



The Resiliency of the Black Family

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Introduction

As the bell rings to dismiss my students to go home, I often wonder what types of family structures are awaiting them as they enter their homes. Are their home lives similar to mine? Are they in a single-parent household or do they live with extended family? As each bell rings to signify the ending of the day, I notice that more and more questions lurk in my mind about my students' families. There are moments when students ask me about the members of my family. I often say how I am a "daddy's girl" and how my parents adopted my little cousin. They definitely understand the concept of extended families as low-income or even middle class families, regardless of color, tend to have strong kinship bonds with family. ¹ My students discuss with me how their cousins, aunts, or uncles live with them off and on throughout their lives. In past years, "about a third of all black households included other adults," which substantiates my students' family situations? ² The idea of family and who their immediate family members are seem to change constantly for my learners, but nonetheless, they are a family. However, a constant that exists in some of my students' homes is a strong matriarchy. My students reveal that their mothers and/or grandmothers are the head of their households. Sometimes students will voluntarily tell me that their fathers are absent, incarcerated, or deceased. As a history teacher listening to my students' narratives about their family structure, I immediately think about the origin and structure of the black family in America.

In an effort to learn more about black families in America, I will be using a variety of examples that show what different families look like. I will also highlight the resiliency of the black family throughout American history. Some focus and activities will be geared towards the models of the "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" and "Good Times" in order to analyze different dynamics of those black families. Some of my learners have seen these television shows, but I am almost sure that they were not watching with a critical eye. Key concepts that will help guide their discovery and my curriculum unit will be male/female dynamics, parent/children dynamics, the role of education, and the idea of economic status.

Rationale

When teaching geography, it is important for students to be open-minded to understanding new concepts, but I also understand that this is very difficult for freshmen and sophomores to do. So instead of forcing the issue, I want to understand my students' ideas of family and what they perceive it to be. When studying cultural geography, family is very important and can be a complex issue as well. During lecture, I may forget my audience and assume that my students' family structures mimic mine. As a teacher, it is important to recognize those differences because those differences are the ingredients for great conversations and lessons! When conducting research about the black family in the United States Daniel Moynihan and E. Franklin Frazier present classic arguments that should be taken into consideration for the development of this curriculum unit.

As mentioned, a lot of my students are products of different types of family structures. Some students are members of female-headed homes due to absentee fathers. As students discuss reasons as to why their fathers are absent, I usually hear the same themes: their fathers are incarcerated, deceased, or not interested in being present. There was one female student in particular who stuck out among the rest. This student was a senior this past school year and was looking forward to life after high school. On any day after school, she would ask my advice about college and how to apply for scholarships. As I sat with her, we began to discuss her family. She informed me that her father would not be present for her high school graduation because he is incarcerated. This past holiday, her father robbed a bank and now is serving a sentence in jail. After she told me this, there were so many thoughts running through my head. But before I could console her, she said, "But Ms. Beatty, he did it because he wanted to finally give my sister and me a good Christmas. He was always so mad at himself for not being able to provide for us and so he wanted a change." The student went on to pull out a crumbled piece of paper out of her purse. Her father's actions were in our local newspaper. After reading the article, it was evident that he was not going to be present for his daughter's high school graduation, college graduation, wedding, the birth of his daughter's children, or any other moments that parents celebrate. As the student and I sat with tears in our eyes, she looked up at me and said, "Even though I am sort of used to him not always being there, my mom will really have to do everything now."

As I looked at her, I wondered how this event would change her life. Would the choices she makes be rooted in her father's actions? More importantly, she implied that her father was never really a constant force in her family, which equates to a female-headed household. As a result of this, does she always interpret family as female headed?

