Giving Thanks: Curricular Opportunities for Expanding Young Children's Cultural Awareness

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Giving Thanks
Observing Thanksgiving, Kwanzaa, and Day of the Dead

Martha T. Dever and James J. Barta

Traditionally in America, Thanksgiving Day is recognized as a time for giving thanks and celebrated in customary ways. While Thanksgiving is an important holiday, it is not the only way people acknowledge and reaffirm their gratitude for what they value and enjoy in life. Since virtually all cultural groups have celebrations in which they give thanks, teachers should incorporate a study of a variety of these celebrations in their curriculum.

Holidays can be meaningful events in the lives of children. However, when holidays are observed in classrooms, they should provide accurate information rather than stereotypical images of the cultures that celebrate them, and be integrated as part of a more global study of cultural diversity. Some scholars suggest that the holiday curriculum has a place in elementary classrooms if the activities provide study rather than an endorsement of celebrations, and if the historical and cultural meaning of celebrations is not lost.

The purpose of this article is to describe a primary grade curriculum unit organized around the theme of “giving thanks” and encompassing the holidays of Thanksgiving, Kwanzaa, and Day of the Dead. Consistent with guidelines set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, this thematic unit provides integrated, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that encompass holidays and other expressions of thank-giving from different cultures.

History and Traditions
Each of the holidays—Thanksgiving, Kwanzaa, and Day of the Dead—encompasses traditions of giving thanks that are historically significant to a culture or group of people. Thanksgiving is an American harvest celebration that dates back to the 1620s. Kwanzaa is a celebration of African American roots that began during the 1960s. Hispanics in the United States remember their dead ancestors on Day of the Dead, which has its roots in ancient Mexico.

Thanksgiving Day
In search of religious freedom, the Pilgrims arrived on the shores of what would become Massachusetts in November 1620. The land was inhabited by Wampanoags, an Algonquin-speaking people living along the coasts of what are now Massachusetts and Rhode Island. They lived in round-roofed dwellings made of poles covered with bark, and called wigwams. The Wampanoags were accomplished hunters and gardeners who befriended the Pilgrims and taught them how to fish, hunt, and plant crops successfully. The Pilgrims suffered greatly during their first year in America, and many died from hunger or disease. The settlers had brought wheat to plant, only to discover that it would not grow in the rocky New England soil. Squanto, a Wampanoag who spoke English, stayed with the Pilgrims for several months and taught them suitable plants to grow—beans, pumpkins, corn, and squash. The following autumn, Captain Miles Standish invited Squanto and other Wampanoags to join the Pilgrims for a celebration in thanksgiving for the harvest.

Most Americans still celebrate Thanksgiving as a time to express gratitude. During a traditional celebration, extended families and friends gather to enjoy being together and share a meal. Other traditions may include children’s games and viewing football and parades on television. A traditional Thanksgiving dinner may feature some of the foods shared by the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags, such as turkey, corn, and pumpkin or squash.

Kwanzaa
Kwanzaa was originated in 1966 by M. Ron Karenga and was inspired by a traditional agricultural harvest festival observed throughout Africa for centuries. This seven-day festival is observed in late December and early January. During the Kwanzaa festival, African Americans and others celebrate family
During the Kwanzaa festival, African Americans and others celebrate family and ancestral values, and offer gratitude for what they have in life.

One symbol of Kwanzaa, the kinara, is a wooden candle holder containing one black, three red, and three green candles. The black candle represents the rich color of African American skin, the red candles represent struggles that people often face, and the green candles remind participants to look to a prosperous future. The candles also represent the seven principles of Kwanzaa—unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Each day of Kwanzaa focuses on one of the principles, and one candle is lit. Kwanzaa culminates with a feast during which families give thanks for food and each other.7

Day of the Dead
Many Hispanics in the United States are deeply connected to the culture of Mexico, and continue to celebrate the ancient holiday of Dia de Muertos, or Day of the Dead. Catholic missionaries, believing the celebration to be evil, originally tried to uproot it. But Day of the Dead—its rituals influenced by Catholic beliefs and practice—continues as a holiday of thanksgiving for the souls of departed relatives.

A traditional Day of the Dead holiday begins at home with families working together to prepare an ofrenda, or offering. Many families prepare an altar in their homes, where they place articles such as clothing or photographs honoring the dead. Candles are placed on the altar to light the way for the dead, and drinks are offered to quench their thirst.

Children play an important part in the preparations for Day of the Dead. They help clean up and beautify local cemeteries where processions are held to honor those buried there. They also help decorate the altar and prepare skeleton masks to be worn. During the somber procession, special prayers are said for the dead while facing in particular directions—north for ancestors, west for women, south for infants and children, and east for men. The procession is followed by dancing and feasting during which people give thanks to those who have died.8

A Unit on Giving Thanks
This unit begins by connecting children to what they understand best, their own experiences. After sharing personal thanksgiving traditions, the unit addresses the origin and meaning of our national Thanksgiving holiday. Connections are then made to two other cultural thanksgiving celebrations—Kwanzaa and Day of the Dead.

The following activities are intended to guide individual, small group, and whole group study, and should be used selectively based on the age, level, and interests of the students. Individual subject areas and related skills are naturally integrated within the contexts being studied. The role of the teacher is to pique curiosity, help students discover information, and provide activities for shared learning as young children begin to understand the meaning, origin, and contemporary significance of these holidays.

