

Honoring our Native American friends and building understanding of Native American
Culture and Way of Life

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Introduction

Early Childhood Education has been the majority of my teaching career. I have always been drawn to the younger learners and they hold a special place in my heart. For the last four school years, I have taught first grade at William A Oberle Jr., Elementary school. I am the first grade special education teacher for the first grade team. While teaching special education students, I also teach general education students in my co-teaching classroom. Teaching in first grade can be challenging, but is often more challenging when students are identified as Special Education or English Language Learners. It is even more challenging when students are identified as both Special Education and English Language Learners. Often you are left trying to figure out if it is a learning disability, or they don't understand what you are asking or saying in English. It can be even harder if there is a speech delay or a more severe disability.

In first grade, my students are learning to become more comfortable with who they are. They are not shy kindergarteners like they once were. They love to talk. They will talk to their friends, their teachers and even to themselves. These students also love to ask questions. They have found the joy in learning, and are ready to learn. My students are often like sponges, and soak up everything you tell them the best that they can. In our social studies and reading units, we often discuss various cultures. Often my students can often relate to most of the cultures discussed. However there is one culture and identity that my co-teacher and I often get asked about. This culture is Native Americans, and they want to know more. I want to know more. However my education lacks this information. Not by choice, but by that lack of understanding and teaching on the subject. I often think back and wonder how our school system doesn't put more emphasis on the original people of our country. There's history about our country that we are missing.

Demographics

The students in my school come from very diverse backgrounds. There is approximately 558 or more kindergarten through fifth grade students in my school according to our schools Data Service Center page. Our school services student's from low socioeconomic status and receive free breakfast and lunch. Over 61% of our students are low income.¹ As a first-grade special education teacher, I have about 14 students on my caseload (spread throughout the first grade team, and my classroom) and about 12 general education students in the classroom I co-teach in. More than 60% of my class is ELL students. I often have students who speak one of these languages (sometimes two) English, Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese. Learning to write or read in their native language can be challenging, let along learning a second language, while being expected to write

and read competently in their second language. First graders are ages 6 and 7 years old (sometimes 8).

My students are often still learning basic math and phonics skills when they come into first grade. Many cannot write a sentence or read independently. They are familiar with the Smartboard, small and whole group activities, and hands on activities. They enjoy working together any chance that they can get. My goal for this unit is to have my students improve upon their knowledge and ability to write multiple complete sentences in order to write an informational text about what they have learned during Native American History Month. This unit will help my students not only practice their writing skills, while connecting what they have learned across the curriculum. Today's students are exposed to various cultures through various media forms. This includes digital activities on the Smartboard, short texts or stories in small or whole group, and across various areas of curriculum. It is important for them to understand whom the original Americans were and still are. My students will be expected to apply the reading skills they have learned, to connect to their writing, while applying the history and cultural understanding of our local Native Americans.

Rationale

My first grade students are expected to come with the ability to write full and complete sentences. By the end of first grade, they are expected to write a full paragraph (3-5 sentences). These students are expected to write an informational piece about something they have researched. Usually, we have them research and write about an animal. This seems like an easy writing experience, however most on grade level students struggle to form a complete sentence, let alone write an organized paragraph on an experience that they have had. Along with the writing expectations, students are expected to be able to read by the middle to the end of first grade.

My unit will be a cross-curricular unit that will encompass Social Studies, English Language Arts, and Writing, while learning about Native Americans and the importance of corn in their culture. They will need to be able to apply the skills taught during reading to complete activities based off of the unit, while incorporating their knowledge to complete the activities and writing assignments. My students will listen to stories about Native Americans during reading and social studies. My goal is to either visit a Native American community center, or to have someone from a local tribe or nation come visit. This way my students can hear and learn about the local tribe and maybe do an activity with that person. During social studies they will complete hands on activities to connect with the readings about Native Americans and the importance of corn in their culture. They will then be able to write an informational text, applying all of the information they have learned and gathered. At the end of the unit, they will present what they have learned to the class and possibly to their visitor or the tribe or nation that they visited.

