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Cuba! Identity Revealed through Cultural Connections

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Introduction

I am a New Haven, Connecticut Public School instructor who **loves** to travel abroad. I do so because it affords me the opportunity to connect with people from myriad cultures, providing insight into the lives, customs, and traditions of diverse populations within our global community. It too helps me have a better understanding of diverse groups of Americans whose families live beyond American shores, many with whom I interact right within my New Haven residential and school community. Equally important, getting to experience diverse cultures first-hand helps to dispel misconceptions and false identification regarding specific cultural groups.

Last summer, I was honored to travel to Cuba as part of a team of college students, teaching professionals, and businesspersons who visited the country with Washington State's Pinchot University. While there, I met and conversed with professors, educators, entrepreneurs, scientists, and everyday folk—gaining insight into Cuba and its people from *their* perspective. Through that interaction, I experienced that Cuba, like the U.S., is a diverse nation. Primarily comprised of descendants of the Taíno, the Ciboney, and Arawak (original inhabitants of the island), Africans, and Spaniards, the diversity is evident in the color spectrum of the population, ranging from deep, ebony-hues to sun-kissed tan and creamy vanilla tones. I too learned something deeper.

One afternoon, my Pinchot roommate and I decided to venture out to visit *Callejon de Hamel*, a narrow thoroughfare laden with impressive Santeria murals, sculptures, and Yoruba images. While on route, we noticed a queue of musicians at *Parque de Los Matires Universitarios*. The young people marched, rhythmically playing congas, trumpets, maracas, and claves as nearby clusters of young dancers moved to the syncopated, Afro-Cuban beats. Turns out, they were preparing for Fidel Castro's celebratory birthday parade, scheduled to be held a few days later on Malécon, a long esplanade that borders the coastline of Havana.

Two Cuban by-passers approached us and began to engage in discussion. Initially, my roommate and I put up our guard: our thoughts immediately flashed to hustles and scams often encountered by tourists back in the states. Our preconceived notions clouded our perception: that said, our use of the Spanish language was satisfactory enough to effectively converse with the strangers. This allowed us to successfully communicate with them, dispelling our initial apprehensions. We soon learned that the young woman was an elementary school teacher and the gentleman, a laborer. Both were off from work and happened to be in the vicinity. Our

discussion transformed into a warm welcome to their homeland. The young man noted that the plaza in which we were standing was actually a memorial park to honor university students who had been involved in Cuba's struggle for independence. The young woman spoke of Cuba's free health care system, education, and housing. "For these three things, Cuba is a good place to live, but economically, we are not free." The two shared about how life in Cuba "*no es facil*" (is not easy), but it is good, and they survive.

Our congenial companions continued with us along our approximately 1½ mile walk, providing us with insight into Cuba's economic condition. As my roommate and I took in the surroundings, the young woman pointed to an antiquated building. She noted that it was distribution center where government-rationed food was dispersed to Cuban residents. "Although I am a teacher," she commented, "I get one chicken from there per month." The two spoke of the Cuban peso (CUP) and the Cuban Convertible peso (CUC). "We have a dual currency system here," the young man noted. "Cuban residents must make use of the Cuban peso, but we would prefer to receive convertible pesos," both agreed. "CUCS are higher in value but are mostly used mostly by businesspersons and tourists."

We finally reached our destination. In time, we parted ways. My roommate and I offered the two a few convertible pesos for their time. The pair readily accepted and wished us well. In those brief moments spent with our new-found acquaintances, my roommate and I learned much more than could ever be acquired in a textbook: we gained invaluable, impartial insight into aspects of the Cuban life and the Cuban persona.

A Reflective View

Generally, I found that irrespective of occupation, societal, and/or economic status, many Cubans were spontaneously gregarious like the individuals my roommate and I encountered. The citizens with whom I interacted made me feel comfortable enough to ask candid questions, among them, "*As members of a diverse nation, do you classify yourself as Afro-Cuban, Cuban of Spanish descent, Mixed Heritage...?*" To my surprise, the response was always the same: "I am Cuban." It was refreshing to experience the way the people identified themselves, seemingly with a collective oneness.

Those interactions led me to reflect on the late 50s and mid-60s, a time when the U.S. was at odds Cuba because of the country's camaraderie with Russia. I recollected countless "beneath-the-desk-hands-over-heads" air-raid drills during my elementary school years, coupled with news media broadcast and televised Twilight Zone episodes that alluded to Castro being a communist mad man alongside zany reruns of "I Love Lucy" featuring Cuban-born musician Ricky Ricardo. Because of such images and knowing little else about Cuba, I associated Cuba and Cubans as being America's life-long enemies. I too envisioned all Cubans as being fair-skinned with wavy hair, fiery tempers, and deep Spanish accents.

Those images were somewhat dispelled around the mid-70s, during which time I was pursuing my degree in Education. I student-taught at P.S. 128, located in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan; during that time, the surrounding community was densely populated by diverse, Spanish-speaking residents. There, I worked with Cuban newcomers to America. None had the countenance of Ricky Ricardo. Most were brown-skinned with tightly curled hair and in countenance favored me. Each was congenial and willing to share info about life in his or her homeland (just like the twosome my roommate and I had encountered during our Cuba visit). They readily emphasized how life there differed significantly from New York City apartment living. Many spoke Spanish with a remarkable trace of African dialect that proved most fascinating. In retrospect, I had experienced first-hand how limited interactions and skewed knowledge have an impact on the way we identify and interact with others from cultural backgrounds unlike our own.

Rationale

It is for these collective reasons that I have developed **Cuba! Identity Revealed Through Cultural Connections**. Targeted at Grade 3, but modifiable for use in Grades 4-6, it encourages students to embrace others through an identity lens. This unit—implemented on a trial-run basis throughout the course of my participation in Professor Campbell’s 2015-16 seminar—incorporates Social Studies, Language Arts, Music and Dance, and Social Development on an interdisciplinary basis. Students will conduct research via in-person interviews with Cuban-American residents, entrepreneurs, and others familiar with Cuban culture. Through the use of query and other metacognitive strategies, students will engage in independent and small group research to objectively analyze Cuban culture.