Daniel Moynihan, who was the assistant secretary of labor in the U.S. Department of Labor, produced a report in 1965 titled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." The *Moynihan Report*, as it is commonly known as, discusses how racism and other economic changes "had badly damaged black people, especially black men." ³ In the *Report*, Moynihan makes many assertions that mainly center on how family patterns among black Americans are different from those found among whites and that family instability among blacks "was the root cause of the social and economic problems suffered by blacks." ⁴ His reason for the instability was attributed to slavery and racial oppression, which crippled the black man. Moynihan characterized the situation of the black family as "crumbling," "a tangle of pathology," ⁵ and a situation "that feeds on itself." ⁶ I am certain that there are a lot of students who have many stories as to why their grandmothers or mothers head their households. I am certain that there are even more students whose fathers are jobless and are not present in the home. If my students subscribe to Moynihan's theories, they could conclude that the present

problems of blacks are rooted in historical injustices, which paints blacks as innocent victims at birth. This could lead to pessimistic attitudes towards life because when obstacles arise, they will be naturally insurmountable. Additionally, if children are fatherless, the growth of female-headed households will continue to "feed on itself." ⁷

The *Moynihan Report* partially echoes the sentiments of sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. In Frazier's book, "*The Negro Family in the United States*," he argues that the black family is subjected to the most severe stresses and strains of social change. Frazier concludes that:

In the field of the family no situations are more challenging in their range and variety than those presented for our observation in the transplantation of the Negro from Africa to America, in the transition from slavery to freedom, and in the mass migration from the plantation to the metropolis. Never before in the recorded history of mankind has the family life of people, in so short a period, experienced so great and so sudden dislocations, necessitating adjustment to new and unforeseen situations.

Frazier's suggestions are eye-opening because the family structure seems to be put under constant change, pressure or stress from external or internal forces. Frazier's argument proposes that the instability of the black family resulted from slavery. Slavery destroyed family bonds with the exception of those between mother and child. ⁸ Blacks and the black family lack social cohesion. The manner in which blacks were "captured and enslaved and inducted into plantation life" in the new world loosened social bonds among blacks and destroyed the family structure. ⁹ Because blacks were unable to cope with the new conditions, "their family lives became disorganized, resulting in spiraling rates of crime, juvenile delinquency, and so on." ¹⁰

If I were to summarize the arguments of Moynihan and Frazier, slavery and racist oppression over the centuries, along with economic changes following industrialization and urbanization, has badly damaged black people, especially black men. Is it safe to assume that my student's father was a victim of a problem that was already predetermined? Because of the lack of government programs that address institutional racism, blacks and the black family will continue to struggle. Frazier and Moynihan raise convincing arguments. Many people, citing especially his focus on the plight of black men, call Moynihan a "prophet" who has raised a "sincere alarm." ¹¹ Public leaders like President Barack Obama and Bill Cosby have chimed in on the debate about black men and the black family as well. As compelling as these arguments are, the components of this unit will not focus on the deficits of the black family but rather its resiliency.

Resiliency and the Black Family

In 1988, sociologist Charles Willie explains the present plight of black families with the statement, "The Black family is still around." This declaration could imply that there should be reason for the black family to be extinct. According to Moynihan, the instability among the black family "was the root cause of the social and economic problems suffered by blacks." ¹² If blacks are not equipped with the proper tools to overcome societal issues, the problem will eventually lead to the decay of the black family. However, Willie's opening statement could have rejected the "tangle of pathology" that Moynihan asserted and highlighted the resiliency of the black family. Resiliency is defined as more than merely surviving and being a victim for life, it also encompasses the ability "to heal from painful wounds, take charge of their lives, and to go on fully and love well." ¹³ As this curriculum unit unfolds, it is important to show the resiliency blacks and the black family throughout time. The majority of my students is black and can greatly benefit from understanding how important family is. I am interested in presenting images of blacks on television that could parallel their life

situations and the structure of their family.

This curriculum unit will concentrate on black families in television in the 1970s and 1990s. While examining the trends and tendencies of blacks in America during the 1970s and 1990s, the unit will also point out how these trends and tendencies played out in popular culture. *Good Times*, which aired in the 1970s and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, which aired in the 1990s, will serve as my primary examples to show how blacks and the black family held strong kinship bonds and a strong work ethic. The shows will also highlight the dynamics of family roles and the roles of education and religion. These shows highlight the resiliency of the black family.

Background

Good Times

Good Times was a show set in Chicago during the 1970s. The cast of *Good Times* included Florida, who was mostly a housewife but would work occasionally. Florida was a religious woman and would often "call on the Lord" or have conversations with God throughout the show. The husband, James Evans, who was unemployed but always looking for work, would often be very bitter about the state of the economy or make cynical remarks about the government. The married couple had three children. The eldest son was J.J, a middle daughter, Thelma and a younger son, Michael. The Evans' neighbor, a fortyish woman named Willona, made frequent appearances. A very young Janet Jackson joined the cast later as Willona's adopted daughter.