Content Objectives

The Delaware Social Studies Standards and the Common Core Literacy Writing Standards will guide the enduring understandings for this unit. After completing the unit students will understand the importance of corn for Native Americans, and how it has impacted the local tribe. Essential Questions to help guide this unit include: Who are Native Americans? Why is corn so important to the Native Americans? What roles does corn play across the Native American culture?

Lenape

Lenapehoking is the land of the Lenape. The Lenape lived in various land areas. Some were in river dwellers, lived on the coast, while some lived in the forests. The English settlers called the Indigenous people from Delaware the Lenni Lenape. Lenni Lenape lived in Delaware, New Jersey, southeastern Pennsylvania (near the Delaware river), and southeastern New York State when Europeans first made contact.² Unfortunately, most of the Lenni Lenape were pushed into western Pennsylvania and Ohio by the white settlers. Currently, there are “four major Delaware groups, living predominantly in Oklahoma and Ontario, Canada with about sixteen thousand people.”³ There is a small Lenape tribe in Delaware today. The Lenape shared many similarities even though they were spread out. They shared their cultural tradition’s, common values traditions, spiritual practices, and family structure and common language roots. “The Lenape, Mahicans, and other native peoples were part of a larger group called the Algonquians.”⁴

The Lenni Lenape was considered a highly gendered society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This can be seen in their physical appearance, clothing, work roles, and behavior to show which gender they were. Women would wear their hair long, while men would pluck their hair from their head to create a “round crest of about two inches in diameter.”⁵ These gender roles can be seen in their every day work. These work roles were very different than what a person would see or what was expected from Europeans at the time. European men were often the farmers, however Lenape women were predominantly the framers. They would grow corn, beans, and squash. Lenape men would hunt.

Maize

Maize is what Native Americans and Lantinx people call corn. It is often spelled differently or slightly pronounced differently depending on the area it is spoken. It has even impacted other cultures in America to this day. It is such a staple in the American diet, it had to be genetically modified to keep up with the pace of the demand for corn. Not only has it been used as a side dish, eaten on the cob at a BBQ, it has been turned into a sugar to be added to our food. Corn syrup is in almost every process food now. It can even be used as a fuel for vehicles. Something that was so highly reverend, and thanked by one group of people is now an every day item that most Americans do not think twice about.

Scientists have evidence about when and where corn was cultivated. “Indigenous peoples in Central Mexico cultivated corn ten thousands years ago, around 8,000 BCE.”⁶ Between 6800-6600 BCE, growing corn spread to the far end of South America all the way up to the north subarctic and to the coasts. In order for this to happen it “required a vast network of cultural and commercial exchange among the peoples of North, Central, and South America.”⁷ Corn did not grow in the wild on its own. Corn was cultivated by Indigenous scientists who turned wild grain into corn, which not only impacted their daily life as a nourishing food product, but in spiritual ways. Indigenous people were able to grow corn of various colors, and in many different climates. However, it required a complex irrigation system. The Aztecs used hydraulic agriculture for their crops, especially corn.

Origin Story

Each Native American Tribe or Nation has his or her own creation origin story. While the origin stories have many similarities, there are many unique differences for each tribe. Dalton references two creation stories in her book *The Lenape of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware, Wisconsin, and Ontario*. Spirits named manetuwak, were spirits that are in nature according to the Lenape. These spirits play important roles in everyday life; hunting, rain, crop growth, etc. The Lenape had a Great Spirit who is called He Who Created Us By His Thoughts. This Great Spirit is created the world and everything in it.

Dalton references two origin stories in her book about Lenape. The first story is thought to have been collected between 1641 and 1655. This is the first origin story:

“At first, the whole world was entirely covered by water. Then a beautiful woman with a very large belly came down from the heaven and settled onto the water. Land began to appear beneath her, where she sat, and more and more land emerged until it reached as far as the eye could see. Plants began to grow on the land. More plants grew until the once dry land was full of trees and vegetation as it is now. Then the beautiful woman gave birth to three creatures: a deer, a bear, and a wolf. She nursed the three animals until they were grown and she stayed on Earth, living with them. It is from these animals and their beautiful mother that all other animals and human beings came. When all the creatures we know today were finally made perfect, and when they could live by themselves, the great mother rejoiced and ascended back up to heaven, where she now stays in goodness and in love with the Great Spirit. It is because we are all born of the three original animals that all people have the nature of one of them. We are like the deer: timid and innocent. We are like the bear: brave, vengeful, and just. Or we are like the wolf: cunning and bloodthirsty.”⁸

This next Lenape creation story was told by an 80-year-old man named Tantaque in 1679. He began his story by drawing a tortoise in the sand.

