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**Mexican Dance Group: Breaking Barriers One Tap at a Time  
(Chapter in Emerging Issues and Trends in Education)**

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# Mexican Dance Group

## Breaking Barriers One Tap at a Time

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*Tatiana Cevallos*

I resolutely believe that respect for diversity is a fundamental pillar in the eradication of racism, xenophobia, and intolerance.

—Rigoberta Menchú

It [is] important to stand up for your rights, and regardless of who you are and where you come from, to hold your heads up high with dignity and respect.

—Hilda Solis

**W**ith a growing number of Hispanic students in schools (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2014; Oregon Department of Education, 2012), many educators wonder how to make the school community more accessible to Hispanic parents (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Valdés, 1996; Wink, 2005). The dance group described in this chapter demonstrates a natural way in which one teacher has accomplished Hispanic parental accessibility and, in doing so, positively impacted her school community. Rosa Floyd, the director of Nellie Muir's Dance Group, has been teaching in Spanish-English bilingual

classrooms for more than nineteen years. She came from Mexico as an adult and learned English, becoming an instructional assistant and subsequently a teacher. She has chosen to work with Hispanic students and regards her work as a bridge between Mexican parents and schools. Bilingual and bicultural, Rosa understands the Mexican community as well as the Anglo-dominated school culture. For several years, she has effectively facilitated cross-cultural relationships between parents and teachers through the use of traditional dance groups. The months of practice preparing for the Cinco de Mayo presentations provide a catalyst for change as the teachers and parents address the invisible barriers that have kept Hispanic parents separated from the school community. Rosa's efforts have led to a more welcoming and respectful school environment that embraces Mexican parents and reinforces students' sense of cultural identity and heritage pride.

Establishing the dance group emerged from Rosa's desire to preserve a cultural tradition. But in so doing she also created a teaching tool for both parents and teachers that helps penetrate cultural barriers. In Rosa's words (translated by author):

My purpose with the dance was not only cultural but also didactic for both sides. I wanted teachers to learn from students' culture, that they respect their students' culture and show children that *they* [teachers] are proud of their [students'] culture. . . . Also, teachers are showing respect to parents. That is the idea for the dance, not only dancing. And that is why our group is formed by teachers and parents.

For Rosa, it is crucial to include parents in schooling. She brings parents to school through the dance group, providing them with an authentic opportunity to interact with teachers. This created a nonthreatening environment where Mexican parents do not feel alienated (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Valdés, 1996; Wink, 2005). According to Rosa,

The other reason that I want to involve the parents is because I want them to work at the same level as the teachers. A lot of our parents are afraid, or are ashamed and do not know how to integrate [with the school].

By embracing a cultural tradition—traditional Mexican dances—Rosa purposefully changes the dynamics of parent-teacher interactions and extends culturally responsive practices beyond confines of the classroom (Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Wink, 2005).



**FIGURE 1.** Third and Fifth Grade Dance Group

## Context

The story of Rosa Floyd and the dance group comes from a series of phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006) from a larger study of bilingual reading specialists. This section provides an overview of the school community and dual-language program in which Rosa teaches. In this chapter, I have chosen to use the term “Hispanic” to refer to the Spanish-speaking Woodburn community comprised mainly of Mexican parents and students of first, second, and third generations who live in this agricultural region of Oregon. “Hispanic” is a cognate to the Spanish word *hispano* that Rosa uses when describing the school community, parents, and students with whom she works. I also use the term “Mexican” when referring to this population and related cultural elements, such as the dance or other customs parents have brought from their country of origin. At the time of the study, all the Hispanic students and their parents were from Mexico.

## The Local Community

Rosa is a teacher at a bilingual school in a community that has a significant population of families from Mexico or of Mexican descent. The Hispanic community is a mix of Mexican families that have been established in the area for several generations, coupled with new immigrants who are attracted to the location because of family ties, cultural and language networks, and work opportunities. The community is in the heart of Oregon's Willamette Valley, where the local public institutions are under the direction of Anglo mainstream personnel. In this sense, the community reflects the larger state, where Anglo mainstream members hold economic, social, and political power. Interactions between Anglo and Hispanic members of this community are mainly limited to commerce and work-related relationships. While parents see one another at school, they rarely develop strong friendships, and their interactions may be limited to polite greetings. The Anglo community in Woodburn includes an older and retired population, families who have lived in the area for a long time, and newer families who have found affordable homes along the I-5 corridor and work in the Portland metro area. The Hispanic community, formed predominantly by Mexican immigrants, typically works in the agricultural and service sectors. Hispanic parents tend to have lower rates of completion of high school than Anglo parents. In some cases, Hispanic parents may not have attended school beyond sixth grade in Mexico. Thus, while the Hispanic and Anglo populations inhabit the same geographical area, they have not established strong intercultural or interracial relationships and friendships. The cultural division evident in the community is due to a combination of language barriers, the geographically segregated neighborhoods in which the groups live, and prevailing cultural differences.

