

6-1-1995

## Kwanzaa: A Holiday of Principles

Phyllis M. Ferguson  
*Phyllis Ferguson, Inc.*

Terrell A. Young  
*Washington State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Education Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Ferguson, P. M., & Young, T. A. (1995). Kwanzaa: A Holiday of Principles. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 35 (5). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol35/iss5/7](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol35/iss5/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# Kwanzaa: A Holiday of Principles

Phyllis M. Ferguson  
Terrell A. Young

As soon as Jonathan Daines learned about Kwanzaa, the seven-day celebration millions of African Americans celebrate each year between December 26 and January 1, he wanted to find ways of bringing it into his classroom. He read everything he could find about Kwanzaa. At first, he read a couple of books about Kwanzaa to his students. Each succeeding year, he added more and more until he developed a three-week Kwanzaa study. The purpose of this article is to provide background information about Kwanzaa, a sample Kwanzaa study and children's literature and other resources for teachers to use in creating their own Kwanzaa study.

## **Background information**

Maulana Karenga, chair and professor of Black Studies at California State University at Long Beach, created Kwanzaa in 1966 to help African Americans celebrate their African heritage. Kwanzaa, based on traditional African harvest festivals, means first fruits in Swahili. Karenga developed seven principles of Kwanzaa, the *Nguzo Saba*, to be highlighted during the seven-day celebration. One principle is featured each day of Kwanzaa. *Umoja* (oo-MOH-jah), or unity, is the first principle and is celebrated on December 26. A black candle is lit in the center of a *kinara* (kee-NAH-rah), a candle holder — holding seven candles — three green, three red, and one black as

celebrants gather and focus on unity in the family, school, community, nation, and/or race.

The second principle, Kujichagulia (KOO-gee-CHA-goo-lee-ah) represents self-determination. Ujima (oo-GEE-mah), or collective work and responsibility, is the focus of the third day; a red candle is lit. The principle of Ujamaa (oo-jah-MAH, cooperative economics, is highlighted on day four. On day five, the fifth candle is lit for Nia (NEE-ah) which means purpose. Creativity, Kuumba (koo-OOM-bah) is celebrated on day six. On the last day of Kwanzaa, the seventh candle is lit for Imani (ee-MON-ee) or faith. On this, the last day of Kwanzaa, a great feast is held. Figure 1 contains the Nguzo Saba rewritten for children by Margaret Bland.

## A Kwanzaa lesson plan

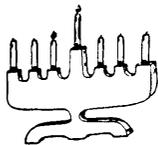
**Introduction.** Mr. Daines introduces Kwanzaa to his students by reading aloud Deborah Chocolate's *Kwanzaa* (1990). He chose this book since it provides a good overview of the holiday. After the reading, they are then ready to create posters to represent the principles celebrated on the seven days of Kwanzaa. Students are divided into seven groups with each group illustrating one of the Kwanzaa principles. At the top of their illustration, the Swahili term for the principle is placed with the English translation written at the bottom as illustrated in Figure 2. The students then hang the seven posters in order on a clothesline or stand them on a chalk tray.

**Day Two.** Students listen to the song, "Seven Principles," from the album *See What the End's Gonna Be* by Sweet Honey in the Rock. The seven posters can be distributed to the children, and they can practice putting them in order as they sing along with the recording.

**Figure 1**  
**The Mguzo Saba: The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa**

1. **UMOJA (UNITY)**

We can work with others in our families, schools, communities and nation and be an important part of these groups.



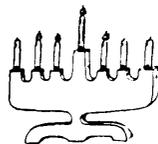
2. **KUJICHAGULIA (SELF-DETERMINATION)**

We can do our own thinking about what is right and fair and decide how we should behave.



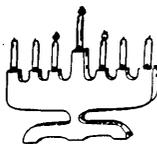
3. **UJIMA (COLLECTIVE WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY)**

We can help other children when they are doing something appropriate. We can be responsible for things we are expected to do.



