

# **Celebrations of Light**

**Lesson Video: Grades K-2**

# Overview

---

**Teacher:** Eileen Mesmer  
**Grades:** K-1  
**School:** Saltonstall School  
**Location:** Salem, Massachusetts

**NCSS Standards-Based Themes:** Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments

**Content Standards:** Geography, History

## Video Summary

Eileen Mesmer uses the theme of holidays to teach students about social studies. Throughout the year her class has read stories about different cultures' holiday celebrations, prepared foods traditionally eaten during those holidays, learned holiday greetings in other languages, and studied artifacts related to the various holidays. Shifting the emphasis from how holiday traditions differ from culture to culture, this lesson explores the question, What do all of these holidays have in common?

First, students listen to a story about the winter solstice. Then the class divides among four learning centers to compare the different holidays they have studied. When they reconvene as a class, the students determine that light is a common theme among the winter celebrations, noting that it symbolizes the hope people have as they wait for spring. To better understand what the winter solstice is and why there are seasons, students explore the relative position of the earth as it revolves around the sun. This seeming digression away from the holiday theme is actually a carefully planned lesson that brings science into the social studies class, creating an integrated curriculum. As a culminating activity, students return to the learning centers to create artwork about the celebrations they have studied, which will later be displayed in the school's hallways.

## Standards

---

*Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. This lesson correlates to the following standards for elementary school students:

### I. Culture

Explore and describe similarities and differences in the ways groups, societies, and cultures address similar human needs and concerns; describe ways in which language, stories, folktales, music, and artistic creations serve as expressions of culture and influence behavior of people living in a particular culture; compare ways in which people from different cultures think about and deal with their physical environment and social conditions.

# Standards, cont'd.

---

## II. Time, Continuity, and Change

Demonstrate an ability to use correctly vocabulary associated with time such as past, present, future, and long ago; ...identify examples of change; and recognize examples of cause and effect relationships.

## III. People, Places, and Environments

Describe and speculate about physical system changes, such as seasons, climate, and weather.

## Content Standards: Geography, History

# About the Class

---

## Classroom Profile

“Social studies encompasses who we are and where we came from. I wanted my students to celebrate the ways in which people are different and to understand how what they’re learning applies to how people live in different communities around the world.” —Eileen Mesmer

Eileen Mesmer teaches kindergarten and first grade at the Saltonstall School in Salem, Massachusetts, a historic coastal town north of Boston with a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population.

At least 10 percent of the students are Spanish bilingual. Located in downtown Salem, the Saltonstall School opened in 1994 as one of seven choice schools in the city. The school follows a year-round calendar, giving students an additional 10 days of instruction per year. The school day at Saltonstall is also an hour longer than at other local schools. Finally, the instructional focus at Saltonstall, a science- and technology-themed school, is on multiple intelligences.

Ms. Mesmer began the year with a social studies unit called Me and My Family. Students identified family members, defined the term “ancestor,” and learned about the diverse cultural backgrounds represented in their class and community. Then the class read Peter Sis’s book *Madlenka*, about a girl who goes around her neighborhood telling her friends—including the Asian shopkeeper, the French baker, and the Italian ice-cream vendor—about her loose tooth. Ms. Mesmer used stories like this one and the class’s own diversity to teach students about the traditions different cultures celebrate and to introduce the next unit, My Community.

Next, the class studied the history and traditions of the following holidays: St. Nicholas Day, St. Lucia Day, Kwanzaa, *Las Posadas*, Hanukkah, and Christmas. Ms. Mesmer asked students to identify not only the differences between the holiday traditions, but the common thread among them: light. Ms. Mesmer also used the study of holidays to connect to other subject areas, like science. For example, when studying the winter solstice, students learned about the earth’s relative position to the sun as it made its year-long journey around the star, and the corresponding changes in sunlight that produce the seasons.

Year at a Glance
Me and My Family
<b>My Community</b>
Built Structures
Day and Night
Transportation
The Ocean Community

# About the Class, cont'd.

---

At the end of the unit, students made posters and gave presentations on the holidays. In the next unit, on built structures, Ms. Mesmer connected the cultures and traditions that the class had just studied to the architectural styles of the buildings in their community.

## Lesson Background

Read this information to better understand the lesson shown in the video.

### Content: Holidays

**St. Nicholas Day—December 6:** The figure we call Santa Claus is based on an actual bishop named Nicholas, who lived in Europe during the fourth century. According to legend, St. Nicholas (as he is referred to today) was a wealthy man who loved children. Although he is depicted differently, depending upon the religious traditions and customs of the country, his birthday—December 6—is celebrated throughout Europe. On St. Nicholas Eve, children set out their shoes for him to fill with treats.

