

Using Photographs to Create Culturally Relevant Classrooms: People of San Antonio, Texas, in the 1930s

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Examining the enlarged photographs positioned at each table, the elementary teachers were captivated. One of the teachers looked at the others around her table and commented in amazement, “I had no idea that happened right here. I’ve lived here all my life and never knew anything about this.” The teachers at another table, looking at the black and white photo of a 1930s Tejano singer, immediately pulled out their cell phones to find more information about her and her music and were amazed when they found a YouTube clip with one of her recordings. A teacher in a different group exclaimed, “Hey, I know that place! I grew up right by there!”

It is difficult to overstate the power of visual images, particularly historical primary source photos, to provide a window into the past. Photos allow us to envision how people lived, how they dressed, how they interacted with each other, and how they experienced the world. Photos help us to see how things were *back then*, often through the eyes of ordinary people. We also can almost experience major world events and stand close to people of historical significance by examining what is documented by those photos. Perhaps the most important thing photos do, however, is evoke emotion that can promote curiosity and learning.

When tasked with finding resources and materials for their social studies classroom, elementary teachers naturally gravitate toward finding print primary documents in the form of letters, personal journal or diary entries, written speeches, or government documents. The emphasis on fostering strong literacy skills in the social studies content area often aids in that decision. Primary documents in print form have a valuable place in social studies learning; and visual images, such as photos, can add another dimension that provides students with a deeper understanding of the past.



Making tortillas in a bake shop, San Antonio, Texas, 1939.

Library of Congress/Russel Lee

An additional benefit of using historical photos in the classroom is accessibility. Primary source texts are often difficult for elementary and secondary students to read, but English Learners or students who are not yet reading at grade level can deeply engage with photos, especially when they see familiar faces reflected in the images. Photos are both aesthetically and intellectually engaging and can be used as springboards to writing and further research. As an aid to teachers and students, the Library of Congress website includes downloadable analysis tools for thinking critically about primary source photos. These tools encourage students to observe, reflect, and ask further questions.

Using historical photos in the classroom has been well researched,¹ illustrating the various ways that photos can help school-aged children, particularly elementary students, build historical understanding. However, the research on using his-



Pecan shellers. Union plant. San Antonio, Texas, 1939.



Mexican baby with sister, San Antonio, Texas, 1939.

torical photos that specifically connect students and their culture is not nearly as robust. This gap in the research prompted us to embark on an examination of primary source photos and of new approaches for their use. We found that if students do not see their self, heritage, and culture represented in those photos, then the development of their historical understanding is incomplete or fragmented.² Historical understanding is enhanced when students see their identities in the primary source images selected and presented to them.³ Finding these resources can prove to be challenging, however, especially ones that are age-appropriate for elementary students.

The Importance of Creating Culturally Relevant Classrooms

Using photos that reflect and highlight the lived experience and culture of the students in the classroom provides a powerful vehicle for celebrating students' heritage, history, and identity while also deepening their historical understanding. Gloria Ladson-Billings' call for teachers to use a culturally relevant approach to teaching has been a driving force in teachers disrupting the dominant historical narratives for the past three decades.⁴ This approach has teachers challenging what is typically presented in social studies curriculum and pushing for counter narratives that will center people who are too often left out of the American story, leaving large gaps in historical understanding. Ladson-Billings encouraged teachers to create a classroom where students develop cultural competence as well as critical consciousness to challenge the status quo.

Selecting photos that portray key figures from students' culture and heritage engages students in ways that other primary sources do not. Students seeing reflections of themselves in the

photos and visual images that are presented provides important representations and reinforces that their heritage is part of the national narrative. When teachers select images that portray their students as part of that story, it creates a space for students to question why their stories may not have always been included. This gets directly to the essence of a culturally relevant framework. To build a complete historical understanding, teachers can emphasize culturally relevant historical photos to provide that connection to their students.

Engaging the Educators

In the fall of 2019, after receiving a Teaching with Primary Sources (TPS) regional grant through the Library of Congress, we presented our first professional development workshop to elementary teachers. That workshop became the foundation for other workshops and presentations to over 200 in-service and pre-service teachers over the course of a year. The primary emphases of the workshops were to provide strategies for teachers in finding and selecting culturally relevant, historical photos using the Library of Congress website (www.LOC.gov), to demonstrate how to find supporting materials to enhance teaching while using the photos, and how to use those items effectively in the classroom. An additional focus of the workshops was to provide direct explanation and guidance to the participants so teachers would successfully navigate the Library of Congress website and use it in their classrooms.