The Learning Spiral, consisting of Engagement, Investigation, and Sharing activities, has been used as a framework for organizing activities within the unit.9 Engagement activities are designed to capture interest and motivate students. Investigation activities guide open-ended exploration of the topic. Sharing activities provide ways for students to communicate what they have learned.

Opportunities to provide mini-lessons on various skills should also be used. For example, when charting students’ responses, teachers might note specific letters, sounds, or word patterns. A giving thanks journal can provide continuous and authentic opportunities for writing. Mathematical skills and concepts can frequently be integrated into activities.

Because this unit focuses on families and culture, many opportunities will emerge to involve parents and community members in the classroom. For example, they might be invited to visit the classroom and share their experiences. (Thank you letters to guest speakers can provide another writing experience following a guest speaker.) Finally, assessment should be continuous and include anecdotal records, checklists, and artifacts created by students for both formative and summative assessment.

Engagement Activities
Personal Experiences. Knowing that children learn best when connections are made to their lives, begin the unit by inviting children to share personal and family rituals for giving thanks. These might be informal or formal practices. Parents can become involved in this activity as children gather information to share at school. Provide opportunities for children to write about the information they have collected, or to present it in pictorial or graphic form.

Shared Reading. Choose a piece of literature to read to the class. (See...
selections are *An Old Fashioned Thanksgiving* by Louisa May Alcott, *The Gifts of Kwanzaa* by S. Saint James, and *Days of the Dead* by Kathryn Lasky. Invite children to talk about personal experiences that come to mind during this shared reading experience. Commonalities and differences between Wampanoag, Pilgrim, and contemporary families can be noted and discussed. The process of sharing their experiences will assist students in understanding the meaning of the holidays portrayed in the books.

**Investigation Activities**

**Literature Circles.** After discussion of personal experiences, the study of the first Thanksgiving can begin with an investigation of the historical factors that led to the celebration enjoyed by the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags. *Three Young Pilgrims* by C. Harness provides excellent content information for beginning the investigation. Provide the class with several other historical selections. Then ask students to indicate what book they are most interested in reading in a small group. (Volunteers and parents can be enlisted to read to non-conventional readers.) Over a few days, have students read and discuss their books, sharing their thoughts and ideas.

**Making Wigwams and Pilgrim Houses.** Mathematics is embedded in a variety of experiences designed to help children investigate Thanksgiving traditions. If possible, begin this activity by reading students *Tapenum's Day: A Wampanoag Indian Boy in Pilgrim Times* by K. Waters. Figure 1 provides directions for students to measure and design wigwams for a Wampanoag Village. Students might also be interested in creating a life-sized wigwam outdoors or in a large indoor area of the school. This activity could be extended to the design of houses characteristic of a Pilgrim settlement.

**Preparing a Feast.** Each of the holidays under study involves a feast as part of the traditional celebration. Have students prepare foods for one or all of the holidays using traditional recipes. This activity provides opportunities for students to tabulate supplies needed, calculate their cost, learn cooking time and temperature, and investigate fractions as they increase or decrease recipe ingredients.

**Comparing Cultures.** As students develop an understanding of the Pilgrims' situation and the events leading to the first Thanksgiving, help them make connections to the other two thanksgiving traditions. *Seven Candles for Kwanzaa* by A. D. Pinkney offers children a rich understanding of the origin, meaning, and rituals of the Kwanzaa holiday. Students can respond to the story and look for similarities and differences between this African American holiday, Thanksgiving, and Day of the Dead. They might analyze the similarities and differences among these holidays by creating a Venn Diagram.

**Creating Masks.** Masks worn during the procession are an important part of Day of the Dead celebrations. Students can make masks using paper shapes and glue. This activity allows children to explore mathematical concepts related to informal geometry, such as the names of shapes and their characteristics and symmetry. Students should understand that masks created for Day of the Dead are to be honored as commemorating family members and more distant ancestors. Invite students to talk and write about any traditions in which they participate wearing masks.

**Sharing Activities**

**Share The Book.** This activity is an ideal follow-up to the literature circles.
activity. Using a variety of materials, students create a presentation of their book intended to convince other students to read it. The resulting artifact might take the form of a poster, a dramatization, a newspaper article, or a wall mural, to name a few possibilities. Each presentation should highlight what students have learned about the meaning and origin of the holiday. Artistic, literacy, and mathematical skills are some of the opportunities for integration that occur.

**Writing.** Journals provide an opportunity for students to write daily or weekly about what they are learning. Teachers should also incorporate opportunities for writing thank you notes following a guest speaker or field trip.

**Dramatic Play.** Appropriate props will invite dramatic play with younger children. For example, garden props might be used for scenarios representing how the Pilgrims learned to plant suitable crops in America. Food props might generate play around the feast tradition common to each of the holidays.

**Conclusion**

The unit described here introduces, but does not exhaust, possibilities for students to learn about thanksgiving holidays and make connections among cultures and sub-cultures. Hopefully, it will help students to appreciate the multitude of ways in which human beings express gratitude in their celebrations. As such, it provides a model for engaging students' interest in a meaningful study of their world, while guiding them toward awareness, understanding, and acceptance of others within it.

**Notes**

6. Highline Indian Education Program (Seattle, WA: unpublished manuscript)

**Children's Literature**


**About the Authors:**

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