

# People, Places, and Environments: Social Studies and Spanish Cultural Enrichment

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If the young people of this nation are to become effective participants in a democratic society, then social studies must be an essential part of the curriculum in the early childhood/elementary years. In a world that demands independent and cooperative problem solving to address complex social, economic, ethical, and personal concerns, the social studies are as basic for survival as reading, writing, and computing. Knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for informed and thoughtful participation in society require a systematically developed program focused on concepts from history and the social sciences.<sup>1</sup>

## Social Studies and Languages

Children benefit from a study of cultures, people, places, and environments (strand III of the social studies curriculum standards) as well as the study of a foreign language in the primary grades.<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Marcos of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics observes, “Most importantly, encourage your child’s interest in the language and in other cultures. Show her that you value the ability to speak a second language. Attend cultural events that feature music, dance, or food from the country or countries where the language is spoken.”<sup>3</sup> Learning a second language in primary school can provide elementary teachers with a very unique opportunity to infuse social studies into the curriculum.

The goal of the Spanish Enrichment Program at Centerville Elementary School in Centerville, Ohio, is to expose students to the language and culture of Spanish-speaking countries. Teachers provide students with an abundance of opportunities for listening, speaking, and singing in Spanish. Students experience culture, geography, economics, history, music, dance, art, food, meal preparation, and literature related to Spain, Central America, and South America.

Students are delighted to have a native of Argentina visit the classroom frequently to share his personal stories and answer students’ questions about life in South America. All of these activities have helped the first graders to develop an appreciation of other world cultures, which is part of global education.

## Collaboration

Teachers make an ongoing effort at Centerville Elementary all year to work collaboratively and build a sense of community. The Spanish class fosters collaboration in a variety of ways. One such collaboration involved working with the Spanish I students from Centerville High School for a lesson on the alphabet. The high school students decorated a tissue box for each letter of the Spanish alphabet. For example, the letter *g* was illustrated with a cat, because the Spanish word for “cat” is *gato*. The high school students recorded a DVD on which they recited the alphabet in Spanish as they held up the boxes for the various letters. These colorful boxes remained in the classroom all year as a visual aid for the first graders, who wrote a thank you letter, incorporating some Spanish words, to the Spanish I students.

## Cultural Activities

The elementary students followed up this activity by making a Spanish alphabet book. Each student illustrated a letter of the Spanish alphabet. The laminated and spiral bound books became part of the classroom library. Books were also sent home on a rotating basis and shared with adult family members, making a connection between school and home.

Another activity that involved student collaboration was the construction of a class *piñata*. After reading the non-fiction book, *The Piñata Maker* by George Ancona, the class brainstormed ideas for how a class *piñata* might look (it can be in the shape



of an animal or a familiar object, like a folk guitar), and each student sketched one design. The students viewed all of the sketches and voted for a favorite.

Students constructed the winning design. They fringed and glued crepe paper strips and cut paper to decorate a paper-bag *piñata*. Each class assembled one *piñata*, and then all ten *piñatas* were displayed prominently in the front foyer of the school for several weeks. Each class broke open its *piñata*, filled with goodies, at an end-of-the-year fiesta.

Another activity that provided an excellent opportunity for meaningful interaction and communication among students was a class fruit stand, or *fruteria*. A parent from Argentina volunteered to teach about Latin markets, or outdoor vending stands. The students viewed pictures in books and read about Latin markets. The parent brought in currency from Argentina for students to compare with U.S. currency. The art teacher assisted students in constructing a fruit stand from a large cardboard box and making a sign for it.

The teacher constructed a poster listing names of fruits and vegetables in Spanish and English, illustrated with simple pictures. The parent taught students several simple Spanish phrases such as, “May I help you?,” “I want...,” and “How much?” The

parent and teacher role-played a shopping scenario. Students were then ready to “shop” at the market, using basic Spanish vocabulary for food item, color, size, and number. The market remained in the classroom for several weeks, allowing students many chances to practice their conversation skills in Spanish. As the students became more proficient at the market, they progressed to making conversation at a hamburger stand. The students added hamburgers, condiments, and beverages to their Spanish menu. *La Fruteria* and *La Casa de la Hamburguesa* were very popular with students.

### Integrating Disciplines

Integrating the different disciplines is a strong component in the Spanish enrichment program. The curriculum incorporates learning from math, science, and social studies. Art, music, and movement are daily elements of the Spanish class. Often, connections are made to specific topics that students are investigating in their home classrooms, such as animals or community. Since a major focus of the elementary schools is literacy acquisition, teachers strive to make sure that learning the Spanish language is integrated with literacy development in English and in the social studies.

For example, while students were working on the *piñata* project, they were eager to talk and learn more about them. Many students had *piñata* stories to share from their own experiences. The classes discussed the history of *piñatas* and examined an authentic, carved *piñata* bat (used for hitting the *piñata*) from Mexico. The classes read the colorfully illustrated picture book, *Piñatas*, by Rebecca Emberley that featured the simple text in English and Spanish. As the teacher read the book, the students repeated certain words and lines in Spanish.

