



Creating
Culturally Responsive
and Engaging

Integrated Learning Experiences

GRADES 3–6

Creating Culturally Responsive and Engaging Integrated Learning Experiences: Grades 3–6

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Introduction

This guide is designed to support teachers in planning, developing, and delivering culturally responsive and integrated learning experiences during the 158 minutes of daily Integrated English Language Arts in grade 3, and during the 50–60 minutes per day (4 out of 5 days per week) of the Integrated Learning Block in grades 4–6. Integrated learning fosters meaningful connections across subject areas, promoting deeper understanding, critical thinking, and skill development.

By explicitly teaching vocabulary, building background knowledge, introducing new concepts, and developing comprehension strategies alongside oral language skills, teachers can intentionally support student achievement in a connected and purposeful way.

From grades 3 to 6, texts such as picture books used during read-alouds serve as effective tools for engaging students. These texts, which blend visual and written elements, offer rich opportunities for students to explore content across disciplines. This cross-curricular approach not only deepens understanding and builds critical thinking but also strengthens foundational literacy skills that extend beyond language arts.

“Skilled reading” is not the result of mastering a single skill; rather, it results from the integration of multiple literacy components—phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, oral language, and critical analysis. Purposefully embedding these components within rich, integrated learning experiences equips students to make meaning of texts, think critically, and transfer learning across subject areas.

Grade 3 Integrated Language Arts:

790 minutes of instructional time per week is recommended in grade 3 (approximately 158 minutes per day). In French Immersion, this includes 45–50 minutes of English Language Arts.

[\(Revised Time to Learn Strategy: Grades Primary–3\)](#)

Grades 4–6 Integrated Learning:

200–240 minutes of instructional time per week is recommended in grades 4–6 (50–60 minutes per day, 4 out of 5 days per week).

[\(Revised Time to Learn Strategy: Grades 4–6\)](#)

Oral Language

Phonological Awareness

Phonics

Vocabulary

Reading Fluency

Comprehension



Skilled Reading

Planning a Culturally Responsive and Engaging Integrated Learning Experience

When planning a culturally responsive and integrated learning experience, it is important to set aside adequate time for preparation to support the best outcomes for students.

The steps below are designed to support teachers in developing culturally responsive and engaging lessons that align with curriculum standards and strengthen students' language comprehension.

1. Identify curriculum outcomes and indicators

Begin with the Nova Scotia Teacher's Guide and At-a-Glance documents to select relevant outcomes and indicators that align with your lesson topic or theme. These will guide your lesson's direction and serve as the foundation for planning the lesson.

2. Develop learning goals

Create learning goals from the selected outcomes and indicators. These goals describe what students should understand and be able to do by the end of the lesson.

3. Develop learning targets (objectives)

Build on the learning goals by breaking them down into specific, measurable learning targets or objectives. These are often written as "I can" statements helping students understand what they are expected to learn.

4. Select an engaging text

Choose a text that captures the interest of your students and deepens their content knowledge. The text should be thoughtfully selected based on what you know about the students in your classroom. Texts may include include challenging vocabulary and abstract ideas, making them excellent tools for teaching literary devices and building background knowledge through discussion, and integrating other subjects.

The **Nova Scotia School Book Bureau** is responsible for the distribution of learning resources and related products to support teaching and learning in Nova Scotia schools. Visit the NSSBB website to access the catalogue of Authorized Learning Resources and online order form:

<https://edapps.ednet.ns.ca/nssbb/>.

5. Choose vocabulary words to explicitly teach

Select content-related words that most students do not already know and whose meanings are essential for understanding the text and the subject content. Remember that both explicit (direct teaching of word meanings) and implicit instruction (such as learning new words through listening to stories) help build word knowledge, support reading development, and enhance content learning.

6. Provide or activate background knowledge

Ensure all students, regardless of their prior knowledge, have the necessary background to better understand the text. This can include connecting new information to what students already know or introducing key concepts in advance.

7. Intentionally plan opportunities for student interaction with the text

Design purposeful opportunities for students to interact with the text. This may include explicit vocabulary instruction, exploring the meaning of phrases and sentences, and teaching reading comprehension strategies. This approach supports the development of language comprehension and aligns with the Six Pillars of Effective Reading Instruction.