Via student-generated inquiry, family interviews, viewed films, and subsequent informational narrative creations, young researchers will gain a deep understanding of cultural identity. Using select non-fiction and realistic fiction resources, folkloric narratives, and the poetic work of Cuban freedom fighter Jose Martí, students will strengthen reading and reading comprehension skills, synthesizing important information to make text-to-world connections, thus deepening their understanding of the subject at hand.

The ultimate goal is for students to become objective thinkers who learn to effectively embrace, communicate, and interact with others—skills to help them successfully navigate life within our ever-changing global community. Students will additionally learn the mechanics of conducting extensive research, indispensable skills needed throughout their academic and professional pursuits. It is hoped that **Cuba Revealed** serves as a prototype for students (and teachers) to go beyond textbook knowledge, media images, and sweeping generalizations to explore diverse cultures. In this way, we can better understand and constructively embrace diverse cultures that exist within American shores.

Cultural Identity: Setting The Tone

According to renowned Psychologist Erik Erikson, identity is a process rooted in the core of the individual, yet it is very much influenced by where a person sees themselves fitting in to their world. ¹ Erikson grasped that individuals can be understood within their social context, that the individual and society are intricately woven. By learning to embrace one another, and our cultural differences, students, educators, and society overall can strive to develop healthy and engaging ways to connect with others. Inviting children to explore themselves and others through an identity lens is a terrific way to segue into learning about diverse cultures within and beyond our immediate communities.

My students and I establish a pact, asserting that our community is a safe haven where all members can collaboratively interact, work with, and truly get to know one another. In time, we embrace that each member has a unique persona that contributes to the beauty within us all: our goal is to respect, appreciate, and thrive together within the community. We agree to be able to disagree, to bring multiple viewpoints into perspective, and to come to consensus regarding rules to be embraced by each community member. Laying the foundation in this way helps us to tangibly define social identity. Relationships deepen. In time, students recognize that each community member possesses a unique style and persona, identities to be valued and

respected.

Affirmation in Song

This introductory discourse and interaction is complemented by an engaging folksong entitled “Turn the World Around” (visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIPjUvOxAf0>). Created by renowned vocalist Harry Belafonte and sung throughout the Caribbean and beyond, its lyrics remind listeners to go deeper than the surface in getting to know our fellow man irrespective of race, color, or creed. Via this musical complement, students soon grasp that the way we identify ourselves and others shapes our relationships with one another. As we delve further into the unit, young learners will become familiar with the works of several Cuban musicians. Through that experience, they will discover that identity can be conveyed through song. Students will also come to realize that being mindful of ways in which a people define themselves and others opens doors to our effectively interacting and communicating with one another. This will help foster a genuine, unbiased understanding of diverse people within our immediate communities and beyond.

Related Activity: A Supplemental Prelude

To enhance the understanding of cultural identity as it pertains to cultural groups, have students identify themselves in a social context via familial ties, community interaction, and traditions embraced therein. Interviewing family members and friends, gathering photos, and jotting down info regarding family history—specifically pinpointing family members and ancestors from whence they hailed— are great ways to begin. Through this activity, students will discover that identity encompasses relationships and interactions that impact our lives over time. It also accentuates that relationships often cross racial and social boundaries. This approach can be applied when comparing and contrasting people in context with the way they live and identify themselves within their society.

Getting Started

Have students brainstorm to create a listing of ways that people identify themselves: you will find that the children come up with a wealth of ideas. Highlight that one of many ways in which a people identify themselves is via their birthplace and geographic locale. In this regards, have students locate Cuba on the map. Use visual images to highlight select landmasses and geographic terminology (e.g., island, cays, mountains, plateaus...). Doing so will help children gain a sense of the environment in which a people reside.

In addition to key geographic vocabulary, introduce words to highlight the culture itself. (I introduced vocabulary via a PowerPoint presentation that highlighted key aspects of Cuban culture; I also introduced personality words as a prelude to select readings.) Regarding Cuba, below are a few vocabulary words with which to begin:

aboriginal	agrarian	Arawak	communism	Convertible Peso-CUC	culture
customs	democracy	embargo	export	heritage	identity
embargo	Guantanamo Bay	Guantanamera	plantains	Merengue	mores
mosaic	nationalize	nationality	Peso-CUP	ration	resident
revolution	salsa	sanctions	Taíno	The Cold War	totalitarianism

Establish Essential Questions

Throughout this learning adventure, young learners will investigate multiple aspects of Cuban culture. They

will formulate enduring understandings by making use of quality, non-fiction text and on-line resources, along with fables, folktales, and other literary works to help bring perspective to the identity of Cuban people. They too will be afforded opportunities to meet with and interview entrepreneurs and people of Cuban descent. Students will be encouraged to ask and answer probing questions as they relate to select aspects Cuban culture. This will help them make inferences, draw opinions, and gain deep insight regarding identifying Cuba and her people. Points of view will be examined in multiple perspectives. In this regard, focus questions will be examined, to include:

How are the identity of a country and its people created?

How have various people contributed to the country's identity?

What are some of the country's historic and cultural resources, and how do they affect where how people live?

How does culture influence or impact the way people adapt to their environment?

What words best describe a people with regard to how they adapt to their environment or circumstance(s) therein?

Based on objective research and consequential discoveries, how does one identify Cuba?

How might Cubans identify or define themselves?

Can perceptions of identity be impacted based on who is making the observation(s)?

These probing questions are to be revisited and addressed throughout each facet of the study to help students analyze character traits as they relate to motivations, feelings and/or actions in correlation to events and/or circumstances that impact a nation and its people. In this regards, help students develop a personality word list. (Students often make use of basic personality word terminology. Provide them with sophisticated terminology to bolster vocabulary like *gregarious, spontaneous, artistic, generous, persevering, instigative, innovative, industrious, hopeful, resilient, revolutionary, adversarial, survivalist, enduring, disheartened ...*, powerful words that can be used to describe a person and/or people in context with their culture and societal circumstance.)