After reading the book, the class did a social studies extension activity. Following the pattern of the book, each class designed a poster listing the items that the students wanted to place inside the *piñata*. The class brainstormed a list of items, the teacher assigned some students to draw and cut out a selected number of those items, and other students glued these items to the poster. The teacher also listed each word on the poster in English and in Spanish. Ten class posters were displayed in the classroom or hall to be read and compared with each other. This activity integrated language arts with art, social studies (the history and the multi-cultural element of *piñatas*), and math (using number words in Spanish to count the numbers of various items in the *piñata*).

The students studied animals, weather, and the seasons quite extensively in their home classrooms. In Spanish class, they learned words for many animals as well as geography terms. Students played many games and engaged in several art activities involving animals, such as class murals of farm animals, zoo animals, pond animals, and pets.

### **The Monarch Butterfly**

During the fall, students study the annual monarch butterfly migration from North America to Mexico. There are many picture books available on this topic, such as *A Monarch Butterfly's Life* by John Himmelman. The classes used several maps and globes, and traced the monarchs' migration route. The students discussed migration, and why it is advantageous for certain animals. The classes learned about the cooperative relationship the United States has developed with Mexico to protect the butterfly during its migration. The butterfly lesson included science (studying insects, weather, seasons and migration), reading (non-fiction books about monarchs), social studies (maps, globes, and cooperation), and art (puppets.) The topic is a springboard for classroom discussion. The lesson culminated when students designed monarch puppets to take home.

In the spring, many classes are studying "animals around us in Ohio." These lessons lead to a study of various animals that live in Mexico. The students have a particular interest in iguanas. We read the picture book *The Iguana Brothers* by Tony Johnston. This amusing fictional tale takes place in Mexico. The book includes some Spanish words, and the author discusses some plants and animals from Mexico. The students learned some facts about iguanas from this story, and made list of more unanswered questions. Using a stack of non-fiction books from

the library, students researched their questions, writing on a chart the answers that they found.

Students received a construction paper in the shape of an iguana and, as a follow up art and writing activity, they drew or cut out a collage environment for it, and wrote one sentence in Spanish about their iguana. Some students drew the iguana on a branch getting ready to eat an insect; others showed the iguana on a leash as a pet. One student drew a measuring stick beside his iguana, showing that an iguana can grow to be six feet long! For the writing part of the assignment, the students received incomplete sentence strips reading, "*La iguana...*" Students copied a sentence from the chart onto their strip, which was dictated in English, but which they wrote in Spanish. Iguana pictures are displayed in the hall to be read and enjoyed by all. This activity includes reading, writing, science, social studies and art.

### **Spanish Cultural Enrichment**

Spanish cultural enrichment is an integral component of the regular first grade program, so students of diverse backgrounds and abilities, including students on Individual Education Plans, all participate in the program. The first grade Spanish classes include some predictable routines. Within the familiarity of those routines, many opportunities for differentiation of instruction occur.

The lessons began with a Spanish song. They sang familiar songs repeatedly, and continue to learn new songs throughout the year. These group songs are a fun, non-threatening way for students to join in and practice Spanish words and learn about culture.

Another routine activity was "The question of the day." The teacher asked the students a simple question in Spanish. The class discussed several possible answers, and then the teacher asked for answers from individual students, encouraging them to answer in Spanish, if they could. Some students chose to include extra vocabulary words that they had learned previously, or that they knew from their own experience. One of the two bilingual (Spanish-English) students often enjoyed expanding on his answer in Spanish, while the other helped with the translation into English.

A reluctant speaker was a member of one class. The classroom aide helped her pre-record her answers to daily questions on a special device. When the teacher called on this student, she pressed a button to play her recorded response. Answering these daily questions about likes and interests helped students learn about one another, and the class became a stronger learning community.

Another wonderful learning opportunity occurred one day after the class sang "Happy Birthday" in Spanish to a student. Two boys of Chinese-American descent asked if they could sing Happy Birthday in Chinese to the class, and they did. It was an authentic opportunity for students to make a multi-lingual connection, and honor the cultural heritage of two of



their classmates. There were similar learning experiences in other classes when students from various ethnic backgrounds taught the class other vocabulary words from their families' native languages.

### Conclusion: The Future

The Spanish Enrichment program for first grade will continue for a second year in Centerville. The plan is to expand collaboration with the high school Spanish students to have them working with the first graders on projects such as book making, performing simple puppet shows in Spanish, and tutoring younger students one-on-one.

The school district is planning to expand the Spanish program throughout the elementary grades. Adding Spanish at the primary level has been an exciting venture. The Spanish program has helped our students to have a broader experience in language development as well as a better appreciation of world cultures and increased global awareness. The Spanish program is an important component of the district's principles of collaboration, integration, and differentiation. The Centerville, Ohio children are benefiting from a study of cultures, people, places, and environments, and the study of a foreign language in the primary grades. 🌍

### Notes

1. "Social Studies in the Era of No Child Left Behind," A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies (May 2007), [www.socialstudies.org/positions/nclb-era](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/nclb-era).
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
3. Kathleen Marcos, "Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?" (ERIC # ED402794), [www.kidsourc.com/kidsourc/content3/second.language.p.k12.2.html](http://www.kidsourc.com/kidsourc/content3/second.language.p.k12.2.html).

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