## The School and School District

At the time of this study, 80 percent of the students in this district qualified for free and reduced lunch, 60 percent of the students entered school as English learners, and 20 percent came from a migrant background. The school district is highly diverse: 78 percent of students are Spanish dominant, 11 percent are English dominant, and 11 percent are of Russian heritage (Collier & Thomas, 2014). Moreover, the school district offers bilingual education from preschool to grade 12 in Spanish/English and Russian/English.

In the past decade, the school district moved from offering a late-exit transitional bilingual program at the elementary level to a dual-language (DL) program P–12. The former program served only Spanish-speaking students and is aimed at teaching children strong English skills to be successful in school once they transition to middle school—where instruction took place only in English. The current dual-language program, in contrast, serves both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking children and promotes bilingualism and biliteracy.

Rosa teaches kindergarten in the Spanish-English dual program at Nellie Muir Elementary. Her kindergarten classroom is composed of Mexican Spanish-speaking children and Anglo English-speakers. Both groups learn content in English and Spanish and study side-by-side. The school follows an 80/20 model for language instruction: 80 percent of content instruction in kindergarten is delivered in Spanish and 20 percent of instruction in English. Students learned to first read in Spanish. At each grade level, the percentage of English instruction increases. By fifth grade, students spent 50 percent of their day learning in Spanish and 50 percent of their day learning in English. In addition to promoting bilingualism and biliteracy, one of the goals for the dual-language program is to promote the integration of the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking student groups (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005). Whereas a late-exit bilingual program is frequently regarded as a remedial approach designed to help English learners overcome the English barrier at school, a dual-language program model values minority students' native language as an asset and offers the potential for Spanish-speakers to assume a positive attitude toward their language and culture. Ultimately the goal is for students to feel validated within their school (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2005; Lindholm-Leary, 2004).

## Dual-Language Programs

There has been an explosion of dual-language programs across the nation in the past few years (Collier & Thomas, 2014; Harris, 2015; Lindholm-Leary, 2012). These programs are the most effective in reducing the opportunity gap, educating linguistically and culturally diverse students whose first language is not English. Additionally, they provide the opportunity for native-English speakers to acquire another language from an early age (Collier & Thomas, 2014; Lindholm-Leary, 2004, 2012). Dual-language programs bring students from different ethnic, language, and cultural groups together to learn content in two languages. Students tend to remain

together as a cohort for the entirety of their school experience, as in some cases these programs are only a strand within a school.

Seminal work by Valdés (1997) at the initiation of dual-language programs in schools involved inviting administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders to examine opportunities to use the dual-language initiatives as social change agents. She identified critical economic, social, and cultural factors that render Hispanic families at an academic disadvantage in school and that ultimately hinder social mobility within the United States. This critical analysis has led Valdés to question the lasting potential for isolated school programs, at a micro level, to change the dynamics of the larger society and its inequities. Most specifically, she has speculated about the true potential dual-language programs have for relationships and friendships among Anglo and Hispanic students to develop outside the school walls. Valdés remains critical, yet hopeful, that educators will take an active role in facilitating equal relationships among students that would place minority Spanish-speaking children in a status comparable to that of their majority English-speaking classmates (Macedo, Dendrinos, & Gounari, 2003). Although Rosa's dance group project remains at a micro-scale, it is a testament to the power individuals have to promote positive intergroup interactions. Efforts such as Rosa's have lasting effects inside and outside of school among the Hispanic parents, Anglo parents, and Anglo teachers involved in the dance group.

## Rosa Floyd

I have known Rosa for seventeen years and have always admired the way she connects with students and parents to create a positive learning environment. Even years after her kindergarten students have left her class, they and their parents remain in contact with her. She is often invited to celebrate *quinceañeras* (a traditional and formal celebration in Hispanic culture for fifteen-year-old girls transitioning into adulthood), high school graduations, and other important family events. Rosa sees herself as “their teacher for life.” And she certainly is, as her Hispanic and Anglo students enter formal education through her kindergarten class.

