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One Room, Many Minds

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LSEE 333

One Room, Many Minds

On this day in particular, I sat down with my students to talk about tradition. My classroom is one of many brilliant and creative students, with four of them being emergent bilinguals (three Spanish speaking and one Korean). My students have so many stories to share, and I realized that instead of teaching *to* my students about traditions beyond those of the dominant culture, it would be best to let them tell those stories themselves. So, I wrote up a letter to send to parents, asking that they sit down with their child and talk with them about all of their family's traditions. I've been trying to get all of my parents more involved in classroom activities, and I figured this could be a fun project for them to get in on. I met with my Spanish speaking colleague while doing so, as she is doing the same project with her students, and she helped me write a version of the letter in Spanish as well, to send home to those parents who do not speak English. I included in my letter that if any students wanted to bring in objects or pictures to go with their project, they were more than welcome to. The project itself, I explained, was to write a poem about a favorite family tradition. I thought that this way, my students would have freedom to choose one that is special to them, and by sharing their poems at the end they could have more of a window into each other's lives - as well as make connections they may not have otherwise.

As I sat with my students that morning, they began to buzz with excitement when I mentioned the project. They had already spoken to their parents, they already had their objects and/or ideas in mind. I asked them what they thought a tradition was. A white, English speaking girl named Alyssa said:

“Something you repeat! Like once a year or something.” Her friend, a Spanish speaking student named Elena chimed in:

“Yeah! It means something too. Like, es importante.” (Utilizing a mix of both Spanish and English is common in my classroom, and welcome. It demonstrates that my students are grasping both languages, and are able to perform the very complex task of speaking both at the same time through a train of thought. I believe this feat should be celebrated, so I do not stop them from language mixing.)

“Yes!” I agreed. “A tradition is a belief or custom handed down from one generation to another! Each of our families has traditions, and we are going to explore those today.” I went on to explain that they were to write a poem about their favorite family tradition. It had to be a minimum of 5 lines long, and it had to have at least four adjectives (we were working on descriptive language). As I gave my instructions, I walked to each table and handed them a sheet with potential sentence starters. While not required in the project, I’ve found that students, specifically my emergent bilinguals, are less likely to feel overwhelmed and anxious about a project if they have a few examples or assistance getting started. I also made it clear that although some projects had to be written in just English so they could get practice in, this one could be written in Spanish, English, or both. What was important here, in this project, was the content. As long as they could explain the tradition in English while sharing to the class, I didn’t mind. Once written, they would then be able to share their poem, an explanation of the tradition, and anything they had brought along to go with it with the rest of the class. Normally, asking them to share work in front of the class was met with groans and wide-eyed panic, but on this day they were bursting with anticipation. They could not wait to share their very special traditions with one another.

As they settled in, I noticed Elena and Alyssa engaged in a vibrant discussion about their ideas.

“I’m going to write about Dia de los Muertos!!” Boasted Elena.

“What’s Dia de los Moor... how do you say it again?”

“Muertos.”

“Dia... de los... Muertos. Right?” At this moment I was a proud teacher, as I watched my English speaking student pushing herself to learn the Spanish term without dismissing it or getting frustrated. I have taught my students that it is important to respect and cherish all languages, and that those of us who only speak the dominant language have to put in extra work to help everyone else feel validated and not discouraged. I also beamed at the sight of Elena proudly teaching her classmate the Spanish term, as well as sharing her culture. At the beginning of the year, Elena would barely share her name with the class.

“Right. It is a... celebración de la vida. Um-” Elena looked at me and fidgeted with her hands. “A party for dead.” Alyssa seemed perplexed, but did not discourage Elena with judgement. We learned at the beginning of the year that if you do not understand, ask kindly.

“A party for the dead? Like, a funeral?”

“No... You put pictures of gone family and their favorite foods on a table. You dance and eat comida y light velas y-” As Elena spoke she got more excited, her fingers dancing up into the air as she recalled all of the details. She spoke faster too, and more Spanish became intermingled with her carefully constructed English response. Alyssa was captivated, and the two began to converse about Elena’s cherished tradition. I eventually had to step in and redirect them towards a more productive (and quiet) workspace.

A few days later, it was time to share the poems. Alyssa talked about her family's tradition of travelling to Maine each year to see family, and showed off a poster board with pictures of her trips over the years. Elena shared her tradition of Dia de los Muertos, and she brought along a sugar skull and flags she had made from the previous year. Sung-ho spoke about the lunar new year, and passed around a small red envelope that he got in the mail from his grandmother in Korea.

“Every year you get one of these with money in it from your grandparents, and you get to wear fancy Korean clothes called hanbok!!” He exclaimed. I sat back and watched as my students stood up in my teacher spot and spoke about their lives. They listened closely to one another, assisted when words seemed to fail, and chattered with joy whenever they realized they had something in common. If I had gone about this another way, and taught about traditions and holidays outside of the dominant culture by standing up there with the projector and notebook in hand, I never would have achieved this.

As a monolingual white woman, I am learning these lessons every day. I don't always get it right, and I will never be the perfect teacher for my bilingual students as I do not speak their language, but I am growing. I have learned that sometimes it's best to let them take the reins, and that as much as they are learning from me they are learning from each other and I am learning from them. What is most important is holding them up as they discover their identity, and a huge part of that is fostering their home languages and their cultures and traditions. I do my best to prevent a divide between home and classroom, child and peers, and teacher and students. It takes a village, and I intend for my classroom to be a place of comfort and discovery within that village.

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