“This is a tortoise, lying in the water around it ... this ... is all water, and so at first was the world ... when the tortoise gradually raised its back up high, and the water ran off it, and thus the earth became dry ... and there grew a tree in the middle of the earth, and the root of this tree sent forth a sprout beside it and there grew upon it a man, who was the first male. This man was then alone ... but the tree bent over until its top touched the earth, and there shot therein another root, from which came forth another sprout, and there grew upon it the woman, and from these two are all men produced.”⁹

Both origin stories share many similarities about how the earth was created. “Present-day indigenous peoples of the Americas tell their own histories of their origins, and these seldom mirror the nonindigenous histories produced by anthropologists, archaeologists, botanists, and geographers.”¹⁰ It is important that we listen to our Native Americans to understand their history, since history has showed us repeatedly, when trusting nonindigenous people to accurately share and honor their stories, we don’t. We end up erasing their history.

Maize Gods

Corn or Maize plays an important role in almost every culture today. For Native Americans, corn is life. “Maize figures are prominently in the founding histories of peoples and connects them to their land, their gods, and their ancestors. Their languages reflect these connections, containing words and stories that tell of the role of maize in the creation of the first peoples.”¹¹ For the Lenape people, Mother Corn is extremely important. The Lenape people rely on seasonal crops. Dalton explains how Mother Corn controls all the plant spirits.¹²

Native Food

Native food is making a splash in the news and with foodies all over America. It is as simple as a discovery or rediscovery from various views and purposes of that food. For an example, seed savers, naturalists, commercial producers, advocates, nutritionists, and Indians could bring it up in the news, blogs, etc. Native American communities can see this as they are trying to revitalize their own cultural histories and economies.¹³ Each region has their own special native food that they are known for. The following native tribes and nations are known for their unique native natural foods: “Hopis and other Pueblos farm and market native varieties of corn, beans, and other vegetables to provide a better diet and income for their people.” Green states that the Ojibwas farm and market wild rice in the Great Lakes. Next, she discusses that “in the Plains, where once the death of bison was synonymous with the defeat and death of Indians themselves, buffalo herds now thrive on tribal and public lands.” Buffalo meat is a great example of indigenous people revitalizing their culture, while keeping up with the foodies. The Northwest Coastal people are known for fishing for salmon, packing and shipping it to people who enjoy that type of food. They also serve it at salmon feasts, some for the communities, some for the income generated by cultural tourism.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Green discusses how modern tribal efforts at “resource revitalization are still met with resistance because they interfere, as Indians always have with large non-Indian economic and cultural interests.”¹⁵ There are many examples of this resistance. “Native people and park rangers in the Plains often fight ranchers over the renewed presence of brucellosis-carrying buffalo in proximity to the huge cattle herds that graze, subsidized by federal money, on public lands.”¹⁶ The Northwest Coastal people struggle against many outside influences. These influences “come from international agency regulators, Japanese fish factories, and sport fishers for the right to catch the fish emblematic of their survival as a people.”¹⁷ As always, Native Alaskans continue to battle with the state and federal governments, as well with animal rights activists to continue their (Native Alaskans) traditional subsistence diet, and maintain their cultural skills and legal rights.¹⁸ Another issue, which impacts the corn more directly is the introduction of genetically engineered corn (GMO’s). This changes the nature of the natural corn if and when it is planted too close to native corn.