A Precautionary Note

Cuba has a rich and penetrating history. Some aspects of its historic past are too intense to share with young learners at the elementary grade. Socially-sensitive information included within this overview (under the subheading "Corruption Befalls The Island") has been included for instructors to gain insight into the interaction between the U.S. and Cuba. For example, versus elaborating on specific details regarding life in Cuba during totalitarian President Batista's rule, generally state that unfair business practices occurred between the U.S. and Cuba, in many instances to the advantage of United States' interest beginning with Guantanamo Bay. Bottom line: use discretion where required.

Cuba—A General Overview



Cuba is a multi-ethnically diverse, Caribbean nation. The largest island in the Caribbean, it is located 90 miles south of Florida. It takes but 45-minutes non-stop to reach the country's shores by plane. Its diverse population—a predominant blend of people of aboriginal (Taíno, Ciboney, Arawak), Spanish, and/or African origins—totals approximately 11.4 million. Its rich history heralds its identity.

Cuba's Beginnings

Christopher Columbus arrived on Cuban shores in 1492 and claimed the country for Spain. Cuba's soil was conducive to growing tobacco, coffee beans, and sugar cane. In time, these products—particularly processed sugar—became major exports for the country. The original inhabitants who once densely populated and resided on the land before Columbus' arrival were overtaken. Forced to work as laborers, many succumbed to disease brought over by their Spanish captors and/or lost their lives in the fight against their colonizers. Nevertheless, the Spaniards needed laborers to harvest their crops within the agrarian nation.

Between the 1700 through late 1800s, Spain was actively involved in the African slave trade. Many Blacks—from such regions today referred to as Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and surrounding areas—were captured

and brought to Cuba where they labored on coffee, tobacco, and sugar cane plantations. In time, Spain grew wealthy because of the slave trade and the sugar export.

By the mid-1800s, anti-colonial and slave revolts began to take place on the Caribbean island. For three years beginning in 1895, Cuban revolutionaries fought vehemently to overthrow Spanish rule. Sympathetic to the plight of its Cuban neighbors—and aware that the island could serve as a strategic locale for American military interest—the United States assisted in Cuba’s fight for independence. Because of our country’s involvement, many believed Cuba would serve as an indebted ally to the United States. In a sense, America interceded in Cuban affairs such that it could in theory be deemed its new colonizer.

Post the Spanish-American War, the U.S. maintained a military presence in Cuba. Business and trade went on between the two countries. ³ By 1908, the United States had established a leasing agreement for a naval base in Cuban waters in the territory known as Guantanamo Bay. Cuba agreed to the terms of the leasing agreement. Based on that agreement, the U.S. Navy stored countless tons of coal at a designated site. The coal site was used as a filling station for naval sailing vessels through 1934, when the need for coal had subsided. In time, unbeknownst to its Cuban hosts, the contract was modified such that a naval base could exist on the former coal site. Additionally, the leasing agreement continued to be expanded to the advantage of the United States government. ⁴

Corruption Befalls The Island

Cuba was liberated from Spain. As would be anticipated, new government leaders came into power. During the 1920s through 1933, when prohibition was taking place in the United States, hedonistic social ills—ranging from Mafia-sponsored numbers running (illegal gambling) to prostitution—befell the island sanctioned in part by corrupt government leaders and the American government. Many of America’s elite found Cuba to be a great get-away and an indulgent place to be.

Among the Cuban leaders who promoted this economically-advantageous interaction was President Fulgencio Batista. ⁵ A revered member of the Cuban military, Batista served as the country’s president from 1933 to 1944 and again from 1952 to 1959. Many Cubans—particularly the working class—disliked him. They complained that Batista was corrupt because he favored the rich and did little for the impoverished people of Cuba. ⁶

Under Batista’s rule, the United States and private-land owners controlled much of the land and business enterprises. During the mid-1900s, many American corporations—including AT&T—maintained a working relationship with the Cuban government, gaining profits, but giving Cuba an unfair portion of those revenues in return. ⁷ Guantanamo Bay—today a U.S. military detention center for war criminals—originally served as a leased coal-storage site for the United States government. By 1934, America expanded the terms of the leasing agreement, giving U.S. naval forces full access to the area for use at any time. ⁸ Funds gained from that interaction stirred Cuba’s economy at the Cuban people’s expense. In a sense, the United States supported Cuba’s economy; it also supported Fulgencio Batista’s form of government.

The Revolution Begins

By the early 1950s, then military leader and attorney Fidel Castro Ruz was well known among his people, for he played an influential part in encouraging his countrymen to rebel against the Batista regime. Fidel, as held true for his followers, believed Batista’s unfair rule should come to an end. Together, he and his rebels

launched a revolution. Among Fidel's military entourage were his brother, Raul, and Ché Guevara, an Argentine freedom fighter and dedicated friend. Together, the three along with their soldiers overthrew Batista's government. Fidel Castro became Cuba's president in 1959.

Because the United States had helped Cuba in the past, American government officials *may have* presumed Cuba would continue to embrace its economic dealings with the country. Fidel Castro and his followers, however, believed that the United States engaged in unfair business practices with his nation. He was displeased with the disproportionate amount of profit gained by the U.S., with little benefit to the Cuban people. He too was displeased with the extensive misuse of the Guantanamo Bay leasing agreement.

After taking power, the Cuban government made changes in their economic dealings with the United States. Castro seized foreign-owned businesses in an effort to terminate the control of American-owned industries on the island. In an attempt to promote equity for those who had been disenfranchised, Castro also outlawed racial discrimination and redistributed the wealth on the island so that the impoverished too would be able to thrive on the land. Farms, industries, and communication systems throughout Cuba were nationalized. Upper and middle class constituents of Cuba were stripped of past privileges they had previously enjoyed. Many fled to Miami, Florida.

