



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume II: Latinx Histories, Cultures, and Communities

Beyond Borders: Where Roots Shape Identity

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Introduction

“La vida no es la que uno vivió, sino la que uno recuerda, y cómo la recuerda para contarla.” -Gabriel García Márquez.[1] “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers, and how one remembers it in order to recount it.”

Central to the theme “Latinx Histories, Cultures, and Communities” explored in Albert Laguna’s seminar, one thing soon became evident to me: there is an increasing need to address gaps in both students’ and educators’ understanding of the diverse cultures and identities that make up the Latinx community. Developing this teaching unit is one way to foster greater cultural awareness and promote culturally responsive learning. One of the main reasons I developed this teaching unit on Latinx identity is my commitment to providing culturally responsive learning experiences that support all of my students. Literacy is not simply the act of decoding text but a process of exploring culture, identity, history, and belonging.[2] This unit reflects that philosophy by encouraging students to move “beyond borders” -both physical and conceptual- to understand the diverse experiences that shape Latinx identities.

In *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, Zaretta Hammond maintains that effective teaching starts with understanding students’ cultural identities and lived experiences, rather than seeing them only as learners. She emphasizes the importance of humanizing our students as whole people with stories, identities, and experiences that intersect within and beyond our classrooms.[3] This concept crystallized for me when reflecting about the diverse student population in my classroom and the ever-increasing Latinx population on the rise in my school district.

In the process of developing this learning unit, the notion of ‘roots’ shaping identity extends beyond geographic boundaries. It also encompasses the cultural and social boundaries that shape an individual’s experiences. These influences contribute to the development of both individual and collective identities.

Students will examine these boundaries by exploring how migration, language, race, and cultural heritage contribute to the formation of Latinx identity. By analyzing texts and artistic works, students will be guided beyond borders to develop empathy and gain a deeper understanding of diverse Latinx experiences, and engage in meaningful reflection. Through analysis of texts and artistic works, students will recognize these sources as vehicles for self-expression and opportunities to explore experiences that connect to their own

lives.

Rationale

As with anything worth doing, one must question its purpose. Why is it significant to instruct my students about Latinx identity? The answer to that question is multi-layered. As I began to fully grasp its importance through the readings and the Summer Intensive Session about Latinx influence in the United States, I recognized a compelling reason for students and myself to connect with the immigrant stories that define these influences through texts, poems, and artwork.

As a guiding voice of my profession, what propels me to write and teach this unit is the notion that I am invested in passing on this relevant subject matter to my students. It is fundamental to create an all-inclusive classroom environment that provides students with an understanding of what identity means by exploring where we come from and where we are heading. This new knowledge, and how we choose to interact with it, has a lasting impact that extends to future generations.

Recognizing the need for greater attention to identity-focused teaching, I developed this unit with two guiding purposes. First, I hope to build with my students a learning community in which their cultural identities are recognized as strengths rather than obstacles. Second, I seek to foster a sense of pride by connecting my students' lived experiences to academic learning. Reading and writing will become a means of examining identity through personal reflection and meaningful dialogue.[4]

As students engage in learning about diverse backgrounds that may or may not be the same as those of their peers, my goal is for my students to develop a new appreciation for the diversity of their environment, the value that cultures bring, and the opportunities they provide to enrich our lives. As students explore stories of familial roots and cultural differences, they will gain a sense of pride in themselves and a sense of belonging for what lies ahead. In the words of Sandra Cisneros:

"I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong. We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Paulina, but what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to. [...] I write it down and Mango says goodbye sometimes. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free. [...] One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. [...] Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to that Esperanza? Where did she go with all those books and paper? Why did she march so far away? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot get out.[5]"

Cisneros' illustrates that moving forward does not mean abandoning one's roots. In her closing vignette, "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," Esperanza recognizes that while she can pursue new opportunities beyond Mango Street, her community and cultural roots remain central to her identity.[6] Her promise to return "for the ones who cannot out" exemplifies that belonging is not confined to a place but continues to shape who we become, suggesting that identity carries both personal growth and a responsibility to one's

community.

While Cisneros explores the formation of identity through personal experience, Judith Ortiz Cofer shifts the focus to the collective practices that sustain cultural roots across generations. The importance of cultural roots is reflected in Cofer's depiction of a neighborhood deli in her poem *The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica*, where everyday experiences become reminders of heritage and identity:[7]

“And to the Cubans perfecting their speech of a “glorious return” to Havana, [...] to Mexicans who pass through, [...] all wanting the comfort of spoken Spanish, [...] as they speak to her and each other of their dreams and their disillusion - how she smiles understanding, [...]”.

Both authors reinforce the purpose of this unit by encouraging students to value their own cultural roots while recognizing that understanding diverse experiences fosters empathy, pride, and a deeper sense of belonging.

