

Folklore: A Key to Cultural Understanding

"Once upon a time" there was a strong and courageous warrior named Ulysses . . . a great and wise king named Arthur . . . a clever and resourceful frontiersman named Dan'l Boone . . . a lazy boy named Jack.

THESE and many other folklore personalities are widely known across the United States. Such heroes of folk tales and legends make frequent and significant appearances in the curriculum. So do other examples of folklore such as:

"We're marching 'round the levee" . . . "with a right hand to your partner and a left hand to your corner," and "skip to my lou, my darlin'" . . . "I am a poor way-faring stranger" . . . "on the Chisholm trail." So "Go tell Aunt Rhody," "I'm dreadful sorry, Clementine." "Swing low, sweet chariot" . . . "I wish I may, I wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight." . . . "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." . . . "Red at night, sailors' delight; red in the morning, sailors take warning."

Most teachers are familiar with aspects of folklore. The English teacher and the librarian, for example, are con-

cerned with folk tales, myths, legends, folk ballads, and folk speech; the music teacher makes liberal use of folk songs and sometimes plays folk musical instruments; in physical education classes, the teacher often leads folk dances and games originating as folklore; the art teacher encourages handcraft activity and costume design based on folk motifs; the science teacher develops methods for testing superstitions; and the teacher of social studies or social sciences (including the sociologist, historian, and anthropologist) emphasizes to a great extent patterns of living and folkways.

However, while most teachers are familiar with small segments of the folklore spectrum, their familiarity with other aspects often is limited. Because many teachers do not fully understand folklore, they are unable to recognize or to make the most profitable use of its potential values for education. Some teachers do not fully understand the role folklore can play in strengthening the school program. Neither do they understand the potential role of the school in developing an understanding and appreciation of folk heritage and in help-

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ing to preserve aspects of this heritage which have value.

What Is Folklore?

Briefly, folklore includes the traditional elements of the way of life of a group of people and the creative expressions developing naturally as a part of this way of life. In addition to folk songs, dances, tales, and handicrafts of a group, folklore includes the generally held beliefs of members of this group and their activities resulting from these beliefs.

Folklore is a significant factor in the life of every pupil. A pupil's heritage includes the folk heritage of all the groups with which he is associated. In widening circles, these groups include the child's family, his neighborhood play group, his classroom and school groups, his church group, his family's economic or occupational group, his racial group, his state and regional groups, and his nationality group.

The most significant folklore to a child is that which belongs to the groups with which he has the closest ties. While all types of folk heritage have value when used appropriately in the school program, that which comes from the local folk heritage is of greatest immediate significance to the pupil. The school, therefore, should consider making adequate and appropriate use of the resources related to local folk heritage, that is, the folk heritage of the pupils and their community.

In emphasizing the significance of local folk heritage, this article presents a few illustrative classroom activities related to the utilization and preservation of family folklore, local history, and local folklore. Reference to important aspects of folklore such as regional and

national heroes, legends, tales and traditions is implied only as they are found locally. While this article does not specifically refer to dances, songs, and other forms of folklore which come from other nations, it does recognize that the cultures of the family and the local community both have their foundations in larger cultures.

Family Folklore

Family folklore includes traditions, of whatever origin, that have become a part of the family heritage. Most significant are those traditions which have been in the family for several generations or longer, including elements of folk heritage such as "This little piggy went to market," "Jack and Jill went up the hill," "Barb'ry Allen," numerous other nursery games, nursery rhymes, songs and ballads, methods of food preparation, speech patterns, and traditional beliefs.

Typical school activities involving family folklore include the telling by the teacher of an appropriate tale, rhyme or saying which may stimulate the collection of similar materials by pupils. Pupils may repeat the teacher's illustration at home and learn new variations or obtain other materials to bring back to class. Pupils may attempt to systematize their collection of sayings, stories, songs or other materials gleaned from their families. Older pupils might even prepare these materials for preservation in an archive. From parents and grandparents, pupils may learn about "the old days" and "the old ways"; pupils may compare *their* daily activities and objects in common daily use with those of an earlier time and, perhaps, another location.

Activities emphasizing family folklore often promote an understanding, ac-

ceptance and appreciation of one's own cultural heritage. Family pride and self-respect may be enhanced with a resultant strengthening of family relationships. Further, significant elements of family heritage may be preserved.

Local History

Local history is full of colorful and interesting facts, legends and places. A most significant aspect is local *cultural* history which considers the way of life of people of earlier times and hence is concerned with their folklore.

Among the many activities by which "the local folk" of the past may be studied are field trips to historical sites, historical museums, Indian burial grounds, cemeteries, and homes or workshops of older residents of the community who may talk, sing or demonstrate in some other manner their folk knowledge and skills.

Pupils may take part in activities such as those actually pursued by "the folk" in their work and recreation such as singing, playing musical instruments, storytelling, folk dancing, playing games, weaving, and other handcraft work. Pupils might collect articles made and used by pioneer ancestors, or legendary or semi-legendary tales of local heroes and events. They may start a collection of local place names, songs, or folk sayings and language expressions peculiar to the locality, along with explanations of their origins and meaning.

Not only do pupils learn about their local community when they study local history, they also learn generalities which apply to all people. Learning about local history facilitates learning about the relationships between man's environment and his activities. Certain pupils can understand that their forefathers and pred-

ecessors lived the way they did, not because of a lack of intelligence, but as a matter of adaptation. When children regard adaptation to one's surroundings as a test of intelligence, they look with a more tolerant eye toward the ways of "folk" of other cultures and other generations of their own family.