Integrating Grade 3 English Language Arts and Social Studies (Here's How)

Step 1. Identify the outcome(s) and indicators

Use the Nova Scotia Teacher's Guide and At-a-Glance documents to select relevant outcomes and indicators that align with your lesson's topic or theme. These guide your lesson's focus and ensure your instructional decisions support learning objectives.

For example:

The following outcomes and indicators have been selected for an integrated lesson exploring how people express and share their culture through traditions, stories, and artistic forms.

"Learners are provided the opportunity to experience and appreciate a variety of ways to express culture (e.g., language, stories, folk tales, songs, music, poetry, dance, visual art). Such cultural expressions should be infused throughout the learning experiences. It is important, however, to move beyond a surface celebration of culture (e.g., food and fashion) and examine deeper aspects of cultural expression (e.g., language, stories, visual art)." (*Social Studies At-a-Glance*, p. 13)

English Language Arts

- **A2** Learners will apply understanding of foundational language knowledge and skills when reading and writing.
 - Identify the meaning of vocabulary through explicit learning, explicit instruction, and word awareness.
- **B3** Learners will analyze a variety of texts that represent individuals with diverse identities, perspectives, cultures, and experiences.
 - Identify and describe literary devices and rhetorical techniques and explain how they communicate meaning.

Social Studies

- Learners will investigate various groups including Acadians, African Nova Scotians, Gaels, and Mi'kmaq, through their expressions of culture.
 - Ask questions about diverse people and cultures in the province.
 - Investigate the expression of cultures in the province, inclusive of Acadians, African Nova Scotians, Gaels, Mi'kmaq, and additional cultural groups.

Step 2. Develop learning goals

Align your learning goals with the social studies and English language arts curriculum. These goals should describe what students should understand and be able to do by the end of the lesson.

For example, students will:

- identify and describe literary devices (e.g., similes, metaphors, imagery) and rhetorical techniques in texts
- explain how these devices and techniques contribute to the meaning of a passage or story
- explain how word choice, imagery, and visuals reveal meaning and cultural traditions
- identify ways culture is expressed, such as language, stories, music, poetry, and art
- ask questions to explore the cultures and traditions of various groups in Nova Scotia

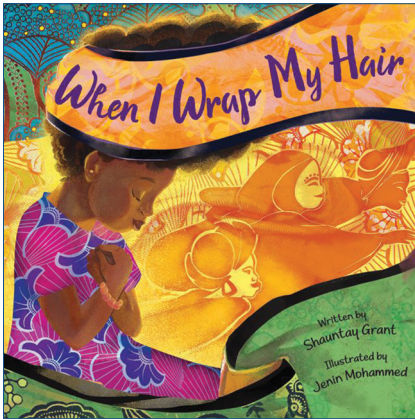
Step 3. Develop learning targets (objectives)

Develop clear learning objectives to help focus instruction and ensure students know what they are expected to learn. These objectives should be specific, measurable, and aligned with curriculum outcomes. Writing “I can” statements on the whiteboard or chart paper helps students communicate lesson goals in student-friendly language.

For example: Objectives: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:	Targets: “I Can ...”
identify similes, metaphors, and visual elements used in texts and explain their meaning	I can find and explain how metaphors, similes, and pictures show culture in the stories I read.
explain how word choice, imagery, and visuals convey meaning and cultural traditions in texts	I can explain how authors use words and pictures to show meaning and culture.
identify and describe different forms of cultural expression, such as language, music, stories, art, and traditions	I can describe different ways people express their culture, like through stories, music, language, or art.
ask questions to explore the cultures and traditions of people in Nova Scotia, including Mi’kmaq, Acadian, African Nova Scotian, Gaelic, and other communities	I can ask questions to learn about the cultures and traditions of people in Nova Scotia.
use vocabulary related to culture and literary devices to discuss texts	I can use new words to talk about culture and how authors use language to show it.

Step 4. Select an engaging text

Choosing the right text is key to engaging students and enhancing their understanding of the lesson content. Select the text thoughtfully, considering your students' backgrounds and learning needs. A well-chosen text can support integration with other subjects and enrich the overall learning experience.