Importance of Corn

Corn is extremely important to each Native tribe or nation. “The story of maize begins at least 9,000 years ago in southwestern Mexico as small groups of nomadic people found themselves attracted to stands of a rather tall, bushy tropical grass.”¹⁹ Sometime between “about 9,000 and 6,200 years ago, during the Archaic period and in the general vicinity of the Balsas River region, a mutant form of teosinte showing the rudimentary signs of maize must have appeared.”²⁰ Maize plays an extremely versatile role to the indigenous people of North America. It can be seen in how they cook, in their stories, and as a goddess. Corn is a staple to their life, and is a part of their identity.

Since corn or maize is extremely versatile as food and drinks. It can be used as a vegetable, a source of sugar, and as alcohol. Maize has other parts of it that can be used in everyday life. Weatherwax discusses how the husks can be used as papers, wraps for tamales, cigarette wrappers, mats, baskets, and soles for shoes. The silks of the corn were used for medicinal purposes. Corncobs were cut and used as plugs for jugs, scrubbing brushes, and can be burned like charcoal. Corn stalks were used for building fences and the walls for their houses. Native Americans used every part of the corn plant.

Maize Tools and Corn Recipes

Maize has many tools that were used to cook many different recipes. Each tool is unique to each nation and to each recipe. Some tribes use traditional tools, while others have upgraded with technology. Grinding stones were often used on the main land by Native Americans for grinding corn. The stone was concave and about two to three palms long and one palm wide. They would then use a round stone to grind the corn. Next, they would add water to it. This would form a kind of dough, which would be used to make a small loaf the size of xeme (from tip of thumb to tip of pointer finger spread apart). Then

it would be wrapped in a maize leaf or other plant leaf and boiled. Once boiled it would be baked.²¹

Cooking pots had different purposes when cooking corn. Some had holes to help with washing of the work (like a colander). Other cooking pots without holes were used to boil, mix, or cook corn. Nixtamalization is a process that soaks and cooks corn in limewater. It helps make it easier to grind the corn. It can be used for making tortillas, tamales, and other meals. Comales are another cooking instrument used to cook maize. “They are usually flat ceramic discs with a slightly thickened and upturned rim.”²² They are used to cook on an open fire to make tortillas. Chicha is an alcoholic drink that is still popular in South America.

There are many recipes an educator can choose from, however to make the most impact and show respect to the local tribe, try to find a recipe that tribe has used. Also, something that your students can help with, even if its just small portions at a time. Some recipes to consider are chipas, cornmeal, tortillas, and corn bread. These are easy recipes that are used not only in Native American communities, but are used in the Latinx communities.

Strategies

Hands on activities

Students will participate in various hands on activities and skills. These activities will allow students to understand the content and material that are being taught by providing them an opportunity to explore artifacts and make a recipe with corn. As well as any other activities that may be planned for your field trip or guest from the local tribe or nation. This age group loves hands on activities. My students always want to touch and explore everything. The greatest thing about hands on activities is that it can be adapted for various abilities and differentiated for all of your learners.

Multicultural Education

Multicultural Education is just as important as social emotional learning, and learning the building blocks to reading. When applying the multicultural approach to education you’re providing an opportunity for your students to learn and appreciate another culture. It helps reduce prejudice, while building respect. In my classroom we have students whose families are from all parts of the world. Representation in curriculum is key in making connections to the curriculum. In Delaware, we have an inefficient multicultural social studies curriculum. It breezes over our Lenape tribe, as well as recognizing that they are still active in Delaware. We have this great resource and community to help educate our students, and we do no even use. However in this unit, we will build connections with the Lenape tribe, to build and enhance our understanding of them, while providing a respectful multicultural curriculum.

Special Education and English Language Learners

There are special resources and materials I use to help my Special Education Students and my English Language Learners. It is important to keep many of these resources available to them is to teach them how to use these resources. Just handing them an ABC chart or pointing to your word wall is ineffective. They will need practice and constant exposure and reminders. Incorporating these resources and materials ahead of time will help this unit be more successful.

Some of these resources include a word wall for reference, pictures that are labeled to help them visualize and write on topic for this unit. This helps your students know where to go when writing on the topic of this unit. For students, who need some extra help, create individual cards with the picture of the word and the label. Introduce these cards and vocabulary before each lesson. This will help front load information, which is in many of their IEP's or a skill that helps students to learn. Also, this helps them build confidence with their writing, while not feeling overwhelmed to pull from memory or to apply skills they have yet to understand. Other resources I have available for my special education students and English language learners are laminated ABC, blends & digraph, and vowel pair's charts with pictures associated with the sound that I hand out for them to use. As well as a visual checklist for their completed work.