Castro additionally maintained that the perpetual 1934 lease agreement regarding Guantanamo Bay was illegal. Under Batista's rule, funds toward leasing the property were paid in a timely manner. Castro, however, refused to accept U.S. funds towards the leasing that property. Thereafter, tensions between Cuba and the United States soared.

In time, the United States severed trade and industry ties with Cuba, placing economic sanctions on the country. With no alternative recourse, Castro reached out to other nations: he began to conduct trade with the Soviet Union, today referred to as the Russian Federation. That stunned American government officials, for the United States and the Soviet Union maintained an adversarial relationship; the two countries were at odds regarding the nuclear arms race. America and Russia engaged in discussions regarding the use of the Cuban nation, yet Castro was never brought into the two-way discussion. Although he did not promote the threat of nuclear war against the U.S.—nor fully took on the communistic views of the Soviet Union—America feared that Cuba would align with Russia. Because of Cuba's strategic location, America strongly believed Cuba would obtain those destructive weapons, placing the U.S. in imminent danger.

In October 1960, the United States placed a trade embargo on Cuba. By 1962, the embargo was made permanent. The relationship between the United States and Cuba remained strained until 55 years later.

Initially under Castro's rule, it appeared social and economic conditions would improve for the Cuban nation. By the 70's, Cuba had become economically advanced: the country's health care system and government-managed apartment and homes made housing available to the people. Education for all was promoted. In time—with the U.S. embargo and the downfall of Cuba's primary trade partner, Russia—Cuba faced economic hardship. The residual effect of the embargo continues to impact the country well into the 21st century.

Fidel Alejandro

After more than 50 years, Fidel Castro is no longer *El Presidente de Cuba*. His life journey is most fascinating. Born on August 13, 1926, he was conceived out of wedlock to Cuban sugar plantation owner Angel Castro and his maidservant, Lina Ruz Gonzalez. Young Fidel knew well the arduous work, ill-treatment, and low wages reaped by those who labored in the sugar cane fields, for he himself had seen and on occasion

had worked in the fields alongside the disenfranchised. Additionally, Fidel's father did not claim him as his son for the first 17 years of his life. Because of this, Fidel took on his mother's last name, " Ruz. "

Ironically, it is said that during his childhood years, Fidel had a rebellious spirit. At age 13, he allegedly helped organize a strike of sugar cane workers on his father's plantation. Perhaps his familial relationship with his father, coupled with what he had experienced on the plantation, contributed to his overall behavior, political views, and fervor in fighting on behalf of the underserved and working poor.

When he reached age 17, his father married his mother. At that time, Fidel's last name was officially changed to "Castro." Thereafter, Fidel's father enrolled him in Jesuit boarding schools. Fidel was an intelligent young man, but he was not fond of Jesuit teaching practices and was not the best student. He loved baseball, but he gained popularity as being an all-around athlete.

By 1945, Fidel entered law school at the University of Havana, where he received his Doctorate. Thereafter, he worked as an attorney. His caseload encompassed working on behalf of Cuba's poor. Once again, Fidel Alejandro evidenced the inequities between the wealthy and the impoverished people of his nation. Later, he became involved in politics. The rest is history.

In 2008, due to poor health, the former president resigned from his leadership position. His brother, Raul Castro, has taken over as interim president. Raul Castro intends to lead his country through 2018. Although Fidel Castro is no longer the official leader, he consults with Raul regarding government affairs.

Identifying Castro

Some say Fidel Castro is one of the few leaders who worked on behalf of the people. In many Latin American countries, he is revered as an impressive role model. Under his leadership, free and universal education, medical care, and housing for all Cuban citizens were placed in the forefront. ⁹ Today, his nation has an impressive 97% literacy. Life expectancy among Cubans is 78 years, and the infant mortality rate has significantly decreased. He made efforts to eradicate race discrimination between dark and light-skinned Cubans that ran rampant under previous presidential regimes, uniting the populace. Cuba's education system has produced some of the best physicians in the world. Despite economic sanctions, a deteriorating infrastructure in need of dire repair, and economic woes, many believe Castro and his government continues to work on behalf of the people.

Others believe Castro is a ruthless dictator who for too long has held on to idealistic, non-materialistic views; his anachronistic views do not align with today's changing world. In an attempt to level the social and economic playing field for the poor, he annihilated Cuba's middle class and elite. According to others, Castro's form of government rule must come to an end. How Castro is perceived is a matter of opinion based on life circumstance.

Cuba in the 21st Century

Cuba's economic and societal stance differs greatly today from colonial times. In recent decades, Cuba's sugar industry has waned. Today, the majority of Cubans are employed in the service industry, working as cooks, waiters, cab drivers, laundry workers, physicians, nurses, teachers, truck drivers, mechanics, tour guides, and more. The state employs people to work within its various departments. Some Cubans have been permitted to open their own businesses like restaurants, art shops, and other small business.

Irrespective of their occupation, wages are modest. Upon setting foot in the country today, one would think he or she has been catapulted back to the 50s. The infrastructure is deteriorating, yet stands regally. Despite economic and societal hardships, Cubans have been resourcefully resilient.

Students Dig Deeper

At this point, engage students in exploring Cuban culture in the 21st century. Advise that they will take on the role of researcher. Working in collective teams, they will make use of learned reading strategies to access, analyze, and pool together information to share with a broader community. Together, they too will embrace that Cuba and its people can be identified by the country's history, the people's enduring spirit, the country's overall way of life, and involvement with others.

Lesson 1: Team Informational Research Project

Duration: 8 Weeks, 3 days per week – 50 minute sessions.

