

# Bringing Cultures into the Classroom: An Invitation to Families

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**As elementary teachers**, we were concerned that our young students were coming into our classes without a real respect and tolerance for cultural differences. We teach in a variety of settings—in rural, inner city, and medium-sized town schools. We believed that lessons could be taught in the primary grades instructing students on the wealth of diversity in America and fostering a respect for multiculturalism. Bringing respect for and knowledge of others' diversity lends itself to a democratic education.<sup>1</sup> This article describes how we began with, as it happened, Asian American families. Later in the year, we used what we learned in our early efforts to work with family members from various cultural traditions and backgrounds.

As we went through the school year and taught the standard curriculum (which focused on “all about me, all about my family, and all about my community”), we made an effort to expand the course content to embrace diversity.<sup>2</sup> We discovered, in the process, that when Asian families shared their food, clothing, and shelter, some students developed new relationships with their Asian-American peers. Students also learned that Asia includes many different countries and cultures.

Telling stories orally is a major form of instruction in many traditional cultures,<sup>3</sup> and it is both a comfortable and exciting method for use in the elementary classroom. Storytelling opens the door for visiting family members to come to class and share aspects of their culture. For example, we encouraged family members to bring items from their culture into the class and relate to students how that item “tells about their culture.” In this article, we describe how family members taught the class about the food, clothing, dance, and drama that is part of their heritage.

## Food First

One way to begin teaching about culture is to let children cook and eat the foods of a specific culture. In response to an invitation that students carried home, some parents volunteered to bring in ethnic foods for the students to try. For example, a Chinese American mother brought egg rolls that everyone enjoyed eating. She asked us if she could come back and teach the children how to make them. Using four electric skillets, we



all enjoyed making and eating egg rolls. This was a chance for students to learn mathematics as well as cooking and cultural diversity, as they had to measure ingredients. Comments from the children ranged from, “This is different but I like it;” “This is fun [to make] and I would like to eat it at home;” to “This tastes good, and can I have some more?”

## Rice: A Staple

Rice is a staple food item in Asian homes, but also in homes all over the world. Reading about food such as rice, and cooking and eating traditional foods to use rice, was an opportunity to help students compare similarities and differences between cultures. In the book *Everybody Cooks Rice*, seven-year-old Carrie is hungry for dinner, but her little brother Anthony is missing.<sup>4</sup> She sets off in the neighborhood in search of the little fellow, who is described as “such a moocher.” She visits Mr. and Mrs. Darlington from the Barbados, who were just sitting down to eat black-eyed peas and rice. At the Dias house, where the parents were still at work, the older children were cooking and arguing about the proportions of spices that were to go into cooking West Indian rice and pigeon peas with turmeric. Carrie also visited the Trans from Viet Nam who made rice

with a garlic fish sauce, and the Krishnamurthy's from India who cooked a fancy colorful Indian dish called *biryani*, with peas, cashews, raisins lots of spices, and basmati rice. She finally visited the Huas from China and the Bleus from Haiti. Needless to say Carrie's stomach wasn't grumbling anymore, but she still had room for her mother's Italian *risi e bisi* when she returned home with her brother.

Recipes for the various dishes are in the back of the book.

### Korean Clothing

Apparel plays a vital role in the preservation and expression of cultural identity. The South Korean aunt of one of our students asked to come to our class. She brought some clothes and allowed one girl and one boy to try them on. The national ladies' jacket is called a *hanbok*. The national men's jacket is a *jeogori*. They are similar in shape, but the women's garment tends to be less colorful. The ladies wear their hanbok over a skirt, and the men wear their jeogori over wide-cut trousers. The aunt explained that the colors of the garment probably came from China, but both the cut and shape seem reminiscent of Japan. However, the overall costume is strictly Korean. She explained that Korea lies near China and Japan.

We learned that traditionally, in China, a woman might wear a *cheongsam* (ladies' dress), while, in Japan, one could wear a *kimono*. We also learned that western-style, modern clothing is prevalent in urban and suburban areas of all three nations today.

### Dance

As the students modeled the clothing, the aunt talked about the concept of extended families in Korea. Grandparents live with the family. Aunts, uncles, and cousins traditionally live nearby in the same village.

Historically, Korean folk dances refer to work and life. The aunt informed us that men and women dance together, but do not touch. She taught us "The Coal Miner's Dance," which is an ancient folk dance performed in a circle. The children seemed to have fun doing the dance, and the experience turned out to be an enlightening for all—she later did the same things for our PTO.

### Adapting to Climate

Pointing to the map, the aunt explained that Korea is far enough to the north to be very cold in the winter. So, the Koreans invented floor heating. A small fire kept burning under the house, and heat flows through pipes under the floor. People sit, sleep, and eat on the floor and are kept warm. She also

explained that Korea has a humid climate. While food can be preserved (in the era before refrigerators) by drying, the Koreans excelled in pickling food. The national dish of Korea is *kimchi*. Children had a taste of some homemade kimchi, but most found that the taste was too strong (it is both salty and fermented). She laughed and said that it was an acquired taste. Some students quietly told us that, "This tastes sour" or "It is too salty and smells." A few said they thought it was "Okay."