It was a male-headed household where the mother was the voice of reason. Education was certainly stressed in the Evans' household. The Museum of Broadcast Communications suggests that the younger son Michael "was thoughtful, intelligent, and fascinated with African-American history who frequently participated in protest marches for good causes." Pamela S. Dean, a writer for the Museum of Broadcast Communications, summarized the time period of the 1970s and the show's response to it. She writes:

Good Times was initially successful in that it offered solace for both blacks and whites, who could identify with the difficulties the Evans family faced. During the program's appearance on prime-time television, the concurrent period of history had included the Watergate scandal, the atrocities of the Vietnam War, staggeringly high interest rates, and growing unemployment. The James Evans character made clear his dissatisfaction with current government policies, hence, the show became a champion for the plight of the underclass.

As do most television shows, *Good Times* serves as a social commentary for the 1970s. It interjected relevancy and realism into prime-time television by dealing with the pressing issues of the day. The percentage of both black and white students completing high school increased steadily from the 1960s to the 1980s. In the mid-1970s, twenty-three percent of black 18-24 year olds were enrolled in college which was an all-time high for the black community in the United States ¹⁴ The Evans' family certainly regarded education as a must for their children. As soon as the children came from school, it was a habit for them to complete their homework first and then help their mom with dinner.

As viewers watch *Good Times*, they see how the Evans' resiliency is tested through "evictions, gang warfare, financial problems, muggings, rent parties and discrimination" and the death of the father, James. During the 1970s, the cast was not only making a difference on television, but they were very involved in the direction of

the show behind scenes. John Amos, who played James, was concerned about the state of J.J.'s character. His sentiments were later echoed by Florida Evans, played by Esther Rolle. They both wanted J.J.'s character to evolve to a more mature representation of blacks in the media. Instead, they felt writers were perpetuating the "coon-stereotype reminiscent of early American film...with his toothy grin, ridiculous strut and bug-eyed buffoonery." ¹⁵ J.J. lied, stole, and was barely literate and more and more episodes were centered on these images. Amos and Rolle wanted production to highlight the good parenting skills of James and Florida Evans, the father's constant and relentless search for a job and Michael's scholastic successes. ¹⁶

As the show wrapped in 1979, the Evans family had proven how resilient they really were as they could relish in what they had worked so hard to obtain – good times! The last original episode of *Good Times* aired in August 1979. ¹⁷ J.J. got his big break as an artist for a comic book company and had a more matured character. Michael attended college and moved into an on-campus dorm. Thelma married a football player and moved into a luxury apartment in Chicago's upscale area and offered Florida the chance to move in with them. Willona became the head buyer of the boutique she worked in and she and her daughter moved into the same luxury building.

When watching *Good Times*, the viewer sees how a family solves problems, gender dynamics, children dynamics, the importance of religion and the role of education. If viewers choose to look deeper, they will see how cast members were certainly aware of stereotypes and misconceptions that America had of blacks and the black family unit. Amos and Rolle understood how resilient the family was and wanted that message to resonate in the homes of viewers.

Good Times is now in syndication and can be seen on television networks like *Centric* and/or *Nick-at-Night*. Another family that subscribed to the same idea of hard-work, education, and kinship bonds was the Banks. The Banks and Will Smith were a part of the cast of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. Will Smith, the character, plays a fictionalized version of Will Smith, the actor.

Fresh Prince of Bel-Air

The *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is certainly a departure from some of the common themes in *Good Times*. The father in *Good Times* is an out-of-work husband who struggles to survive in an unstable economy while the father in the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* is a successful attorney turned judge in California. The *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* originally aired on NBC from September 10, 1990, to May 20, 1996. ¹⁸ The show stars Will Smith as a fictionalized version of himself who was born in West Philadelphia. He was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in their wealthy Bel-Air mansion in California, where his lifestyle often clashes with that of his relatives. According to the theme song of the show, Will was sent to live with his aunt and uncle because his mother was concerned about a fight he had with neighborhood boys.