Because identity construction has a measurable academic and emotional impact on students, educators must consider effective methods and instructional strategies to drive learning while taking into account how students view themselves and others.[8] This requires instruction that helps students explore their cultural roots, consider different perspectives, and connect what they read to their own lives. Examining roots allows Latinx students to see their histories reflected in the curriculum while providing non-Latinx students with opportunities to appreciate cultural diversity. Such instruction not only increases student engagement but also enables students to challenge stereotypes and recognize the diversity within Latinx communities.

Demographic Background

Brandywine High School is a public high school in the Brandywine School District in northern Delaware, serving approximately 1,300 students in grades 9th through 12th. The school serves a diverse population of students representing multiple racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This diversity creates opportunities for students to engage with complex questions surrounding culture, identity, migration, language, and belonging. Through Advanced Placement coursework, dual-enrollment opportunities, and the Spanish Immersion Program, students are encouraged to develop global perspectives while strengthening academic literacy and intercultural competence.

AP Spanish Language and Culture serve as both the capstone course of Brandywine High School's Spanish Immersion Program and as the first course in a structured dual-enrollment pathway that ultimately leads students to earn college credit through the University of Delaware. This is the third year of the immersion program's cohort model at Brandywine, and students enrolled in AP Spanish represent the second group to progress into the four-year dual-enrollment sequence. As the entry point into this rigorous academic pathway, AP Spanish introduces students to advanced language proficiency (from college level Spanish-100 to Spanish-300), authentic cultural texts, scholarly inquiry, and higher-order analytical thinking.

Students engage with increasingly complex linguistic and cultural content while preparing for future coursework that can culminate in twelve University of Delaware credits through the Bridge Language Immersion Program initiative supported by the Delaware Department of Education. Students entering AP Spanish are expected under the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages to engage with authentic, real-world texts, advanced linguistic structures, and complex cultural themes while developing interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational communication skills.[9] As students transition into college-

level coursework during high school, they must navigate beyond language acquisition to engage critically with the diverse Latinx experiences, histories, and identities that shape Spanish-speaking communities.

Exploring Roots Through Literature and Art

The authors and artist selected for this unit present different perspectives on how roots shape identity and belonging. Their works explore the influence of family, culture, traditions, memories, and community on personal identity. Although each selection approaches the topic in its own way, together they encourage students to reflect on the experiences that shape who they are. This foundation prepares students to explore the unit's essential question: How do our roots shape who we are?

The selected works are arranged to guide students through different perspectives on how roots shape identity and belonging. The unit begins with Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*. Students then read Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, followed by Esmeralda Santiago's *When I Was Puerto Rican*. Judith Ortiz Cofer's *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry* continues the discussion before the unit concludes with Carmen Lomas Garza's *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia*. Each work builds upon the previous one and expands students' understanding of how roots shape identity.

Sandra Cisneros and *The House on Mango Street*

Sandra Cisneros is a Mexican American writer who was born and raised in Chicago. Her writing draws upon family, neighborhood, Mexican heritage, and the experience of growing up between different cultural spaces. *The House on Mango Street* was first published in 1984 and later published by Vintage Books in 1991, the edition used in this unit.[10] Cisneros tells Esperanza's story through a series of short vignettes that capture her life and the people around her.[11]

Esperanza is growing up in a Latino neighborhood in Chicago while trying to understand her home, her family, and herself. The short vignettes capture experiences with family expectations, neighborhood life, and the meaning of having a home. Esperanza begins to discover who she will become, yet the people and places around her remain part of that process. Her story provides a strong beginning for this unit because students can first examine roots through experiences that are close to everyday life.

Because the novel is written in short vignettes, students can pause to annotate ideas and discuss them before moving to the next reading. Students read selected vignettes including "My Name," "The House on Mango Street," "A Rice Sandwich," "No Speak English," "A House of My Own," and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes." Through Close Reading and Text Annotation, students identify passages that connect Esperanza to family, community, memory, and language. They return to their annotations as they consider how Esperanza's understanding of herself changes. This approach gives students their first opportunity to collect evidence about how roots contribute to identity and belonging.

Rudolfo Anaya and *Bless Me, Ultima*

The exploration of roots continues with Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Inspired by his upbringing in New Mexico, Anaya weaves together family traditions, spirituality, and community to tell Antonio's story. Published in 1972, *Bless Me, Ultima* became one of the best-known works of Chicano literature.[12] Anaya places Antonio Márez within a family and community where different beliefs and traditions influence his understanding of the world.[13]

The novel follows Antonio as he begins to question what his family expects of him and what he believes for himself. His mother and father's families represent different traditions and hopes for his future. Ultima becomes another important influence through her knowledge, spirituality, and connection to the community. Antonio gradually learns how these different parts of his life fit together. His experience adds another layer to the unit because roots are no longer connected only to home. They are also connected to beliefs that have been carried through families and communities.