### Recent History

She also spoke briefly about the Korean economy and history. She told the students that Korea was alternately conquered by China or Japan over the centuries. While now independent, the Korean peninsula is still divided. North Korea is ruled under a communist dictatorship. South Korea is a democracy. Many Koreans hope that the two countries can be united some day. People have plenty to eat in South Korea, but North Koreans do not, and they currently receive aid from the South.

### A Hands-On Activity

While there are many art activities that a teacher can select from to promote the learning of culture, we selected mask-making. This is because the different traditional Asian cultures use masks for religious ceremonies or dramatic performances. For example, Japanese *Noh* plays are classical dramas whose ancient origins were in rustic folk dramas performed in the villages. These later became fine art, as beautiful poetry and prose were added. When having students create a mask, it helps to have pictures so that students can see examples.

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, masks represent angels or demons. In the Japanese *Noh* plays, the masks can represent heroes, heroines, and villains.<sup>5</sup>

We asked students to create their own masks that told something about their personalities or moods. For example, if a student wanted to depict happiness, he or she could create a smiling mask. If a student wanted to make a "friendship mask," he or she could do something in design or colors that depicted friendship.

### Procedure

- Ask students to bring old shirts and newspapers from home.



- The teacher blows up spherical balloons before class, one for each student.
- Students put on old shirts (or smocks) and tear up the newspapers into strips that are about one inch across
- The teacher makes flour-and-water paste: one cup of flour to one-half cup of water.
- Each student dips newspaper strips into the flour-water paste and places them on one half of his or her balloon, creating a paper mache half-sphere.
- The teacher “digs” two holes in the wet mask with a blunt pencil (for later string placement).
- Let these items dry for two days, during which the teacher can cut eyeholes with scissors on each mask. Then students can pop their balloons.
- Now students can decorate their masks with poster paints.
- Allow the paint to dry for a day.
- Attach strings through the holes, and then students can try on their masks, holding them in place with the string.

Students also explain the theme of their masks to the class. Each child presented his or her mask and told about it. Then the finished masks were proudly displayed in the hall outside our room. The first grade students also wrote about their masks (the kindergartners did not), and their papers were displayed along with their product. One student wrote, “I am a hero. I am like a lion.” Another student wrote, “I am a pretty lady and very good.” A third wrote, “I am a nice butterfly because I would like to fly away.” This display allowed school visitors to view what our class was doing and learn about another culture.

Before making the display, our students wore their masks and explained what each mask meant. Thus, when they presented their work to other students, they were really telling something about themselves. This was an opportunity for each student to feel positive about himself or herself as the class applauded after a presentation. Parents brought in Asian treats, which included Chinese *dim sum* and Japanese cookies.

### A Class Newsletter

A newsletter is a way to communicate to students’ families the desire of their teachers to promote respect for all diversity. With help from students, the teacher created a one-page newsletter that students carried home to their parents once a month. The paper included a column on cultural diversity that became very popular. This column highlighted a different culture every month with a parent contributing to it. Sometimes, the parent contributed recipes or information about holidays such as the Chinese New Year and the Japanese Girls’ Festival.

### Respect

These projects helped to teach students the value of all human beings and about the wealth that is in diversity. One of our goals was to create respect in our students for all cultures. Students’ discussions and products showed that the classroom projects

and events promoted a respect for diversity. These activities also allowed us to learn more about our students. In addition, from what we observed of the classroom interactions, the lessons seemed to increase self-esteem among our minority students. As students talked about their learning experiences, they seemed to feel proud of their heritage.

As we reached out to learn about the different cultures represented in our classroom, family members of different cultural backgrounds responded positively. We discovered that when a teacher reaches out to communicate better, the teacher builds a community of learners who respect one another<sup>6</sup>—this community turned out to include both our students and their families.

In sum, exploring the “rainbow of cultures” in the classroom can be a very rewarding experience, but the teacher must be prepared to devote a lot of thought, careful preparation, and communication to the effort. Learning to work with diversity is good practice for advancing a democratic society.<sup>7</sup> 🌍

### Notes

1. National Council for the Social Studies Task Force on Ethnic Studies Curriculum Guidelines, “Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education.” [www.socialstudies.org/positions/multicultural/](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/multicultural/)
2. State Standards for South Carolina can be seen at [ed.sc.gov/agency/offices/cso](http://ed.sc.gov/agency/offices/cso).
3. Valerie O. Pang, *Multicultural Education* (Boston, MA: McGraw Hill, 2004); James Banks, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2003).
4. Norah Dooley, illustr. Peter J. Thornton, *Everybody Cooks* (Minneapolis, MN: Carolrhoda Books, 1991).
5. Noh plays and masks are discussed at [www.artelino.com/articles/nohtheater.asp](http://www.artelino.com/articles/nohtheater.asp)
6. Yuan Rodriguez and Bjorn Sjostrom, “Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Pedagogical Approach for Preparing Teachers for Cultural Diversity.” Workshop presented at American Educational Research Association Annual Conference in Chicago, IL, on April 21, 2006.
7. Pang and Banks.

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