For example, *When I Wrap My Hair* by Shauntay Grant:

- aligns with Grade 3 Social Studies by investigating various groups like African Nova Scotians and people of African Ancestry
- highlights the cultural significance of hair wrapping as a family tradition connecting past and present
- has illustrations that beautifully blend traditional African textiles with contemporary styles, supporting cultural awareness and learning
- provides rich sentence structures and patterns that support students' understanding of syntax, helping them build skills in English Language Arts

Exploring Additional Texts

Explore additional texts that reflect culture and traditions to deepen students' knowledge and reinforce key vocabulary.

For additional texts, visit the [Nova Scotia School Book Bureau](#) website.

Step 5. Choose vocabulary words to explicitly teach

Select content-related words that are important for understanding the text and building subject knowledge. Introduce the new words clearly and explicitly, then provide student-friendly definitions using visuals (pictures or illustrations) and synonyms. Offer multiple opportunities for students to hear, say, and use the words during discussions and other classroom activities.

To support comprehension

- introduce key vocabulary before reading; provide simple explanations and ask students to repeat the words
- during reading, encourage students to give a thumbs-up when they hear the target words
- point to images in the book to reinforce meaning

Exploring vocabulary from the text in addition to curriculum related tier 2 and tier 3 words (such as historian, museum curator, and anthropologist/sociologist) can deepen students' understanding and connect learning to real-world contexts.

Key words from the book:

- **roots:** the feelings or connections that you have with a place because you have lived there or your family came from there (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- **wrap:** to cover something/somebody in material, for example in order to protect it/them (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

Key words and concepts from the curriculum:

- **culture:** the customs and beliefs, art, way of life, and social organization of a particular country or group (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- **Cultural expressions:** Those expressions that result from the creativity of individuals, groups and societies, and that have cultural content. (*Diversity of Cultural Expression, UNESCO*)
- **heritage:** the history, traditions, buildings, and objects that a country or society has had for many years and that are considered an important part of its character (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- **tradition:** a belief, custom, or way of doing something that has existed for a long time among a particular group of people; a set of these beliefs or customs (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- **metaphor:** a word or phrase used to describe somebody/ something else, in a way that is different from its normal use (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)
- **simile:** a word or phrase that compares something to something else, using the words like or as (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*)

Step 6. Provide or activate background knowledge

Provide or activate background knowledge necessary for understanding the text. Introducing key concepts and terms before sharing a text ensures all students, regardless of prior knowledge, can engage meaningfully with the text.

- Introduce key concepts and vocabulary in simple, student-friendly language before reading.
- Use visuals, such as pictures, to support understanding.
- Connect new content to prior learning by discussing related books, experiences, or ideas.
- Encourage students to share what they already know to build on existing knowledge.

Step 7. Intentionally plan opportunities for students to interact with the text

Create intentional moments during reading where students can actively engage with the text. This supports comprehension, vocabulary development, and oral language skills.

For example:

- Display the book cover and read the title. Invite students to predict what the text could be about, supporting their ideas with clues from the cover and title.
- Introduce the author and illustrator and explain the purpose of the book.
- Plan in advance where you will pause in the text and what questions you will ask. Choose moments that highlight important events, vocabulary, or emotional shifts in the text. This preparation ensures deeper engagement and purposeful discussion.
- Pause and ask questions that encourage students to think about the text and make connections.
- Invite students to repeat new vocabulary words and use them in discussion.
- Design classroom centres that extend the text's themes or vocabulary. For example, a writing centre could explore literary devices such as similes and metaphors by using examples from *When I Wrap My Hair*, and other related texts, to reinforce language and literacy skills.

Teacher Background Information

- **Book jacket:** “Shauntay Grant’s tender, lyrical verse is woven together with stirring art by Jenin Mohammed to create a beautiful tribute to the emotions, traditions, and heritage that are tied to the act of hair wrapping.”
- **Illustrations/artwork (by Jenin Mohammed):**

The illustrations play an important role in strengthening the connection to cultural roots, traditions, and expressions. They bring the act of hair wrapping to life, which is a key part of the story. The artwork also depicts the relationships between different generations—mothers, grandmothers, and daughters—showing how hair wrapping is a tradition passed down through families. This reflects that the practice of wrapping hair is not just a personal ritual but also a communal and familial tradition.

