



Día de los Muertos/ Day of the Dead

**Goals 2000 - Partnerships for
Educating Colorado Students**

**In Partnership with the Denver Public Schools
and the Metropolitan State College of Denver**

El Alma de la Raza Project



THE ALMA PROJECT

A Cultural Curriculum Infusion Model

Día de los Muertos/ Day of the Dead

by Shanna Birkholz

Grades 3–4

Implementation Time: 3–4 Weeks



The Alma Curriculum and Teacher Training Project
Loyola A. Martinez, Project Director

Día de los Muertos/Day of the Dead

Unit Concepts:

- Historical significance of the Day of the Dead
- Personal family traditions and holidays
- Major aspects of the Day of the Dead

Standards Addressed by This Unit:

Reading and Writing:

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)

Students read and locate, select, evaluate, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

Math:

Students develop number sense, understand and use appropriate math vocabulary, understand and use number relationships in problem-solving situations, and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems. (M1)

Students use a variety of tools and techniques to measure, apply the results in problem-solving situations, and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems. (M5)

History:

Students understand political institutions and theories that have developed and changed over time. (H5)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

Visual Art:

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive features of visual arts. (A2)

Introduction

According to Aztec tradition, one does not mourn for a departed one, for tears will fall on the path the soul must travel and the soul may slip and fall. Contemporary Mexican culture continues this tradition by associating some festive elements with death. The Day of the Dead, primarily celebrated on November 2, is a day set aside to commemorate members of the family who have died. Preparations must be made to welcome the departed visitor.

Usually an altar is set up with a photograph of the deceased. Candles and yellow flowers called *zempasuchitl* are placed on the altar together with “Bread of the Dead” (a sweet bread), candy skulls, and favorite articles of the person.

The loved one’s favorite foods are also prepared and an elaborate table is set. The spirit comes to his or her former home and is supposed to take the essence from the food. Then the rest of the family and invited guests are asked to partake of the food.

Other families decorate the graves of their dead relatives. They make elaborate decorations using petals from the *zempasuchitl*, as well as bouquets of the yellow flower. The atmosphere at the grave side is one of subdued festivity.

If one were to visit the marketplaces in Michoacan or Patzcuaro while the Day of the Dead is being celebrated, the visitor would experience a distinct feeling of festivity. Gaily decorated skeletons, skeleton puppets, skeleton toys, coffins, candy skulls, and decorated bread are arranged throughout the marketplace.

The Day of the Dead may seem a very unusual holiday to some people, but in Mexican culture, death is considered a very important journey and a reason to celebrate, even though the ones who have died are greatly missed.

Implementation Guidelines

It is recommended that this unit be taught in second or third grade, but it can be adapted for use in first or fourth grades. Although the unit is not written for the purpose of teaching reading and writing skills, reading and writing strategies are included in the lessons in order to strengthen these skills. If the strategies used in any lesson are unfamiliar to your students, the teacher should do some pre-teaching activities before attempting the lesson. The last three lessons are extensions and can be used as additional activities.

Instructional Materials and Resources:

The following books are required for implementing this unit as written:

Books:

Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of Day of the Dead by Jorge Ancona Díaz

Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith

The Spirit of Tío Fernando by Janice Levy

Days of the Dead by Kathryn Lasky

Optional Videos:

Celebrating the Day of the Dead, Educational Video Network, #742dV (20 min.), 1401 19th Street, Huntsville, TX 77340, (409) 295-5767

The Day of the Dead, The Carlex Co., #1045, (32 min.), (800) 526-3768

Lesson Summary:

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|------------------------|--|
| Lesson 1 | Holidays and Traditions
Students list the various holidays and discuss the traditions associated with them. |
| Lesson 2 | Informational Web
After reading <i>The Spirit of Tío Fernando</i> , students list the important aspects of the holiday, Day of the Dead. |
| Lesson 3 | Story Structure Matrix
After rereading <i>The Spirit of Tío Fernando</i> , students fill out a story structure matrix and illustrate the events. |
| Lesson 4 | Excitement Map
Students complete a class graph plotting the excitement level of selected events in the story, <i>The Spirit of Tío Fernando</i> . |
| Lesson 5 | Days of the Dead Masks
Students make masks in the traditional Day of the Dead style. |
| Lesson 6 | Candy Skulls
Students make candy skulls out of marzipan, frosting, and cake decorations. |
| Lesson 7
(Extended) | Day of the Dead Altar
Students create and explain a traditional Day of the Dead altar. |
| Lesson 8
(Extended) | Bread of the Dead
Students make and eat Bread of the Dead. |
| Lesson 9
(Extended) | “Death Went and Sat Down One Day”
Students read, write, and illustrate their own version of a traditional poem. |

Lesson 1: Holidays and Traditions

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students understand political institutions and theories that have been developed and changed over time. (H5)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students write and speak to peers, teachers, and the community.