Classroom Activities

Exploring Artifacts

In this unit, students will have the opportunity to explore artifacts related to corn. Exploring artifacts falls in line with social studies. This includes the many different types of corn, various equipment used to crush, grind, and cook or bake with corn. They may also explore fabrics, paintings, and other materials that tell the story of corn and its importance of corn to Native Americans. This activity can be done in one week or spread out over several weeks. It depends on how much time you have or how far deep you want your students to delve into exploring the various artifacts. This activity is great for student discussions amongst peers, as well as pairing students up with another student who is on a different level academically.

The first part of exploring artifacts is to collect corncobs from various types of corn. It may be easier to start this activity during the fall where there are more varieties in corn available. Create an information card matching the corncob for children to match and to learn fun facts. Some information you may want to use is: name, characteristics, what that type of corn is used for, what type of tool that may need to be used, and where that type of corn grows. Students will take turns rotating through bins to explore different types of corn. Try to have at least 5 ears of corn per bin and assign a group to each bin. After exploring a bin, have students draw that ear of corn and describe it using what they have learned in a special journal for this unit. Once they have explored all areas they will have several pages of different types of corn.

The second part of exploring artifacts, students will explore the different types of tools and equipment. This time you may need to use videos for some materials and tools. Create an information card matching the tool or equipment for the children to match and to learn fun facts. Some information you may want to use is: name, characteristics, what that type of corn is used for this type of tool, what type of recipe that may need to be used, where this tool or material may be found, and how to use this type of tool or piece of equipment may be used. Students will take turns rotating through bins to explore different types of equipment. Try to have at least one type of equipment or tool per bin and assign a group to each bin. For materials that are hard to find, provide a QR code for children to scan to watch a video on a device, or have a station of computers with the link up. Students will need help writing down information from the technology portion, so this would make a great small group activity. After exploring a bin or watching a video clip, have students draw that type of equipment or tool and describe it using what they have learned in a special journal for this unit. Once they have explored all areas they will have several pages of different types of tools and materials.

Cooking with Corn

Another activity for this unit would be cooking with corn. This would be a great activity to complete during social studies. We will start with the basics, and from the beginning. Students can use artifacts to make corn meal by using dried corn kernels (if possible) and a mortar and pestle (in place of grinding stones if not available). Each student can get a turn grinding the corn. During this time you can read a story about corn, facts about corn, etc. This activity can be done with a visitor from the local tribe, or an independent activity. Of course, make sure you have a food processor on hand to speed the project up. To take this activity to the next level, you can use the cornmeal the students made to make corn bread or another corn dish. This can be done in one day or across multiple days.

Indigenous Stories

During English Language Arts, teachers can incorporate Indigenous stories into their units. Some of these unit topics include folklore, fable, non-fiction, fiction, biography, narrative, informational texts, and so much more. Not only does this allow teachers to follow their curriculum maps, but to make this unit cross curricular. If a teacher is not from the Delaware area, focus on stories that are about tribes and nations from their particular area. This way, students are exposed to the history of the tribes and nations from their area.

When focusing on stories from your area, pick a mixture of texts, to provide your students with vast and well-rounded information. Try to include that tribe or nations creation story, importance of corn to them, the corn god/goddess story associated with their nation, corn recipes, and some tribe history.

Local Tribe Visitor

If you are lucky enough to have a Tribe or Nation close to the school, ask them if they would be willing to come to your classroom. This is perfect if taking a class trip is not an opportunity at the time. This visitor can share stories of their Tribe or Nation, their origin story, and why corn is important to their Nation. Another great activity to complete with your classroom visitor would be making a treat with corn. This could be a recipe that their tribe uses everyday or even for special ceremonies. Ask them to bring the tools they use, or even the tools that their ancestors used. This would make a great presentation, and it would reinforce the previous activity of exploring artifacts.

