Famous African Americans Lesson Plan

Grade level: 5+

Overview
Students will learn about famous African Americans, such as inventor George Washington Carver and peaceful protestor Rosa Parks. Prior to this lesson, students should have spent time in class learning about famous African Americans and their role in the fight for civil rights and other important moments in American history. In this lesson, the students will choose one famous person that they connect with in some way, research that person in depth and develop a presentation for the class where they dress as the famous person and tell the story of that person in a personal way that brings history to life.

Lesson Goals
Students should:

1. Choose a famous African American to research.
2. Discover what the person looked like and what they did.
3. Take notes on that person and figure out the impact they had on history and if it makes a difference today.
4. Write a short speech as though it is being told from that person’s viewpoint.
5. Decipher any differing accounts of the person, and clear up any discrepancies by focusing on reliable resources.
6. Create or find a costume that represents the person the student researched.
7. Present the speech in front of the class while dressed as the famous African American and speaking in first person as though the student is that person telling his or her story.

Materials
Each student will need different materials. Encourage parents to get involved in coming up with a costume by sending a letter home beforehand letting them know the event is coming up. You may even want to invite parents to come hear the speeches.

Teaching the Lesson
Schedule computer lab time and have students research famous African Americans and find a person they would like to know more about. If possible, it is best for each student to choose a different historical figure to research. However, in a large class, this might be impossible. Also, if a student is particularly passionate about covering a certain historical figure, it is best to encourage that enthusiasm.

Once each student has chosen a famous figure in African-American history, students should be instructed to study that individual independently and take notes on what impact that person had on history. Allow students a few days to gather this information and then ask them to take out a pen and paper and answer the following questions about the person they chose:
• Why is the person you chose famous? What are they known for?
• What did the person do that made him/her a prominent figure in African-American history?
• Did what the person do change the world?
• Has the person's actions impacted society today?
• What did this person look like?

Instruct the students to take the answers to the questions home and write a short speech for homework. This will give you a chance to see if the student has enough material for their presentation and also if they understand what the person looked like and their impact on the world.

Remind the students that they will need to dress like their famous figure and present their speech in front of the class on the day you’ve chosen. Hold onto the speeches until the day of the presentations so that they are not accidentally lost.

The final part of this lesson is the actual presentations. Make this an event for the students. If inviting parents, have class parents bring in snacks for the event.

Suggestions for Possible Famous People to Research

• Rosa Parks
• Martin Luther King Jr.
• George Washington Carver (inventor)
• Elijah McCoy
• Lewis Latimer
• Madam C.J. Walker
• Dr. Patricia E. Bath
• Walter White
• Roy Wilkins
• Thurgood Marshall
• Louis Armstrong

These are just a few suggestions. There are many African Americans who contributed great things to our nation's history, so allow students to explore the topic and come up with suggestions as well.

Concluding Activity
This lesson plan concludes with the presentations of the famous people. This is a good opportunity to invite parents and have a class event to celebrate Black History Month. Through the presentations of the other students, each child should gain an overview of the many people who have done great things in the country’s history and be able to recognize top leaders and what they accomplished.

Photo: George Washington Carver
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