

Culture Calle: Celebrating Heritage, Diversity, and Dreams in Bilingual Classrooms

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Former President Barack Obama has touched hearts by sharing his inspiring book, *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters*, with the children of the world.¹ Together, with the breathtaking illustrations of Loren Long, Obama presents 13 historical figures that have each had a profound impact on America. In a very different book, *Calling the Doves/ El Canto de las Palomas*,² award-winning Mexican American poet Juan Felipe Herrera beautifully illustrates his childhood as the son of Mexican migrant farmworkers. Herrera vividly describes his family's journey through the mountains and valleys of California from one small farm town to another. These two picture books offer powerful opportunities to teach students about culture as well as individual development and identity.³

In this article, we describe how these two books anchor a week-long unit on cultural heritage and the contributions of famous Americans. The lessons, usually about one hour in length, were taught in Mrs. Hobgood's English language classroom and Ms. Vargas's Spanish language classroom. In this two-way immersion (TWI) program in a public school, students spend half of the day in each classroom, learning language arts, math, science, and social studies content knowledge and skills in both places. The teachers work a full day, with children switching rooms at midday.

The concept of culture cannot be represented by "a single definition or a simple description. It brings to mind different images to different people [...] such as the mental habits, personal prejudices, moral values, social customs, artistic achievements, and aesthetic preferences of particular societies."⁴ Thus, teaching about culture is a complicated road, *la calle*, that is contextually driven⁵ and sometimes delimited by state curriculum requirements (e.g., a list of specific famous American contributions must be taught at a specific grade).⁶ Teachers should be aware of their students' diverse backgrounds such as their families' native language(s) (e.g., Spanish, English, French) and living situations (e.g., adoption, homelessness) in order to recognize and honor families' cultural assets. In this unit, teachers used a family tree activity, children's literature (mentioned above), graphic organizers, classroom discussions, and student-created writing. Throughout the unit, Mrs. Hobgood and Ms. Vargas's students received half of their social studies instruction in Spanish and half in English. The teachers worked to explicitly connect the content taught in one language with the appropriate vocabulary in the other language. The

guiding questions for the unit included the following:

What do you dream of doing in the future?

In what ways does your culture make you special?

How does your family give you unique experiences that help you pursue your dream?

How does your culture influence your interactions with others, where you live, why you move, and when you live in a particular place?

The unit culminated in the culture *calle* project, in which students wrote about their families' cultures, individual identity characteristics, and future career aspirations. In this article, we describe how two teachers used children's literature and specific activities to support student learning (i.e., building background knowledge, making connections, and honoring culture) about cultural heritage and famous American contributions. The **Pullout** in this issue of *SSYL* provides handouts that other teachers might use in their classrooms, with modifications as needed.

Learning about Relationships and Cultural Heritage

To introduce the upcoming unit, and to build background knowledge about students' individual cultures, students received a two-page, homework assignment, the family tree activity. The first page included a description of the task in Spanish and English, and two sample family trees

(**Pullout**, P1). The second page featured the outline of a tree with eight open squares below it (**Pullout**, P2). The task for students (working along with adult family members) was to write within a square an adult's relationship to the student, the name of that adult, and the adult's heritage. There would be one square per family member (e.g., Patrick, Grandpa, Irish). Students were encouraged to use as many squares as needed to represent their family members, adding additional squares if eight was insufficient. Students glued the squares to their trees and placed arrows between names to show relationships. We allowed several days for families to finish this activity and return the second page back to school.

On the first official day of the unit, students were greeted by a morning message asking them to identify something that was important to them and their respective families. Students read, "Culture is anything that is important to your family. Write one thing that is important to your family." Responses included "spending time together," "eating dinner," "board games," "singing Christmas songs," "playing sports," and "learning in school." The developmentally appropriate teacher-constructed definition of culture in the morning message stemmed from the definition of culture (i.e., the beliefs, customs, and way of life of a group of people) in Virginia's second grade curriculum framework for history and social science.

