Exploring World Cultures with Music

Mary Frances Erler

As a music teacher, I am always looking for good cross-curricular connections. Music, because it is something that all children enjoy to some degree, is a great way to open new doors to a subject area. Students can be introduced to musical expressions of their own culture and to specific regions of the United States. Music is an integral part of every culture, and so it can be part of any unit of study on a foreign country or distant continent. In addition, music can be a motivating part of a lesson in geography, history, cultural anthropology, and many other aspects of social studies.

Serving as music specialist in a 100-student parochial school, I move in and out of each of our classes, kindergarten through grade six, at least twice a week, and I have found this a unique opportunity to make useful connections between aspects of music and the content of various other fields of study. For example, I used music as the foundation for lessons about seven different cultures. These lessons included activities on geography, science, math, literature, art, physical education, and cultural foods. These curricular connections were devised to incorporate several of the thematic strands in social studies, especially ☼ Culture; ☼ People, Places, and Environments; and ☼ Individuals, Groups, and Institutions. I have had the opportunity to work with various teachers, developing school-wide multicultural units of study at several different grade levels, but the effort to enhance a standard lesson with music and sound does not need to be as grand or time consuming as that. A short activity linking music and social studies might be found for many topics of study at any particular grade level.

Each teacher in our school (we have one classroom at each grade level) chooses a culture to study in depth during the month of January. For example, kindergarten used the Latin American unit of study, the first grade teacher chose a unit on cultures in Africa, second grade studied life in Asia, and fourth graders studied Native Americans. An outline of the unit of study on Native Americans is shown below.

I provided to each teacher a standard format, a basic outline, for each unit of study. I also provided additional information such as recipes, words to songs, and folklore, as requested by individual teachers. Each of the units was designed to be flexible, so that the regular classroom teacher and the music specialist could use them in whatever setting was most effective. For example, the music teacher introduces songs and literature during regular music classes, or the classroom teacher can use them at Circle Time. Some activities work best when students gather in small groups, such as writing stories or poems, doing crafts, or playing games. Music can also be taped from recordings for (classroom-only) use in a listening center. In addition to presenting traditional music from each culture, I taught some basic phrases in relevant languages. For example, each class also learned to sing “hello” in four languages besides English, including Spanish, Japanese, German, and Swahili.

Teachers and students’ families can provide additional resources relating to their own cultural traditions if they wish. Educational websites, local libraries, and community organizations are other sources of information and additional activities. Our school librarian was especially helpful in locating literature selections and informational books on various cultures for each class.

Each teacher developed lesson plans by expanding and adding resources of his or her own, including Internet sites. For example, the fourth grade teacher chose various books on Native Americans from the school library to read and share in literature circles. This class also studied Central American rain forests while learning about the Mayas. For science, they learned about organisms in the rain forest and the impact destruction of rain forests is having on global ecology. For an art project, they turned their classroom into a “rain forest,” with a leafy canopy overhead, birds perched in the branches, and monkeys hanging from vines.

Second graders studied Japanese culture. They did several art projects, including weaving full-sized zabutons (floor mats) with paper strips. One day they sat on the floor, with shoes off, in Japanese style.

The third grade teacher selected Ireland from the unit options because she is of Irish heritage and wanted to share some of her own cultural background with her students. Together, they explored poems by Eleanor Farjeon and made posters of various Irish quotes and blessings.

The fifth and sixth graders studied Germany, building a “castle on the Rhine” from boxes in their classroom. This class also wrote reports and made posters on German contributions to world culture, from famous classical composers to German automakers.