Students understand how democratic ideas and institutions and theories in the United States have developed, changed, and/or been maintained.

Students know how societies have been affected by religions and philosophies.

Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will list holidays celebrated by many different cultures.

Students will share and chart traditions associated with the different holidays.

Students will develop background knowledge on the Day of the Dead.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Graphic organizers

Teacher guided/Student directed

Discussions

PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

In order for students to understand that the holiday, Day of the Dead, is rich with tradition, students must first explore the holidays and traditions with which they are most familiar. They must see that their families have cultures and traditions that are an integral part of their family history. The holidays used may alter slightly depending on the class; however, they should come from a variety of cultures. Possible holidays to include are: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Kwanzaa, Las Posadas, Easter, Passover, New Year's Eve, Christmas, and Valentine's Day. Traditions should include the activities associated with the holiday. An example of a holiday tradition in a specific family would be opening Christmas presents on Christmas Eve.

ACTIVITIES

Share and create a list of holidays. The holidays may be traditional and/or family holidays.

Write the names of the holidays across the top of a piece of chart paper. Next, discuss the traditions associated with the various holidays. Place each tradition under the appropriate holiday on the chart paper. Read pages 10–12 in *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith.

Lesson 1 (cont.)

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith

chart paper

markers

books on traditions:

Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions by Margaret Musgrove

The Happy Funeral by Eve Bunting

Special Korean Birthday by Jae Hyun Hahn and Han Hahn

Seven Korean Sisters by Jae Hyun Hahn

ASSESEMNT

Students will be able to discuss various holidays and share a variety of traditions associated with these holidays.

Lesson 2: Information Web

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)

Students read and recognize literature as a record or human experience. (RW6)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students make predictions, analyze, draw conclusions, and discriminate between fact and opinion in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Students use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing to gather data, define the problem, and apply problem-solving skills.

Students will read literature to understand places, people, events, and vocabulary, both familiar and unfamiliar.

Students will read classic and contemporary literature, representing various cultural and ethnic traditions from throughout the world.

Students know how societies have been affected by religions and philosophies.

Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will record the various events and objects associated with Day of the Dead.

Students will organize the events and objects of Day of the Dead into an organizational web.

SPECIFICS

The Day of the Dead is a holiday celebrated in Mexico during early November. At this time families gather to celebrate the reunion of the living and the nonliving. It is a time for commemoration of one's ancestors, and for the nonliving, it is a time to return home to ensure they are not forgotten. The celebration involves remembering the nonliving by visiting the cemetery, and/or setting up an altar in their honor. Offerings of food, flowers, candles, and toys (for children) are made to show respect and provide nourishment for the return of the spirits of the deceased to the world of the living.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Read aloud

Teacher-directed

Information web

Lesson 2 (cont.)

ACTIVITIES

After the teacher reads aloud *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of Day of the Dead* by Jorge Ancona Díaz and *Days of the Dead* by Kathryn Lasky, synthesize the information in the text by restating what you have learned about the Day of the Dead. Chart your responses on a web. Once your ideas are posted, the teacher will ask you questions to help you identify the organizational patterns in the information charted. Take turns making simple illustrations for the various categories on the web.

VOCABULARY

<i>calacas</i>	Handmade Day of the Dead figurines showing skeletons working and playing
<i>calavera</i>	Skull
<i>masa</i>	Dough or the cornmeal mixture used to make tortillas
<i>ofrenda</i>	Offering
<i>pan</i>	Bread
<i>tumbas</i>	Graves

RESOURCES / MATERIALS

Days of the Dead by Kathryn Lasky

Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead by Jorge Ancona Díaz

chart paper

markers/crayons

ASSESSMENT

Students will actively participate in synthesizing the information on Day of the Dead from the story and then determine how to group the information.