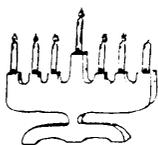
4. **UJAMMAA (COOPERATIVE ECONOMICS)**

We can share things we have with children who need them. We can each give a little and it will become a lot.



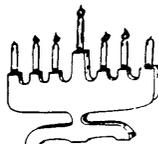
5. **NIA (PURPOSE)**

We can learn. We can get knowledge that can be used to benefit ourselves and others.



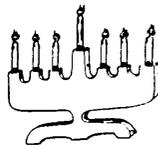
6. **KUUMBA (CREATIVITY)**

Creative thoughts and actions get helpful things done in interesting ways. We can use our talents to bring beauty to things we do.



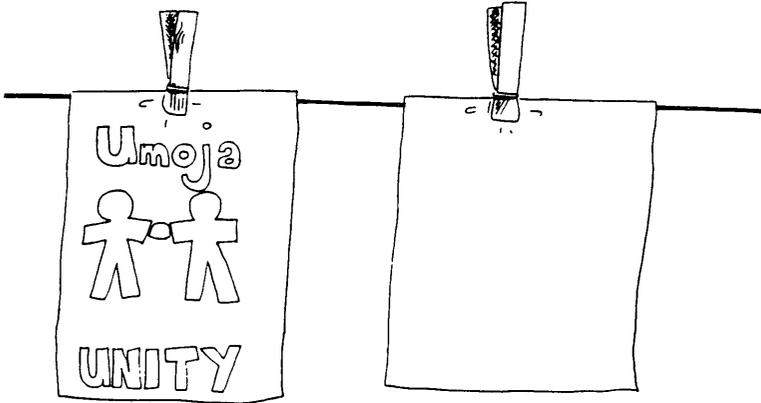
7. **IMANI (FAITH)**

We can believe in those principles and practices that protect and make human life better. We can believe in ourselves and know that we are important and can do things well.



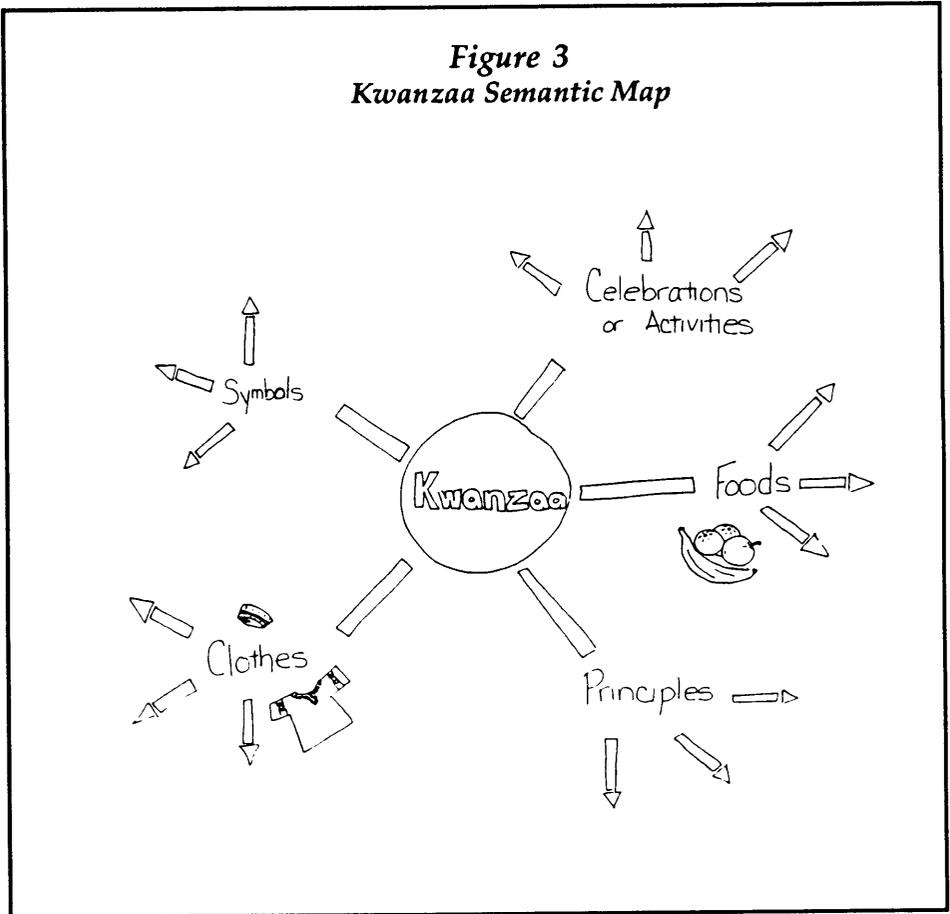
Next, the teacher reads aloud *Celebrating Kwanzaa* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith (1993). After the students have enjoyed the book and discussed it, they are ready to create a semantic map of the important elements of Kwanzaa. Mr. Daines draws a map similar to the one shown in Figure 3 on the chalkboard or an overhead transparency. The students work in small groups to brainstorm important elements of Kwanzaa. After the students have worked together, the whole class creates a group semantic map. The semantic map can later be converted to a bulletin board illustrated with student created or collected pictures.