Students use Reflective Journaling to consider how family traditions and beliefs influence Antonio's understanding of belonging. Students focus on Chapter One, where Antonio's family history and relationship with Ultima begin to take shape. They also reflect on traditions or experiences within their own families. The journal gives students a place to move from reading about Antonio to considering how family roots continue to influence people as they grow.

Esmeralda Santiago and When I Was Puerto Rican

Esmeralda Santiago was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the United States with her family at the age of thirteen. Her experiences growing up in rural Puerto Rico and later adjusting to life in Brooklyn became central to her writing.[14] Her 1993 memoir, *When I Was Puerto Rican*, recounts her childhood and the changes that came with leaving Puerto Rico for New York.[15]

Santiago writes about family relationships, childhood memories, language, food, traditions, and the places she remembers from Puerto Rico. These memories establish her roots before migration becomes part of her story. When her surroundings change, those earlier experiences do not disappear. They remain part of who she is. Santiago is important to this unit because she introduces movement across geographic borders while keeping the focus on what a person carries from one place to another.

Because students often connect easily with personal memories, the memoir becomes a natural bridge to reflective writing. Students read "Jíbara," "Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap," or the final section connected to the family's move to New York. They use Reflective Journaling to compare Santiago's memories with experiences from their own families. Students consider which memories stay with people and why some experiences continue to have meaning after circumstances change. Santiago's memoir helps them recognize that roots can travel with a person and remain part of belonging.

Judith Ortiz Cofer and The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry

Judith Ortiz Cofer offers another perspective on roots through her writing. Drawing upon from her experiences between Puerto Rico and the mainland United States, Cofer explores language, family, community, and belonging. Her writing also reflects cultural differences and the experience of living between two cultures. *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*, published in 1993, combines poetry, personal narrative, and short fiction connected to Puerto Rican and Latino experiences in the United States.[16] Her work often returns to the connections people maintain with places and cultures that remain important to them.[17]

In "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," the deli becomes more than a place to purchase food. Familiar foods, language, memories, and interactions connect members of the community with places they once called home. The space creates a sense of familiarity for people who are living away from their homelands. Cofer adds an important perspective to the unit because belonging is now connected to a community space where cultural memories can be shared and maintained.

The poem invites students to slow down and examine images that might otherwise seem ordinary. With Close Reading and Text Annotation, students examine literary images and symbols in the poem. They identify details connected to food, language, memories, and community. Students then consider why these ordinary objects and experiences carry meaning for the people who visit the deli. The reading moves students from individual and family roots toward an understanding of how communities also create and preserve belonging.

Carmen Lomas Garza and Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia

Carmen Lomas Garza is a Mexican American artist whose work draws from memories of growing up in Kingsville, Texas. Her paintings often represent family life, celebrations, traditions, and everyday experiences within a Mexican American community. *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* was published in 1990 and combines her artwork with short bilingual stories connected to childhood experiences.[18] Her work preserves moments that might appear ordinary but carry meaning through family and culture.

In "Tamalada," family members take part in the tradition of making tamales together. The activity represents more than preparing food. Family members work together while cultural knowledge is shared across generations. The image provides a visual example of how traditions become part of family memory. Smarthistory describes *tamalada* as rooted in the South Texas Mexican American community in which Lomas Garza grew up.[19]

Before students begin writing, they learn to read visual details and consider how artwork communicates culture. Instead of beginning with written language, they 'read' the artwork by identifying people, objects, actions, and family interactions. Students annotate visual details that communicate tradition and belonging and then connect those observations to ideas from the previous texts. Lomas Garza's work brings the unit together by helping students recognize that cultural roots can be communicated through visual storytelling as well as through literature.

Together, these works provide the literary and artistic foundation for the unit. Each text contributes a different perspective on roots while preparing students to examine identity through reading, writing, discussion, reflection, and visual analysis. The instructional objectives that follow build upon these works and guide students toward deeper connections between literature and their own experiences.

Content Objectives

Background Knowledge in Building Community

The unit opens by guiding students to connect with their own background knowledge. Through the works of Sandra Cisneros, Rudolfo Anaya, Esmeralda Santiago, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Carmen Lomas Garza, and others, students encounter authentic voices that illuminate the complexity of contemporary Latinx experiences (See figure 1 in the Resources section). Students reflect on where they come from, the communities they belong to, and the experiences that have shaped who they are. They will discuss how people sometimes judge communities without knowing them and how those ideas can affect belonging. I will use this starting point to introduce the idea that borders are not always physical. Some are created by perceptions, culture, and society. This prepares students to read *The House on Mango Street* through the lens of identity and belonging.

