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Teaching the Whole Enchilada: Enhancing Multiculturalism Through Children's Literature in the Content Areas

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Historically, educators disagree on curriculum goals and as a result the educational process is fragmented. This fragmentation is evident in standards that differ from state to state, district to district, and teacher expectations at kindergarten to teacher expectations at high school. In the report, *A Nation At Risk* (Gardner, 1983), the National Commission on Excellence in Education found that "where there should be a coherent continuum of learning, we have none, but instead an often incoherent outdated, patchwork quilt" (p. 14). This fragmented approach is almost impossible to change. In *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, Theodore Sizer (1984) states that "a curriculum represented by six or seven autonomous subjects quickly freezes hard..." (pp. 216-217).

Theme units and theme cycles

Use of thematic units is one method of defrosting the boundaries between subjects and incorporating teaching the child using individual learning styles. Thematic units

allow the teacher to develop a theme around an activity, resources or central topic and integrate the theme into the content areas. In addition, the theme cycle allows students to determine the topics and to drive the curriculum. The teacher must decide how the thematic unit is to be best used and then choose between a teacher-directed theme unit or student-directed theme cycle. When creating thematic units and cycles, there are several major considerations. One is Routman's (1991) warning to avoid trivialization of a thematic unit:

A thematic unit is an integrated unit only when the topic or theme is meaningful, relevant to the curriculum and student lives, consistent with whole language principles and authentic in the interrelationship of the language processes (p. 278).

Another consideration is presented by Kaplan (1990): thematic units are successful when teachers and students see a purpose to their reading. In addition, thematic units have brought innovative teaching strategies into the classroom. French and Danielson (1991) suggest that organizing classroom instruction according to thematic units offers a rich environment for developing early literacy skills. Activities suggested for different content areas throughout this article are based on Carmen Lomas Garza's book, *Family Pictures*.

Health

- While studying nutrition, look into the differences between American food groups and Mexican food groups.
- While studying health care providers, look into folk healers in Mexico and how the healer's remedies play a large role in Mexico.
- Research and look into the folk tale of "mal de ojo" and some of the other illnesses people can place on you.

Integration of curriculum

The term integration refers to the implementation of language arts across the curriculum (Routman, 1991). Through this process reading, writing, speaking and listening are all used together as teaching tools to enhance learning. Routman believes "literature is the best vehicle to achieve integration of language arts" (p. 277).

Through the use of children's literature and the integration of content, the student can be addressed through all subjects. While integrating content area literature, many curriculum areas can be and should be covered at one time. Narrative literature makes comprehension easier because it is written in a form to which students can relate. Regardless of what some teachers believe, all subjects relate and should not be taken apart; therefore, all teachers share a responsibility for developing reading skills. Literature enhances and promotes comprehension of all subject matters. In working with the curriculum process our goal is to "dissolve the boundaries" (Drake, 1991, p. 20) so subject areas come together naturally with integration.

Math

- Graph the number of words it takes to say the same thing in Spanish as English.
- Predict how many swings it will take to break a piñata. Record the data. Now, actually count how many swings it took and compare the data to find the difference.
- Measure the ingredients needed to make tamales. Compare the fractions.

Creating thematic units

When creating a thematic unit to integrate subject areas, there are two approaches. According to Pappas,

Kiefer, and Levstik (1990) the traditional approach involves the following steps: 1) choosing a theme; 2) completing a web; 3) selecting resources; 4) planning activities; 5) organizing the classroom; and 6) implementing the unit.

In the second approach, the focus shifts from the theme to activities developed from the available resources, while still incorporating a theme integrating the subject areas. This approach is one which teachers typically use when developing lesson plans. The steps in this second approach are as follows: 1) selecting resources, including printed materials, manipulatives, and community resources; 2) choosing a theme relating to the resources; 3) completing a web and integrating the subject areas; 4) planning activities and matching them to the appropriate objectives; 5) organizing the classroom; and 6) implementing the unit.

Science

- Plant some of the plants that are native to Mexico and grow well in the area.
- Discuss the plants that are fruit bearing and those that are not.
- Discuss plants that can live with very little water and why that is important in some parts of Mexico.
- Research the animals that are used for food in Mexico.

The whole enchilada

With the current emphasis on multicultural education, we used the second strategy to create a thematic unit on Hispanics. We first selected the children's book entitled *Family Pictures* by Carmen Lomas Garza (1990). Through illustrations and a bilingual explanation, the author describes her childhood in Kingsville, Texas. Additional literature is available to teach other thematic units on Afro-

Americans, Asians and a variety of other cultures. With *Family Pictures* as our primary resource, we chose Mexican-Americans as our topic.

Art and Physical Education

- Make a pinata out of papier mache. Report the history of the pinata.
- Make a sombrero.
- Prepare a maraca out of beans and a coffee can.
- Prepare a song and dance to go with it.
- Prepare a cake walk and discuss the physical activity that goes with it.
- Research some of the sports native to Mexico and analyze physical attributes of each. Play some of the games.
- Perform a Mexican folk dance.

The activities we have chosen provide integration across the curriculum using resources which are readily available. No time constraints can be placed on the theme. Each group will need different amounts of time, depending on your individual students and involvement.

Language Arts

- Study the Spanish language. Note differences in placement of nouns and verbs. Use a Spanish-English dictionary to translate.
- Correspond with a letter to a pen pal from Mexico.
- Write a comparison/contrast theme.
- Write a response letter to the author of the book.
- Learn some of the basic words in Spanish and learn to spell them. Examples: hola, gracias, etc.

The activities in this article are only a few of the possibilities you have for integrating. As you can see, the subject areas overlap with each other in many activities. This is important to schools that departmentalize. All teachers will plan and integrate instead of not knowing what the other is doing or working on. When a thematic approach is integrated throughout the curriculum, teachers plan cooperatively rather than working in isolation. These activities enable students to compare and contrast two cultures, develop an appreciation for other cultures, and cultural activities.

Social Studies

- Research the culture of the people of Mexico. This can be done by going to a library or visiting with people who are natives of Mexico.
- Study and celebrate the holidays of Mexico. Prepare costumes to really get involved.
- Use a map to locate Mexico and compare it's size to others. While looking at the location discuss any weather hazards.
- Set up an assembly line for preparing tamales using division of labor.

The last bite

The use of thematic units can eliminate the boundaries between subjects and provide opportunities for children to learn in a variety of ways. Through the use of children's literature and the integration of content areas, teachers may work as an integrated team in teaching.

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