Lesson 3: Story Structure Matrix

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students use comprehension strategies.

Students recognize and know when it is appropriate to use dialectical, idiomatic, and colloquial language, including awareness and appreciation of cultural and dialectic variance.

Students read literature to understand places, people, events, and vocabulary, both familiar and unfamiliar.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will determine the important events in the Day of the Dead and put them in order.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Read aloud

Guided writing

Comprehension strategies—sequence

Graphic organizers—story structure matrix

PRELIMINARY LESSON PLAN

Prior experience recalling the main events of a story and using a story structure matrix might be helpful. Remind the students to use the story as the framework for ordering the events. Use the Story Structure Matrix as a model and create a matrix on chart paper.

ACTIVITIES

The teacher will read aloud *The Spirit of Tío Fernando* and then post the Story Structure Matrix. Recall the title, the time the story takes place, the location of the story, the characters of the story, five events related to Day of the Dead in the story, and the ending of the story. As the events are recalled, the teacher will write the information in the appropriate box in the matrix. In groups, draw illustrations that correspond with the boxes of the matrix.

Lesson 3 (cont.)

VOCABULARY

<i>tío</i>	Uncle
<i>mole</i>	A thick sauce made from a variety of ingredients including chills, sesame seeds, herbs, spices, chocolate/fruit
<i>fiesta</i>	Party
<i>señora</i>	Mrs.
<i>-ito</i> at the end of a word (i.e., Nandito)	Little

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

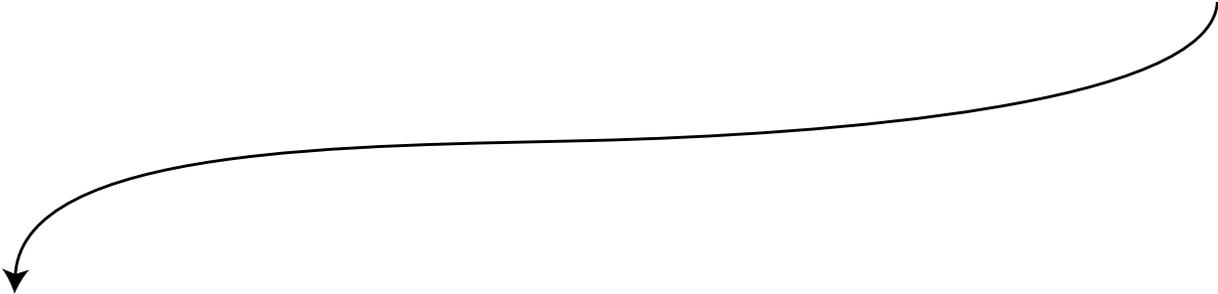
The Spirit of Tío Fernando by Janice Levy
Story Structure Matrix on chart paper
markers/crayons

ASSESSMENT

Students will actively participate in filling in the Story Structure Matrix using complete sentences and correct grammar and punctuation. Students will use the appropriate colloquial vocabulary associated with Day of the Dead in their discussions.

Story Structure Matrix

Title	Time	Location	Characters	Event



Event	Event	Event	Event	Ending

Lesson 4: Excitement Map

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students use comprehension strategies.

Students make predictions, analyze, draw conclusions, and discriminate between fact and opinion in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Students read literature to understand places, people, events, and vocabulary, both familiar and unfamiliar.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will show their understanding of the climax of a story by completing an excitement map.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Read aloud

Determining importance in text

Graphic organizers

PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Prior experience with story climaxes and excitement maps might be helpful.

ACTIVITIES

As a whole class, write and sequence five events involved in the Day of the Dead from the story *The Spirit of Tío Fernando* in the boxes at the bottom of the grid. In small groups, make an illustration of each event. As a whole group, decide which event is the most exciting. Place the corresponding illustration above the appropriate text at the highest level (five). Discuss and place the rest of the events accordingly.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