As an activating activity, students deconstruct the title of the unit. The objective at the start of the unit will be to understand the concept of borders as one that serves as both a physical and symbolic framework. Students will examine geographic borders crossed through migration, linguistic borders navigated through bilingualism and language use, and cultural borders negotiated through questions of heritage, and belonging.

In Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, students will begin to analyze how roots shape identity even when individuals encounter social borders.[20] Students will explore how Cisneros presents identity as something grounded in family, language, and community while also showing how those roots are challenged by the boundaries people encounter in their everyday life.

This idea becomes evident in her vignette "Those Who Don't," where Esperanza reflects on the invisible borders that separate neighborhoods and shape people's perceptions of one another:[21]

"Those who don't know any better come into our neighborhood scared. They think we're dangerous. They think we will attack them with shiny knives. [...] people who are lost and got here by mistake. But we aren't afraid. We know the guy with the crooked eye is Davey the Baby's brother, and the tall one next to him in the straw brim, that's Rosa's Eddie. V., [...] All brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes."

Rather than describing a physical border, Cisneros reveals how fear and misunderstanding create social boundaries between communities. As students analyze this passage, they will examine how stereotypes influence belonging and consider how their own communities shape their own identities. Through classroom discussion, students examine how these invisible borders affect relationships and reflect on similar experiences in their own lives.

Cisneros expands this exploration of identity in "No Speak English," where the focus shifts from community to language. The vignette illustrates that language is more than a means of communication; it is a connection to culture, memory, and family:[22]

"[...] She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull. Home. Home. Home is a house in a photograph, a pink house, pink as hollyhocks with lots of startled light. The man paints the walls of the apartment pink, but it's not the same, you know. She still sighs for her pink house, and then I think she cries. I would. Sometimes the man gets disgusted. He starts screaming and you can hear it all the way down the street. Ay, she says, she is sad. Oh, he says. Not again. ¿Cuándo, cuándo, cuándo? she asks. ¡Ay, caray! We are home. This is home. Here I am and here I stay. Speak English. Speak English. Christ! ¡Ay! Mamacita, who does not belong, every once in a while, lets out a cry, hysterical, high, as if he had torn the only skinny thread that kept her alive, the only road out to that country. And then to break her heart forever, the baby boy, who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V. No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can't believe her ears."

Through the character Mamacita's experience, students will recognize that linguistic borders can preserve cultural identity while also creating feelings of isolation. Classroom discussions will encourage students to examine how language reflects personal history and consider how bilingualism or multilingualism shape their own identities. These conversations help students understand that roots continue to influence identity even as people navigate new cultures and communities.

As students continue reading *The House on Mango Street*, they explore additional vignettes that deepen their understanding of identity and belonging. In "My Name," students examine how names connect to family history, culture, and personal identity:[23]

"In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing. It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse--which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female-but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong. My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild, horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, [...]"

In "A Rice Sandwich," students will explore how the desire to belong can shape the way people see themselves and others:[24]

"The special kids, the ones who wear keys around their necks, get to eat in the canteen. The canteen! Even the name sounds important. And these kids at lunch time go there because their mothers aren't home or home is too far to get to. My home isn't far but it's not close either, and somehow, I got it in my head one day to ask my mother to make me a sandwich and write a note to the principal so I could eat in the canteen too. [...] Okay, okay, my mother says after three days of this. And the following morning I get to go to school with my mother's letter and a rice sandwich because we don't have lunch meat. Mondays or Fridays, it doesn't matter, mornings always go by slow and this day especially. But lunchtime came finally and I got to get in line with the stay-at-school kids. Everything is fine until the nun who knows all the canteen kids by heart looks at me [...] Then she was sorry and said I could stay - just for today, not tomorrow or the day after - you go home. And I said yes and could I please have a Kleenex - I had to blow my nose. In the canteen, which was nothing special, lots of boys and girls watched while I cried and ate my sandwich, the bread already greasy and the rice cold."

Lastly, in "A House of My Own," students reflect on the importance of remembering where they come from even as they imagine their future:[25]

"Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after. Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem."

Understanding Latinx Identity Through Reading

In the World Language classroom, students are expected to construct their own connections to texts and identify similarities and differences between those texts and their own culture. This unit expands students' understanding of literature that may be unfamiliar to them. It challenges them to look beyond their own experiences as they explore how identity is shaped, challenged, and transformed. As a result, students develop critical thinking skills by examining multiple perspectives.

As students' progress through the unit, this section emphasizes the importance of identity-centered reading in the classroom. Wagner argues that literacy instruction should recognize students' identities as an essential part of learning rather than treating identity as a separate topic.[26] Building on this idea, students engage in close reading and literary analysis that prepare them to approach more complex texts with greater confidence. Throughout the unit, students will keep a visual journal through drawings and writing. The journal will allow students to record their thinking, reflect on their learning, and identify similarities and differences across the texts.

