

DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF MEXICAN AND MEXICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

by

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Introduction

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Mexican-Americans are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. Despite the numerical power this data represents, Mexican-Americans as a group have not realized proportional economic power which is indicative of a growing need for the building of social and economic sensitivity within the larger culture. These factors also indicate a need to provide resources which allow for an exploration, understanding, and appreciation for the values, customs, and traditions of the Mexican-American culture. Literature is a key resource in helping us understand our pluralistic world in all of its dimensions, social, cultural, economic and political. Given these conditions, several important dimensions are to be considered when selecting Mexican-American literature for children.

Culturally Authentic Literature

First, it is important that the literature reflect cultural accuracy and authenticity in the portrayal of Mexican-Americans and should not reinforce stereotypic images. Literature should be culturally specific, contain nuances of Mexican-American life, and should depict Mexican-Americans in mainstream cultural

roles. Mexican-American children need to read literature that reflects their own culture and that is written by authors who have shared similar life experiences and perspectives. Such literature validates a Mexican-American child's lifestyle and culture and gives all children an authentic view of the Mexican-American culture.

Books of Literary Merit

Another important issue in selecting literature is that the book should be of literary merit, rich in content and language, and include well-developed characters. There should be potential for multiple perspective, and opportunities for personal responses should be present.

The Influence of Cultural Values and Beliefs

When viewing literature as a way to understand another culture, one needs a multiple perspective. Books selected need to present a variety of perspectives on Mexican-Americans and their Mexican cultural roots. It is important to offer a variety of books in order to depict the diverse perspectives and experiences of the Mexican-American population. The experiences of Mexicans who have just arrived in the United States will be different from that of subsequent generations who are born and raised in this country and have limited contact with the roots of their cultural heritage.

Balanced Literature Collection

The classroom collection needs to include a variety of books. Folk tales give readers an opportunity to enjoy the traditional Mexican tales that have been shared by generations. Biographies help readers to gain awareness of notable Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and their accomplishments and contributions. Books about contemporary Mexican-American experiences help readers understand that Mexican-Americans have similar experiences. A balance of books from each of these areas help readers gain a sense of the Mexican-American culture.

The following literature books and activities depict the many cultural legacies of the Mexican-Americans and promote discussions of issues that will lead to an awareness and understanding of this culture. These literature books could be used in an in-depth study of the Mexican-American culture or integrated into other thematic units. Both approaches are recommended.

Family Traditions and Daily Rituals

Family Portraits/Cuadros de Familia (1990) by Carmen Lomas Garza is an example of a culturally authentic book that represents the personal experiences of persons of Mexican-American origin. The author, a Mexican-American artist, describes her childhood in Kingsville, Texas. The book's detailed illustrations depict traditional games and festivals, special family occasions, and daily activities of family life.

Activities:

Artistic Style. Discuss Carmen Lomas Garza's artistic style with the students. Point out the colorful, detailed illustrations. Garza's illustrations contain folk art qualities such as use of detail to record things and events, a flatness to the objects and people, and children are represented as miniature adults. The traditional Mexican folk art technique of cutting out pictures from a single black piece of paper was used to illustrate text pages. Invite the students to illustrate a special memory of an event with family members imitating the artist's style, and have them write a text to accompany their illustrations.

Compare/Contrast. Help students make comparisons between their lives and this artist's life. Create a chart divided into categories (i.e., holidays, food, and special family occasions). Invite students to share and compare personal experiences related to the author's experiences, as identified in these categories.

Cake Walk. Plan a cake walk similar to the one in the book. Compare it to the cake walk in *Mirandy and Brother Wind* (McKissak, 1988), an African-American story about Mirandy who would like to win the cake walk with the help of Brother Wind.

Fiestas and Religious Holidays

Nine Days to Christmas (Ets, 1959/1991) is the story of a little Mexican girl's first posada and her excitement about getting her first pinata. *Rosita's Christmas Wish* by Mary Ann Smothers Bruin (1985) also describes these traditional Mexican Christmas customs.

Activities:

Games and Songs. *Las Navidades* (Delacre, 1990) is a bilingual collection of Christmas songs, games, and rhymes from Central and South America. The Pinata Song from *Las Navidades* could be recorded so that the students may learn and sing it during the breaking of their own pinata.

Venn Diagram. Use a Venn diagram to compare the similarities and differences between the character's Christmas and the student's Christmas.

