

An Exploration of Culture

Lesson #2: EXISTING SIDE BY SIDE: BICULTURAL COMMUNITIES

TIME

50 minutes

MATERIALS FROM TRUNK

Graphics - #1 - 6

TEACHER PREPARATIONS

Review the historical background section of this lesson. If a clearer understanding of culture is desired, review lesson #1 "What is Culture?"

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- 1) define the term bicultural
- 2) identify examples of a bicultural community
- 3) construct an imaginary model of a bicultural lifestyle
- 4) assess biculturalism in Mexican American communities

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

If the arts, belief, and customs that make up a way of life for a group of people at any certain time are determined by the culture of the community, then bicultural means two sets of arts, beliefs, and customs within a group of people or community.

Bicultural communities usually come into existence when people leave their homes to move to a new location that has a different culture than the one they are used to. They don't want to cut themselves off from their former culture. Instead they find ways to merge, combine, or integrate the two cultures into something that works for them. In the end aspects of culture will be modified to meet this end.

Many Mexican Americans live in bicultural communities. Although they are Americans and live like many other Americans, they also value their Mexican background and traditions. Many families hold onto their Mexican culture through language, food, music, and religion. Some live in Mexican American communities where the Spanish language is spoken, heard on the radio and television, and found in newspapers and on street signs.

Every group of immigrants to the United States has had to make the adjustment of moving to a new home. The Mexican American situation was somewhat different from the experiences of some other ethnic groups. These immigrants moved to a new home that was in close proximity to their homeland. Early immigrants moved between the United States and

Mexico on a seasonal basis, and many others made frequent visits to their native country.

Much of the southwestern portion of the United States was once part of Mexico. When the U.S. gained control of this land numerous Mexicans became U.S. citizens. Many Mexicans felt this land was theirs and that is where they belonged because their ancestors had lived there long before European Americans arrived. Because this was once their land and they were guaranteed that past Spanish land grants to Mexicans would be honored, and "the enjoyment of all the rights of citizens of the United States," many Mexicans did not feel the responsibility to completely adopt American ways and put their Mexican culture behind them. Many owned land and lived lifestyles they thought were safe under the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 the United States government assumed responsibility for thousands of Mexicans living in what is today the southwestern United States. The treaty gave residents the choice of becoming U.S. citizens or returning to Mexico. Those who stayed became the first Mexican Americans. Even though the treaty guaranteed the constitutional rights of Mexican Americans, these rights have been violated through the years.

Many Mexicans did not originally come to the U.S. planning to stay. They came to earn money to take back home to their families. Because their stay in the United States was to be of limited duration they had no reason to adopt a new culture. They planned to return to their homes in Mexico.

Like other immigrant groups, Mexicans came in at the bottom of the economic ladder and faced discrimination because of their cultural differences. They often remained in isolated communities with other people of Mexican descent. Living in communities of Mexican Americans, having strong religious and family ties, and their close proximity to Mexico all helped to preserve much of their Mexican heritage.

VOCABULARY

- **Bi** = Two.
- **Bicultural** = Belonging to two distinct cultures.
- **Biculturalism** = The existence of two distinct cultures in one nation.
- **Culture** = Shared world view and beliefs of a particular community transmitted through its arts, beliefs, and customs.
- **Heritage** = Something handed down from earlier generations or from the past.

ACTIVITY

- 1) Explain the meaning of culture if the class is unfamiliar with it.
Shared world view and beliefs of a particular community transmitted through its arts, beliefs, and customs.
- 2) Once the class understand the term culture, ask them what the word bicultural means. If they

have trouble with this word have them break the word into its two base parts, bi and culture.

Bi means two, and culture is defined above. Bicultural is the existence of two distinct sets of beliefs and customs. Being bicultural is more than keeping traditions alive by the periodic use of certain recipes, music, ethnic clothing, etc.

Ask the class what the word bicultural might mean in terms of people's daily lives?

Living in a bicultural community means functioning within two distinct cultures on a daily basis. It is necessary for people living in a bicultural community to find ways to merge the two cultures together so that one does not displace the other. These people must be able to function in the society in which they live.

An example is the lives of many Mexican Americans. Mexican Americans live in the United States and are part of its culture. (Examples might include celebrating Christmas with Christmas trees and enjoying fireworks on the Fourth of July.) They are also part of a community that continues to practice the arts, beliefs, and customs of Mexico (holding fiestas, eating Mexican food, speaking Spanish in the home, etc.). Within their lives Mexican Americans need to practice both cultures, but each culture must be altered or adapted from its purest form to allow it to coexist with the other culture. People living within two cultures are called bicultural.

- 3) Begin a discussion with the class about what they think life in a bicultural community would be like. Use the following questions to help lead the discussion.

Whenever people move from one location to another they need to make changes in their lives to adapt to their new homes. Have the class think of an example of how their lives might change if they moved to a new community where life was different from what they are used to. What type of move might this be and what changes might it entail?