For this content objective, selected readings and visual texts explore the themes of belonging and Latinx identity while encouraging students to reflect on their own identities. The readings provide the foundation for close reading, reflective writing, and collaborative activities. Students identify literary elements, make text-to-self and text-to-world connections, and examine how each author represents the many experiences of Latinx identity. Organizing the readings around the idea of roots helps students recognize how family, culture, language, and community shape identity. It also helps them recognize shared experiences while appreciating the diversity within Latinx communities.

Students continue analyzing these themes through selected works by other Latinx authors and artists. In Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, students will study how family traditions, faith, and community shape Antonio's understanding of himself as he struggles to balance different cultural influences:[27]

“In many cuentos I had heard the owl was one of the disguises a bruja took, and so it struck a chord of fear in the heart to hear them hooting at night. But not Ultima's owl. Its soft hooting was like a song, and as it grew rhythmic it calmed the moonlit hills and lulled us to sleep. Its song seemed to say that it had come to watch over us. I dreamed about the owl that night, and my dream was good. La Virgen de Guadalupe was the patron saint of our town. The town was named after her. In my dream I saw Ultima's owl lift la Virgen on her wide wings and fly her to heaven. Then the owl returned and gathered up all the babes of Limbo and flew them up to the clouds of heaven. The Virgin smiled at the goodness of the owl.”

In *When I Was Puerto Rican*, Esmeralda Santiago examines how family, migration, and cultural expectations influence identity while reflecting on the meaning of belonging in more than one place:[28]

“I had my last guava the day we left Puerto Rico. It was large and juicy, almost red in the center, and so fragrant that I didn't want to eat it because I would lose the smell. All the way to the airport I scratched at it with my teeth, making little dents in the skin, chewing small pieces with my front teeth, so that I could feel the texture against my tongue, the tiny pink pellets of sweet. Today, I stand before a stack of dark green guavas, each perfectly round and hard, each \$1.59. The one in my hand is tempting. It smells faintly of late summer afternoons and hop-scotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I am no longer a child.”

And for the visual text objective, students will analyze Carmen Lomas Garza's "Tamalada" as the artwork celebrates family traditions and cultural memory.[29]

The readings will encourage students to examine how everyday experiences, food, and community gatherings preserve heritage across generations. The teacher will guide students in making connections among these works through close reading, visual analysis, classroom discussion, and reflective writing. To summarize, students will compare each author's perspective while considering how their own families, traditions, and communities continue to shape their identities.

The primary objective of this unit is to help students develop their language skills while thinking critically about identity, culture, and the world around them. Through literature, memoir, poetry, and visual art, students will examine how language, cultural heritage, family, and community shape individual identities. Beyond studying authentic texts, they will develop a broader understanding of the diverse experiences that define Latinx communities and foster greater respect for the perspectives of others.

As a result of this unit, students will: (1) recognize and value the diversity within their classroom and community, (2) understand both the similarities and differences that connect people across cultures, and (3) appreciate the unique backgrounds, traditions, and personal stories that shape individual identity. The unit's overarching questions encourage students to consider how learning about the lives of others can build empathy, respect, and meaningful connections. Through reading, discussion, reflection, and analysis, students will recognize that identity is shaped by family history, language, and culture. They will also understand that while the past influences who we become, individuals have the ability to define themselves. Students will engage in how to preserve their cultural heritage, and contribute to their communities.

The sequence of learning experiences intentionally scaffolds students' understanding by moving from literary fiction to memoir and culminating in visual art. Each text offers a different perspective on identity while reinforcing the central idea of 'Where Roots Shape Identity.' Together, these text sources demonstrate that identity is not formed by a single experience but through the traditions, memories, and communities that shape our lives. By the conclusion of the unit, students will have strengthened their interpretive, interpersonal, and presentational language skills while developing a deeper appreciation for the richness and diversity of Latinx experiences. More importantly, they will advance with a greater understanding that every person's story contributes to a larger human experience. My hope is that they are able to recognize these stories are an essential step toward empathy, belonging, and cultural understanding.

Teaching Strategies

Strategy: Close Reading and Text Annotation with Cornell Notes

Reading: Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* - Students read the vignettes "The House on Mango Street", "My Name," "A House of My Own," "A Rice Sandwich", "No Speak English", and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes" several times. During the first reading they will identify the main ideas and events. During the second reading they annotate words, phrases, and literary elements that reveal Esperanza's family relationships, community, and changing identity. Students underline evidence that explains why Esperanza wants a place of her own while remaining connected to Mango Street. They write notes in the margins and explain why each passage is important. Students compare their annotations with a partner and discuss

similarities and differences in their interpretations. Each group shares one important passage with the class by explaining how it supports the theme of identity. The teacher models annotation strategies before students begin. The teacher guides class discussions by asking text-dependent questions and encouraging students to support every response with evidence from the text. Using Cornell Notes, students write the essential questions, record textual evidence, and summarize how Esperanza's experiences shape her identity. Students compare their annotations with a partner and Pair-Share their Cornell Notes to discuss different interpretations before sharing their findings with the class. The teacher models annotation and Cornell Notes[30] strategies, guide text-dependent discussions, and encourages students to support every interpretation with evidence from the text. This strategy helps students organize evidence, deepen comprehension, and prepare for literary analysis and analytical writing.

