



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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A Close Look at Mexico

Curriculum Unit 97.01.04
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Since Mexico is such a close neighbor to the United States, one may find oneself curious of its culture. For those who have been curious enough to visit, there are usually no regrets for time well spent. Mexico has much to offer culturally. Its population is diverse and through the years, they have produced fine literature, art, and music. Moreover, because of Mexico's closeness, the United States is easily able to relish its cuisine.

It is becoming more common to come across a Spanish-speaking family or individual in the United States. It is also very common to find a preponderance of Spanish speaking people in a community as is evident in parts of California, Florida, New York, Texas, and New Mexico. There are well over 2 million Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in Los Angeles alone. Mexican people are crossing United States borders daily and settling in this country. As they become more a part of the country and integrate their background with American culture, a look at their culture becomes more enticing. Moreover, it becomes more important to be more sensitive linguistically. Firstly, we must accommodate Spanish speaking Mexicans in our businesses, stores, banks, and government buildings by including directions and signs in Spanish. Secondly, some of us may find it necessary to acclimate ourselves to the Spanish language in order to communicate effectively. This especially holds true for teachers that find themselves with a Spanish speaking student who is lonely and scared in an English speaking classroom.

The intent of this unit is to allow elementary students the opportunity to discover Mexico and its culture. The way in which students will do this is with as many hands on activities as possible. Experiencing a particular subject matter in this hands on fashion will make learning more meaningful and exciting. For example, students will not just taste Mexican food, but they will cook it. They will read recipes, gather ingredients, and cook the food in the class. They will not just look at an article of traditional Mexican clothing and pass it around, but they will make clothing and wear it during the day. In addition to this, they will make murals in the style of famous Mexican artists and display them throughout the school. The more students can stay away from ditto sheets and the "paint by numbers" approach, the more effective this unit will be.

This unit will be implemented at Davis Street School and is targeted towards a second grade class but can be adapted to higher or lower grades. Recently, Davis Street School has reached a Magnet School status. It is expected that the school's population will be more racially diverse in the future. However, for the time being, this unit will be used for a population that is mostly African-American with a small percentage of white and Latin-American students. The unit will also be used during the latter part of the year. Students advance considerably towards the last half of the year and are more ready to meet with more difficult tasks such as

effective writing. This topic will not be done in conjunction with other second grade classes, however, other classes throughout the school are doing similar studies of other countries at this time of the school year.

Annually, Davis Street School celebrates International Day in conjunction with Black History Month. On this day, classes celebrate the country that they have been studying by serving food, dressing in that country's traditional clothing, and holding a school wide assembly. For the past two years my second grade class has studied and celebrated Mexico for this event. For food, we served arroz con pollo(yellow rice with chicken), frijoles negros(black beans), guacamole, nachos, and burritos. We wore the clothing that we made and paraded around the school. Students found this to be a very exciting culminating activity, however, not one that can be shared by all schools. In the following pages, I will suggest ideas for making your classroom a Mexican restaurant that can be visited by anyone in the school during the day. Students will be given jobs in the restaurant such as cashier , waiter/waitress, and host/hostess. A menu will be created that will include prices and food will be purchased with "play pesos." Also, the restaurant will be decorated with the murals that students will create as a result of this unit.

This unit will include topics such as language, music, food, clothing, holidays, art, literature, and people. It will not, however, exclude creative writing activities. Writing prompts can be extracted from any topic in the unit and should be done often. If students keep a daily journal, this would be an opportunity to write about what they are learning about Mexico at that time. Once students "absorb" Mexican culture, they will create stories by pretending that they are a Mexican boy or girl for a day and tell of all the things they would do in Mexico. Many of the activities in this unit will be co-operative learning activities. That is to say, students will be working together in small groups for activities that include having a simple Spanish conversation, and creating murals.

Following the unit objectives which are presented on the following page, the unit will be broken into topic area and each area will be expanded on. Lesson plans will not be included at this point, but topics will include background information and plans of topic implementation. The unit will be introduced with literature. From the chosen book(s) students will discuss setting and characters. They will discuss how these settings and characters are different from them and how they are the same. At this point, the concept of culture will be discussed.

OBJECTIVES

1. To expose students to the diverse population of Mexico and compare it to that of the United States.
2. To learn and sing traditional songs of Mexico including the national anthem.
3. To memorize simple Spanish vocabulary and be able to express greetings, age, likes, and dislikes.
4. To cook Mexican dishes by reading recipes.
5. To create a class mural in the style of traditional Mexican artists.
6. To read Mexican children's literature and respond to it through the creative writing process.

LITERATURE

This unit will be introduced with the book *Hill of Fire* written by Thomas P. Lewis and illustrated by Joan Sandin. The story is based on the eruption of Paricutin volcano in 1943. It takes place in the state of Michoacan, on a farm owned by an Indian named Dionisio Pulido.