*Figure 2*  
*Kwanzaa Posters*



**Day Three.** Students again sing "Seven Principles." To review the seven principles, students place cards in a pocket chart with the Swahili terms for the each of the seven principles in the proper order. Next, they place the matching English term next to the Swahili name for each principle. Finally, the students brainstorm and write class definitions or applications for each of the seven principles. For example, an application for Umoja, unity, might be written as "We can work together in our family, school, and community." These definitions or applications can be placed next to the English terms.

*Figure 3*  
*Kwanzaa Semantic Map*



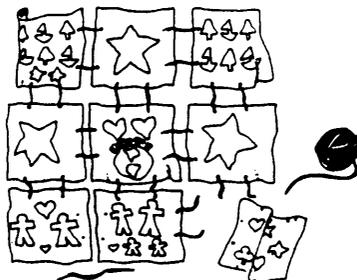
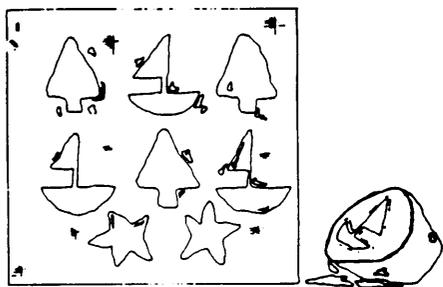
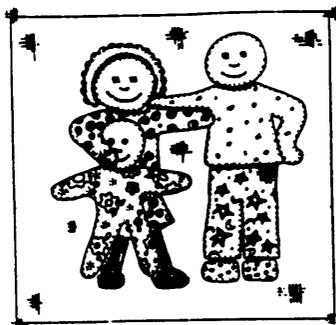
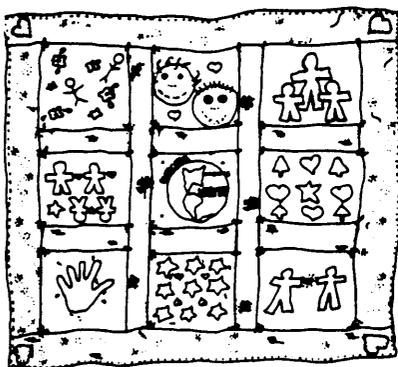
After working through the process of sorting and re-defining the principles, Mr. Daines makes a duplicated master of smaller versions of the cards. Students cut out the cards and in small groups sort them into small personal sized pocket charts. To extend the activity, he asks the children to write examples on a fourth card to place next to their definitions or applications. For example, children might write something like "We can all work together to keep our school clean." Day three's activities are complete after the teacher has read aloud Andrea Davis Pinkney's *Seven Candles for Kwanzaa* (1993).