Strategy: Reflective Journaling

Reading: Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* -Students read Chapter 1 and identify the traditions, beliefs, and values that shape Antonio's childhood. They write a journal entry explaining how his family influences the way he understands himself and the world around him. Students describe the differences between the Luna and Márez families and explain how those traditions affect Antonio's identity. They connect Antonio's experiences to their own families by describing traditions, beliefs, or memories that have influenced their lives. Students share selected journal entries with a partner or small group and discuss both similarities and differences among their experiences. The teacher provides guiding questions before students write. The teacher encourages students to expand their thinking by asking follow-up questions and by connecting their ideas back to the novel.

Reading: Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican* - Students read "Jíbara," "Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap," and the first-final chapters describing Santiago's migration to New York. They write a journal describing how family memories, language, childhood experiences, and Puerto Rican traditions contribute to Santiago's sense of identity. Students compare Santiago's experiences with their own family stories and explain how culture continues to influence identity even after people move to new places. Students exchange journals with a partner and discuss common themes of belonging, family, and heritage. They ask questions and explain how different life experiences shape different identities. The teacher guides students with prompts before writing begins. The teacher facilitates discussion by helping students connect Santiago's memoir to the larger themes of identity and belonging.

Close Reading and Text Annotation - Reading: Judith Ortiz Cofer, *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry* - Students read "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica" and identify literary images, symbols, and descriptive language that represent cultural traditions (family, memory, food, etc.). They annotate passages that show how the deli serves as a gathering place where immigrants preserve their customs and maintain connections to their homelands. Students explain how food becomes a symbol of culture, memory, and belonging. They compare annotations with classmates and discuss why certain passages are significant. Each group select one image or symbol and explain its meaning to the class. The teacher models how to annotate figurative language and symbolism before students begin. The teacher asks questions that require students to justify their interpretations with evidence from the poem.

Visual Reading and Text Annotation – Artwork: Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* - Students define "Tamalada" before creating a vocabulary list of what is being observed. They annotate the illustration by labeling important visual details that communicate Mexican American traditions. Students identify how each family member contributes to the preparation of tamales and explain how this shared

activity strengthens cultural identity. They compare their observations with classmates and discuss how visual storytelling communicates meaning without written words. Each group presents one section of the artwork and explain how it reflects family, community, and belonging. The teacher models how to analyze visual texts before students begin their annotations. The teacher guides discussion by asking students to support their observations with specific evidence from the illustration. Other works by Carmen Lomas Garza can extend this instructional strategy and deepen students' understanding of cultural identity through visual storytelling. Illustrations such as "Quinceañera," "Las Posadas," "Piscando Nopalitos," and "Cakewalk" portray family traditions, celebrations, work, and community life that reflect the richness of Mexican American culture.[31] Students can apply the same visual reading and text annotation strategies to identify cultural symbols, family interactions, and shared traditions. Comparing these works to their own lives allows students to recognize similarities and differences among family traditions, cultural practices, and personal experiences. It also helps them make meaningful text-to-self connections while developing a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity, and belonging.

Classroom Activities

Design the Cover of Your Story

Lesson Essential Question: *How do our experiences shape the story of who we are?* - Students begin by discussing the meaning of their names and the places that have influenced their lives. After reading the selected vignettes from *The House on Mango Street*, students annotate passages that reveal Esperanza's identity and organize their evidence using Cornell Notes. They use those notes to design a new book cover that represents Esperanza's identity. The cover must include symbols, colors, quotations, and images supported by evidence from the text. Students then create a second cover representing their own life story using the same elements. They present both covers to the class and explain how family, language, community, and personal experiences have shaped each identity. The teacher models how symbolism communicates meaning and guides students in supporting every design choice with textual evidence.

My Family Heritage Museum

Lesson Essential Question: *Why should family traditions be preserved?* - Students begin by interviewing a family member about one tradition, celebration, belief, recipe, or object that has been passed through generations. After reading the opening chapter of *Bless Me, Ultima*, students compare Antonio's traditions with their own. They create a museum exhibit using photographs, drawings, family objects, recipes, or digital images that represent their family's heritage. Each exhibit includes a written explanation describing how those traditions influence identity and belonging. Students participate in a classroom museum walk and leave positive comments or questions at each display. The teacher facilitates discussion by helping students recognize common themes that connect families from different cultures.