The story describes a farmer that is not very happy because he feels that on his farm, “nothing ever happens.” Every day he is faced with the same breakfast and the same chores. The people in the village feel that the farmer is foolish because they are happy with everything that they have. (At this point, I would ask students to name some of the things that they have in their town to see if they name some of the same things that the village has such as a school and church). As the story continues, the farmer is working on his farm with his ox and plow. As his plow is digging the earth, it gets stuck and gray smoke starts to escape from the hole. The hole hisses and spits out sparks and soon they realize that a volcano is erupting. The farmer and his village move to a new location which ends up being a little bigger and better than the old one. The farmer becomes content on this new village and no longer complains that “nothing ever happens.”

I feel that this book is a great introduction to this unit because it shows a lot of different people and what they do in this village. There are also children in school and a description of an old church with a bell. Students immediately begin to see what life is like for a Mexican farmer and his family during the 1940’s. They will be able to relate to the way the little boy in the story decides to play a game when he has nothing better to do by throwing pebbles in a hole that he dug in the earth.

Another book that I feel would be effective during the unit’s introduction is called *Friends from the Other Side* written by Gloria Anzaldua and illustrated by Consuelo Mendez. This is the story of a Mexican boy named Joaquin who crossed the Rio Grande River into Texas with his mother in search for a new life. Upon his arrival, he befriends a young Mexican American girl named Prietita. Prietita protects Joaquin from her family and friends that tease him and call him the mojadito or the wetback. Eventually, Joaquin must hide from the Boarder Patrol who drives up and down the streets looking for illegal immigrants. Prietita hides the boy and they make a successful escape.

This book does a great job at showing children what it is like to be a Mexican child in a poorer community. It deals with friendships, economy, and community. It also introduces students to a Mexican card game called loteria which students will be doing as a result of this unit. This book also provides teachers an opportunity to explain why numbers of Mexicans that try to make it safely across the borders of the United States. It lends itself to let the students act out with each other a make-believe situation where they can pretend that someone from the class is an immigrant that knows nothing of the country he just came to. How can other students make him/her feel comfortable and welcome just as Prietita did to Joaquin.

One final great quality of *Friends from the Other Side* is that it is written in Spanish as well as English. One page has the English text and the other page has the same text in Spanish. This allows students to hear the Spanish language in story form. It lets them compare Spanish sentences directly to English sentences. It also provides them an opportunity to learn some Spanish vocabulary that is important in their every day lives such as the words friend, food, and play.

Another book that is incorporated into the unit is called *Uncle Nacho’s Hat*. This is a Nicaraguan folk tale adapted by Harriet Rohmer and illustrated by Mira Reisberg. This book is also written in Spanish and in English in the same fashion as *Friends from the Other Side* . This tale is about a man called Uncle Nacho who

discovers that his hat is old, full of holes, and is no good to him anymore. His niece realizes this and buys him a new hat. But Uncle Nacho has trouble giving up his old hat. He tries to get rid of it but it keeps finding its way back to him. After telling his niece of this problem, she recommends that he stop thinking of his old hat and start thinking of his new hat.

This book provides a good opportunity to introduce children to the Mexican sombrero. It's a good point to have children start to learn more about traditional Mexican clothing and make their own. From this story, students can make sombreros and Mexican Indian huipils which is a simple sack like shirt with openings for the head and arms.

MUSIC

It is my intent to have students learn popular Mexican songs which are short and easy to memorize. The resource I will be using the most for this task is a book called *Arroz con Leche Popular Songs and Rhymes from Latin American* selected and illustrated by Lulu Delacre. This collection includes words in English and Spanish and music accompaniment for piano or guitar. The following is an example of one of the short songs:

Alla en la fuente	The Fountain
Alla en la fuente	There in the fountain
habia un chorrito;	A little streamlet
se hacia grandote,	Would smell so grandly
se hacia chiquito;	Then wither sadly.
estaba de mal humor,	It could not but shed a tear
pobre chorrito	It felt too hot,
tenia calor	The poor little dear.

Upon completion of learning these songs, we will visit other classes and perform a song for them. This may seem challenging for second graders, however, I have heard first graders memorize songs in other languages and I feel that given enough time, it is possible. If you play any musical instruments or are musically inclined, you will have no problem teaching these songs. They lend themselves best to the guitar since that is such an important instrument used in much Mexican music. If you do not have a musical background, I suggest collaborating with your music teacher.

FOOD

Food is such a fun subject for everyone. Children love to eat and experiment with food. When they are introduced to a new kind of food, they taste it as others wait with great anticipation for the tasters reaction. Moreover, it has been my experience that students love to taste their own food that was prepared by themselves and other classmates.

