

Corn Queries

Standard

SS4H1 The student will describe how early Native American cultures developed in North America.

- a. Locate where Native Americans settled with emphasis on the Arctic (Inuit), Northwest (Kwakiutl), Plateau (Nez Perce), Southwest (Hopi), Plains (Pawnee), and Southeast (Seminole).
- b. Describe how Native Americans used their environment to obtain food, clothing, and shelter.

Overview

"My students had been reading about Native Americans and noticed the many references to corn and its range of uses," reports Cambridge, MA, third and fourth grade teacher Marianne Moll. "This inspired a series of questions about corn: *Where did it come from? How did it grow? How was it used?* So I drew on the students' curiosity, helping them to organize their questions and encouraging collaborative investigations."

Marianne brought in some ears of dried Indian corn, passed around an ear, and invited each student to ask it (the ear!) one question, then pass it on. The "rules" were that each question had to be original (not one that had already been asked) and that anyone who couldn't think of a question could pass. "The students had enough unique questions -- ranging from *Has this been painted?* to *Are there seeds that can grow?* -- for the corn ear to pass twice around the circle," says Marianne.

As questions were generated, Marianne recorded them on a chart, then asked students to organize them in two categories: *questions we can answer ourselves* and *questions we need more help with*. They further broke down the first category into questions that could be answered through simple observations and those that required experiments. They identified questions in the second category they could answer through books and those for which they would try to find "experts." Small groups of students then chose questions from the first category to try to answer. "Many questions centered around whether the Indian corn was alive and would actually grow," explains Marianne, "so several groups tried growing it in different ways. The kernels one group planted now have beautiful stalks emerging." Other groups tried cooking the corn, creating jewelry, dissecting the seeds, and so on.

"Although this activity was fairly short term, it grabbed students' attention, helped focus and organize their questions, and helped them consider different ways they could gather information," relates Marianne. "Even the less verbal students seemed to find this exercise engaging and nonthreatening. It stretched their observation skills and generated some surprisingly high-quality questions," she adds.

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