Let's Begin (Grade 3 Sample Lesson)

Before Reading

Prepare students by building background knowledge, activating prior experiences, and introducing key vocabulary.

Introduction to Active Listening

Teachers:

- Tell students that they will be practicing their active listening skills during the story.
- Model active listening behaviours, such as facing the speaker, making eye contact (if culturally appropriate) or looking in the speaker's direction, and nodding.
- Emphasize that paying close attention will help them understand the tradition described and make it easier for them to answer questions afterward.
- Ensure all students can see the pictures and hear the text being read.
- Prompt students to give a thumbs up when they hear the key vocabulary words from the story.

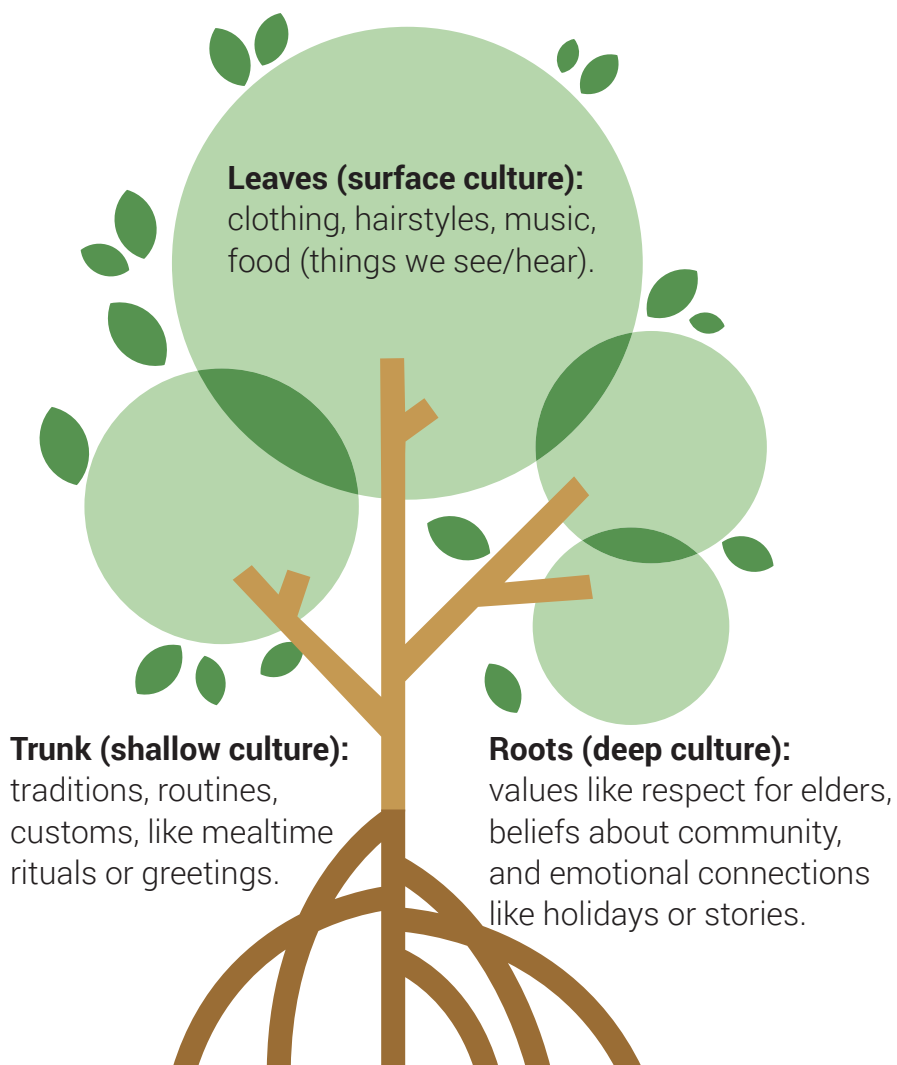
Students:

- Listen attentively to the story.
- Look closely at the illustrations in the book.
- Give a thumbs up when they hear the key vocabulary words.
- Ask and respond to questions about the story.

Teacher Note:

This lesson invites students to share and reflect on their personal cultural experiences. Participation is voluntary, and students are encouraged to share only at their comfort level. Remind students that it is okay to pass if they prefer not to share.