Mexican food is a very popular and well liked by those who frequent many restaurants. It has become a top choice for people looking for an interesting meal. The Mexican menu offers something completely different from that of "American" cuisine. It has a reputation for being spicy and filling. One may find themselves almost "having fun" while they are making their choice from the menu.

Students will first be introduced to foods found on a menu from a Mexican restaurant. They will discuss the common ingredients found in many of the dishes. They will also become familiar with very common hot sauces, dips, and chips. After becoming familiar with the menu, the class will choose a dish that sounds very appetizing to them and we will cook it from scratch. I think that the important thing here is that the students get to pick their own dish to cook and will therefore be more motivated in the project.

After experimenting with many different foods, the class will “open a restaurant” in the classroom. They will create their own menu and dictate the prices. A menu will be designed and distributed throughout the school. Patrons will be paying with pesos which will be given out at the door. Students will have to accept the pesos and be able to make change. When an order is taken, the children will serve the food and respond with “Buen provecho”(Enjoy your meal). This activity may cost a little unless you can ask for each parent to contribute a little which is usually not a problem.

This experience will give students a lasting impression of Mexican food. I find it common for children to enjoy pizza, french fries, and burgers the most. It is my feeling that they will include some Mexican dishes amongst their favorites.

CLOTHING

As stated earlier, The story *Uncle Nachos Hat* would be a good place to introduce traditional Mexican clothing. Since the sombrero is the most well known, students may begin by creating their own. A variety of materials should be used and can be brought in by students.

The huipil will also be included. This garment is sack like with holes for the head and arms. It is made from rectangular strips of cloth and may be long, short, narrow, or wide. Heavy wool is sometimes used, however, cotton is most common. Huipils are made from one, two, or three pieces of garment sewn together lengthwise. Small holes can be cut for the arms or the sides can remain open for more comfort. In Mexico, the huipil is worn only by the women. This garment can be a project that the girls of the class create.

Another garment of interest is called the quechquemitl. This garment is also worn by women and is described as “cape like.” A typical construction would be for a rectangular piece of cloth to be folded in half. However, when the garment is draped over the body, the head goes through one of the corners and the bottom corners are left hanging in the front and the back.

The skirt is usually a long woven rectangular cloth and is worn by wrapping it around the body and tucking in one corner. There are many different weaves, colors, and sizes for these skirts. Some of the Spanish names for these skirts include manta, lia, costal, sabana, and enredo.

Belts are worn by both men and women. These belts are made of cloth and are decorated with patterns or stripes. The men’s belts can be wider than women’s belts, almost scarf like, but this is not always the case. The belt is usually a decorative feature but may be covered by long huipils or skirts.

Sandals have a traditional Mexican character but may be harder to produce. It may make more sense for students to wear sandals brought from home with an understanding that the traditional Mexican design would be a little different.

These traditional Mexican costumes are not hard to reproduce. Your greatest need is enough fabric for a class. The designs are simple geometric shapes and stripes and can be added with extra fabric and glue. There is nothing complicated and students will feel successful when they are finished. Clothing can be taken out and put on anytime your class begins work on the unit. This will set the mood to learn more about Mexico.

PEOPLE

Mexico's population is comprised of a wide variety of racial and ethnic groups. Students can compare this to the population of the United States or even in their own classroom. It would be important to point out to students that Indians are believed to have migrated over from Asia 40,000 to 60,000 years ago. In addition, up to about 2,000 years before European settlement, Aztec civilizations contained impressive architectural design, irrigation technology, and social structure. After the European settlement in the early 1500's, Europeans along with Indians have dominated the country in population.

These days, most of the population is living in the cities. People were pushed from rural areas to the cities due to a lack of jobs and opportunities. Many Mexicans still find it necessary to cross the borders into the United States in search for new opportunities as illustrated in the story *Friends from the Other Side*.

Children will not be surprised to learn that all Mexican children ages 6 to 14 are required to go to school. There are both public and private schools just like the United States. Not surprisingly, the private schools offer a superior education to the public schools but are only available to those with the financial means.

Although Spanish is the official language of the country, there are still some places where Indian language dominates. We will, however, be concentrating on the former for this unit. There are also some places in the United States where Spanish dominates. As Spanish speaking people fan out over the country, it is more likely that the language will become more the mainstream.

I feel that the best way to introduce students to Mexican people is through literature and video. Through literature, students will become familiar with characters and their ways of living and speaking. Children can also role play characters and stories as a way to make the experience more enjoyable. Spanish speaking television stations also offer children's programs which you can encourage students to view. It would be worth while to have students watch one of these shows and write what they think was happening.

Perhaps the most effective way for students to get to know Mexican people is to invite someone from the community that has a sense of his/her Mexican culture to come in to speak to the class. This person may want to discuss his family traditions and some Mexican holidays that he/she celebrates. Students would be able to ask questions and really get a sense of Mexican people.

