



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1990 Volume V: American Family Portraits (Section II)

The Family as Seen Through Interpretive Dance

Curriculum Unit 90.05.03
by Michelle Elaine Edmonds

The primary goals of this unit are to focus on the differences and similarities of different ethnic and economic American families. We will then study different music and typical dances pertaining to these families after which we will be able to choreograph dances that will portray these families.

I teach dance at Roberto Clemente Middle School in New Haven. My students are 7th and 8th graders. The community in which the school is located is predominantly populated by Spanish speaking and African American people. Though the students at Roberto Clemente have some knowledge of each others cultures, it has often bothered me to see racial separation among them. There is even separation among the American Hispanics and the bilingual Hispanic students. I have often felt that there was some lack of knowledge of similarities in the cultures that caused this separation among peers.

By studying these cultures and having fun through an experience in dance, the students will be able to identify the similarities and cultural diversity in each other is families and perhaps feel closer to one another.

I want them to realize there have been other racial groups that “moved through” the slums and ghettos in America other than themselves. I also want to prove to them that there are other means by which to change their lifestyles other than a miraculous event that permits them to move out of these conditions in which they live. I believe most of my students think most blacks and Hispanics live in ghettos and must remain there. It is as if they feel it is their designated place to live, love, and die.

I also want to use this unit and dance to dispel notions that ballet is a dance form solely for white people or that salsa and meringue are strictly Latin dances with no African roots or influences. We will basically use jazz, modern, and ballet dance forms to present our living pictures and interject our choreography with cultural dances. We will also study dancers who are specialized in these basic forms of dances but also represent our different families when relevant.

The first book we will use is titled *La Vida*, by Oscar Lewis. It is an anthropological study of a low income family in Puerto Rico. Though this true story is set in the 1950's, there is cultural behavior and language found in the book that is still commonly used today. Many of the characters are well displayed in the book.

Each chapter focuses on one member of the family i.e., their thoughts, feelings, fears, living conditions, and personal histories. From this rich material I would like to have the students focus on a chosen character and later act out this character in a one act play written together by the students. This play will eventually be set

to music of the period set by the book and evolve into a dance combination.

The family in *La Vida* is very lively and outspoken. A reader senses they love to engage in active and sometimes sensual dances. They are also fond of their own cultural dances like salsa and meringue. This liveliness would work well in jazz dance combinations. Jazz itself allows one to move freely and to express the family exemplified in *La Vida*.

We will then examine American Puerto Rican life through two wonderful books written by Piri Thomas. The first is titled *Down These Mean Streets*. It is an autobiographical account of Piri Thomas' formative years as he grew up in Spanish Harlem between the 1950's and 1960's. Piri Thomas writes very descriptive accounts of el barrio and also gives a detailed account of the prejudice and confusion he experienced because he was darker than the other members of his family and often identified by others as an African American.

These two themes will work well with the students at Roberto Clemente. There are similarities that both groups (Puerto Ricans and African Americans) will be able to readily identify with. During the years Mr. Thomas writes about heroin and other drugs that were very popular. He writes candidly about his own use of drugs and their destruction after the drugs invaded his neighborhood. The students at Roberto Clemente know this same destruction because their neighborhood is heavily bombarded by drug dealers and users. They see both sides of the drug scene—the glamorized and the destructive.

After we have discussed the book in detail and conversed about the many similarities found that mirror life in the student's environment, I would like to give them a mirroring exercise using ballet as the dance form. Students will represent both races that predominate their environment and face each other. They will be asked to mirror each other's actions one at a time and then discuss the similarities in their movements. It will be interesting to see these movements through ballet which is a more rigid form of dancing and mime set to music.

The second book by Piri Thomas is titled *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand*. It is a continuation of his first book. Mr. Thomas writes about what he found when he returned from a seven year prison term. He writes about the aftermath of the drugs that eventually landed him in jail and his inability to get a job because of lack of experience and a union that was open to whites only. He eventually is led to life in the church by a persevering aunt who helped to reshape his future. He eventually worked with street kids and their everyday problems that included drugs and gang violence.

This book will show the students that there are other options that can be both legal and fulfilling. We will use the poverty and vitality of the ghetto described in this book to choreograph dances using the jazz dance form.