Build Background Knowledge: Explore the Three Levels of Culture



Preview the Book

- Show the book cover and read the title aloud.
- Ask:
 - What do you notice on the cover?
 - What clues do the title and image give you about the story?
 - Explain: This story shows a special practice a girl shares with her family—a tradition they continue over time. Traditions like these are ways people express their culture and connect to their heritage.

When we do something special many times, like singing a birthday song or telling a family story, it becomes a tradition that helps us remember who we are and where we come from. Traditions are part of cultural expression, which can include language, stories, music, art, and more.

Examples of Deep Culture from the Text

1. Connection to Family in the Past

The image of the girl surrounded by grandmothers symbolizes honoring elders and how we remember our family members who lived before us.

– Feeling connected to those who came before us

2. Feeling Proud of Who You Are

The girl smiling at herself in the mirror with her hair wrapped shows that she feels proud of her culture and who she is.

– Loving yourself and feeling confident

Support for Students with Limited Background Knowledge

- Acknowledge that some students may not know about hair wrapping.
- Use the book's illustrations to show examples of people wearing headwraps, helping students visualize and understand what hair wrapping looks like.
- Help students connect to cultural expression by talking about special family traditions, like holiday celebrations or unique ways they show their culture.

Build Vocabulary Before Reading

- Introduce and explicitly teach vocabulary words like, **culture**, **cultural expression**, **tradition**, **metaphor**, and **simile** before reading.
- Use:
 - visuals (images and drawings)
 - gestures and body movements
 - student-friendly definitions
 - think-pair-share strategy
(let students try using the words with a partner)

Introduce Figurative Language

Briefly explain two types of figurative language with simple definitions and examples:

- **metaphor:** A direct comparison without “like” or “as.”
Example: *“When I wrap, my roots run deep.”*
Sample Explanation: This means that wrapping her hair connects the girl to her heritage and family traditions—her “roots” symbolize her family and cultural background.
- **simile:** A comparison using “like” or “as.”
Example: *“I feel new, like a golden sunrise ...”*
Sample Explanation: This means the person feels refreshed or full of hope, just as a golden sunrise brings light and a sense of new beginnings.

During Reading

1st Read: Read Aloud

Modelling fluency: Read the story aloud without interruptions to model fluent reading. Use expression, tone, and pacing to demonstrate how to read with fluency.

Listening for Key Ideas: During the reading, encourage students to give a thumbs-up whenever they hear:

- any key vocabulary word from the story
- a simile or metaphor
- a cultural expression

2nd Read: Discussion Questions

After the first read, reread the story while engaging the students in a discussion about the story, such as:

- What do you think the tradition is in this story? What makes you think that?
- Can you think of an example of a tradition in your own life?
- Can you think of a tradition that makes you feel happy or proud? Why?
- Besides traditions, what are some ways people express their culture? (E.g., music, art, language, stories)

Sample Transition

The story not only tells us about traditions and culture; it also uses **literary devices**—like **metaphors** and **similes**—to help us feel the importance and emotion behind these ideas. These special language tools make the story more vivid and help us understand the deep connections the character has to their heritage. Use the table below to explore examples of these literary devices. Discuss with students what each line means and how it shows feelings or cultural connections.

Teacher Note:

The activities listed here are suggestions to support student engagement with the text and development of language skills. You do not need to complete them all in one session. Select activities based on your instructional focus and students' needs and spread them over multiple days or repeated readings to maximize learning and retention.

Analyze Figurative Language

Line from Text	Type	What It Means
"When I wrap, my roots run deep."	Metaphor	Shows heritage and belonging
"I feel a thousand grandmothers around me."	Metaphor	Symbolizes family connection
"I feel new, like a golden sunrise."	Simile	Expresses joy and renewal

Turn and Talk

Prompt: What do you feel like when you do something important in your culture?

Invite students to share short responses with a partner before opening to the class. This helps them begin forming personal metaphors or similes later.

After Reading

Reinforce vocabulary, summarize key ideas, and encourage personal connections to the story.

Review and Retell

- Briefly revisit the new vocabulary and summarize the key ideas of the story.
- Highlight how the ritual of the hair wrapping connects to traditions.