The Spirit of Tío Fernando by Janice Levy

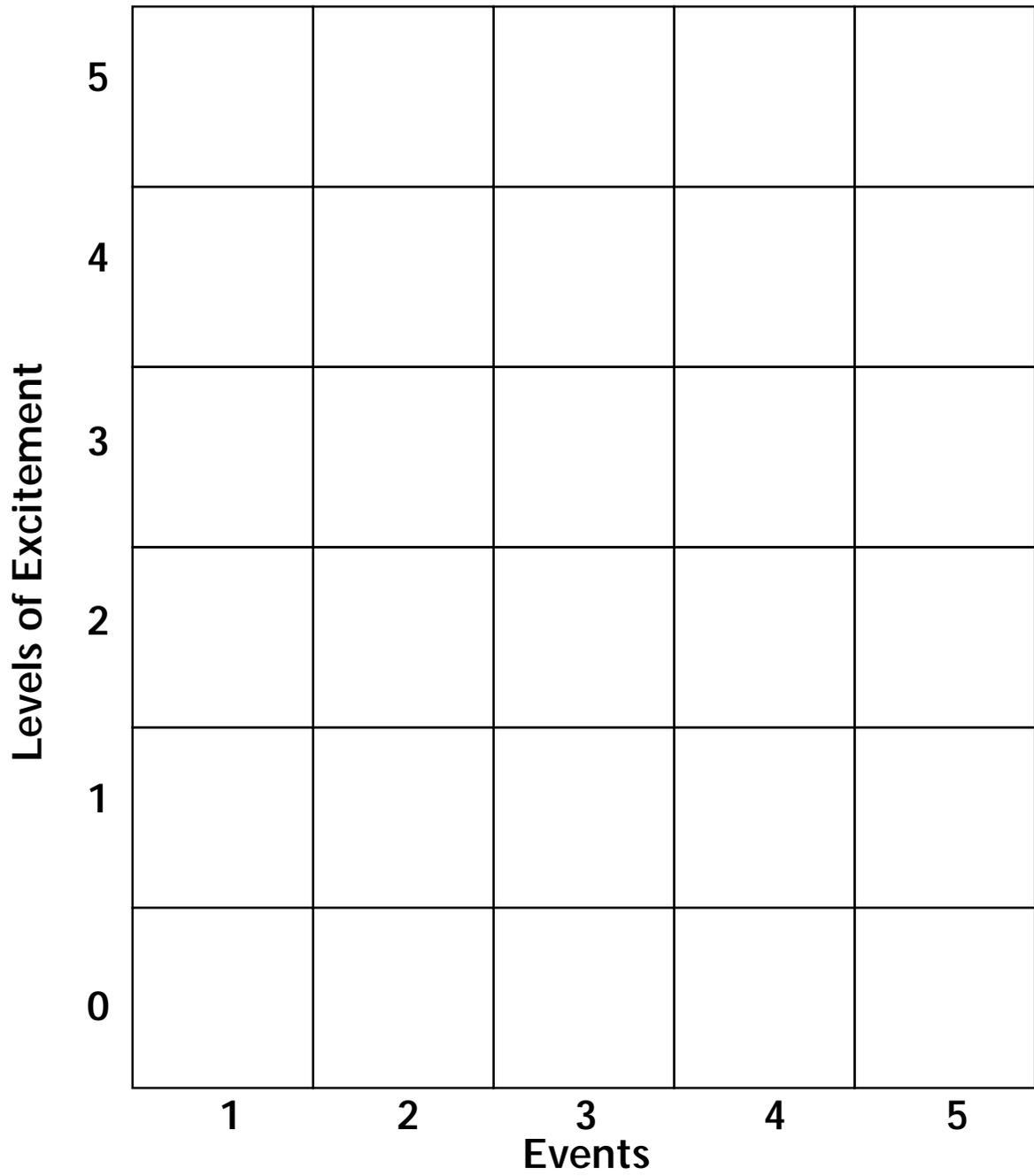
Excitement Map on chart paper

markers/crayons

ASSESSMENT

Students will participate in the sequencing of the events of Day of the Dead and determining the climax of the story by placing the illustrations on the Excitement Map .

Excitement Map



Event 1	Event 2	Event 3	Event 4	Event 5
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Lesson 5: Day of the Dead Masks

What will students be learning:

STANDARD(S)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experiences. (RW6)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive history. (VA2)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students read literature to understand places, people, events, and vocabulary, both familiar and unfamiliar.

Students know how societies have been affected by religions and philosophies.

Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will learn the tradition behind the masks worn during the Day of the Dead.

Students will construct their own Day of the Dead mask.