All of the participants in that first workshop were elementary teachers from the South Side of San Antonio, Texas. Most of the teachers in the building were native San Antonians. Many had grown up near the school where they now teach. The school student demographic make-up is approximately 45 percent

Hispanic and 52 percent African American, and the teachers' demographic mirrors that of the students. While the school is ethnically and racially diverse, the history told in their classes often was not. At the beginning of the workshop, they expressed frustration at the challenge of finding vibrant, engaging historical narratives that would reflect their students' lives.

Navigating the Library of Congress Website

During the workshop, we took 26 teachers on a virtual journey through the Library of Congress website, showing them where we found the photos, and accompanying resources we used. We concentrated on historical images about the city of San Antonio, and made sure the images we selected reflected the cultures represented in the school, and that teaching activities aligned with the Common Core State Standards for ELA and the Texas 4th grade English Language Arts and 4th grade Social Studies Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The Library of Congress website includes a primary source set that relates to these state standards, "Mexican American Migrations and Communities," which we used extensively.⁵ By focusing on one specific state standard strand and one historical time period, we were able to find all of the above resources and our teachers were able to explore the Library of Congress website with an eye to future projects.

The photos we chose focused on historical events in San Antonio and people who have made a profound impact on the city and culture. One photo showed pecan shellers working in a factory in the 1930s. We provided the teachers with newspaper articles describing a strike in 1938 by pecan shellers led by Emma Tenayuca. One photo showed Lydia Mendoza, a famous Tejano singer in the 1930s. We also included photos of elderly African Americans in San Antonio during the same time period, images preserved in the LOC collection, "Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the FWP, 1936–1938."⁶ Those images were particularly powerful, as several of the teachers commented about their own families growing up near the places shown in the photos.

Reactions from the Teachers

Most of the teachers said they were unfamiliar with the Library of Congress website before participating in the workshop. They expressed gratitude for learning how to navigate the website effectively, and expressed how excited they were to begin looking for new resources. Others commented about the many connections they could make between other disciplines (e.g., math, ELAR, science) and social studies by using photos. A few remarked that they had not used photos (independent of textbook illustrations) as classroom teaching materials, but would do so in the future. They also explained the importance they found in selecting images that their students could connect with and reflected their families' culture. One teacher mentioned that the most significant thing she learned was, "The process for explaining photos to students and [using] the

inquiry process with primary documents." About using photos in her classroom in the future, she added, "I love the idea and am glad to have a place to find quality, relevant photos!" Two other teachers identified the importance of the power of images that reflect their students' culture. One teacher said, "It is interesting how so many people can see the same thing but from different perspectives." Another added, "San Antonio has a rich culture and history. I love the idea of using photos to validate students' culture."

Classroom Application

The teachers who participated in the workshop discussed in detail the many ways they could use the information they learned in their future classroom. The ideas for lesson activities presented below reflect some of those conversations.

Artifact Selection. While it is true that using historical photos to help students develop their historical understanding is not new, the concept of having teachers specifically, and with intentionality, select images that are culturally relevant is a new approach to this endeavor. The legwork of working to create culturally relevant classrooms happens first in the artifact selection. A critical aspect of this work lies in choosing photos that connect with students in ways that are motivating and also affirm and value students' life experience. Teachers should approach these decisions with intentionality and purpose, specifically selecting images students can relate to and can identify with. Here are some questions to ask when selecting images:

1. Do these photos reflect the culture, heritage, and identity of the students I teach?
2. Do these photos provide the history of the local community?
3. Will these pictures connect with students and provide them with a foundation for meaningful conversation and analysis?

ELA and Social Studies Standards. Teaching students how to analyze photos and work to create culturally relevant classrooms addresses both ELA and Social Studies content standards. The ELA Common Core standards for 4th grade, Reading Informational Text, CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.4.7 state that students will "Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively (e.g., in charts, graphs, diagrams, timelines, animations, or interactive elements on webpages) and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears."⁷

As the individual photos presented in this article specifically pertain to the state of Texas, however, the standards that these photos addressed are 4th grade ELAR and 4th grade Social Studies TEKS. The 4th grade Texas ELAR standard 4.13.A and D call on students to "[use] Inquiry and research: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and thinking using multiple texts. The student engages in both short-term and sustained recursive



Mexican boys looking at movie poster, San Antonio, Texas, 1939.

inquiry processes for a variety of purposes. [And] the student is expected to: (A) generate and clarify questions on a topic for formal and informal inquiry ... [and] (D) identify primary and secondary sources.”⁸ The 4th Grade Social Studies TEKS, 4.17.B and 4.19.A are also addressed. Those standards state that, “The student understands the contributions of people of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups to Texas culture. The student is expected to: (B) summarize the contributions of artists of various racial, ethnic, and religious groups in the development of Texas culture such as Lydia Mendoza ... [and] The student applies critical-thinking skills to organize and use information acquired from a variety of valid sources, including technology. The student is expected to: (A) differentiate between, locate, and use valid primary and secondary sources such as technology; interviews; biographies; oral, print, and visual material; documents; and artifacts to acquire information about Texas.”⁹