Discussion and Reflection

- Ask students to turn and talk to a partner about something new they learned, using the new vocabulary.

After partner discussion, invite students to reflect individually by writing or drawing a short response to one or both of these sample questions:

- What is one new thing I learned about culture or traditions from this story?
- How do I express my culture or traditions in my family or community?

Figurative Language Activity (Guided Practice)

Use sentence prompts to guide student writing:

- **Simile Prompt:**

When I _____, I feel like a _____.

Example: When I sing with my family, I feel like a shining star.

- **Metaphor Prompt:**

When I _____, I am a _____.

Example: When I read, I am a detective.

Writing Activity

Concept and Guiding Question

(Social Studies 3 At-a-Glance, p.13)

Concept: Expressions of culture are rooted in traditions.

Question: Ask students, What are some ways people express their culture? (e.g., stories, music, art, language)

Cultural Collage

Students will use words, phrases and visual representations that reflect the ways they express their culture.

The collages can be presented all together to demonstrate the variety and similarities of their local community.

Pre-Writing for Thinking and Learning

Writing is a powerful tool for thinking and reinforcing new learning. It helps students process new information, make connections, and clarify their understanding. Students can apply pre-writing strategies like discussion, brainstorming, and using sentence stems and frames to generate ideas for any text they create. Here are some ways you can encourage students to use these pre-writing strategies to create their cultural collages:

1. Discussion

Speaking allows students to organize their thoughts, explore ideas verbally, develop vocabulary, and clarify their understanding.

Provide students with questions and ask them to take turns interviewing a partner to help them identify aspects of their cultures.

Sample questions:

- What holidays do you celebrate?
- Are there games or activities that you like to play that are part of your culture?
- What food does your family eat on special occasions?
- How do you say “hello” at home?
- Does your family have any special traditions or stories that you tell?

2. Brainstorming

Brainstorming allows students to generate their ideas, activates prior knowledge, and develops vocabulary.

Ask students to think about what they discussed and brainstorm images that they could include in their collage. You may wish to reinforce key vocabulary by giving students questions to guide their brainstorming.

Sample questions:

- What are some traditions in your family?
- What parts of your culture make you feel proud?
- Are there cultural expressions like music, stories, or dances that are part of how your family celebrates your culture?
- Where do you experience your culture being practiced— at home, at church, at festivals, at school?
- What are some images that represent your culture?
- How could you use images to illustrate ways you express your culture?

Collage content may include:

- photos of local festivals, markets, or cultural events that showcase traditions unique to their community
- visuals of places like community centers, places of worship, or schools where cultural knowledge is shared
- descriptions of cultural elements and traditions
- explanations of why particular images are important

Each student's collage represents their perspective, and together, all the students' collages collectively illustrate how culture is lived and experienced within specific local communities.

3. Sentence Stems and Frames

Sentence stems and frames provide a starting point to help students expand on their thoughts as they develop their ideas.

After students have completed their brainstorm, ask them to decide on the images they want to include in their collage by using the sentence frame:

I chose the picture of a _____. It is important in my culture because _____.

Examples:

- *I chose the picture of a hockey stick. It is important in my culture because I play hockey on the pond with my cousins every winter and my mom and aunt come and cheer us on.*
- *I chose the picture of a picnic basket. It is important in my culture because every summer, my family meets up for a big family reunion and we all bring food and have fun together outside.*
- *I chose the picture of a quilt. It is important in my culture because my grandmother teaches all of us how to use old scraps to make something beautiful and new.*

Artist's Statement

Students write their completed sentences as an Artist's Statement to accompany their finished collage. This could be written either under or on the back of their collage.

Sharing and Reflection

- Students can present their collages in small groups or to the whole class.
- Display collages in a classroom gallery with artist statements to celebrate the diversity of traditions within your classroom community.

Assessment Suggestions

Checklist for Teachers

Did students

- identify a tradition from the text and explain its importance?
- identify a simile and metaphor from the story?
- use new vocabulary words from the story and lesson in discussion?
- create their own figurative language using prompts?
- share a personal cultural tradition or expression during the collage activity?

“Look Fors” (Teacher Observations)

Did students

- contribute to discussions?
- use the vocabulary introduced in the lessons in their speaking and writing?
- create a cultural collage that represents their own culture?

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