On the second day, students shared their family trees during morning meeting within their respective homeroom classes. In the English classroom, Mrs. Hobgood shared one student's family tree and asked that child some clarification questions. For example, "Are all of your family members from the same town or city in Mexico?" From the family trees, Mrs. Hobgood created a table listing the families' countries of origin (**Table**, p. 19). Then Mrs. Hobgood showed where these countries were located on a globe in order to build the students' sense of place and geography. This activity could be replicated using a line-drawn world map (**Pullout**, P3). As the C3 Framework notes, "geographic inquiry helps people understand and appreciate their own place in the world, and fosters curiosity about Earth's wide diversity of environments and cultures."⁷ To encourage further geographic inquiry and reasoning, Mrs. Hobgood called on the students' prior knowledge with questions such as, "What ocean did your family members have to cross to come to America?" or "Find your family's country of origin. On which continent is that country located?"

In the Spanish classroom, Ms. Vargas allowed the students to present their own family trees, and she similarly asked clarification questions in Spanish. Rather than using a globe to locate their families' countries of origin, Ms. Vargas pointed to a map of the Earth projected on a whiteboard. As the family trees were shared in each classroom, students generated a concept map (i.e., a graphic organizer that shows relationships between concepts) around the word "culture." Some student ideas mirrored their answers to the morning message prompt (e.g., "music" and "food"), while others highlighted

new components of their culture including, but not limited to, "trusting each other," "selling things," "faith," "language," and "celebrations."

By building background knowledge with the family trees, morning messages, and concept maps, students were primed to think (as a class and individually) about their cultural heritage. Ms. Hobgood and Ms. Vargas hoped that students would reflect upon questions such as, "In what ways do I stand out?" and "How am I connected to my peers?"

In the read-alouds described below, which spanned two days of classes, the two books were used as resources to increase students' awareness and respect for one another's culture and individuality. This awareness led to understandings such as the knowledge that diversity helps individuals pursue different passions in life, and that believing in one's future and dreams impacts your own life as well as the lives of family members, friends, and your greater community.

Discussing Personal Characteristics and Future Aspirations

If students are expected to "think flexibly and act responsibly to address civic issues in a diverse and interdependent world,"⁸ they must be provided with "opportunities to explore the variety and complexity of human experience through a dynamic and meaningful education."⁹ With the experiences provided in this unit, students were consistently interacting with content and practicing skills that will prepare them to "understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world."¹⁰ Exposure to the selected children's literature further allowed them to examine connections among various cultures as well as understand how diversity and individuality simultaneously influence their futures.

In the English classroom, Mrs. Hobgood began by reading aloud *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters*. First, to activate students' background knowledge and facilitate the upcoming discussion, Mrs. Hobgood asked the students if they were familiar with the author, Barack Obama. Many of the students responded quickly and enthusiastically that Barack Obama was the United States' first African American president. Next, she prompted the students to think about why Barack Obama would share the letter that he wrote to his daughters with other children. Mrs. Hobgood previewed the book, explaining that it described Barack Obama's heroes, famous American women (Georgia O'Keefe, Billie Holiday, Helen Keller, Maya Lin, and Jane Addams) and men (Albert Einstein, Jackie Robinson, Sitting Bull, Martin Luther King Jr., Neil Armstrong, Cesar Chavez, Abraham Lincoln, and George Washington) who the students have studied or will study in the future.¹¹

Obama begins the letter to his daughters by posing this question, "Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?" He uses this sentence structure to create a rhythm that repeats across

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each two-page spread as he introduces new figures and their historical significance. For example, as he introduces Jackie Robinson, Obama writes, “Have I told you that you are brave?” Below this question, readers see an illustrated portrait of Jackie Robinson as a child standing with a crowd of the previously introduced historical figures (also portrayed as children). On the next page, Obama describes how Jackie Robinson demonstrated bravery as an athlete playing the American sport of baseball. The illustration on this page shows an adult Jackie Robinson swinging a bat in front of a crowd with mixed facial expressions (i.e., angry, sad, happy). Students immediately connect with this thought-provoking image, noticing the distinct reactions on the faces in the crowd.