As the first season unfolds, viewers are introduced to the cast of the show. Philip and Vivian Banks are successful professionals. Phillip is a lawyer who later becomes a judge and Vivian, a college professor. They have four children: Hilary, Carlton, Ashley, and Nikki who all attend private schools. The family also has a live-in butler from England whose name is Geoffrey. Upon looking at the cast, set, and plot of some of the first episodes, viewers can already see how blacks have made progress since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. United States blacks, who numbered 30 million in 1991, "were more educated, earned higher salaries, worked in prestigious jobs, and participated more fully in politics." ¹⁹ All of these ideas were very much present in the make-up of the seasons and serves as another example for young blacks to aspire to achieve.

Even though the Evans family and the Banks family are in two totally different financial brackets, live in different communities, and tackle different issues, my students will see the same themes in the Banks' household. The Banks welcome Will into their home; they share their wealth, demonstrate the importance of education for all of their children, and they have a very strong work-ethic.

Comparing and Contrasting *Good Times* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

A Venn-diagram will be provided to show the differences and similarities of both shows to better help students and the readers of this curriculum unit.

See Appendix A

Demographics

I am approaching my fourth year of teaching. I have taught World Geography and World History II for the past three years. The majority of my students are freshmen and sophomores. As reported on the Virginia Department of Education's website, for the academic school year of 2011-2012, Wythe's school population was 984 students. ²⁰ Of those students, there were 287 freshmen and 231 sophomores. ²¹ I taught approximately 155 freshmen and 30 sophomores. It is my responsibility to get the freshmen prepared to take Virginia's geography state assessment. Most state assessed classes are seen as difficult for learners but geography is especially difficult as some of Richmond Public School's high schools have done away with the class. Last year, I collaborated with another social science teacher to accommodate exceptional education learners within the classroom. A large percentage of Wythe's student population receives an individualized education plan (IEP) by which those students have special accommodations that must be met within their learning environment. It is not uncommon to have collaborative teaching teams within the classrooms of Wythe as more than half of the school's population has an IEP.

Sources used

The sources used in this unit will attempt to answer my questions that I have posed in the layout of the curriculum. I have short episodes of *Good Times* and the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. It is my belief that these sources will capture my students' attention and will force the issue of questioning the resiliency of the black family.

Films

The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air

I will use two episodes from the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* as I feel these episodes lay out the most important points of the units.

- *Air Date: September 10, 1990* "Fresh Prince Project"

This is the first episode of the pilot season. It starts off with Will coming to live with his aunt and uncle in Bel-Air. Uncle Phil is not too impressed by Will's behavior, especially teaching Ashley, Will's cousin, to rap. There is

also concern that Will is ruining the family's image with the members of the law firm. Vivian, Will's aunt, tries to remain neutral in all this. Carlton and Hilary, Will's cousins, look at Will with disdain. ²²

I have chosen this episode because it shows how different Will is from the rest of the family. Will's new family was not accustomed to his appearance, the way he spoke, or his culture. My students will be seeing two different types of black families during the same time period and how the concept of blending extended families can be amusing.

- Air Date: May 9, 1994 "*Papas Got a Brand New Excuse*"

The closest thing to a father-figure Will has ever had is his Uncle Phil. Will was raised by his mother Vy in Philadelphia until he was sent to Bel-Air. Will's biological father, Lou, abandoned Will at the age of four. One day, Will's father locates him in California and tries picking up things where he left off 14 years ago. Though Uncle Phil and Aunt Vivian are less than ecstatic for Lou's return, Will is filled with so much happiness to have his dad with him again. Reacting the only way Will can, he plans out baseball games and camping weekends to catch up with his "long lost" father. It seems Will has finally found the missing link in his family until Lou decides to take off on his son for a second and final time. ²³

I feel this episode will definitely resonate with my learners because as mentioned, some of my students do not have constant father figures in their lives. I am interested in showing how family roles have evolved in this episode and how Will sees his relationship with his Uncle Phil.