Our Lady of Guadalupe by Tomie de Paola (1980) tells the story of the vision that appeared to Juan Diego, an Aztec Indian. A church was built in honor of this vision, the Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico.

Activities:

Character Traits. Have students list the character traits of Juan Diego, and give examples from the book to support those character traits.

Historical Perspective. Throughout the book there are implicit examples of the changes that occurred when the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs in Mexico. Have small groups discuss the changes this affected in Juan Diego's life. Students could also discuss the treatment of Juan Diego by the Spanish friars. Some students might wish to pursue more information about the Aztec Civilization.

Fiesta: Cinco de Mayo by June Behrens (1978) describes the celebration of Cinco de May, Mexico's day of independence from French occupation. *Pablo Remembers the Fiesta of the Day of the Dead* by George Ancona (1993) provides information about this fiesta. Both books include photos of the activities associated with each fiesta.

Activities:

Cooking. Students and parents could prepare special dishes for the different holidays, or the class could go to a Mexican-American restaurant to taste the different types of food. Recipes can be found in various cookbooks. One resource is *Cooking the Mexican Way* (Coronado, 1992).

Songs, Dances, and Games. Both of these books would provide an opportunity to integrate learning experiences across the curriculum subject

areas. Share these books with physical education and music teachers and work together to teach dances, games, and songs for the various holidays.

Folk Tales

Folk tales provide an excellent opportunity to study the history, geography, and culture of a country. There are several folk tales from Oaxaca, Mexico, such as *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun* (Zubizarreta, 1991), *The Moon was at a Fiesta* (Gollub, 1994), and *The Tale of Rabbit and Coyote* (Johnston, 1994). *The Hummingbird's Gift* (Czernecki & Rhodes, 1994), *The Legend of Food Mountain* (Harriet, 1982), and *Rain Player* (Wisniewski, 1991) are also folk tales.

Activities:

Storytelling. Invite a storyteller to share stories with the students. Have students select a favorite folk tale and retell the story. Students may wish to make and use flannel board pieces or props.

Compare/Contrast With Other Cultures. Have students read *The Tale of Rabbit and Coyote* (Johnston, 1994) and *The Coyote Rings the Wrong Bell* (Mora, 1991). Compare these tales to the Uncle Remus tales about Brer Rabbit.

Both *The Rain Player* (Wisniewski, 1991) and *The Woman Who Outshone the Sun* (Zubizarreta, 1991) are a version of porquoi stories that explain the occurrence of a drought.

The folk tale, *The Moon Was at a Fiesta* (Gollub, 1994) could be compared with other culture's folk tales about the moon such as the Native American legend, *Moon Was tired of Walking on Air* (Belting, 1992).

The Legend of Food Mountain (Harriet, 1982), an Aztec Creation myth, shows the value of the preservation of the Earth. This could be compared to the Papago's creation story in Byrd Baylor's *The Desert is Theirs* (1975). Another book, *How Music Came to the World* (Ober, 1994), is a retelling of an Aztec myth that explains how music was brought into the world.

Artistic Style. Stefan Czernecki illustrated the book, *The Hummingbird's Gift* (Czernecki & Rhodes, 1994). Bring in other books by this illustrator. *Pancho's Pinata* (Czernecki & Rhodes, 1992), is a talk of how the first pinata came to be created in the village of San Miguel. *The Sleeping Bread* (Czernecki & Rhodes, 1992), is a Guatemalan tale about showing compas-

sion for one's neighbors. This artist's style is similar to that of Carmen Lomas Garza. Both illustrate in the style of Mexican folk art.

Historical Perspective. *Rain Player* by David Wisniewski (1991) includes historical information about the Mayan culture printed at the back of the book. The Mayan astronomers observed and recorded the movements of the sun, moon, and planets with astounding accuracy. Invite students to learn more about the Mayan culture. This research could also be related to the study of the moon.

Notable Mexican-American and Mexicans

Through literature students have an opportunity to learn about the accomplishments and contributions of notable Mexican-Americans. Some biographies are: *Diego* (Winter, 1991), *The Little Painter of Sabana Grande* (Markum, 1993), *Frida Kahlo* (Turner, 1993), *Henry Cisneros* (Roberts, 1991), *Cesar Chavez and La Causa* (Roberts, 1987), and *Velma Martinez* (Codye, 1991). The Mexican-Americans exemplify the spirit of determination and commitment.

Activity:

Biographies. Display biographies of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Invite students to select a biography and write a report about that person to share with the class. Create a Hall of Fame and display the reports.

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