With each hero, Obama summarizes his or her contribution to society and encourages the reader to heed that example. The rhythmic pattern continues with Neil Armstrong, “Have I told you that you are an explorer?” After explaining that Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon, Obama encourages students to look to their own lives, “We watched his lunar landing leaps, which made us brave enough to take our own big, bold strides.” The final hero he includes is George Washington, whose pages begin with the question, “Have I told you that I am proud to be American?” Obama reminds us that George Washington helped build our country to be “strong and true, a country of principles, a country of citizens.” The book concludes with these heroes depicted as children mixed in a group with dozens of unidentified children. Obama states that, “America is made of people of every kind...” and tells readers that these famous American women and men are a part of each of us. Obama encourages readers by saying, “Have I told you that you are one of them [i.e., heroes] and that you are the future?” The illustrations and words build to this final provocation perfectly, leaving the audience feeling inspired and connected to a greater, common good. *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* builds a sense of connection between heroes of the past and students of the present.

Mrs. Hobgood utilized intentional questioning (e.g., “How do you show that you are respectful?”) to invite students to reflect upon the heroes’ contributions to our society. For example, when Barack Obama described Jackie Robinson as brave, some students noticed both excited and despondent fans in the crowd behind the famous African American baseball player. Students were astonished that some Americans could hold such animosity towards a brave man just because of the color of his skin. This inspired students to think about how Jackie Robinson remained courageous in the face of adversity. Connecting this concept to the students’ family trees, Mrs. Hobgood asked, “Did he learn how to be brave from someone in his family?”

When the class encountered the following question posed

by Obama, “Have I told you that you are an explorer?”, Mrs. Hobgood moved from exclusively focusing on famous American heroes to supporting students as they made text-to-self connections. Mrs. Hobgood asked, “Are any of you all explorers?” Many of the students excitedly remarked that they explored their natural environments (e.g., backyards, parks, hiking paths). Some mentioned people with whom they enjoyed exploring their world such as siblings, parents, and friends. Lastly, they made connections among famous explorers. Neil Armstrong was the example in this book; however, the students had learned about Christopher Columbus in kindergarten and Christopher Newport in first grade.

After hearing the book read aloud, the class transitioned into snack time, and Mrs. Hobgood asked the class to discuss the famous American heroes from the book as well as other heroes they could imagine adding to the book if it were to have a part two. Right away, two students started talking about primatologist Jane Goodall and how she would be an excellent addition to the book due to her compassion for animals. Students also mentioned Erno Rubik, the creator of the Rubik’s Cube, as well as their own parents.

Honoring the Culture and Labor of Our Predecessors

To begin this lesson, each teacher asked students what they observed on the front cover of the book *Calling the Doves/El Canto de las Palomas*. Students remarked on the family members depicted (i.e., mother, father, and son) and their differing clothing, the sprawling landscape, and the bilingual title. Both teachers commented that the book is a true story about the author’s life; beginning with his move from Fowler, California, to the nearby valleys, which housed labor camps for migrant farmworkers. Students immediately connected with this narrative due to their prior learning experiences (e.g., lessons on Cesar Chavez) as well as some of their families’ transient lifestyles. Additionally, both teachers framed this story within the continuous, historical struggle for migrant farmworkers’ rights.