Local history provides a point of departure for the study of various phases of United States history. It vividly pictures the nature of history as being a sequential development from the long ago to today, starting with a place which is familiar and understandable to the child—the local community.

Local Folklore

Local folklore encompasses the tradition-based activities of the various groups within the community. Through its study, the pupil (or the teacher, for that matter) may obtain a meaningful picture of life within the community.

In studying local folklore, pupils may observe ethnic groups in traditional holiday and festival activities. Native costumes, dances, foods, and "old-country" customs may be seen at weddings, religious processions, and other special occasions. Pupils themselves may sponsor play-parties, social gatherings, or festivals at which they may observe or participate in traditional songs, dances, tales, costumes, and foods from many community cultural groups. They may visit homes of children having diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds; during such visits conversation may be directed toward the customs and traditions of the host family. Pupils may visit foreign-born craftsmen. They may visit or invite other members of the community into the classroom to talk, to sing, or to demonstrate folk knowledge. Foreign-

born children may be invited to give programs in native dress and native tongue. Pupils may listen to tales learned from foreign-born parents as told by other pupils of their classroom. They may develop a familiarity with, and collect examples of, the vocabulary, speech patterns, folk beliefs, and folkways of local cultural groups.

Activities centered around local folklore should help develop an appreciation of the cultures of other groups of people; appreciation may lead to greater understanding of the basic nature of these groups and the individuals constituting them. Such intercultural experiences may result in a better understanding of the nature of the local community and enhance relationships among neighbors. Study of local folklore may help develop a realization that one's own culture is an integral part of the larger national and world culture.

Pupils may develop an understanding of the United States as being composed of numerous groups, each group having its own place of origin and its own heritage, each representing an important strand in the total national fabric. Through folklore, pupils may learn much about democracy and democratic living; they may increase their respect for the rights and abilities of others. They may become more broad-minded, more open to acceptance of new ideas and new people.

A study of local folklore may help pupils reconcile the fact of differences among people and individuals. It may help dispel stereotypes, enabling pupils to see other people as individuals.

Through identification with the local community the pupil may be enabled to set down personal cultural roots. This is especially important in these days of increased mobility and of weakening of

family ties. An understanding of local folklore tends to dignify and preserve worthy local cultural traditions.

Potential Values

What values may result from the utilization of folklore resources? Because folklore has intrinsic value in its art forms, it can help stimulate an understanding and appreciation of many types of artistic expression. The folk arts can inspire significant creative experiences. Various folklore-centered activities can provide aesthetic experiences, wholesome pleasure, and stimulation for the development of the imagination.

The school can help pupils distinguish and understand differences between genuine cultural tradition and "fakelore" or pseudo-folklore. By learning to distinguish between that which is genuine and that which is not, between that which has significant cultural value and that which has little, and between that which is beautiful and that which is tawdry, pupils may gain greater perspective for developing their sense of values.

Folklore can provide enrichment for the instructional program through its art forms, its content and its motivational values. Further, it may help develop a unity within the instructional program by providing significant relationships among the various content areas. It can give added meaning to school studies and activities by relating them to the life and heritage of the community.

Folk songs, games, and dances, providing a refreshing relief from formality, often produce improved attitudes toward school and school work. Judicious use of folklore can help school work become more "alive" and more meaningful for the pupil. These activities have values which may last a lifetime.

Participation in folk songs, games and dances provides children with opportunities for wholesome social experiences. Further, because folklore reflects human nature, studying it may be the means by which pupils can become aware of the universalities of human thought and activity.

Finally, the teacher may better understand the child and the community as a result of a personal study and of pupil reports of local and family folklore.

Undesirable Practices

While the utilization of folklore resources may provide many desirable educational outcomes, there are several practices which might produce undesirable results. Among these practices are the following.

Oversimplification of cultural considerations—as when attention is given more to the superficial and “quaint” than to fundamental and significant institutions, practices, and beliefs—may result in the development of untrue or misleading stereotypes and generalities.

Glorification or idealization of folklore itself is unrealistic and misleading.

The effectiveness of folklore materials may be lost or diminished by the indiscriminate use of tales, songs, customs, beliefs, and dances; by the use of inappropriate materials (for example, materials which are too advanced for the child's understanding or of little interest to him); and by *compelling* pupils to participate unwillingly in activities.

Severe criticism of colloquial language may be unreasonable; it may reflect a lack of teacher understanding of the nature and function of folk speech.

Undue emphasis on perfection of artistic performance and on exhibitions should be avoided; pupils should find

enjoyment in participation without striving self-consciously for artistic perfection.

Finally, undue emphasis on a particular body of tradition as “superior” may result in attitudes of superiority and lead to clannishness or chauvinism. Folklore, as a common heritage, should not be used for chauvinistic purposes but to foster humane regard for *all* people.

Several conclusions may be reached regarding adequate and appropriate use in the instructional program of resources related to local folk heritage.

First, the effectiveness of the instructional program can be enhanced through enlightened use of folklore, primarily through the intellectual, emotional, artistic, and social benefits it offers to the pupils and to the teachers.

Second, consideration of family folklore, local history, and local folklore offers opportunities for active participation, emotional enjoyment, and intellectual understanding of a most significant but often neglected segment of the cultural heritage of each pupil and each community.

Third, if the school *fails* to utilize its local folklore resources, a portion of significant local cultural heritage may be lost.

Finally, if the school *does* make intelligent utilization of its folklore resources, the instructional program will be more effective; the children and youth of each community may be enabled to find greater meaning and significance in their own lives; their creative and artistic talents will have additional opportunities for expression and development; and pupils will be better equipped to understand and to deal intelligently with those universal characteristics of human nature which affect the lives of people throughout the world.

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