My Roots Map

Lesson Essential Question: *How do memories and places become part of our identity?* - Students read the selected memoir chapter and identify important memories that shaped Santiago's childhood. They then create a personal identity map that illustrates places, people, traditions, languages, foods, celebrations, and memories that have influenced their own lives. Students may include photographs, drawings, magazine

images, or digital graphics. Each section of the map includes a short explanation describing why that memory or place is meaningful. Students share their maps in small groups and identify experiences they have in common with their classmates. The teacher encourages students to recognize that every person's identity is built from unique experiences while also sharing connections with others.

Build a Community Memory Box

Lesson Essential Question: *How can everyday objects tell the story of a culture?* - After reading "The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica," students identify the symbols that represent family, memory, and belonging. Working in small groups, students create a Community Memory Box containing five objects that represent their own culture, family, or neighborhood. The objects may be real items, photographs, drawings, recipes, tickets, letters, or other meaningful artifacts. Each object includes a short explanation describing why it belongs in the collection. Groups present their Memory Boxes and explain how ordinary objects preserve family stories and cultural traditions. The teacher encourages students to compare the symbols from the poem with the symbols chosen by their classmates.

My Family Through Art

Lesson Essential Question: *How can art preserve family traditions for future generations?* - Students closely examine Carmen Lomas Garza's "Tamalada" and annotate the visual details that communicate family, tradition, and community. They discuss how one family event can tell an important story about identity. Students then create an original illustration, painting, collage, or digital artwork showing one event that best represents their own family or culture. The artwork should capture a meaningful celebration, tradition, meal, holiday, or everyday moment. Students include a one-paragraph artist statement explaining why they selected the event and how it reflects their identity. The artwork is displayed during a classroom gallery walk where students leave written comments celebrating the similarities and differences represented in each piece. The teacher guides students in recognizing how visual storytelling preserves culture across generations.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

My district follows the Delaware World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, which are aligned with the ACTFL World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. The standards identified below represent specific subcategories within those frameworks.[32] Students will be able to:

1. Interpret and analyze key vocabulary concepts and sentence structures by understanding their cultural background, identity and community. ACTFL Communications 1.3 Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics. ACTFL Communities 5.1 Students use the language both within and beyond the school setting.
2. Compare what identity looks like among different cultures to represent and express meaning. ACTFL Communications 1.1 Students engage in conversations, provide and obtain information, express feelings and emotions, and exchange opinions. ACTFL Communications 1.3 Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics. ACTFL Cultures 2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. ACTFL Connections 3.1 Students reinforce and further their

knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language.

3. Organize and compose identity meaning and information by deriving meaning from written context of origin, cultural background and sense of place. ACTFL Communications 1.3 Students present information, concepts, and ideas to an audience of listeners or readers on a variety of topics. ACTFL Cultures 2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. ACTFL Cultures 2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. ACTFL Comparisons 4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through the comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.
4. Interpret and analyze key vocabulary concepts and sentence structures by comparing identity in the target culture to those of the US. ACTFL Communications 1.2 Students understand and interpret written and spoken language on a variety of topics. ACTFL Cultures 2.1 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied. ACTFL Cultures 2.2 Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studied. ACTFL Connections 3.1 Students reinforce and further their knowledge of other disciplines through the foreign language. ACTFL Comparisons 4.2 Students demonstrate understanding of the concept of culture through the comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.

Resources

Bibliography for Teachers

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages. "Use Authentic Texts." In *Guiding Principles for Language Learning*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL. Accessed July 24, 2026.

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According to ACTFL, authentic texts are created by and for the target-language.

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Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015. Explains how culturally responsive teaching increases student engagement by connecting instruction to students' background and experiences.

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Santiago, Esmeralda. *When I Was Puerto Rican*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. A memoir that explores migration, language, family, and cultural adaptation.

Street, Brian V. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. The author introduces literacy as a social and cultural practice rather than simply a set of academic skills.

Wagner, Christopher J. "Learning to Be Readers and Writers through Identity-Based Instruction." *Language Arts* 102, no. 2 (2024): 78. The author advocates for identity-based literacy instruction and encourages authentic reading, writing through self-expression.

Yazon, Alberto D. *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching*. Oakville, ON: Arcler Education Incorporated, 2024. This reading examines culturally responsive teaching practices that promote equity, inclusion, and respect for diverse perspectives.

List of Materials

Literary Work	Student Readings	Strategy connection	Connection to Latinx Roots
1. Sandra Cisneros, <i>The House on Mango Street</i> (1991)	Main Vignettes. "My Name", "A House of My Own", "A Rice Sandwich", "The House on Mango Street", "No Speak English", "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes",	Close Reading and Text Annotation: Students annotate passages that reveal how family, community, memory, and language contribute to Esperanza's developing identity.	Cisneros explores how family, neighborhood, and community influence the development of identity. Esperanza reflects on the meaning of her name, her cultural heritage, and her desire to define herself while remaining connected to her community. These will vignettes illustrate Cisneros’ concept that identity is shaped by multiple cultural influences and lived experiences.