**Day Four.** To focus on Umoja, the teacher reads aloud *The Quilt* by Ann Jonas and discusses with his students how the pieces represent the child's life. He also reads Valerie Flournoy's *Patchwork Quilt* (1985). The students explain how the quilt represents the family. Next the students can create a class quilt to illustrate the class diversity and unity. Children each make quilt pieces representing themselves or their families. The quilt piece may be an illustration or a pattern illustrating interests. The illustration can be a drawing or collage (to simulate applique); potato prints work well for patterns. The quilt pieces can be joined together with yarn to create a wall hanging or placed on a wall in patchwork fashion as illustrated in Figure 4.

**Day Five.** To introduce Kujichagulia, the principle of self-determination, Mr. Daines reads aloud from *The Hundred Penny Box* by Sharon Mathis. He asks his students for examples of Aunt Dew's self-determination. After discussing *The Hundred Penny Box*, the students then create personal time-lines with pennies representing years of their lives as illustrated in Figure 5. Children can predict their future accomplishments as they complete their time-lines.

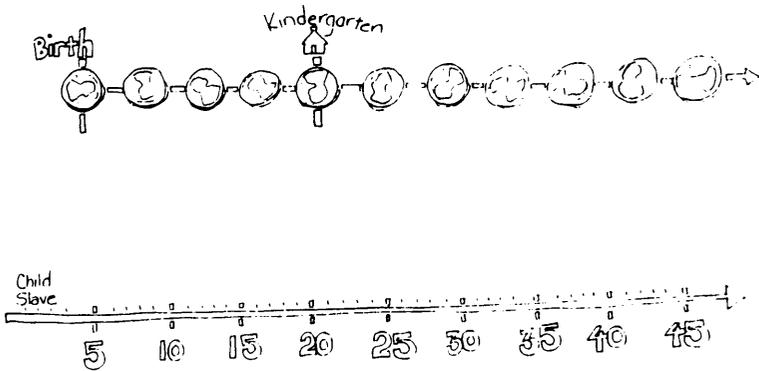
Many note with surprise those things that students consider momentous.

Figure 4  
Kwanzaa Quilts



**Day Six.** Mr. Daines begins this day by reading aloud *Who Owns the Sun?* by Stacy Chbosky (1988). He leads the students in a discussion of the boy's life as a slave and his accomplishments. In small groups, the students could discuss the determination the boy demonstrated throughout his life and especially in becoming a teacher. After whole-class debriefing, Mr. Daines oversees his class' creation of a time-line illustrating the boy's life from his beginnings as a slave until he becomes a teacher. (This time-line provides the students with a background for learning about the principle of purpose.)

*Figure 5*  
*Penny Time-Lines*



**Day Seven.** To introduce Ujima, the principle of collective responsibility, Mr. Daines reads aloud Phil Mendez's *The Black Snowman* (1989). The students discuss their feelings about the book and then focus on the family's relationship and how they work together. After their discussion, the students meet in small groups to brainstorm ways they can apply collective responsibility in their families, the school and the community. As a class, each group shares the results of their brainstorming. Children each create a personal goal for becoming a more responsible family member and write about the plans for achieving the goal in their journals. As a class, the students may select two goals for making their school and community better places (e.g., cleaning the playground each week, organizing a group to paint over graffiti, cleaning up a park, planting and maintaining a flower garden at a community center).

**Day Eight.** Once again the students listen as their teacher reads *The Black Snowman*. Today's focus is on the portion where the snowman asks if the boys know about their ancestors: "Have you sat at the table of your forefathers? Have you accepted the shield of courage they have passed along to you?" Mr. Daines uses this as an opportunity to introduce Margaret Musgrove's *Ashanti to Zulu* (1976) and Ifeoma Onyefulu's *A Is for Africa* (1993). These books are alphabet books about Africa.

**Day Nine.** The students use a number of nonfiction and reference books about Africa as they work together to create an ABC book about Africa or African Americans.

**Day Ten.** Mr. Daines reminds his students about the kente cloth worn by the snowman in *The Black Snowman*. He shows them a kente cloth before reading *Huggy Bean and the Origin of the Magic Kente Cloth* by Linda Cousins (1992).