While *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* was read solely in the English classroom (i.e., because a Spanish version was not available), *Calling the Doves/El Canto de las Palomas* was read in both the English and Spanish classroom. Mrs. Hobgood read half of the book in English and Ms. Vargas read the other half in Spanish. Author Herrera describes his admiration of the *campesino* lifestyle he shared with his loving mother and father (i.e., two everyday American heroes) as a young child. Herrera fondly reminisces about falling asleep under the stars listening to the wolves and then waking up to eat breakfast in the open air using the sky as his “blue spoon” and the “wavy clay of the land” as his plate. He humbly depicts his family’s one-room house built atop of an abandoned car as a “warm cave of conversations” that blared Mexican songs and radio auctions. Herrera affectionately recalls bathing in a giant tin bucket while lovingly listening to his mother sing

about Mexicanos and their journeys across the Texas border. He recounts the awe he felt as he watched his father cup his hands around his mouth to make a deep whistle, resembling the sound of a small clarinet, to summon doves (i.e., imitating their calls). Similarly, Herrera metaphorically felt the world stop spinning as he listened to his “healer” mother reciting poetry. Readers sense his love for his family and other *campesinos* as he describes the *fiestas* under circus tents as a “home-made city of brown faces with smiles and music.” At eight years old, Herrera needed to go to school, but he knew that he would one day let his voice fly just as his mother recited poems and his father called the doves. This bilingual memoir illustrates how Herrera’s Mexican cultural heritage molded him into an award-winning poet and writer (i.e., this book won the 1997 Ezra Jack Keats Book Award).

During the English read aloud, there was a constant flow of questioning between Mrs. Hobgood and her students. When discussing how the family lived in *campesinos*, she asked, “What type of home did the family have?” One student responded, “A tent.” Another student asked, “What is a tent?” Students started detailing stories about camping with their families in the woods as well as building blanket tents in their living rooms. Students posed several questions and drew from prior experiences. For example, when the teacher outlined how the family eventually built a one-room house out of wood, a student asked, “How could they afford the wood?” Then, when talking about the family’s inability to access electricity, which prohibited them from having kitchen appliances (e.g., an oven, a refrigerator), a student remarked that his family had given an old refrigerator to another family who needed it. These are just a few examples of the many text-to-self connections that the students made. To further elaborate, Mrs. Hobgood highlighted the mother’s ability to imitate birdcalls. One student remarked, “My teacher at the Boys & Girls Club tells us to listen to the birds when we are outside.”

In the afternoon, Ms. Vargas recalled the school’s annual Hispanic Heritage Night during National Hispanic Heritage Month in the fall.¹² Students were able to identify examples of Mexican American music, art, food, and traditions in the book because they had experience creating exhibits, preparing snacks, and rehearsing performances for the festive night. After finishing the read aloud in both classes, the teachers foreshadowed the culture *calle* culminating project to increase student excitement for the next day’s activities.

A Culminating Culture *Calle*

For the culture *calle*, both classes united in the same room to discuss the books and receive directions in both languages from the two teachers. For the writing task, students were able to choose whether they wanted to write in English or Spanish. Mrs. Hobgood and Ms. Vargas provided students with the following sentence stems, which mirrored the language found in Obama’s book:

Have I told you that I am _____? I am _____
and I am a/an _____.
My family’s culture is from _____ and
helps make me who I am.”
¿Te he dicho que soy _____? Yo soy _____ y
soy un/una _____.
La cultura de mi familia viene de _____ y
ayuda a hacerme quien soy.

The teachers modeled how to answer these questions in both English and Spanish, while assuming the persona of Juan Felipe Herrera, the author of *Calling the Doves/ El Canto de las Palomas*.

The class brainstormed a list of adjectives in English and Spanish for use in completing the first blank in the writing prompt. Then they turned to filling out their own prompts, before transferring the writing to a sheet of pre-cut yellow rectangular paper. While doing so, students used the list of adjectives, but they also asked the teachers about other adjectives. Ms. McNamara (Mrs. Hobgood’s pre-service teacher) returned family trees to the students, which they used as a reference for their writing. In total, 16 students decided to complete the worksheet in English and 12 students decided to complete it in Spanish.

Finally, the students’ writing was added to the culture *calle*, constructed in the second-grade hallway.



Each student writing sample served as one of the yellow, dashed, center-strip markings on the culture *calle*, and their family trees comprised the forest along the side. Once the culture *calle* was complete, the students journeyed alongside it in small groups to read their classmates’ work with a teacher.