Good Times

- "The Big Move" Episodes 1-6

Towards the finale episodes of *Good Times*, there were a series of episodes titled "The Big Move." The Evans family is to move from their high-rise apartment building in Chicago back to Mississippi. The father, James Evans, has landed a high-paying job in Mississippi and can now afford to move his family. As the episodes progress, my students will see how excited the Evans' family is about leaving Chicago and even make jokes about moving back to the South. These episodes highlight the struggles, the tears and the triumphs that the Evans' endured. Because John has landed this job in Mississippi it appears that the "good times" can finally begin. At the end of episode 6, the student will see how the Evans' family deals with grief as we learn that James had died in an automobile accident before "the big move" could commence. ²⁴

Objectives

In my classroom, I am mandated by the Virginia Standards of Learning to teach my students how regions have been characterized by having regional labels and how cultural characteristics have linked and/or divided regions. I am also mandated to teach about eleven different regions but for this unit, I will mainly focus on the United States. Before my learners can appreciate the cultures of other regions, I want them to first learn how to enjoy what is in their backyards. Finally, my learners must interpret the past, understand the present, and plan for the future by honing their skill sets to analyze problems and to make decisions about their communities and others. I firmly believe that disengaged citizens are often marginalized. Therefore, I find that

it is essential that they can connect to the material studied not as a silent observer but as an advocate for change.

Strategies

Many of my learners have difficulty comprehending material. So that I can accommodate those learners, I will scaffold their learning by using a number of graphic organizers. I can reach the visual and auditory learners by providing material that will be read aloud and short episodes from the television shows. Among the strategies that will be used in my unit are as follows:

Venn-Diagrams

These diagrams will aid in understanding the immediate differences and similarities between "Good Times" and "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air." The diagram will serve as introducing new concepts. As the students complete the diagram, I am interested in them discovering how similar or dissimilar their family structures are to these shows.

KWL Charts

These charts will be used to tap into the learner's mind about what they KNOW (K) about the show, what they WANT to know (W) about it and what they have LEARNED (L) as we finish the lesson. I am interested in all parts of the chart because typically I will uncover their familiarity of the shows in the (K) column, their curiosities(W), if any, in the middle column, and what they have learned (L) in the last column. As the unit progresses, I am hoping to see the middle column (W) become lengthier because new concepts and criticisms will be added to the lesson plan. The students are not just watching the shows for pure entertainment. They are now watching with a critical eye. The first column can be used as the student's pre-assessment (K) as the last column (L) can be used as the student's post assessment.

Cooperative/Collaborative Learning Groups

As the school year progresses, I will place students in cooperative learning groups. There are many benefits to high school students being able to communicate with one another. As the students complete activities, each group member will be assigned a different task to complete. This type of group learning is termed the round - robin - brainstorming.

- The class is divided into small groups (4 to 6) with one person appointed as the recorder.
- A question or dilemma is presented and students are given time to think about answers.
- After the "think time," members of the team share responses with one another round robin style.
- The recorder writes down the answers of the group members.
- The person next to the recorder starts to record for the next questions and the cycle begins again although with a different recorder each time. ²⁵

Aside from the immediate positive effects of having collaborative learning groups (enhancing student satisfaction with their learning experiences, helping students develop skills in oral communication, promoting student self-esteem, and promoting student learning and academic achievement) I am extremely interested in helping to promote positive student relations.

Mini-Lessons (Classroom Activities)

Day 1- "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyons

The first day of class will be spent reading this poem. I plan to read the poem aloud to my students instead of them having to read it to themselves. After reading it, I want to analyze each stanza as some stanzas appeal to our senses and others bring us to pause. I want to pull out symbolisms and details that may be personal to the author. I definitely want to allow a time for questions and comments as I am sure some students may not understand some inferences or concepts that were developed. Now, I want students to write their own "Where I'm From" poems. After they finish writing them, I will volunteer to share my poem first. I will project my poem for all to see so that after I read it, I can begin to tell a bit about my life and my family. As I share, I will pose the questions,

- Can anyone relate to my poem?
- How do I value family?
- Is this different from you?
- If so, how or how not?
- What does it mean to be resilient?
- Please provide examples of when you or someone you know had to be resilient?
- Are there examples of resiliency in black families?
- If so, how or how not.
- Are there resilient black families in the media?
- Is so, what are the qualities that those families have that make them resilient? If not, what are qualities that those families are lacking?