The ideas presented here also address Dimension 1 of the C3 Framework¹⁰ through inquiry-based instruction. There are many activities that teachers could facilitate in their classroom that would use culturally relevant images such as:

1) a gallery walk where students walk through in small groups and discuss the photos as they are viewing, or 2) stations throughout the room where students research a particular person in one of the photos, or 3) students could provide a written response to a focus question pertaining to one of the images. Additionally, the activities identified below are specific activity examples that the teachers themselves participated in during their professional development workshop and that they then reimagined for their future classroom.

Lesson Activities

The teachers in the workshop explained how they could use the activities they learned in the workshop in their own classroom by providing students with a vehicle for examining personal identity and rich conversations about their community heritage and culture.

Activity 1: The teacher will place students into groups of four with desks facing one another and provide them with enlarged photos. If it is possible, place the photos on foam core board. The students will be given the LOC Primary Source Analysis Tool and will respond to the document as a group. In order to ensure that elementary-aged students can fill out the document properly, the teacher can use synonyms for the organizing columns provided by the “Library of Congress Teacher Guides: Analyzing Photos & Prints.”¹¹ For example: “What do you see?” for the word Observe, “What do you think?” for Reflect, and “What do you wonder?” for Question. The most important aspect of this photo analysis activity is that the students are generating questions. They are being intellectually curious and using that curiosity to engage in meaningful small-group dialogue. After the groups have completed the document, the teacher will have the students report out their responses. This activity would take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The teacher will formatively assess the students based on their group responses to the document.

Activity 2: The second activity of the lesson will build upon the first by asking students to deepen their historical understanding and cultural awareness through a small group discussion. After all students have reported their responses, the teacher will facilitate a whole group discussion. During this whole group discussion, the teacher will review each photo separately for the class while providing the students with additional historical information and detail about each of the photos. The teacher will engage the students in a discussion as to how each photo reflects their culture and heritage. The discussion will create a space for students to describe ways in which they personally identify with the images and see themselves in the images. In addition, during the discussion, the teacher will provide the historical significance of each of the subjects of the images and the impact those individuals had on our society. This activity would take approximately 15 minutes

to complete. The teacher will formatively assess the students based on their questions (five are suggested here) during the whole group discussion.

1. How does this photo remind you of your life, in your neighborhood, or in your community?
2. How does this photo remind you of home?
3. Are the stories about the people in these photos stories you have heard before? If so, when?
4. How do these photos make you feel?
5. What do you want to learn more about the people in these photos?

Activity 3: The final activity of the lesson will be an extension of learning where students apply knowledge from that day. This activity will merge Language Arts and Social Studies. The teacher will conduct a read-aloud activity, reading a book, or a portion of a book, to the students. One such example that would correspond with the photos we used is: *That's Not Fair!/¡No Es Justo!: Emma Tenayuca's Struggle for Justice/La Lucha de Emma Tenayuca por la Justicia*.¹² This book tells the story of Tenayuca's fight for workers' rights in the San Antonio and throughout Texas. A second example is *Who Was Selena?*¹³ Teachers can use this book to connect Selena with Lydia Mendoza and the importance of Tejano music in the Hispanic culture. As an extension to this activity, students will be asked to interview someone in their homes and ask them if they know about the people in the photos. This will provide students with an opportunity to engage in an intergenerational learning experience. The students will be given approximately 5–6 minutes the following day to write down any responses their family members had the previous evening regarding the photos. The teacher will formatively assess the students through their questions and discussion during the read-aloud as well as the written responses from their family interviews.

Conclusion

The visual historical record confirms that people of color have been builders, innovators, and activists in our society even though they have been left out of many historical narratives written for school students, K through college. That is changing, and educators can be part of the reexamination that is happening. Teachers can effectively use primary source photos to create a more inclusive, culturally relevant environment in their classrooms. Our search together for historical photos that reflect the history and heritage of the cultures represented in our classrooms will increase students' engagement and enhance their historical understanding during social studies instruction.

Students deserve to know that their families and communities have played an integral role in U.S. history. Historical photos that reflect their heritage delight and inform elementary school students. The Library of Congress website is a valuable resource for teachers, supplying them with photos, accompanying resources, analysis tools, and plans for instruction. 🌍

Notes

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