**St. Lucia Day—December 13:** St. Lucia Day is celebrated in Sweden as a festival of lights. The oldest girl child in the family dresses in a white gown and red sash with a wreath of twigs and blazing candles on her head. In the early morning hours of December 13, she awakens her family with a tray of steaming coffee and saffron buns. Originally the holiday was celebrated on the shortest day of the year, the lit candles a reminder that the days would soon be getting longer.

**Kwanzaa—December 26-January 1:** Kwanzaa is a cultural festival introduced to the United States from Africa in 1977. Named after the Swahili word *kwanza*, which means “beginnings,” Kwanzaa celebrates the harvesting of the first crops and the African tradition of communal sharing. During the seven days of celebration, African Americans join together in feasting and song to honor the traditions and beliefs of their ancestors, which include unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperation, purpose, creativity, and faith.

**Las Posadas—December 16-December 24:** In Mexico, Christmas lasts nine days in a celebration called *Las Posadas*. Each day, between December 16 and December 24, children walk in a procession (*posada*) carrying clay figures of the biblical Mary, Joseph, and the donkey. They call on the houses of neighbors and friends, stopping outside each one to sing a song that asks for food and lodging for the weary Mary and Joseph. At each home they are told, “There is no room at the inn.” At the last house of the evening there is a party and a piñata. On the last evening of the celebration, December 24, a manger, a stable, and shepherds are added to the procession of clay figures. Mary and Joseph are welcomed into the last home at which they stop, prayers are said, and a figurine representing the baby Jesus is placed in the manger. Families then go to church to pray. Religious services are followed by parties and celebrations.

**Hanukkah—eight days and nights (beginning on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev):** Hanukkah, also known as the Jewish Festival of Lights, marks the end of the war between Antiochus IV, King of Judea, and the Maccabees. According to the Talmud, when the Maccabees returned to Jerusalem in 165 B.C., they found the holy Temple in ruins and the altar destroyed. Upon rebuilding the altar and restoring the Temple, Judas Maccabee searched for oil to light the menorah (branched candelabrum). But the Roman soldiers had smashed the jars of oil, and only enough oil was found to last one day. Miraculously, however, the oil burned for the eight days—long enough for more oil to be made.

**Christmas—December 25:** A public holiday in Christian countries and celebrated predominantly in Western churches, this holiday commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus was not merely a prophet, but the Son of God, who opened the gates of heaven by sacrificing his own life for the lives of mankind. The tradition of exchanging gifts at Christmas is meant to symbolize gifts given to the infant Jesus by three wise men from the East. Gifts are placed under a decorated tree on Christmas Eve, and opened on Christmas morning. Legends of the Christmas tree’s origins tell of Jesus rewarding some act of kindness by touching an evergreen tree and making it glow to bring happiness and joy.

# About the Class, cont'd.

---

**Winter Solstice—December 21:** Because the winter solstice is the shortest day of the year (has the fewest number of daylight hours), many ancient traditions surround this holiday. Some are frightening. For example, some ancients believed that the sun would not return, and without sun, all life on Earth would die. Ceremonies were held to pray for the sun's return. Today, celebrations are more heartwarming. They are rather an opportunity to rejoice at the return of light, as each day for the next several months after the solstice has a few minutes more of daylight than the one before it.

Solstices happen twice a year—when the sun is at its greatest distance north or south of the equator. In the Northern Hemisphere, the winter solstice takes place around December 21 or 22 and the summer solstice around June 21 or 22. In the Southern Hemisphere, it's just the opposite.

## Teaching Strategy: Integrated Curriculum

Ms. Mesmer teaches social studies as part of an integrated curriculum that includes elements of science, art, and English language arts. An integrated curriculum is more reflective of the real world where subjects are not always defined and categorized by separate disciplines. Integrating subjects in the classroom allows students—not limited by artificial boundaries—to make natural connections between content areas and, in doing so, construct their own meaning. It also helps students develop skills they will need in the workplace.

An integrated curriculum may involve one or all of the following:

- examining a topic from different points of view (disciplines)
- a greater emphasis on projects
- using a variety of sources and materials in addition to the class textbook
- encouraging students to recognize the relationships among and between concepts
- using thematic units as organizing principles
- flexible schedules
- flexible student groupings

When teachers develop integrated curriculum units, they often begin with a list of major concepts and processes they expect to teach. Then they endeavor to make learning meaningful by asking students a series of essential guiding questions that connect content across curricula. These questions, usually two to five per topic, reflect the teacher's learning outcomes and conceptual priorities.

Alternatively, teachers may begin by presenting students with a specific topic (e.g., holidays). Upon deconstructing that topic with the teacher, students will likely discover its component parts are derived from separate disciplines (e.g., social studies and science). Teachers can point out the cross-curricular connections and use the integrated curriculum as a jumping off point for further discussions about how topics and subjects are related.