ART

Our main focus for art will be on the mural, particularly those of Diego Rivera. Diego was a 20th century painter who took an interest in painting murals in public places. He particularly enjoyed Mexican themes and people for his subject. He was interested in making sure that everybody, including the poor, saw his paintings and this is why he chose to paint on public walls.

Diego was born in 1886 in the town of Guanajuato. As a young child, he enjoyed spending much time with animals, particularly his pet goat. Soon, he took an interest in drawing. He enjoyed drawing inventions that he made up or mechanical parts from his toys that he took apart. He even developed the habit of drawing on the walls of his house so his father covered one room with canvas so he could have a place to draw.

At 10 years old, he became a student at the San Carlos art academy. There he learned many techniques and studied other European artists. Eventually, he felt that his art was exclusive to only the well educated and he felt it was important for all classes of people to see his work. At this time, he took an interest in painting murals in public places. Most of his work can be seen in Mexico and some in the United States.

I think a great way to introduce the works of Diego Rivera to students is through a book on his life taken from the series *Getting to Know the Worlds Greatest Artists* written and illustrated by Mike Venezia. This book gives information similar to that above and is written for elementary students.

After exploring this book, a class mural will be created. We will first decide on a subject to paint then draw pictures of what it might look like. Students will work in small groups and everyone will contribute. The mural will be done on the wall in the class or on a piece of canvas that can be stuck to the wall. This project will be completed by the time the class restaurant is ready to open.

Lesson Plan 1

Creative Writing

Objectives:

Students will create their own stories given a writing prompt.

Students will recognize and include proper punctuation and grammar including capital letters, periods, question marks, and complete sentences.

Materials:

Friends from the Other Side by Gloria Anzaldua, paper, pencils.

Procedure:

Read *Friends From the Other Side* to students.

Ask guiding questions during the story including how they would feel if they were the character Joaquin coming to a strange new land.

After completing the story, create a web with the class based on the words “New Friend.” Fill in the web by asking students how they would make a new friend that they met comfortable.

Have students create their own stories about a new child that comes to the classroom. This new child does not know anyone and feels very uncomfortable. How would you make this new child feel welcome?

Closure:

Let students share their stories with the class. Publish their stories by mounting them on construction paper and create a bulletin board with them or laminate stories and bind them together to make a class book.

Lesson Plan 2

Art

Objectives:

Students will research the life of Mexican muralist Diego Rivera through literature.

Students will become familiar with the concept of the “mural” as seen through the eyes of Diego Rivera.

Students will create a class mural of a predetermined subject matter chosen by them.

Materials:

Diego Rivera from the series Getting to Know the Worlds Greatest Artists by Mike Venezia, paints, brushes, crayons, markers, construction paper, bulletin board.

Procedure:

Read story *Diego Rivera* to students.

Discuss what he liked to create in his murals and who he created them for.

Ask students what they feel would be an important subject to portray in a class mural that they would create for the school.

Have students draw individual drafts of their mural idea.

Share with the class all of the positive attributes of the individual drafts.

Narrow down the subject matter of the mural and prepare the bulletin board by covering it with white construction paper.

Let students work in small groups on the mural. Assign each group a small task such as coloring the sky or outlining figures.

Closure and Follow-Up:

Ask students why they feel the subject matter that they chose for the mural is important. Have them give the mural a name and label it. Invite parents and other classes to see it and encourage them to ask questions.

Lesson Plan 3

Spanish

Objectives:

Students will use simple Spanish words and phrases such as greetings, expression of likes and dislikes, numbers, and colors.

Students will keep a journal of Spanish they have learned and words that they wish to learn.

Given a block of time, students will work in small groups and use words they have learned in Spanish to create a conversation.

Materials:

Construction paper, writing paper, stapler, crayons, and pencils.

Procedure:

Have students create their Spanish journals by folding a piece of construction paper in half and stapling pieces of writing paper inside. Let students title these books "My Spanish Journal."

Ask students that if they were going Mexico and they needed to learn Spanish to get along, what would be some of the most important things they would have to learn to say first. (Encourage students to say "greetings" as this is usually what is best to start with).

Begin by saying hola (hello) and have students repeat several times. Practice by saying hola to individual students and let them answer with the same.

Continue with Como estas? (How are you), Bien, y tu? (Fine, and you?), si (yes), Por favor (please), Como se llama? (What is your name?), Me llamo . . . (My name is . . .) etc.

Give students the opportunity to repeat these phrases over and over a little at a time.

Numbers 1-10; uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez.

Colors: amarillo (yellow), anaranjado (orange), azul (blue), blanco (white), negro (black), rojo (red), verde (green), marron (brown).

Closure:

Say something in Spanish and see who could respond appropriately to what you have said. Also, tell students to draw a picture of a house and color each part of the house the color that you say in Spanish. (e.g. Color the door rojo; Color the roof negro).

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