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Celebrating Students' Cultural Heritage: Lessons from a Rural School in Texas

By Karen E. Mayo

Karen Embry Mayo, Ed.D., is an Associate Professor of Education at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. Working with nearby Nettie Marshall Elementary School, Dr. Mayo played a central role in designing a collaborative format for professional development for teachers. This format engaged preservice interns and mentor teachers in exploring and promoting cultural understanding and teaching outside of the textbook.

As the students stepped off the buses and walked toward the school building on September 16, 1998, they heard the sounds of mariachi music drifting out from the building. Entering through the front door, they walked past two long tables decorated with colorful sarapes (blankets), a rebozo (shawl), a molcahete (spice grinder), a candle of the Virgin Mary, a tortilla press, and a tiny statue of St. Christopher. A pinata of a donkey sat next to the table and one of a parrot hung from the ceiling. At Nettie Marshall Elementary School in Nacogdoches, Texas, celebrations for the day that marked Mexico's independence from Spain had begun.

The observance of el diez y seis de septiembre (the 16th of September), or Mexican Independence Day, was the kick-off to a continuing exploration of Mexican history and heritage at Nettie Marshall, where the majority of students are Mexican Americans. A collaboration among teachers, student teachers, the staff, students, parents, and the community, the day was filled with content-rich, hands-on activities that taught the whole school something about Mexican American history and tradition and sparked interest in further exploration of the students' cultural diversity.

The September 16th event grew out of a conversation several weeks earlier between two of the school's bilingual education teachers and myself. The two teachers, Annette Rodriguez, who taught 3rd grade, and Diola Willoughby, who taught 4th, were expressing regret that most of the school's Mexican American students didn't know about their own cultural heritage. At the time, I was teaching the social studies methods course for elementary education interns, so I suggested that the interns do a cooking activity with the elementary school students. Together, they could make bunuelos (crispy cinnamon cookies typically eaten on holidays in Mexico), and the elementary students could share stories of their cultural traditions.

As we brainstormed, we added ideas for schoolwide involvement during Jump Start, the daily whole-school morning meeting held in the cafeteria. The bilingual students could lead two pledges of allegiance—one to the U.S. flag in English and one to the Mexican flag in Spanish.

Then another idea came, and another. Before we knew it, we had enough ideas for a whole day of activities. The 16th of September, with its historical and cultural significance, seemed the perfect day to hold the event.

Helping children learn about their own cultural heritage and those of their classmates is an important way for schools to include and honor all students and families. For schools with bilingual programs, these activities also help students preserve and maintain their native language and culture, something that often gets lost in the transition to a second language within mainstream school settings.

Something for everyone

We designed the Mexican Independence Day activities so that they would cover many content areas, give active roles to as many students as possible, and offer something of interest to everyone.

The day opened with Jump Start. After the usual pledge of allegiance to the U.S. flag, Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Willoughby gave a brief explanation of Mexican Independence Day and the reason for the special music and decorations that greeted the students that day. Then several bilingual students came to the microphone and led the school in a pledge in Spanish to the Mexican flag. The students took turns explaining the significance of the symbols and colors of the Mexican flag.

Throughout the rest of the day, students moved in and out of other activities while also attending some of their usual classes. Some classes made Mexican flags and hung them in the hallway. The bilingual 3rd and 4th grade classes decorated the cafeteria with woven paper placemats and tissue flowers depicting Mexican handcrafts. Some classes watched a video clip, recorded by Ms. Rodriguez the night before, of ceremonies conducted in Mexico City to mark the holiday. On the playground, students shouted "Viva! Viva Mexico!" to mimic el grito (the shout), the traditional cry for independence that they saw on the videotape.

Ms. Rodriguez' class joined the college interns for a cooking activity. The bilingual students became the social studies teachers as they shared common Mexican household items that they had brought from home. For example, one 3rd grader showed a molcahete, a large mortar and pestle used for grinding spices and tomatillos (green tomatoes) for making verde sauce. As part of this demonstration and sharing, one student who had recently emigrated from Mexico told how she traveled for two days and nights in the back of a windowless van to get to Nacogdoches.

The entire day provided many authentic writing prompts as students recorded the day's activities in their journals. Earlier in the week, I had contacted the local paper and TV news, whose reporters showed up and covered some of the events. Seeing themselves on television and in the newspaper further helped students feel proud of their cultural heritage. The publicity also conveyed an important message about Nettie Marshall Elementary School valuing its diversity.

Keys to success

Reflecting back, I think of several things that made our observance of el diez y seis de septiembre successful:

We chose the holiday carefully. Had we simply chosen the Mexican American holiday that Americans are generally most familiar with, we might have chosen Cinco de Mayo, the May 5th celebration. But in Mexican history and contemporary practice, Mexican Independence Day is a much larger event, so focusing on that holiday was more appropriate. If schools want to honor students' cultural backgrounds, it's important to find out from the students, their parents, and their community which holidays and traditions are especially significant to their cultural history.

We did research and shared what we learned. Using the Internet and reference materials, Ms. Rodriguez, Ms. Willoughby, and I gathered information on the history and cultural traditions associated with Mexican Independence Day. We put copies of this information in every teacher's mail box. Educating ourselves and others was an important step in making sure we chose suitable activities and gave students accurate information about the holiday.

The activities were interdisciplinary and learner-centered. The flag-making activity brought together art, history, and geography. The cooking demonstration flexed students' language arts, social studies, math and science muscles. Decorating the cafeteria challenged students to use their creativity and practice their teamwork and problem-solving skills. All of the activities put the students in the position of being active, hands-on learners and sometimes co-teachers.

We involved many people. Together, we brainstormed activities and shared responsibilities for inviting guests, setting up the displays, and coordinating group activities. We invited teachers, resource personnel, the principal, administrative staff, and parents to join in facilitating and celebrating the day.

The rest of the year and beyond

Knowing that truly understanding and honoring a culture requires more than a one-day celebration, Nettie Marshall Elementary continues to include and honor Mexican culture in its curriculum and festivities. Over the past two years, many classes have observed traditional American holidays in dual or multicultural format.

For example, dia de los muertos (Day of the Dead) is a Mexican holiday which falls on October 31, Halloween. In Mexico, it's important to honor deceased loved ones and reflect on the continuity of life on this day. Parent volunteers from the bilingual classes helped the third graders stage a production of los viejitos (the old men), a traditional dance associated with this holiday.

Around Thanksgiving time, the 3rd and 4th grade bilingual classes shared a meal of Aztec foods prepared by the students and parents. This meal reinforced what students were learning in a project-based social studies unit on the Aztecs.

Before winter break, the college interns hosted a multicultural learning center fair for the teachers. The learning centers highlighted the ethnic diversity of Texas and some of the holiday traditions that originated with the different cultures. Teachers attended the fair, crafting make-and-take items and carrying ideas back into their classrooms for teaching students about the cultural diversity in our state.

The dual celebration of Mexican and American cultural traditions at Nettie Marshall is successfully raising school and local awareness and respect for Mexican history and culture.

Coordinated by Ms. Rodriguez and Ms. Willoughby, this year's diez y seis de septiembre celebration was even larger, with students from a monolingual class hosting alongside bilingual classmates.

What began two years ago as a day to celebrate the history and heritage of one culture has sparked instruction and activities throughout the year that recognizes and honors the diverse cultures that make up our school. Through these experiences, we gain a deeper understanding of one another. We reflect on our similarities and differences, learning important lessons along the way on the meaning of democracy, diversity, and citizenship.