2. Rudolfo Anaya, <i>Bless Me, Ultima</i> (1972)	Chapter 1: Antonio's introduction to family traditions and Ultima	Reflective Journaling: Students reflect on how family traditions, beliefs, and cultural experiences shape both Antonio's identity and their own understanding of belonging.	Students compare Santiago's memories with their own family experiences, considering how heritage influences identity and belonging.
3. Esmeralda Santiago, <i>When I Was Puerto Rican</i> (1993)	Chapter 1: "Jíbara" or Chapter 2: "Someone Is Coming to Take Your Lap" or the Final chapter describing migration to New York"	Reflective Journaling: Students compare Santiago's memories with their own family experiences, considering how heritage influences identity and belonging.	Santiago's memoir highlights how family stories, childhood memories, language, and Puerto Rican traditions establish a strong sense of identity before migration. Students will see how cultural roots continue to influence identity even as life circumstances change.
4. Judith Ortiz Cofer, <i>The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry</i> (1993)	"The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica"	Close Reading and Text Annotation: Students annotate literary images and symbols that represent family, tradition, memory, and cultural heritage.	Cofer portrays food, language, memory, and community as symbols of cultural continuity. Students explore meaning of a gathering place where immigrants preserve traditions and maintain connections to their homelands. Students illustrate how cultural identity is sustained through shared memories and community.
5. Carmen Lomas Garza, <i>Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia</i> (1990)	"Tamalada"	Visual Reading and Text Annotation: Students "read" the illustrations by annotating visual details, symbols, and family interactions that communicate cultural traditions and identity.	Lomas Garza's illustrations celebrate everyday Mexican American family life and demonstrate how traditions are passed from one generation to the next. Students learn that cultural identity is communicated not only through written texts but also through visual storytelling and shared experiences.

Figure 1 -Literary Sources with Strategy Connections

This table will help teachers in planning a sequence for reading, writing instruction by providing strategies aligned with specific instructional connections to Latinx roots.

Notes

[1] García Márquez, Gabriel. *Living to Tell the Tale*. Translated by Edith Grossman. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

[2] Street, Brian V. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

[3] Hammond, Zaretta. *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015.

- [4] Christopher J. Wagner, "Learning to Be Readers and Writers through Identity-Based Instruction," *Language Arts* 102, no. 2 (2024): 81.
- [5] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 3-5.
- [6] Ibid., 108.
- [7] Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- [8] Alberto D. Yazon, *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, Curriculum, and Teaching* (Oakville, ON: Arcler Education Incorporated, 2024).
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- [10] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).
- [11] Penguin Random House, "The House on Mango Street Reader's Guide," accessed August 3, 2026, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/27844/the-house-on-mango-street-by-sandra-cisneros/readers-guide/>.
- [12] Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, CA: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1972).
- [13] National Endowment for the Humanities, "Rudolfo Anaya," *Humanities*, Fall 2016, accessed August 3, 2026, <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2016/fall/feature/rudolfo-anaya>.
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- [16] Judith Ortiz Cofer, *The Latin Deli: Prose and Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993).
- [17] Poetry Foundation, "Judith Ortiz Cofer," accessed August 3, 2026, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/judith-ortiz-cofer>.
- [18] Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990).
- [19] George Flaherty, "Carmen Lomas Garza, *Tamalada*," *Smarthistory*, November 30, 2023, accessed August 3, 2026, <https://smarthistory.org/carmen-lomas-garza-tamalada/>.
- [20] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*, 3-5.
- [21] Ibid., 28.
- [22] Ibid., 76-78.
- [23] Ibid., 10
- [24] Ibid., 43-45.

[25] Ibid., 108.

[26] Christopher J. Wagner, "Learning to Be Readers and Writers through Identity-Based Instruction, 77.

[27] Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (Berkeley, CA: TQS Publications, 1972), 13.

[28] Esmeralda Santiago, *When I Was Puerto Rican* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 12.

[29] Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990), 22-23.

[30] Cornell University Learning Strategies Center, "The Cornell Note Taking System," accessed August 14, 2026, <https://lsc.cornell.edu/how-to-study/taking-notes/cornell-note-taking-system/>. The Learning Strategies Center explains that Cornell Notes encourage students to record information, identify key ideas, review learning through questions, and summarize understanding after reading or instruction.

[31] Carmen Lomas Garza, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (San Francisco: Children's Book Press, 1990), 12-27.

[32] Delaware Department of Education, *Delaware World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (Dover, DE: Delaware Department of Education, 2016).

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