Indeed, Rosa has a gift for putting students at ease during the transition from home to school, prioritizing the well-being of the child and enlisting parents as crucial supporters in this process. Everyone who has met Rosa knows of her smile,

kindness, enthusiasm, energy, positive attitude, and commitment. Everything about the way she carries herself and how she interacts with students and adults is welcoming, respectful, and affirming. She is the kind of teacher people remember and admire.

### **Dancer and Teacher**

Rosa was born and raised in Guadalajara, Mexico. She obtained her undergraduate degree in architecture and continued with graduate studies in Spanish language and literature in Spain. She then worked at the Universidad de Guadalajara in the audiovisual department, designing instructional materials for high school students for a national education program. She also developed programs for mathematics and provided professional development to teachers on how to use those materials and programs. Rosa learned to dance at the age of six and has been dancing ever since. During her university years she was part of two professional dance groups, for the Universidad de Guadalajara and for Guadalajara's City Hall. She continued to be involved in professional dance groups once she moved to Oregon and has balanced her teaching career with being a dancer.

When Rosa first moved to the United States, she worked as an instructional assistant at a migrant summer school and then at a high school. Besides the school counselor and Spanish teacher, she was the only staff person who spoke Spanish at a high school with 25 percent Hispanic students. As a result, Rosa became a liaison between the school and Spanish-speaking families. She also supported high schoolers who needed help to earn credits toward graduation. This work motivated her to learn English faster. Seeing the needs of Mexican students at the high school enacted a career change in Rosa's life that brought her to pursue a teaching license.

Rosa taught at an immersion Spanish program at a private school in Oregon for six years before she was recruited by the Title I school district where she currently teaches. She obtained her teaching license through a graduate teaching program at a public university and has been teaching in bilingual classrooms for the past fourteen years. In all the schools in which she had taught, Rosa has started and directed traditional Mexican dance groups and has encouraged parents and teachers to participate. This initiative has always been well received by school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and the community.

## Cultural Bridge

Rosa takes advantage of being a cultural insider in Hispanic culture, having grown up in Mexico, yet she also understands the culture of mainstream American schools. She uses this knowledge to navigate and establish relationships within and outside the school. In the process, Rosa functions as a cultural bridge between Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers.

Her effectiveness as teacher and cultural bridge comes from a deep commitment to equity and to what she calls *mi gente* (my people). In fact, she specifically refers to herself as a bridge for communication between parents and the school: “I feel like a bridge between parents and school. I feel that is my work here.” As a kindergarten teacher, the work she does with Hispanic parents is an investment that will eventually translate into greater parental involvement and student success. She strives to provide Hispanic parents with critical information about school culture and practices. She informs parents about their responsibilities as well as their rights. Rosa acknowledges power differentials that can result from cultural differences. Hispanic parents who come from small rural towns frequently regard the priest and schoolteacher as the community authorities. They often do not feel comfortable asking questions or even coming to school. Understanding this, Rosa attempts to prepare Mexican parents to communicate freely and confidently, despite their limited English proficiency. This is important because such parental engagement can be central for student success. “And if they want their children to be successful, they (parents) need to know how to communicate. They need to know how to dialogue and how to come and ask and what they can do to help.” Subsequently, when parents begin to understand the importance of communication (especially regarding cultural differences) while their students are in kindergarten, her efforts pave the road for future interactions with teachers and school staff.

Indeed, working to improve communication and an understanding of U.S. school culture is one of the first deliberate steps Rosa takes with Hispanic parents. She is aware that school personnel and Hispanic families frequently make assumptions about each other and about their roles in students’ education (Faber, 2015; Valdés, 1996). As a result, Rosa explicitly addresses cultural differences with parents:

Sometimes there are problems communicating with parents, because of culture, right? . . . Hispanic parents don’t understand the culture; sometimes they say, “The teacher is too cold.” . . . But part of it is to understand that American culture has its



**FIGURE 2.** Rosa Kindergarten Dance Group

ways and our culture has another way. But if we don't tell them, they are not going to know how to work with teachers.