SPECIFICS

The *calavera* (skull) mask is worn during the Day of the Dead procession. Skulls and skeletons are the primary symbols for the Day of the Dead. They represent the playfulness of the dead, as they mimic the living and play amongst us.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Read aloud

ACTIVITIES

Read aloud pages 20–23 in *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration*. Using the directions found in the book, make a mask. Once the mask is dry, paint the mask all one color and then add designs and details in other colors.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith
materials for masks

ASSESSMENT

Completion of the mask.

Lesson 6: Candy Skulls

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students know that religious and philosophical ideas have been powerful forces throughout history. (H6)

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive history. (A2)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes.

Students know how societies have been affected by religions and philosophies.

Students know how various forms of expression reflect religious beliefs and philosophical ideas.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will create a traditional treat that is associated with Day of the Dead.

SPECIFICS:

Traditionally, children buy candy skulls with the names of their friends to give as presents during the Day of the Dead festivities.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Sequence

Teacher directed

ACTIVITIES

With the teacher's help, make candy skulls, following printed directions.

Supplies

powdered sugar

tubes of icing

small cake decorations

toothpicks

wooden spoon

ready-made white marzipan

1. Roll the marzipan into a ball and then shape into a skull. Use the powdered sugar if the marzipan starts to stick to your hands.
2. Press two eyes into the skull with the end of the wooden spoon. Put a cake decoration in each hole. Carve teeth and other features with a toothpick.
3. Decorate the skull with icing, colored foil, or anything else you want. Write or stick your name on the forehead of the skull.

Lesson 6 (cont.)

When you are done, write your own directions on how to make a candy skull.

VOCABULARY

marzipan Confection of crushed almonds or almond paste, sugar, and egg whites that is often shaped into various forms

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

supplies for the candy skulls
reproduced copies of directions

ASSESSMENT

Completion of the candy skull.

Lesson 7 (Extended): Day of the Dead Altar

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes.

Students write and speak to peers, teachers, and the community.

Students prepare written and oral presentations using strategies.

Students apply formal usage in speaking and writing.

OBJECTIVES

In groups of 4–5, students will create a traditional Day of the Dead altar.

SPECIFICS

The key components of a traditional altar include:

- Four levels to represent the four elements of the world, the four points of directions, the four stages of life, the four mathematical concepts that the pyramids were built upon.
- An arch of flowers
- Water
- Flowers (marigolds are the typical flower used. They are sprinkled around the altar to help the deceased find his/her way)
- Pictures of the deceased
- Offerings of food and drink (typically favorite items of the deceased when he/she was alive. Can include *tamales*, *mole*, *pan de los muertos*)
- Candles (to light the way for the deceased)
- Favorite items enjoyed by the deceased when he/she was alive
- Candy *calaveras* or skulls

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Read aloud

Teacher guided/student directed

Lesson 7 (cont.)

ACTIVITIES

Read aloud pages 14–19 from the book *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration* by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith. View pictures of typical altars found during the Day of the Dead festivities. In small groups, compile a list of items that could be included in an altar. Share the lists as a whole group and compile a class list of the most frequently mentioned items. As groups prepare the altar, they will need to problem solve on how to create the four levels needed. With the teacher’s help, create labels for each item in the altar that explains its cultural significance. Invite the parents to the Day of the Dead celebration.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration by Diane Hoyt-Goldsmith

ASSESSMENT

Divide students and parents into groups for a question and answer session on information about Day of the Dead. Parents can either be given a question to ask or ask one of their own.

Lesson 8 (Extended): Bread of the Dead

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students develop number sense, understand and use appropriate math vocabulary, understand and use number relationships in problem-solving situations, and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems. (M1)

Students use a variety of tools and techniques to measure, apply the results in problem-solving situations, and communicate the reasoning used in solving these problems. (M5)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students adjust reading strategies for a variety of purposes.

Students construct and interpret number meanings through real-world experiences and the use of hands-on materials and relate these meanings to mathematical symbols and numbers.

Students understand the structure, use of, and relationship between systems of measurement.

Students describe and use rates of change and other derived measures.

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will bake the traditional “Bread of the Dead” (*Pan de los Muertos*).

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Sequence

Teacher directed

ACTIVITIES

As a whole group, follow the directions for making “Bread of the Dead.”