Day 2

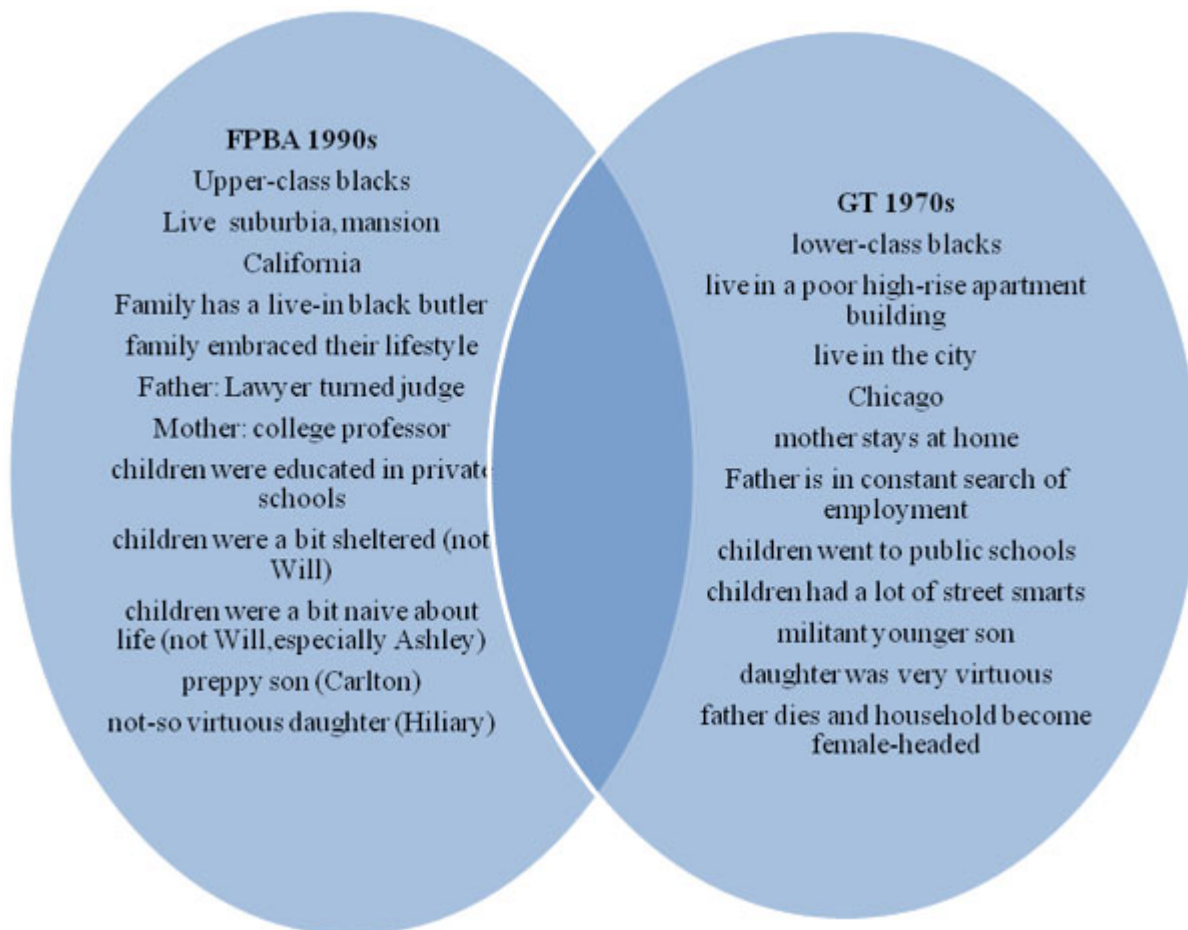
Students will complete two KWL charts for the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and *Good Times* so that I can assess their prior knowledge of the two families. I will only have them to complete the (K) and (W) columns of the chart. Please refer to the *Strategies* section of this unit as I have already outlined how KWL charts work.

Day 3

Students will watch the "Fresh Prince Project" episode. They will return to their KWL charts to complete the final column (L). Questions that will be posed after viewing the episode will be:

- What did you know about the "Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" prior to viewing this episode? (K)
- What did you want to learn? Why was this something that you saw as important to learn? (L)
- What were Uncle Phil's immediate reactions to Will?
- Why do you think he reacted like this? Were his reactions fair?
- Can Will become a "real" member of the Banks' family? Why or why not?
- What have you learned (L) by the end of this episode?
- Are there any families that look like this now where you live?
- Are any of you members of extended families?

Appendix A



Teacher Resources

"Good Times - The Big Move Part 1 of 6 - YouTube." *YouTube - Broadcast Yourself*. . N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Aug. 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FyzUGfhVCw>>.

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