Hispanic parents sometimes perceive Anglo teachers and the school environment as cold and intimidating. For instance, Rosa recalled an instance when Hispanic parents believed that Anglo teachers were not welcoming when they showed up to a classroom unannounced and the teachers requested they make an appointment with the office to talk about volunteering. The cultural norm of valuing a teacher's time and setting up prior appointments to talk to her was perceived as aloof and uninviting. The resulting interaction may have harmed parents' future attempts to volunteer at school. In contrast, parents find Rosa's classroom as always open. When parents drop in for a few minutes and offer their help, she quickly finds activities for them to do, even if it only means sharpening pencils. The task she assigns on the spot is not as important as the validation and gratitude she conveys to parents for their help. Rosa is convinced that cultural misunderstandings can easily be avoided if rules, procedures, and classroom norms are explicitly yet sensitively explained to parents at the beginning of the school year. She, in fact, begins the communication process at the beginning of their child's education.

## Culturally Responsive Activist

A teacher's ability to speak Spanish is not enough when communicating with Hispanic parents. It is also important and necessary to be culturally sensitive, to understand how Hispanic families view school, and to examine and question one's own biases against values and beliefs that are different from mainstream culture (Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Valdés, 1996). Valdés (1996) conducted an ethnographic study with ten Mexican families who lived in the borderlands of Texas. She examined how middle-class Anglo-European mainstream dispositions toward school and parental involvement are different from those of Mexican parents. Valdés contends that Mexican parents frequently operate with the traditional values they have carried from their upbringing in small towns in Mexico. Among those traditional values is that children learn to be responsible, respectful, and productive members who contribute to the family unit. Further, parents consider "school learning as the province of teachers" (Valdés, 1996, p. 180). Thus, children learn that academic learning is the domain of teachers.

While Mexican parents believe education is important, their understanding of the role of parental involvement can sharply differ from what teachers in U.S. schools expect. Mexican families may not always observe school routines such as monitoring homework time, reading to children, or helping students acquire materials for school projects requested by teachers. This is because many Mexican immigrant parents face daunting time and economic restrictions preventing them from accomplishing many academic activities with their children. In some cases, parents may not be fully literate or are not proficient in English. These and other limitations may perpetuate the misconception and unexamined bias that "Hispanic parents are neither committed to nor involved in their children's education" (Valdés, 1996, p. 33). Nevertheless, Valdés identified multiple ways in which families in her study were involved in the education of their children. She invites educators and other stakeholders to focus on the strengths Mexican immigrants have and avoid deficit views of them.

Rosa desires to change the deficit view that some Anglo teachers hold about the lack of school involvement among Hispanic parents. She emphasizes that Hispanic parents want to come to school but they also desire to do so in ways they can feel successful: "Parents want to participate but in things that they can do, or that they know how to do, or in those where they can feel successful." Rosa's efforts as cultural bridge and her active role in changing parent-teacher dynamics with the dance

group aimed to make the school environment feel more friendly, approachable, and welcoming to Hispanic parents.

Rosa's experiences, along with scholarly work by such scholars as Valdés, have great professional and personal resonance with me. In my own work with preservice teachers, I have encountered some of the misconceptions and biases about Hispanic parental involvement that Valdés (1996) challenges. The negative perceptions that Hispanic families are uninvolved and lack commitment to their children's education is something I have heard in subtle as well as explicit comments. I should add that these were not always intentionally malicious comments. However, naive or not, as Rosa recognizes, these perceptions need to be addressed by teacher educators. Preservice and in-service teachers may equate mere parental presence in school with parental involvement (Gorski & Pothini, 2014). However, barriers that keep parents from coming to school are often unexamined. Parents do not necessarily feel comfortable coming to school if to them this institution seems foreign, intimidating, unapproachable, and, ultimately, uninviting (Faber, 2015; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Valdés, 1996; Wink, 2005).

Furthermore, schools may not be operating with culturally relevant information pertaining to Hispanic parental involvement when planning for school activities. For instance, Rosa explained that another cultural difference experienced by Mexican parents at her school was the end-of-kindergarten celebration. In Mexico, this was a big school event celebrated and planned in conjunction with parents. Students wore regalia and there was a formal graduation ceremony with diplomas, music, speeches, and food. This was the students' first transition and it was well celebrated; children danced the waltz during the graduation ceremony. In contrast, the kindergarten graduation in the United States occurred on a smaller scale and parents did not co-plan the event. This lack of knowledge of a cultural tradition was grounds for unfortunate and unnecessary misunderstanding. Mexican parents who were not invited to take part in the planning process of the kindergarten graduation celebration in the United States felt excluded from the school. The exclusion reinforced the perception of being a cultural outsider. It is easy to see how culturally responsive teachers, when made aware of such a small yet important cultural difference, could easily revise their practice and invite parents to take part in the planning and organization of kindergarten graduations. This would require teachers not only to acknowledge a difference in tradition and respond in a culturally appropriate way, but also to view parents as partners and equals (Wink, 2005).