The students discuss the significance of the kente cloth and Mr. Daines explains that students will create their own woven products in art class. He shows them several woven products they can learn to make.

**Day Eleven.** Sheila Smith, the school art teacher, teaches the students to make paper weavings, straw weavings, or paper plate weavings. The children learn how to make the weavings and then complete them in their free time or at home. (The weavings will be sold at the class' Karamu festival).

**Day Twelve.** Mr. Daines introduces Nia, or purpose, to the students by rereading *Who Owns the Sun?* and discussing the possible goals the child in the book may have set for himself in order to escape slavery and become a teacher. Mr. Daines then distributes a number of brief biographies of African Americans to the children. In small groups, the children select a book, read it together, and then complete a questionnaire similar to the sample seen in Figure 6. When they are back in a large group, students share their person and how he or she overcame obstacles to achieve his/her goals or purposes.

*Figure 6*  
*Sample Questionnaire*

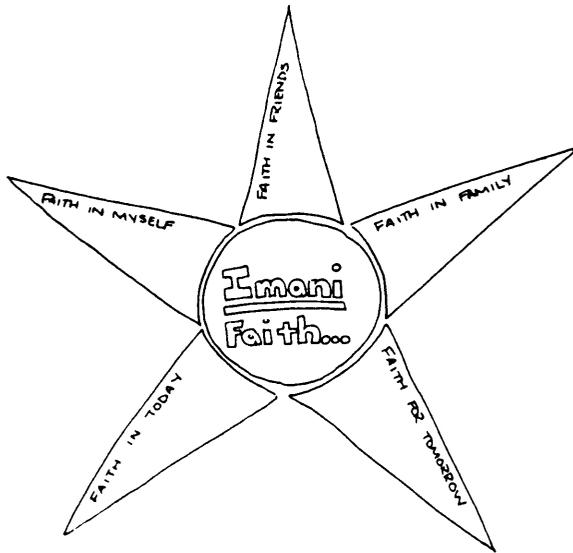
Name of Person: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What were this individual's major accomplishments?
2. What goals did the person have to set?
3. As a child, what could have been this person's vision?
4. What did this person do to achieve goals?
5. What made achieving the goals so difficult?

**Day Thirteen.** Mr. Daines reads Faith Ringgold's *Dinner at Aunt Connie's* (1993) to the students. After the children discuss what they enjoyed about the book, they plan and make place mats for the person they read and wrote about on the previous day. Students will display their place mats at the Karamu celebration.

**Days Fourteen and Fifteen.** To introduce Kuumba, or creativity, Mr. Daines reads Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace* (1991). After students have experienced the story and shared what they like about it, they are ready to brainstorm in small groups about what creativity means and all the ways it can be expressed. For this activity, the students use a roundtable brainstorming in which one paper and one pencil go around the group with each person talking in turn and then writing responses. With roundtable brainstorming, students may not pass. If someone cannot think of an answer, other students make suggestions and the stalled student chooses one of the recommended suggestions. The students next meet as a class to create a list of ways to express creativity. The students are reminded about the upcoming Karamu celebration and the need to provide some type of program. Mr. Daines divides his class into four groups, and they plan presentations based on African or African American literature. A possible program might include the following: a dramatization of Verna Aardema's *Who's in Rabbit's House?* (1977) with student created masks; a Reader's Theater presentation of Patricia McKissack's *Flossie and the Fox* (1986); a choral reading of James Weldon Johnson's *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (1993) and a song and visual presentation to accompany *Follow the Drinking Gourd* (1988) by Jeanette Winters. Other possibilities include writing a rap using the seven Kwanzaa principles or creating a Kwanzaa mural or display.

**Figure 7**  
**Imani Stars**



**Day Sixteen.** Mr. Daines reads Denise Burden-Patron's *Imani's Gift for Kwanzaa* to introduce the final principle, Imani or faith. The students discuss how Imani gave gifts and showed faith. They learn about different types of faith: faith in self; faith in friends; faith in family; faith in higher powers; and faith for tomorrow. Students then create stars using triangles and a circle as shown in Figure 7. On each ray of the star, they illustrate some application or demonstration of their faith.

