - Respond with relevant information, ideas or reasons in support of opinions expressed.
 - Listen to and acknowledge the contributions of others.
 - Adjust tone and involvement to encourage equitable participation.
 - Clarify, illustrate or expand on a response when asked.
 - Present support for opinions.
 - Paraphrase and summarize, when prompted.
- E. Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.
- Initiate everyday conversation.

- Select a topic and present an oral reading.
 - Conduct interviews as part of the research process.
 - Organize and participate in informal debates.
- F. Use media for learning purposes.
- Describe how the media provides information that is sometimes accurate, sometimes biased based on a point of view or by the opinion or beliefs of the presenter.
 - Analyze the role of advertising in the media.
 - Create a multimedia (e.g., film, music, computer-graphic) presentation for display or transmission.

1.8.8 Research

- A. Select and refine a topic for research.
- B. Locate information using appropriate sources and strategies.
- Determine valid resources for researching the topic, including primary and secondary sources.
 - Evaluate the importance and quality of the sources.
 - Select essential sources (e.g., dictionaries, encyclopedias, other reference materials, interviews, observations, computer databases).
 - Use tables of contents, indices, key words, cross-references and appendices.
 - Use traditional and electronic search tools.
- C. Organize, summarize and present the main ideas from research.
- Identify the steps necessary to carry out a research project.
 - Take relevant notes from sources.
 - Develop a thesis statement based on research.
 - Give precise, formal credit for others' ideas, images or information using a standard method of documentation.
 - Use formatting techniques to create an understandable presentation for a designated audience.