## The Dance Groups

Rosa has participated in dance groups since her youth. This cultural expression is an integral part of both her personal and professional life. She values students' cultural roots and recognizes the need within Mexican communities to enjoy and preserve different forms of art and artistic traditions. Rosa incorporates art as a tool for learning, creative expression, and cultural exploration. She also teaches students, parents, and teachers to dance *danzas tradicionales* (traditional dances).

Rosa uses this cultural tradition as a deliberate device not only to bring parents to school but to challenge cultural barriers. In her view, Mexican parents identify with this cultural expression because they grew up listening to Mexican music and seeing dances performed in their native country. They get excited about their children continuing to experience and value a cherished cultural expression. They are grateful to have traditional dances showcased in the school and presented to the larger community. Moreover, they feel this was an activity in which they can participate. All the while, Rosa carefully encourages Hispanic parents to communicate with teachers and integrate into the school community.

There are three main venues in which Rosa teaches traditional dance. The first group is her kindergarten class. The second group is Hispanic and Anglo students in third through fifth grades. The third group is a collection of Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers.

### Kindergarten Dance Group

Rosa incorporates dance into her teaching as a tool to connect with students as well as to expand on students' appreciation of this art form. For instance, over the course of several morning meetings, she teaches her kindergarteners the steps of a dance named *los viejitos*. She does this daily, adding a few steps at a time to what students perceive as physical movement routines, until the whole dance choreography is complete. Both her Hispanic and her Anglo students learn to dance in a natural, nonstressful, and fun way. Once the choreography is ready and students approach the Cinco de Mayo celebration, Rosa shares with them pictures of previous classes that danced in the school assembly. Students come to realize they have been learning traditional dances and respond with emotions ranging from excitement to shyness. As the assembly date approaches, Rosa adds performance elements and prepares her five-year-old students to dance in front of a full school audience that includes family and community members. She helps

them to overcome stage fright and works hard to ensure they will be successful and proud of their performance.

### **Third- to Fifth-Grade Student Dance Group**

This group is formed by Hispanic and Anglo students who meet after school to learn traditional Mexican dances. Some of the students are former kindergarten students in Rosa's class, while other students are new to the group. There is no cost for students to participate in the dance lessons, but in order to be admitted, they need to be at grade level in reading (so as not to miss instructional time when performing in the community). This dance group also creates serendipitous opportunities for Hispanic and Anglo parents to interact as they wait for the dance lessons to end or when they need to coordinate transportation to and from the community places where students perform.

### **Parent and Teacher Traditional Mexican Dance Group**

Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers come together to learn and perform traditional Mexican dances for the school assembly and other community presentations. The group learns the dances' steps, their meaning, and the geographical region where each dance originated. The dances in fact originate from different regions in Mexico—Veracruz, Tamaulipas, Oaxaca, and Jalisco.

By all estimations this is an extremely important group in achieving intercultural communication and interaction. And it involves a significant number of adults. For instance, in 2013 eleven parents and fourteen teachers formed the group. Some of the parents had had their students in Rosa's kindergarten class at some point, and over the years these parents invited other parents who were interested in the dance group and enjoyed showcasing their culture. On occasion, parents and teachers have had to meet and rehearse in small groups. It is important to note that these smaller groups require that Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers negotiate, frequently in their second language, and teach each other the dance steps and moves.

## **Mexican Dance Group as Catalyst for Cultural Understanding**

All three of the dance groups Rosa forms are important and contribute to cultural understanding. However, among all of her efforts, the parent-teacher Mexican

dance group especially has resulted in lasting and meaningful effects for equity and collegiality in the community. Rosa's deliberate efforts to use this group to create a welcoming and respectful school community for Mexican parents have paid off. Several factors contribute to this project's success. First, the dance group promotes interracial and intercultural interactions among parents and teachers. Second, the months of practice spent together preparing for the Cinco de Mayo dance assembly allow parents and teachers to break barriers, overcome boundaries, and simply get to know each other. Third, Rosa's efforts have led to a more welcoming and respectful school environment where Mexican parents participate with increasing frequency.