Conclusion

In elementary schools, “we need to have texts in our classrooms representing the complexity of today’s family,”¹³ as well as texts that showcase the diverse contributions of famous and

everyday American female and male heroes, both past and present. (Pullout, P4) First and foremost, students must feel safe, welcome, and supported in our classrooms in order to grow as lifelong learners. Through meaningful social studies instruction, students will learn that “culture influences the locations and the types of interactions that occur” among people¹⁴ (see Pullout, P4). Students should be provided with opportunities to explore their cultural heritage (e.g., completing family trees, interviewing family members, looking at family photographs) and develop crucial social studies skills such as gathering and evaluating sources, developing claims and using evidence, and communicating conclusions.¹⁵ These opportunities have the potential to support students’ understandings of their family’s past (i.e., where and when people lived, why people moved, what work they did, and how they interacted with each other).¹⁶ Through this exploration, students can track the development of their family’s culture over time and contemplate how their own evolving dreams might shape their culture in the future.

Notes

1. Barack Obama, *Of Thee I Sing: A Letter to My Daughters* (New York: Random House, 2010).
2. Juan Felipe Herrera, *Calling the Doves/ El Canto de las Palomas* (New York: Lee & Low Books, 2001).
3. National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Chapter 2- The Themes of Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands.
4. B. Kumaravadivelu, *Beyond Methods: Microstrategies for Language Teaching* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 267.
5. Zaretta Hammond, *Culturally Responsive Teaching and The Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2015).
6. Melinda Hammerschmidt and Dea Borneman, “Inspiring Americans: Creating a Community of Engaged Citizens in the First Grade,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 31, no. 2 (November/ December 2018).
7. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), 40.
8. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: Executive Summary* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2010), www.socialstudies.org/standards/execsummary.
9. NCSS, “Powerful, Purposeful Pedagogy in Elementary School Social Studies,” *Social Education* 81, no. 3 (May/June 2017), 186.
10. NCSS, “Powerful and Purposeful Teaching and Learning in Elementary School Social Studies,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 22, no. 1 (September/October 2009), 31.
11. Contact the author, Ariel, at kac8dp@virginia.edu for a list of 40 books organized by historical figure.
12. See many resources about National Hispanic Heritage Month at www.hispanicheritagemoth.gov, which explains, “The Library of Congress, National Archives and Records Administration, National Endowment for the Humanities, National Gallery of Art, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum join in paying tribute to the generations of Hispanic Americans who have positively influenced and enriched our nation and society.”
13. Christina M. Tschida and Lisa Brown Buchanan, “What Makes a Family? Sharing Multiple Perspectives through an Inclusive Text Set,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 2 (November/December 2017), 7.
14. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation*, 42.
15. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation*.
16. Corey R. Sell, Jennie Schmaltz, and Stephanie Hartman, “We Came to Colorado: Third Graders Inquire into the Past to Honor their Present,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 30, no. 3 (January/February 2018).

Students’ Cultural Heritage in the Two-Way Immersion Program

English Homeroom (Mrs. Hobgood)	Spanish Homeroom (Ms. Vargas)
El Salvador	Italian, Irish, Puerto Rican, Native American, English
Belgian, American, Canadian	Irish, German, Scottish, French, English/British
German, French, Slovak, Irish	Mexican
French, German, Austrian, Swiss	German
Irish, French, Scottish, German	Brazilian
Peruvian, Argentinian, Italian	Honduran
Swedish, Nordic, English, “European”	Salvadoran, Mexican
Mexican	Mexican
Mexican	Mexican
British, French, Irish, Swedish, German	African American, Cherokee, German, English, Korean, Spanish
Honduran	Honduran
Irish, Italian	*Did not submit a family tree
Indian, Kenyan	*Did not submit a family tree
Scottish, Irish, German, Native American	*Did not submit a family tree

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