Objective: Through this implemented lesson, students will:

- *work together to conduct research as a collaborative team
- * make use of text features, text structures, and learned reading strategies to access and convey key information
- * make use of non-fiction literary and technological resources to access and demonstrate understanding of key information
- *create a collective, realistic fiction narrative grounded in fact, writing in the first-person plural voice to convey thorough understanding of subject matter
- *create an engaging display board to highlight key aspects of Cuban culture
- *articulate their understanding of Cuban culture and identity before classroom peers and/or school community

Multiple Steps: Laying The Foundation

Throughout the course of Professor Campbell's seminar, I experimented with key aspects of the team research project: I learned that timely planning is crucial in the effective implementation of this multifaceted research effort. Parent involvement too is crucial, as student interaction will take place both within and beyond the classroom setting. In this regards, notify parents of the project assignment and the need to assist in coordinating study dates for their children. Provide them with team member phone numbers and E-mail addresses. Be aware that several parents will provide little or no assistance. To counter this possibility, coordinate with your school Library Media Specialist to establish flexible research schedules. Subsequently,

have students visit the Library Media Center as needed. Additionally, incorporate in-class and, where possible, after-school team study sessions into the schedule. Doing so will help fill in the gap.

Thereafter, interface with the public library to borrow an ample supply of Cuba-related informational and fiction resources for classroom use. Purchasing gently used books via Amazon.com serves as a viable complement and is also recommended. Make use of either of these alternatives well in advance of unit implementation; order enough reading materials to accommodate students across needs and abilities levels. Also provide a listing of student-friendly websites, along with team folders, graphic organizers, and notetaking forms for each team. This will help facilitate the info-gathering process.

Next, have your students conduct a K-W-L brainstorming session, generating a listing of subject categories **they** want to investigate. (During our trial run session, my students came up with topic combinations that included Music & Popular Life, Food & Wildlife, Language & Education, People & Communities, Customs & Community, Past History & Government, and Population, Economics, & Religion.)

Subsequently, have students assemble in groups of 3-4 by topics of interest. Set the bar high. Inform students that when completing their report, they will write in the first person plural voice. They too should collectively decide which aspects of their chosen topic will be presented by specific team members. Remind students to refer back to the essential questions when conducting their research. This will help give a sense of the persona of Cuban people. Emphasize that although students are working as collaborative teams, each member will be evaluated based on his/her individual work effort. Each team member will also be held accountable for effectively working both within and outside of the classroom. (Share this information with parents, Library Media Specialist, and Public Library contacts to maintain consistency and uniformity.) Provide each student with a checklist and 8-week pacing calendar. Stress the importance of adhering to the schedule, a sample of which is indicated below:

Weeks 1-2. Visit the public library and/or convene in the school Library Media Center, working individually and/or with team members. Pool together info, and take notes regarding select team topics of interest. Gather a complementary assortment of 3" x 5", 4" x 6", and 5" x 7" pictorial images re: their topic of study. (Provide folders for each student in which they will keep their gathered info.)

Week 3. Compile information, organize notes, and begin developing first draft. Think of ways in which gathered info can help us identify Cuban culture and its people.

Week 4. Revisit the revised draft. Confer with one another and the teacher to assess progress and content accuracy. Where required, make additional edits and/or revisions. Proofread for spelling, grammatical, and content accuracy.

Week 5. Peer/teacher conferencing. Complete final team research report in handwritten or typewritten form. Final review for spelling, grammatical, and content accuracy.

Week 6. Create captions for select pictorial images in handwritten or typewritten form; ensure that pictorial accompaniments supplement and/or bolster provided info.

Week 7. Collaborate regarding the layout and design of the team project display. Decide on presentation format (i.e., what participants will wear, model, demonstrate...). Establish parts to be read by each team participant. Practice reading respective parts fluently, with expression and poise.

Week 8. Team Presentations. Be prepared to collectively present your team project before classmates and/or invited guests. Give it your best!

Unexpected Results

Throughout the preliminary research process, I was astonished by sophisticated discoveries made by student team members, among them, Savion, a beginning reader wise beyond his years. Savion's interest lay in studying Cuba's past history and government. While circulating the classroom to monitor small group discourse, I overheard him equate the tension-filled relationship between Cuba and the U.S. as being similar to three children in a squabble: *"It's like America and Cuba were friends. America wanted to play a game, but Cuba didn't want to, so America stopped playing. Cuba didn't have anyone to play with and did not like being alone. Russia came along, and Cuba and Russia became friends. Cuba thought playing with Russia was better than being alone. America learned that Russia and Cuba became friends. America told Cuba not to hang out with Russia, but Cuba said, "You can't tell me what to do!" After that, America did not speak to Cuba for a long time. Now that's messed up!"*

What a phenomenal interpretation by an eight-year old! Based on his research, Savion deemed Castro to be a compassionate leader. *"He looked out for poor people,"* Savion shared. In response to learning about the flight of middle class Cubans to Florida during the late 50s and beyond, Savion noted, *"If I owned something that I worked hard for, and someone made me give it up, I would be angry and leave too! I would also try to understand why a president would do that, so I would ask President Castro to explain why."* Savion's thought processes made me smile: perhaps we have a future diplomat in our midst.

Lesson 2 - Salsa: More Than Music & Dance

Duration: 1 Day per month, 1½ hour studio sessions within a 5-6 month period.

Service Provider: Dance Studio Entrepreneur Alisa Bowen

Location: Alisa's House of Salsa - New Haven, CT

During this trial-run segment, I once again learned that advanced planning is essential. This time, I sought the assistance of entrepreneurs in our community familiar with Cuban dance forms. Research revealed that a dance studio specializing in Latin dance was located in the heart of New Haven, not far from our school. I subsequently met with choreographer Alisa Bowen. She graciously fit our class into her busy schedule and agreed to work with us over a five-month span. She charged a fee for her services; we managed to negotiate a reasonable, per-session price. (Because I had written a grant and received funding, I was able to financially plan for the first round of dance lessons. During the upcoming 2016-17 school year, grant funding *may not* be available. In this regards, I have devised an alternative plan to cover dance studio rehearsal costs. This includes (1) bringing a proposal before our School-Based Management Team to obtain administrative approval to host a school-wide fundraising event on behalf of my class; (2) taking advantage of Box Tops for Education fundraising initiatives; and/or (3) implementing a weekly class banking program to raise the funds. [Taking on the latter initiative will additionally serve as a hands-on Math and Social Studies lesson to reinforce money calculation, money management, and real-world application.]