Field Trip

Another activity option is a field trip to a local tribe. This could be their reservation or even their community center. Make sure to plan ahead to ask the tribe or nation what they would like to share additionally about their community. This is a great opportunity for students to receive a tour (if applicable) of the reservation or community center, and to meet other Tribe members. Students can ask Tribe member's questions about the reservation or community center. This also gives the students the opportunity for any other activities that the local tribe may want to share or complete with the children. This is another opportunity to see what that tribe uses or used for cooking, make a traditional corn recipe, and listen to indigenous stories.

Informational Text

At the end of this unit, students will use their special notebook to write an informative text about what they have learned about Native Americans and the importance of corn to their tribe or nation. They will also draw a picture to go with their writing. When completed they will present their work to their class, and if possible to their visitor from the local tribe.

To help your students with writing by creating a class informational text based on the information they collected during the many classes, and activities. By working as a class, students are taking ownership for what they learned by providing information that they learned. This will allow you to teach them what an informational text is piece by piece, and reinforcing sentence structure. For your students who struggle with writing, provide sentence starters for certain students (special education, English language learners, or super low) or are unable to write to fill in or copy. Students will most likely need help looking back into their notebook to help them with their writing, or referring to the word walls. When completed, have students show and read their work in a frame.

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Resources

Teacher Materials

- Writing paper (age appropriate)
- Writing paper with highlighted bottom line (for special education students)
- Pencils
- Erasers
- Popsicle sticks (for spacing)
- ABC Charts
- Blends & Digraph Charts
- Checklists
- Journals (with age appropriate spacing)

- Interactive whiteboard (if possible)
- Vocabulary picture cards
- Word Wall
- Bins
- Books on tribe or nation
- Corn cobs (various types, multiple of each)
- Food processor
- Corn grinding tools
- Various other tools or pottery unique to the tribe or nation you are working with
- Zoom

Appendix A: Implementing District Standards

Delaware Social Studies Standards

K-3a: Students will understand that historical accounts are constructed by drawing logical inferences from artifacts and documents.²³

Delaware Social Studies Standards

K-3a: Students will develop an understanding of the similarities between families now and in the past, including: Daily life today and in other times, and cultural origins of customs and beliefs around the world.²⁴

Delaware Social Studies Standards

K-3b: Students will develop an awareness of major events and people in United States and Delaware history. Who lives here and how did they get here? (Immigrants, demographics, ethnic and religious groups), important people in our past, and different kinds of communities in Delaware and the United States.²⁵

Common Core Literacy Writing Standard

Common Core Literacy Writing Standard CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.1.2 Write informative/explanatory texts in which they name a topic, supply some facts about the topic, and provide some sense of closure.²⁶

Appendix B: Virtual Curriculum

Since 2020 has been a year for major changes, I decided to add an appendix for some virtual learning ideas and suggestions. If you are unable to have a guest visitor due to restrictions or distance, create zoom session for 100% virtual or hybrid options. This will allow you to have the guest speaker be virtually in your classroom. Having a virtual session will allow students to ask questions, watch how to grind and cook corn, and listen to stories. Another idea is to create an emoji classroom where students can click on links for stories, artifact exploration, videos, and so much more.

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- 1 “Oberle Elementary”
 - 2 “Complementary Power, 44-45”
 - 3 “Complementary Power, 45”
 - 4 “The Lenape, 7”
 - 5 “Complementary Power, 45”
 - 6 “An Indigenous Peoples, 19”
 - 7 “An Indigenous Peoples, 19”
 - 8 “The Lenape, 28”
 - 9 “The Lenape, 29”
 - 10 “Maize for the Gods, 51”
 - 11 “Maize for the Gods, 51-52”
 - 12 “Lenape, 24”
 - 13 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 14 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 15 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 16 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 17 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 18 “Mother Corn, 115”
 - 19 “Maize for the Gods, 17”
 - 20 “Maize for the Gods, 28”
 - 21 “Indian Corn Old America, 97”
 - 22 “Maize for the Gods, 188”
 - 23 “Social Studies”
 - 24 “Social Studies”
 - 25 “Social Studies”
 - 26 “English Language Arts”