One example might be moving from the city to the country or vice versa. These types of moves would mean adapting to the inaccessibility of shopping malls, movie theaters, restaurants, friends, etc. or, in reverse, the loss of being close to nature, having space in which to roam, pets that might have to be left behind, etc.

- 4) Bicultural communities usually come into existence when people leave their home to move to a new location that has a different culture than the one they are used to. This type of relocation means that changes need to be made in how people live if they are going to function in their new home.

Assign an animal (e.g., cow, dog, cat, pig) to each student. Make sure that there are four to five students assigned to each animal and that they are scattered throughout the room. Have

the class group themselves together by animal by sound only. Students may moo, bark, meow, oink, etc. to help find each other (no talking), but their eyes must be closed. Give them five minutes to try to accomplish this.

After the allotted time is up bring them back together as a class and have them discuss what it was like to be unable to communicate with others or ask for assistance. Did they feel isolated, unsure of themselves, confident that they could accomplish their assigned task, etc.?

Compare this experience with that of someone moving to another location and how this might impact them. Have the class discuss aspects of moving from their homes to another country such as Germany, Korea, or Greenland as American service men and women stationed overseas do. What difficulties might this cause?

Explain to the class that this situation is similar to the one that many Mexican Americans found themselves in. This group moved from a Spanish speaking country to an English speaking one, they had to become familiar with different foods, their celebrations were no longer those being celebrated by the majority of the population, etc.

- 5) Share graphics #1-6 with the class. Use these images to help the class find examples of the biculturalism that exists in many Mexican Americans' lives.

Today many Mexican Americans live in bicultural communities. Although they are Americans and live like many other Americans, they also value and maintain their Mexican heritage. Many families hold onto their culture through language, food, music, religion, and values.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- 1) Teaching culture is difficult. Sharing a book with your class such as Muriel Stanek, *I Speak English for My Mom* (Niles, Ill.: Albert Whitman and Co., 1989), may better help them understand some aspects of life when living within two cultures.
- 2) Have the students choose different countries, imagine that they have moved there, and write about one day of their life there. They may want to include things such as the language spoken, types of food eaten, when meals are served, what school is like (hours of school, subjects taught), family life, shopping, what they do with their friends, leisure time activities, and climate. After writing about a typical day have them research each country and its culture and compare their findings with what they originally believed life would be like in their chosen country. Were they similar or different? How so?
- 3) The Mexican American community often has embraced other Hispanics. This unity frequently occurs because of the similarities in cultural values, similar language, and music. The Hispanic community includes Mexican Americans (the largest Hispanic group due to its proximity to its country of origin), but does not exclude Spanish speaking people from the Caribbean, Central and South America as well. Have the students research Hispanic groups

from countries other than Mexico and report their findings to the class. Students may want to research the locations and numbers of these populations in Kansas, some of their folk stories or music, compare and/or contrast a specific group with Mexican American immigrants in Kansas, etc.

- 4) Ask the class to consider what they've seen and discussed. At what point do they think a bicultural community becomes a culture unto itself. This is a subjective question so the answer will be determined individually.
- 5) Have the students learn about the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which guaranteed Mexicans living in territory acquired by the United States from Mexico in 1848 their constitutional rights. What agreements actually were made with this treaty? What were the constitutional rights of Mexicans living in this area? What rights are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution? A copy of the treaty can be found in Charles I. Bevans, comp., *Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States of America, 1776-1917*, vol. 9 (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office 1968), 791-806.
- 6) To help the class better understand how moving from one location to another might effect their lives, ask them to imagine that their parent(s) are American service men and women being stationed overseas and taking their families with them. Have the class discuss aspects of moving from their homes to another country such as Germany, Korea, or Greenland. What difficulties might this cause?

Language barriers; missing friends and family; differences in climate, school, games, food, drinks, holiday celebrations, etc. Perhaps the youth in this new country play a different role in society or have different things expected of them. Differences might include the students' lives being more or less regimented, the school day or year being longer or shorter, more homework, etc.

If the class moved to a community of Americans in this foreign country would they continue to practice some of their American traditions and customs? If so how might they do this?

They probably would try to continue some aspects of the life they were familiar with in their old home. This might be done by eating American food when possible, celebrating American holidays such as the Fourth of July and Thanksgiving, speaking English in their home and within the American community, etc.

Would they face problems when they went outside this American community? If so, what are some of these potential problems?

They probably would be unable to read road signs, menus, or newspapers; be unfamiliar with the currency; need to eat unfamiliar foods; have to function within a system of laws or practices that were strange and unfamiliar; need to interact with residents of a country who might not understand American lifestyles; etc.

If the students made this type of move do they think they would try to continue some aspects of American ways and life that were familiar and comfortable?

Most likely they would.

- 7) See other lessons in this manual dealing with culture: "What is Culture?," "Mexicans: Old Roots, Young People," "The Hispanic Face of Kansas," and any of the lessons in the section "The Heritage Continues."
- 8) View the videos included in this trunk: *The Hispanic Face of Kansas* and *Hispanic Culture Series: Mexican People and Culture*. Watch for examples of bicultural communities.