Identifying Interaction

Senorita Alisa first visited our classroom during month-end February, during which time she highlighted that

Latin music and dance forms like Salsa, Son, Rhumba, and Merengue are experienced throughout the world. She emphasized that the music and syncopated dance steps that accompany these dances can be traced to Cuba's past history. She shared how black people from West African shores were brought to Cuba aboard slave schooners. Their ankles were shackled with metal chains. As a form of exercise, the bound captives were forced to come up from the ship's hull to exercise above deck. The chains inhibited their movement. Out of necessity, they slid one leg over the next, in unison, to safely move from one locale to another. Their forced, unified movements were often accompanied by the rhythmic beat of a conga drum. According to Miss Alisa, that unified, foot-sliding movement laid the foundation for many Cuban dance steps; today, those movements are used to symbolize the oneness of Cuban people.

Trial Run Outcomes



Our rigorous, monthly dance sessions were reinforced with weekly, student-initiated dance rehearsals. Memorizing numeric dance-step patterns kept the practice on point. As part of this trial-run study, a culminating activity was planned to enable students to present what they had learned before our school community. That opportunity came to fruition on June 9, 2016, when the children performed during our school's annual International Night gala. Before performing, they presented the rationale behind their dance presentation, citing what they had learned from Miss Alisa coupled with their research findings. Dancing in unison, the children demonstrated their understanding of Cuban culture with syncopated know-how and Cuban flair! As a follow up exercise, our class collectively created an expository piece providing instructions on how to execute their Salsa/Merengue routine. My students each agreed that the persona of Cuban people is evidenced in their dance and music forms.

Additional Connections

Student research efforts proved effective. For example, the "Cuban Music & Popular Life" team made use of learned reading strategies to discover background info regarding the music of Celia Cruz and The Buenavista Social Club. They also learned of a revered Cuban folksong entitled "*Guantanamera*," sung by Buenavista Social Club member Campay Segundo. I was impressed with their findings, for the threesome—Jordan, Ella, and Aaron—noted that the song speaks of equality for the poor. They also inferred that Cuban musicians were very creative and cared about their country, for many of the songs incorporated the musicians' views about Cuban life. They noted that this was evidenced in such music selections as "La Vida Es Una Carnivale." My

students additionally cited sources of information to support their findings. (Visit <http://lyricstranslate.com/en/la-vida-es-un-carnaval-life-carnival-celia-cruz-life-carnival.html> for Spanish/English translation.)

The team also embraced that dance and music were not limited to the previously noted rhythmic forms. They highlighted that the “cha-cha” also originated in Cuba. The team additionally learned that one of Cuba’s greatest dancers is a classical prima ballerina, Alicia Alonzo. According to Ella, Miss Alonzo and her husband were supported by the Cuban government to create a dance school. “Their school has been in existence for 60 years,” Ella proudly stated. “It is known as the Ballet Nacional de Cuba!”

As a spin-off of our interactive dance-studio sessions, coupled with their team-study effort, my researchers also inferred that part of the Cuban identity is perseverance and commitment. The entire class concurred that that quality is evidenced in Cuban music and dance forms that span the test of time.

Supplemental Activity: Have students create a signature song to represent the spirit and persona of the class. Have students disperse into collaborative groups to develop lyrics for inclusion in each stanza. Agree upon a background musical accompaniment; if possible, collaborate with your school Music instructor to provide instrumentals. Upon completion, have students embrace their song creation as a classroom anthem. Share the melodic creation with fellow classes within your school. Through the use of song, students can identify themselves as a collaborative, cohesive classroom and/or school body.

Lesson 3 - Culinary Cultural Connections

Duration: 1 Day, 3 Hour Interactive Session

Service Provider: Restaurant General Manager Michael Iamele

Location: Soul de Cuba Restaurant – New Haven, CT

Once again on a trial-run basis, I reached out to businesses within the New Haven area to complement classroom instruction. At the beginning of March 2016, I contacted Soul de Cuba Restaurant General Manager Michael Iamele, asking that he allow my students to visit the restaurant. I requested that he have his staff speak to my students solely in Spanish and allow my students to interview the chef. In this way, students would receive an authentic feel for Cuban culture, the country’s official language, and all that goes into creating traditional Cuban cuisine. Michael agreed on all counts, noting that he and his staff would limit the use of Spanish to basic greetings. Our goal was to help the children immerse themselves in the human-interaction, cultural experience.

As held true for our dance sessions, a fee was involved. Because we were working with third graders, Michael and I negotiated a reduced price for smaller food portions. Once again, because of grant funding, the cost of meal purchases for 25 students (and the instructor) was covered.

Laudable Interaction

Normally, the restaurant opened for business at 11:30 a.m. Michael, however, went the extra mile on our student's behalf. He asked that we arrive at 10:00 a.m., affording students adequate time to converse with the head chef and cooking staff while taking in the overall ambience of the restaurant.

Note, Soul de Cuba is a quaint venue, accommodating approximately 25-adults maximum at a time. Instructors whose class size reaches this capacity should be prepared to bring students to the restaurant **unaccompanied** by adult chaperones. Students should be self-disciplined and well-behaved. Accordingly, teachers must preliminarily set the tone. (Students who prove to be behavioral concerns should not be permitted to participate in the excursion. Arrangements, however, can be made for them to visit the restaurant with their families outside of school hours. Establishing the tone in this manner helps students embrace that behavior and academics go hand-in-hand.) On May 4, 2016, select students ventured to the restaurant to experience Cuban cuisine and culture.

Cuban Etiquette Embraced

Months before visiting Soul de Cuba, the children became familiar with basic Spanish words and greetings that included *"Hello, welcome, good morning, good afternoon, sir, madam, you're welcome, may I have a glass of water please, that's enough, thank you, good-bye, see you later, and the meal was delicious!"* Based on information provided by "People, Customs & Mores" team members, our students also learned about Cuban mealtime etiquette.