# Watching the Video

---

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

## Before You Watch

Respond to the following questions:

- What are some of the natural links that occur to you between social studies and other subject areas?
- What are some of the challenges and benefits of teaching about holidays and celebrations?
- What do you need to consider when asking young students to work in groups?

## Watch the Video

As you watch “Celebrations of Light,” take notes on Ms. Mesmer’s instructional strategies, in particular how she focuses on what the different holidays have in common. Write down what you find interesting, surprising, or especially important about the teaching and learning in this lesson.

## Reflecting on the Video

Review your notes, then respond to the following questions:

- What struck you in terms of classroom climate, background, preparation, strategies, and materials used in this lesson?
- What are the major themes of Ms. Mesmer’s lesson?
- How does Ms. Mesmer work with young students to help them understand the connection between social studies and other subject areas?
- How do the learning centers in the classroom support or enhance the lesson?
- How is this class different from yours? What traditions are relevant to your students or community? What are some traditions that might be unfamiliar to your students?

# Watching the Video, cont'd.

---

## Looking Closer

Here's an opportunity to take a closer look at interesting aspects of Ms. Mesmer's lesson.



### **Practicing Reading Skills in Social Studies: Video Segment**

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately six minutes into the video. Watch for about five minutes.

Ms. Mesmer prepares her students for the learning centers by reading them a story about the winter solstice, adapted from a Cherokee legend. As you view this segment of the video, notice how Ms. Mesmer emphasizes reading skills as the students listen.

- What are the benefits of having students practice reading during a social studies lesson?
- What are some strategies you might employ to bring reading to your social studies lessons?



### **Incorporating Multiple Intelligences: Video Segment**

Go to this segment in the video by matching the image (to the left) on your TV screen. You'll find this segment approximately 12 minutes into the video. Watch for about four minutes.

After the winter solstice story, students go to the learning centers, which focus on the different learning styles.

- Can you identify the different intelligences represented by each of the centers?
- How does each center deepen students' understanding of the holidays?

# Connecting to Your Teaching

---

## Reflecting on Your Practice

As you reflect on these questions, write down your responses or discuss them as a group.

- What themes in your curriculum lend themselves to interdisciplinary teaching and learning?
- What is your process for integrating lessons?
- What strategies do you use during social studies lessons to reinforce literacy skills?
- Think of a topic that might lend itself to learning centers. How many centers would you use, and what purpose would each center serve?
- What types of learning styles exist in your classroom? What theories, strategies, student activities, and student products do you use to address different learning styles?

## Taking It Back to Your Classroom

- Plan a thematic study of holidays, observances, or celebrations. Set up learning centers related to the theme and integrate the theme with other subjects. Have students develop products that can be displayed in your school. Discuss in advance what the final products should include.
- Post a large world map in your classroom. Choose several cultures and have students locate their country of origin on the map. Then have them compare the climate, resources, architecture, foods, and traditions of the cultures. Ask students to draw things that illustrate defining characteristics of each culture or country, and place them on the map.
- Read three different versions of the Cinderella story from three different cultures. Ask students what each version teaches about the people of that culture. Then have students identify any similarities and differences in the stories and record their observations in a Venn diagram.

NOTE: In developing any integrated curriculum unit, it is important to use state or local curriculum frameworks as a guide for identifying the specific standards addressed by each of the disciplines represented in the unit. Using the standards as a guide may also help you to incorporate additional content that had not originally occurred to you, when you initiated work on the unit.

# Resources

---

## Print Resources for Students

Jackson, Ellen. *The Winter Solstice*. Brookfield, Conn.: Millbrook Press Trade, 1997.

Lachner, Dorothea. *The Gift From Saint Nicholas*. New York: North South Books, 1999.

Medearis, Angela Shelf. *The Seven Days of Kwanzaa*. New York: Scholastic Paperbacks, 1997.

Silverman, Maida. *Festival of Lights: The Story of Hanukkah*. Minneapolis, Minn.: Econo-Clad Books, 1999.

## Print Resources for Teachers

Banks, James A. *Educating Citizens in a Multicultural Society*. Multicultural Education Series. New York: Teachers College Press, 1997.

Gardner, Howard. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. 10th Anniversary ed. New York: Basic Books, 1993.

## Web Resources for Students

Kids Domain: <http://kidsdomain.com/holiday>

This educational and entertainment site provides holiday activities, interactive games, and downloads for children.

## Web Resources for Teachers

The Instructional Materials Center: <http://www.umkc.edu/imc/stlucia.htm>

This site offers teaching strategies and in-depth looks at age-appropriate subjects, such as holidays.

Multiple Intelligences: <http://www.metronet.com/~bhorizon/teach.htm>

This informative article examines thinking skills and definitions of intelligence, and gives teaching suggestions for educators.

# Notes

---