Families were involved in a culminating Multicultural Fine Arts Night at the end of the month. Each family was invited to bring a snack or dish that reflected a culture that was studied. (Teachers sent home simple, suggested recipes.) Samples of student
# Native Americans: An Outline for an Interdisciplinary Unit of Study

## Geography
Location of tribal groups
The origin of geographic names with Indian roots
Tribal lands today

## Anthropology
Shelter and climate
Matriarchal families
Hunter-gatherers
Uses of the buffalo

## Literature
*Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*
*The Huron Carol*
*The Gift of the Sacred Dog*
*An Algonquian Year*
*The Legend of the Sleeping Bear*
*The Legend of the Loon*

## P.E./Movement
Grinding Corn (rock game)
Hoop Dance
Duck Dance
Stick Passing Game

## Math
Drumming patterns (division, fractions)
Musical Notation of rhythm

## Science
Animal and plant life
Tracking animals

## Arts and Crafts
Beadwork
Drawing on “skins” (from brown paper bags)
Sand painting
Making rattles and drums

## Music (and sources)
“Navajo Happy Song” (1, p.20) or (3, p.65, Grade 2)
“Hopi Butterfly Melody” (1, p.27)
“Ho Ho Watanay” (2,p.5) or (3, p.65, Grade 2)
“Cayuga Lullaby” (2, p.39)
“The Owl Sings” (2, p.5)
“Iona” (2, p.39)
“Land of the Silverbirch” (2, p.6)
“Canoe Song” (2,p.7) or (3, p.49, Grade 4)

### Sources

## Food/Nutrition
Popcorn
Dried cranberries and raisins
Fry-bread
Pemmican/ Jerky
The “Three Sisters”: Corn, beans, and squash
and other projects were put on display in the school gym. In a short program, each class presented one or two songs from its culture, followed by the opportunity for everyone to sample the foods brought for the multicultural potluck.

Parents enjoyed that special evening, and teachers were very enthusiastic about these multicultural thematic units of study, something we had not done in our school before. Plans are being made to take a similar approach in the coming school year. Shall we hear the sounds of Polynesian, Russian, or French-Canadian people in our classrooms? It’s an opportunity for everyone to sample the foods brought for the multicultural potluck.

Note


Suggested Books on Native Americans


Jeffers, Susan. Brother Eagle, Sister Sky. New York: Dial Books, 1991. Illustration of historic speech by Chief Seattle given when his people were forced to sign the treaty putting them on a reservation. This speech sums up the Native American reverence for the land, and encourages our own good stewardship. Drawings show various Native American tribes. Cultural and Informational: Early Elementary.


Suggested Online Resources about Native Americans

Cradleboard Project www.cradleboard.org/main.html. The fast-growing Cradleboard website offers curriculum units for elementary, middle, and high school grades in the disciplines of geography, history, social studies, music, and science. Songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie founded the site.

National Museum of the American Indian, www.nmai.si.edu. The NMAI website of the Smithsonian Institution has various useful pages, including a Resource Center with a bibliography of suggested books. Critical bibliographies on literature for children relating to Native Americans are available in this site’s Links section.

NativeTech, www.nativetech.org. An Internet resource for indigenous ethno-technology focusing on the arts of Eastern Woodland Indian Peoples, providing historical and contemporary background with instructions for crafts and background references. Many of the activities can be adapted for the elementary classroom.

NativeWeb, www.nativeweb.org. NativeWeb is an international, nonprofit, educational organization dedicated to using telecommunications, including computer technology and the Internet, to disseminate information from and about indigenous nation, peoples, and organizations around the world. It is a good place to start for a search on a subject topic or for Native American communities and resources in your area.

Mary Frances Erler is a music specialist at Holy Family School in East Tawas, Michigan.
1. Sound, Music, and the Environment What do different cultures mean by music? This program explores the definition of music from the sine wave to poetic metaphor, and the impact of the cultural environment on musics as different as Bosnian ganga and becarac singing; Tuvan throat singing; Irish, West African, Trinidadian, and Japanese musics; and Western chamber music, jazz, and rock. 2. The Transformative Power of Music Music can inspire religious devotion, prepare individuals for war, motivate work, enrich play, and stimulate the passions. This interaction of pitches, understood in vastly different ways around the world, is analyzed here in jazz, chamber music, Bosnian ganga singing, early music plainchants, and barbershop quartets.