"When eating at the dinner table," Alysha noted, "it is optional and polite for someone to make a toast. Should a person decide to do so, others at the table should lift up their glasses and say *"Salud!"* (to your health). After that, everyone sips from their glasses in one accord, then places their glasses on the table." Her teammates chimed in, sharing everything from "appropriate utensil usage" to "following the lead of the elder before beginning one's meal." Once again, students experienced cultural consciousness at its best, making substantive text-to-real-world connections.

The Culinary Adventure Begins

"Bienvenido," Michael greeted as our class entered the restaurant. *"Buenos dias, Señor lamele,"* my students responded, bursting with smiles. As the general manager directed his young patrons to their respective seats, they took in the ambience of the venue brimming with artifacts reflective of Cuban culture. An overhead screen flashed images of Cuban citizens past and present conducting their lives in their homeland. The children were fascinated by the pictorial images. Several asked questions about all they took in; Michael engagingly provided background details. Some noted that several paintings were reflective of deities embraced in the Santeria tradition. Michael affirmed their observations. Impressively, much of what students had begun researching in class was revealed in the surroundings, and the children made immediate connections.



Of particular interest were the musical instruments. As Salsa and Son rhythms played in the background, Michael noted, “Congas, claves, and maracas are very much a part of Cuban life. They bring *salsa — spice* —to Cuban culture!” He called on select students to take turns playing the instruments, and my students readily accepted the invitation. The children—and Michael—had a blast!

Shortly thereafter, Head Chef Adis Romero emerged from the rear of the restaurant. She made note of meals on the menu that were representative of traditional Cuban dishes cooked in the home. Included on the children’s menu were *picadillo* (a savory ground beef stew laced with finely chopped tomatoes, onions, olives, bell peppers, capers, garlic) accompanied by *frijoles negros y arroz blanco* (black beans and white; *plantanos maduras* (sautéed plantains— a mildly sweet, banana-type fruit), and *jugo de naranja, guava, y maracuya* (delicious blend of orange, guava, and passion juice). The meal culminated with *flan* , a sweet and creamy custard laced with a caramelized sauce. Several students asked about how to make the delectable dishes. Chef Romero took a moment to discuss the ingredients for a few of her recipes.



Lunch was to be served at 11:00 a.m., however, a few minutes before it was brought out, Chef Romero announced, “In Cuba, people enjoy dancing!” Immediately thereafter, Michael blasted Cuban instrumental rhythms on vintage audio equipment. “ *Ariba,* ” Chef Romero exclaimed, signaling for the children to join in.

Following her lead, the children formed a conga line and boogied to the rhythm. The restaurant was energized. “ *Juepa!* ” chants and laughter indicated all were enjoying the experience. Shortly thereafter, Chef Romero returned to the rear of the restaurant. The children clamored as the waiter poured beverages and served the meal. Before digging into the banquet before them, Michael beckoned his patrons to lift their glasses: “A toast to learning about Cuba!” he exclaimed. Everyone agreed, clicked drinking glasses, took a sip, and eagerly dove in!

By 12:30 p.m., we departed. Upon returning to the classroom, we convened to discuss our morning excursion. The children indicated they were appreciative of having been able to interact with Michael and the Soul de

Cuba staff. Many made note of how music, dance, food, and dining together played an important part in human interaction. They too inferred that people can be identified by their traditional foods and by the way they interact with one another. Food & Wildlife team members Sydney, Niara, Jayana, and Amare concurred, adding that Cuban food, like Cuban people, is a blend of diverse cultures. The four shared that during their research, they learned of another traditional Cuban meal known as *Moros y Cristianos*, a black bean and rice dish sold in *paladares*—restaurants owned by Cuban workers and/or families. “That meal got its name based on wars that took place between dark-skinned Muslims from northern Africa called Mores and *light-skinned Christians from Spain* called Cristianos,” Niara asserted, emphasizing that the wars took place during Spain’s early history. Jayana shared that although flan is often served in Cuba, her research revealed that the delicious dessert originated in Spain. “No matter where it comes from,” she exclaimed, “I **really** enjoyed sampling flan!”

We had 50 minutes remaining to conduct in-class, team-project research. Each member eagerly entered into their respective stations to collaborate on their select topics of study.

A Related Activity: “Delectable Diversity” Recipe Sharing

Have students interview family members to learn about select food creations passed down from generation to generation. Students can record recipe ingredients along with the steps needed to make the select dish. Recipe submissions can be compiled to create a “Delectable Diversity Cookbook.” Take this activity a step further, and host a “Delectable Diversity Day Food-Sampling Celebration!” With the assistance of Mom, Dad, or another committed and capable family member, have students create their family’s special dish, and bring it in for classroom sharing. This event can be used as a social development piece to get diverse family members within your classroom to become acquainted with one another, while promoting parent involvement and student engagement.

Lesson 4. Identity: Reveal It Through the Arts!

Cuba’s history and ambience are depicted in a multitude of artistic forms. The music is often steeped in a blend of African, Spanish, and indigenous rhythms. The Son, which has a melodic bass that heralds patriotism and love, compels listeners to sway to the rhythm. Grammy-award winning Celia Cruz brought Salsa—rich with conga beats, claves, and blaring trumpet accompaniments—to the forefront. Two of her signature tunes, “*La Vida Es Una Carnivale*” and “*Azucar Negra*,” herald the soul of Cuban people. “*La Vida*” emphasizes that despite inequities that befall us in life, life is worth living, so live it! “*Azucar Negra*” accentuates the connection between sugar and the beauty and resilience of Afro-Cuban people. Machito, Mongo Santamaria, Emilio Estefan, and more brought Cuban sounds to world-renowned, award-winning status. American, world-renowned trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and along with other well-known jazz greats other frequented the island, infusing jazz with Afro- Cuban rhythms.