Ingredients:

1½ cups flour

½ cup sugar

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon anise seed

2 packets dry yeast

½ cup milk

½ cup water

½ cup butter

4 eggs

additional 3–4½ cups flour

Lesson 8 (cont.)

1. Mix all dry ingredients together except the 3–4½ cups flour.
2. In a small pan, heat the milk, water, and butter. Add the liquid mixture to the dry mixture.
3. Beat well.
4. Mix in the eggs and 1½ cups of flour. Beat well.
5. Put in the rest of the flour, little by little.
6. Knead the mixture on a floured board for 9–10 minutes.
7. Put the dough in a greased bowl and allow it to rise until it has doubled in size (about an hour and a half).
8. Punch the dough down and reshape it with some “bone” shapes on top to decorate it.
9. Let rise another hour.
10. Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes.
11. After baking, sprinkle it with confectioner’s sugar and colored sugar.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

ingredients

recipe

ASSESSMENT

Students will assist the teacher in following the recipe.

Lesson 9 (Extended): “Death Went and Sat Down One Day”

What will students be learning?

STANDARD(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students know and apply elements of art, principles of design, and sensory and expressive features of visual arts. (VA2)

BENCHMARK(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes. (RW2.2)

Students write and speak to peers, teachers, and the community. (RW2.3)

OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will read the poem and create their own poem based on the original.

What will be done to help students learn this?

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Shared reading

Concepts of print

Drama

Authentic writing

Traditional Poem

Death went and sat down one day,

sat down in a sandy place,

and ate lots of cold tortillas

just to try and gain some weight.

ACTIVITIES

The teacher will read the poem “Death Went and Sat Down One Day” to the class. Join in the reading if and when you feel comfortable. Act out lines of the poem if you wish. Alter the underlined parts of the poem individually or in groups. Illustrate your poem. Compile poems into a class book.

RESOURCES/MATERIALS

“Death Went and Sat Down One Day,” a traditional poem.

ASSESSMENT

Completed poem with illustrations.

Unit Assessment

How do students demonstrate proficiency?

PERFORMANCE TASK

Revisit family holidays and traditions from Lesson 1. Review elements of a story from Lessons 3 and 4. Have students write and illustrate a picture book based on a family tradition.

SCORING RUBRIC

4. Main idea and supporting details on topic. Use of color, creativity evident. Neat writing, correct spelling and punctuation.
3. Main idea and supporting details on topic. Use of color. Legible writing. Few spelling and punctuation errors.
2. Main idea on topic, supporting details off topic. Use of limited color. Legible writing. Numerous spelling and punctuation errors.
1. Off topic. Use of pencil only. Indecipherable writing. Sloppy.

Bibliography

Carmichael and Sayer. *The Skeleton at the Feast*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.

Grades 1–6. An interesting account of Day of the Dead.

Díaz, Jorge Ancona. *Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta of the Day of the Dead*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1993.

Grades 1–6. During the three-day celebration of the Day of the Dead, a young Mexican boy and his family make elaborate preparations to honor the spirits of the dead.

Greenliegh and Beimler. *The Days of the Dead*. San Francisco: Collins, 1991.

Grades 1–6. An illustrated account of the Day of the Dead.

Hoyt-Goldsmith, Diane. *Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration*. New York: Holiday House, 1994.

Grades 4–6. Color photographs and informational text make this book an excellent resource for the historical significance of Day of the Dead.

Lansky, Kathryn. *Days of the Dead*. New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1994.

Grades 1–6. The spirit of the holiday Day of the Dead is captured with vivid prose and brilliant full-color photographs.

Levy, Janice. *The Spirit of Tío Fernando*. Illinois: Albert Whitman & Company, 1995.

Grades 1–6. As he prepares to celebrate the Day of the Dead, a young boy remembers all the things he liked about his favorite uncle.

About the Author

Shanna Birkholz graduated from the University of California, Riverside with a bachelors degree in sociology with a minor in Chicano Bilingual Bicultural Studies. While attending the University, she was able to study in Morelia, Michoacan.

Shanna has been teaching for five years. She has taught every grade with the exception of fourth. She has received her Masters in Education with an emphasis in reading and is currently taking classes at the University of Colorado, Denver for a masters in bilingual education. Shanna is the Standards Advisor for her school, helped to write a DPS bilingual training module, and has presented at various conferences.