### **Other Kwanzaa resources**

Many Kwanzaa books and resources which are available for teachers to use in Kwanzaa studies are listed below in the Appendix. The annotations following each title are taken from each book's Library of Congress Cataloging in Press information found on the verso of the title page.

## Conclusion

Daines introduced his students to a variety of multicultural literature throughout the year. He used Kwanzaa as an opportunity to pique his students' interest and curiosity about their own cultural heritage, and rich reading and discussion experiences followed. Jonathan Daines and his students reaped many benefits from their study of Kwanzaa. Along with learning about the history and significance of this holiday, they were able to celebrate quality living. Daines found that Kwanzaa was a holiday that had meaning for *all* students. It was truly a "holiday of principles."

## References

- Aardema, V. (1977). *Who's in rabbit's house? A Masai tale*. NY: Dial.
- Bland, M. (1985). *Getting ready for Kwanzaa: A story-coloring-activity book*. Seattle: Jomar Enterprises.
- Burden-Patron, D. (1992). *Imani's gift at Kwanzaa*. NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Chbosky, S. (1988). *Who owns the sun?* Kansas City MO: Landmark Editions.
- Chocolate, D. (1990). *Kwanzaa*. Chicago: Children's Press.
- Cousins, L. (1992). *Huggy Bean and the origin of the magic kente cloth*. NY: Gumbs & Thomas.
- Flourney, V. (1985). *The patchwork quilt*. NY: Dial.
- Hoffman, M. (1991). *Amazing grace*. NY: Dial.
- Hoyt-Goldsmith, D. (1993). *Celebrating Kwanzaa*. NY: Holiday House.
- Jonas, A. (1984). *The Quilt*. NY: Greenwillow.
- Johnson, J. (1993). *Lift every voice and sing*. NY: Walker.
- Mathis, S. (1975). *The hundred penny box*. NY: Viking.
- McKissack, P. (1986). *Flossie and the fox*. NY: Dial.
- Mendez, P. (1989). *The black snowman*. NY: Scholastic.
- Musgrove, M. (1976). *Ashanti to Zulu: African traditions*. NY: Dial.
- Onyefulu, I. (1993). *A is for Africa*. NY: Cobblehill.
- Pinkney, A. (1993). *Seven candles for Kwanzaa*. NY: Dial.
- Ringgold, F. (1993). *Dinner at Aunt Connie's*. NY: Hyperion.
- Sweet Honey in the Rock. *See what the end's gonna be*. Redwood Records.
- Winter, J. (1988). *Follow the drinking gourd*. NY: Knopf.

*Phyllis M. Ferguson is a literacy consultant at Phyllis Ferguson, Inc., in Kennewick, Washington. Terrell A. Young is a faculty member in the Literacy Education Department, at Washington State University, in Richland Washington.*