Great Cuban writers, such as revered freedom fighter, Jose Martí, heralded the love, strength, and beauty of his country and its disenfranchised people in poetic form. Martí, is known for his poetic work, “*Cultivo Una Rosa Blanca*” (“I Cultivate The White Rose”). A portion of this poem has been memorialized in the country’s folkloric song, “*Guantanamera* .”

The visual arts are evidenced throughout Cuba. Many Cuban artists like José Rodríguez Fuster are resourceful, making use of recycled materials and available media to convey aspects of Cuban culture. In this regards, encourage students to make use of Art options to convey an understanding of themselves in context with their communities. Provide students with creative license to convey a depiction of themselves using any of the

three approaches.

In Literature & Music : Have students learn about the life of Jose Martí (visit <http://www.biography.com/people/jos%C3%A9-mart%C3%AD-20703847>). Subsequently, have them read his poem, “I Cultivate A White Rose.” Then, listen to the revered Cuban folksong, “Guantanamera.” Make note of how the song incorporates a portion of Martí’s poetic verses into the melody, heralding Cuban views about class equality and economic and social freedom for the poor. Using the poem and song as a springboard, have students consider social ills that plague their community and/or American society overall. Have them create a poem and set the words to a melody to constructively address those societal ills (e.g., gun violence, bullying, racism...). Their creative effort can serve as a mantra for positive change with which others within the school community and beyond can embrace and identify.

In the Visual Arts : Some Cuban visual artists, like José Rodríguez Fuster ¹⁰, recycle ceramics, LP records, plastics, and other materials to create sustainable art. Their work is used to portray images of a people while physically enhancing the community. Their artistic creations convey empowering images with which the community can identify. Using ceramic tiles, LP records, or plastic plates and assorted acrylic paints, have students paint a pictorial image of themselves, their family members, their neighborhood, and/or scenes that herald their identity.

Conclusion

Thus far, the preliminary implementation of this unit has proven effective and engaging. My students made identity connections via hands-on, interactive cultural experiences. Their understanding was demonstrated in the projects they continue to work on, coupled with the way students enthusiastically shared their new-found information with others. (My blossoming researchers had an opportunity to demonstrate what they had learned regarding Cuban culture and identity with fellow grade-level classmates. They shared their knowledge of Cuban dance before our larger school community. Parents were able to experience their children’s in-progress work effort. All were impressed with how much our young learners had grasped and absorbed. Many are additionally excited to know that this type of learning experience will continue in the upcoming school year.)

Moreover, I marveled at the way my third graders implemented the research process to make identity connections. They made use of learned reading and research strategies to immerse themselves in Cuban culture, becoming familiar with identities that many Cuban people themselves embrace. I am also impressed with the way students applied what they had learned to experiences encountered within our New Haven community. For example, Music & Popular Life team members Ella and Jordan pointed out that Jose Martí’s “White Rose” poem was mounted along the wall near the handrail that lead to the upper level of the Soul de Cuba Restaurant. The team’s glimpse into the poet’s literary creation during their course of study allowed them to relate to a major figure in Cuban history. As a result, the children were empowered, once again making text- to-experiential-real-world connections!



The trial-run implementation of parts of this unit helped me realize that students **can** experience culture and identity in tangible, impartial, and engaging ways. The result is an invaluable learning experience to last a lifetime. Across the board, Cuban identity and culture appear to have been objectively embraced. The preliminary implementation of this curriculum unit, however, only touches the surface. There is much more to be explored.

Moving forward, I will fine-tune this unit, modifying it to incorporate other countries whose diverse populations are reflected within our school community, neighborhood, and beyond: *South Africa, Lithuania, Morocco, Argentina* ... the designated country list *and* my travel itinerary will be expanding, as too will my students' insightful ability to embrace the world through an impartial lens!

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Figures 1, 3-5. Photos of Santeria practitioners posing for the camera in *Plaza de la Catedral* in Old Havana, Cuba; Soul de Cuba restaurant with student interaction, and classroom study taken and provided by Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins.

Figure 2. Photo re: International Night culminating Salsa-Merengue dance performance; permission for use granted by reporter/photographer Daniela Brighenti, New Haven Independent.

Implementing District Standards

Cuba! Identity Revealed Through Cultural Interactions is aligned with the Common Core Curriculum Standards for Social Studies and Language Arts. Based on scaffolded instruction, students will embrace the following:

Social Studies Curriculum Content Standards 1.5, 1.13, 2a, and 2c. Students will discuss and understand the characteristics and interactions among and across cultures, social systems, and institutions; compare and contrast identities of ethnic/cultural groups; and identify/compare and contrast the lifestyles and rights of

citizens within diverse cultures.

Language Arts Content Standards 1 and 2. Students will describe their thoughts, opinions, and questions that arise as they read and listen to a text; use non-fictional and realistic fiction text structures to predict, construct meaning, and deepen understanding of text to summarize content; identify characters, settings, themes, events, ideas, relationships, and details found within the text; work both individually and on a collaborative basis in collecting and historical info; gather information from a variety of primary and secondary sources including published resources and electronic media to discover non-fictional support info; read/share their creative writings with partners, who will constructively critique the work, highlighting elements in the literary piece that coincide with select topics of study.

Endnotes

1. E. H. Erikson. *Identity and the Life Cycle* , 41-46.
2. Kenneth D. Allan, *The Social Lens: An Invitation to Social and Sociological Theory* , 76-77.
3. Sarah Cameron, *Insight Guides: Cuba*, 47-50.
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6. *Ibid*, 37 - 68.
7. Sarah Cameron, *The Revolution* , *Insight Guides*, 61.
8. *The Coal Trade Journal* (June 16, 1909), 434.
9. Luis Martinez-Fernandez, *Revolutionary Cuba: A History* , 63-68.
10. <http://havana-cultura.com/en/visual-arts/jose-fuster>. Provides background info re: the works of visual artist José Rodríguez Fuster; highlights the functional aspects of art and Fuster's use of neighborhood homes as a collective canvas to bolster pride in culture and community.

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