It will also be interesting to note any similarities between *La Vida* and Piri Thomas' books since they portray Puerto Ricans in to different geographical locations. Once we've finished with these books and their corresponding dances we will view *West Side Story* (particularly the dance that interprets the conflict between the Puerto Ricans and the Italians). We will then note any similarities between our own dances and those of the movie's choreographer. The students will also be asked to discuss different ways to incorporate basic daily moves, actions, and themes (such as walking, laughing, tragedy . . . etc..) into dance choreography.

We will then glimpse at selected pages from *Five Families* by Oscar Lewis. It is another anthropological study focusing on different families in Mexico. The author presents the homes and characters that richly make up families in a peasant village as well as a slum tenement and an upper class district.

The next ethnic group that we will study will be the Jews. Because they express pride in their heritage through everyday norms and rituals they will be especially interesting. I was astounded at the students at Roberto Clemente when they viewed the Anne Frank exhibit last fall because they really didn't know much about the Jewish culture. I'd like to focus on their traditions that have been practiced for many years. Our main focus however will show the intolerance many Americans greeted immigrating Jews with and life among them in specific areas such as New York's Lower East Side. I then plan to take the students to an Israeli dance class.

Another group of immigrants I would like to study are the Chinese. They too have a rich culture inspired by ancient traditions and norms. We will especially study family life and the important significance of many of their parades. These should be especially interesting when interpreted into dance. We will also have a class speaker demonstrate various dances, both past and present, from China. The students will then participate in a workshop where they will learn to perform a cultural dance with a familial theme.

The last family we will study will be the African American family. We will touch on life in Africa, past and present, slavery (in the United States as well as Puerto Rico), and migration of the freed slaves to the northern states.

We will read excerpts from *Manchild In The Promised Land* by Claude Brown. This book depicts life in Harlem. Like Piri Thomas, Claude Brown wrote an autobiographical account of growing up amid poverty, drugs, and gangs. Actually he was an inspiration to Mr. Thomas. The students will be asked to note the similarities and differences between both author's families. We will then use the modern dance form to interpret Mr. Brown's family. However, their interpretation will be preceded by a segment that will be choreographed by the students. This segment will demonstrate the migration of African Americans and their families from the south looking to establish their own place in America; particularly the north.

We will touch on the life of Alvin Ailey. This late choreographer depicted scenes from his life and his community in dances that later made him famous. This will help reinforce lessons on how to make everyday movement work in choreography. The students will also take a field trip to the Alvin Ailey in New York to take a modern dance class.

Once we have collected our data and experimented with traditional and cultural dances within the histories of different families we will be able to present our living family portraits in a recital. We will perform this recital for the school. Dance is a fun and educating medium that will help inspire and enlighten the students. They will also enjoy sharing choreography and teaching it to one another. Our collective dances will build a recital that will serve as an effective instrument from which to learn about our different and often similar cultures.

LESSON # 1

Objective To point out obvious and subtle similarities and differences that exist in the student's families.

Direction Observe your family for one week. Write down everyday actions and activities your family engages in. Talk to an older relative and ask questions about his/her life as a teenager. Ask about social problems, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, education, etc.

LESSON # 2

Objective To show the students one view of life in Puerto Rico as seen through the eyes of one poverty stricken family.

Direction Have the students read the first chapter of *La Vida* in class aloud. Assign the next two chapters for homework.

Lesson Write a descriptive character sketch of the characters you have been introduced to in the book. Write your own opinion of these characters as well. Do any of these characters remind you of a friend of your family or a relative?

LESSON #3

Objective To show the students how to incorporate actions and behavior into dance choreography.

Direction View the fight scene of *West Side Story* with your students and discuss how the kicks, punches, knives, and anger are “danced about” in the choreography.

Lesson: Help the students incorporate their own actions into a dance skit. For example, you could choreograph a dance depicting lunch time in the cafeteria. Incorporate eating, talking, drinking, and even a food fight into the dance.

LESSON #4

Objective To familiarize the students with a famous dancer or choreographer and to enhance reporting skills.

Direction Assign each student a book report on a famous dancer or choreographer. Take them to the library and help them search for a book to research their assigned person.

Lesson Write a two page book report about an assigned famous dancer or choreographer and share your information in class.

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>