**APPENDIX**  
**RECOMMENDED BOOKS**

**Children's Books**

- Banks, V. (1985). *The Kwanzaa coloring book*. Los Angeles CA: Sala Enterprises. The original Kwanzaa coloring book. Based on harvest festivals held in Africa, Kwanzaa is celebrated in the United States between December 26 and January 1.
- Chocolate, D. (1992). *My first Kwanzaa book*. NY: Scholastic. Introduces Kwanzaa, the holiday in which Afro-Americans celebrate their cultural heritage.
- Freeman, D., & MacMillan, D. (1992). *Kwanzaa*. NY: Enslow. Introduces the African American holiday begun in 1966 which celebrates seven important principles.
- Goss, L. (1993). *It's Kwanzaa time!* Jacksonville FL: Philmod. Stories, recipes, and activities introduce the holiday of Kwanzaa and the ways in which it is celebrated.
- Morninghouse, S. (1992). *Habari gani? = what's the news? A Kwanzaa story*. Seattle WA: Open Hand. A family celebrates each day of Kwanzaa.
- Pinkney, A. (1993). *Seven candles for Kwanzaa*. NY: Dial. Describes the origins and practices of Kwanzaa, the seven-day festival during which people of African descent rejoice in their ancestral values.
- Porter, A. (1991). *Kwanzaa*. NY: Carolrhoda. Describes the origins and practices of Kwanzaa, an African-American holiday created to remind African-Americans of their history and their cultural origins.
- Riehecky, J. (1993). *Kwanzaa*. Chicago: Children's Press. Introduces Kwanzaa, the holiday in which African-Americans celebrate their cultural heritage.
- Ross, K. (1994). *Crafts for Kwanzaa*. NY: Millbrook Press. Ross suggests a number of crafts students can create as they learn about Kwanzaa.
- Saint James, S. (1994). *The gifts of Kwanzaa*. Morton Grove IL: Albert Whitman.
- Walter, M. (1989). *Have a happy--*. NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard. Upset because his birthday falls on Christmas and will therefore be eclipsed as usual, and worried that there is less money because his father is out of work, eleven-year-old Chris takes solace in the carvings he is preparing for Kwanzaa, the Afro-American celebration of their cultural heritage.

**Resources for Teachers and Parents**

- Anderson, D. (1993). *Kwanzaa: An everyday resource and instructional guide*. NY: Gumbs & Thomas.

- Copage, E. (1991). *Kwanzaa: An African-American celebration of culture and cooking*. NY: Morrow.
- Karenga, M. (1988). *The African-American holiday of Kwanzaa: A celebration of family, community & culture*. Los Angeles CA: University of Sankore.
- McClester, C. (1993). *Kwanzaa: Everything you always wanted to know but didn't know where to ask*. NY: Gumbs & Thomas.
- Thompson, H. (1993). *Let's celebrate Kwanzaa: An activity book for young readers*. NY: Gumbs & Thomas.

**Picture book biographies of African Americans are:**

By David A. Adler: *A Picture Book of Jesse Owens* (1992), *A Picture Book of Rosa Parks* (1993), *A Picture Book of Frederick Douglas* (1993), *A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman* (1992), *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King* (1989), *Jackie Robinson: He Was the First* (1989), *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Free at Last* (1986). All published by New York: Holiday House.

By Joann Johansen Burch, Marian Wright Edelman, *Children's Champion* (1994). Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press.

By Patricia McKissack, & Frederick McKissack: *The Father of Black History* (1991), *Mary McLeod* (1992), *Booker T. Washington: Leader and Educator* (1992), *Sojourner Truth: A Voice for Freedom* (1992), *Madam C.J. Walker: Self-Made Millionaire* (1992), *Jesse Owens: Olympic Star* (1992), *Langston Hughes: Great American Poet* (1992), *Zora Neale Hurston, Writer and Storyteller* (1992), *Paul Robeson: A Voice to Remember* (1992), *Satchel Paige: The Best Arm in Baseball* (1992), *The Story of Booker T. Washington* (1991), *Frederick Douglass: Leader Against Slavery* (1991), *Mary Church Terrell: Leader for Equality* (1991), *Louis Armstrong: Jazz Musician* (1991), *Mary McLeod Bethune: A Great Teacher* (1991), *George Washington Carver: The Peanut Scientist* (1991), *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: A Voice Against Violence* (1991), *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Man of Peace* (1991), *Ralph J. Bunche: Peacemaker* (1991), *Marian Anderson: A Great Singer* (1991). All published by Hillside, NJ: Enslow Publishers. *James Weldon Johnson: "Lift Every Voice and Sing"* (1990). Chicago: Children's Press.

By Walter Dean Myers, *Young Martin's Promise* (1993). Austin TX: Raintree Steck-Vaughn.

By Andrea Davis Pinkney, *Dear Benjamin Banneker*. (1994). San Diego CA: Harcourt Brace & Co. *Alvin Ailey* (1993) New York: Hyperion Books for Children.