

Flight to Never-Never Land:
The Story of *Operation Pedro Pan*

Abstract

More than 14,000 Cuban children fled to the United States in the early 1960s, fleeing the political turmoil of their homeland. Unable to leave with them, their parents sent them to the U.S. unaccompanied, hoping to be reunited quickly. For some, that reunification did not come for many months or even years later. In this lesson, students will learn about *Operation Pedro Pan* and its aftermath.

Intended Grade Levels

9th – 12th grades

Learning Objectives

The student will be able to:

- relate the story of *Operation Pedro Pan*;
- explain the reasons for the exodus;
- describe some of the effects the emigration had on children and families;
- differentiate among immigrants, migrants, and refugees.

Curriculum Standards

Social Studies (NCSS):

II. Time, Continuity, and Change

III. People, Places, and Environments

Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education):

9-12 Content Standards: The relationship of the U.S. to other nations

Materials

Guided Imagery exercise: “Flight to Never-Never Land”

Wall map or atlas showing Caribbean region in relation to the United States

PowerPoint Presentation: *Operation Pedro Pan*

Popurri Pedro Pan (song)

Appropriate technology and audio-visual equipment for PowerPoint and music

Teaching Strategy

Set Induction: Guided Imagery

Tell students that today they will be taking a journey --- a journey in their mind's eye. Dim the lights, decrease external stimuli as much as possible, and ask students to close their eyes, getting comfortable at their seats. In a calm, well-modulated voice, read the guided imagery exercise, coaxing students to envision what it might have been like to flee their homeland as a *Pedro Pan* child.

Activity 1: Journal Writing

Ask students to think about what they were feeling as the child in the story. Tell them they are now to write an entry in the child's diary, finishing the following sentence:

"It is September 22, 1961 and I have been in the United States for one day now..."

Instruct them to keep writing until you tell them to stop. Allow 5-10 minutes for this free-writing activity.

Activity 2: Think-Pair-Share

At the end of time allotted for the writing activity, ask students to trade their papers with someone sitting nearby, each silently reading the other's entries. Allow students to ask each other any clarifying questions, if needed.

After everyone has shared their responses with another person, ask for a few volunteers to share their responses with the whole class.

Activity 3: Class Discussion

Generate a class discussion by asking the following questions:

- What is the general tone of the journal entries generated in our class?
- What are the concerns or worries expressed?
- Why was the young person sent to the U.S.?
- How long do you think it took the young person in the story to see his or her parents again?

Activity 4: Teacher Explanation

Tell students that the experience you guided them through mentally was based on the true exodus of Cuban children known as *Operation Pedro Pan*. Have them look at a map of the Caribbean, pointing out Cuba in relation to the U.S.

Segue to the PowerPoint presentation, *Operation Pedro Pan* (in preparation, read the *Latina Encyclopedia* entry on this topic), pausing to answer students' questions and checking for comprehension frequently.

Closure:

Bring closure to the lesson by discussing the policy differences among immigrants, migrants, and refugees. Ask students to name examples of each, probing and prompting as necessary.

Play *Popurro Pedro Pan*, sung by former Pedro Pan refugees Marisela Verena, Lissette Alvarez, Willy Chirino, and Carlos Oliva. It can be accessed on: <http://www.pedropan.org>

Assessment Options:

Further research: Allow students to conduct further research by selecting one or more works from the "Further Reading and Resources" (below). Have them summarize what they discover and share their findings with their classmates.

Oral histories: Have students conduct oral histories of Pedro Pans. These can be done in person, by phone, or via Internet. Operation Pedro Pan Group, Inc. may be able to assist in identifying willing interviewees (members@pedropan.org).

Biographies of prominent Pedro Pan refugees: Ask students to research and write the biographies of some of the more well-known Pedro Panes.

Web Quest: Direct students to locate and capture images pertaining to Operation Pedro Pan from the WWW. These images can then be assembled into a PowerPoint presentation, on a poster, or a bulletin board display.

Further Reading and Resources: (see essay in Latina Encyclopedia for additional references)

Acierno, María Armengol. (1994). *Children of Flight: Pedro Pan*. New York: Silver Moon Press.

Antón, Alex and Joe Cardona. (1994). *Adios Patria*. Univision; WPBT/PBS.

Cardona, Joe and de Varona, Mario. (1999). *The Flight of Pedro Pan: An Untold American Story*. PBS. A Channel 2 Production.

Conde, Yvonne. *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children*. NY: Routledge, 1999.

CubaNet. *The Pedro Pan Generation*. Retrieved November 29, 2007, from <http://www.cubanet.org/CNews/y03/sep03/22e6.htm>.

Gay, Kathlyn. (2000). *Leaving Cuba: Operation Pedro Pan to Elian*. Minneapolis, MN: Millbrook Press.

Lopez, Melinda. (2005). *Sonia Flew*. Play about Operation Pedro Pan. Audio CD available from La Theatre Works.

Paris, Margaret L. (2002). *Embracing America: A Cuban Exile Comes of Age*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

Torres, María de los Angeles. (2004). *The Lost Apple: Operation Pedro Pan, Cuban Children in the U.S., and the Promise of a Better Future*. Ypsilanti, MI: Beacon Press.

Triay, Victor Andrés. *Fleeing Castro: Operation Pedro Pan and the Cuban Children's Program*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998.

National Public Radio. *Pedro Pan*. Retrieved November 29, 2007, from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1073679>.

PedroPan.org

<http://www.pedropan.org>

Perera, Hilda, Warren Hampton, and Hilda A. Gonzalez. (1992). *Kiki: A Cuban Boy's Adventures in America*. Delaware: Pickering Press.

Portuondo, Marie F. (1984). *Ups & Downs of an Unaccompanied Minor Refugee*. Miami, FL: Ediciones Universal.

“Flight to Never-Never Land”

Guided Imagery Exercise

Instructions: Tell students that today they will be taking a journey --- a journey in their mind's eye. Dim the lights, decrease external stimuli as much as possible, and ask students to close their eyes, getting comfortable at their seats. In a calm, well-modulated voice, read the guided imagery exercise, coaxing students to envision what it might have been like to flee their homeland as a *Pedro Pan* child:

The year is 1961 and you are 16 years old. You just left your homeland of Cuba and are on an airplane to Miami, Florida. Your parents, who oppose Fidel Castro's new government and were not allowed to leave, fear that you will be drafted into the military. With the help of a secret underground organization called “Operation Pedro Pan,” you have left the country and will wait for your parents in the United States.

Although you try to put on a brave face, you have never traveled alone. Your family has no relatives in the U.S., so you are not sure where you will end up. Your parents were told that you would be taken in by a foster family and that it will only be for a short while until they arrive.

You now feel the plane landing and the flight attendant is motioning you to get up. What is she saying? You do not understand her language.

When you arrive at the terminal, a priest greets you warmly, showing you the way to a waiting car. When you arrive at a large dormitory and sit on your small cot, waves of homesickness wash over you. At least the other kids in the dorm speak Spanish.

After dinner, you curl up in your bed, thinking about your parents, your friends, your school, and your home back in Cuba. They are calling us “Peter Pan” kids, comparing us to the boy in the famous story who could fly. I didn't ask to fly anywhere. When will I see my family and friends again?