More importantly, the parent-teacher dance group, as a culturally relevant practice, impacted all involved for complex psychological and sociological reasons (Gay, 2000; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Gorski & Pothini, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2013; Valdés, 1996; Wink, 2005). Anglo teachers, Hispanic parents, and Mexican students all benefited in unique ways simply as a result of a culturally competent teacher's wise use of dance.

### **Anglo Teachers**

For Anglo teachers, the exposure to Mexican traditions and experiences through the dance group is enormously beneficial. Anglo teachers discover and learn Mexican traditions and cultural elements about their students' heritage. This exposure and experience holds great potential to support culturally relevant practices. Teachers learn not only dance steps, but also more about individual students through interactions with their parents. The insights they gain into their students' lives and culture enhance their understanding of Hispanic culture and work to support student learning. Also, teachers have an opportunity to communicate in unstructured and informal interactions in Spanish with parents who are native speakers of Spanish. Unlike structured and formal parent-teacher conferences, the social and linguistic exchanges the group dance provides allow teachers to learn and practice communication styles that are perceived by Hispanic parents as warm. Rosa prepares teachers for these exchanges. She instructs them, "We have to try to listen to parents because we have to give them space. This is a different setting, so we have to make it more warm-hearted."

For Anglo teachers who work with culturally and linguistically diverse students, it is not enough to read about other ethnic groups and internalize cultural and linguistic concepts and attempt to apply them to instruction. Gay (2002) has

identified critical aspects of linguistic structures and communication styles among various ethnic communities. According to Gay, culturally responsive teachers must understand these structures and styles and respond appropriately during their instruction. These include complex components such as cultural nuances, discourse characteristics, vocabulary usage, intonation, gestures, and role relationships between speakers and listeners. Gay writes, “Cultural markers and nuances embedded in the communicative behaviors of highly ethnically affiliated Latino, Native, Asian, and African Americans are difficult to recognize, understand, accept, and respond to without corresponding cultural knowledge of these groups” (p. 111). Exposure to and interaction with Hispanics, where cultural elements and communication patterns are experienced firsthand, far surpass textbook knowledge. Rosa’s dance group creates a space for Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers to experience these patterns of communication, to negotiate meaning, and to clarify concepts. Simply put, it allows both groups to experience cross-cultural communication that is respectful, affirming, and informative.

Rosa also notes that Anglo teachers experience an increased understanding of Hispanic culture and develop more flexibility in the ways they interact with parents. She refers to this as a practice of “opening their doors little by little.” For instance, when parents now come to school without a previously arranged appointment and offer their time to volunteer at school, teachers in the dance group are more open and ready to work with them on the spot. Their response is now, “Come to my class, I have work to do.”

The dance group helps parents and teachers to know each other and it creates trust. Moreover, teachers feel more comfortable navigating Hispanic culture and have more tools to interact with parents in different settings. Participation in the dance group also provides an opportunity for teachers to reevaluate their assumptions about parental involvement in school and results in greater recognition of the assets Hispanic parents bring to school (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001). They see parents committed to their children success. They say, “I am going to work with parents, and it is different. It is no longer sit down here, I am the teacher. Is understanding that we need to work together.”

## Hispanic Parents

For Hispanic parents, participation in the dance group opens doors to the school culture and community. Rosa recognizes that Mexican families were marginalized

from school, in part due to language barriers, but also because of a lack of understanding and familiarity with the school culture (Valdés, 1996). The dance group invites parents to be involved in an experience where they can be successful, and one that is culturally appropriate for them. The space created for parents and teachers to come together during rehearsals changes the interaction among these groups. Rosa uses the dance group as an equalizer in the relationships between Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers, thus reducing power differentials. Moreover, she does this intentionally:

The dance [group] started to bring parents and teachers at the same level. Last year we had eleven mothers dancing with fourteen teachers. It is something powerful because the children see it, your mom is dancing with the teachers, and parents can do things together. No one is higher than anybody, we all have to learn. I have as much to learn from them as they can learn from us.

Equalizing the relationship between the parents and teachers is likely the most powerful way the dance group reduces cultural barriers. Rosa is aware of the status of English as the language of power (Macedo et al., 2003) and aware that many Hispanic families view school teachers as authority figures (Valdés, 1996). By bringing parents and teachers together, she provides an opportunity for both groups to get to know each other and to develop relationships where both parties are equals (Everett & Onu, 2013; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Teachers and parents must learn to dance together, and neither is seen as an expert: “You have to reach an equal level where both groups feel comfortable.” This simple yet profound social device helps parents become more comfortable at school. According to Rosa, parents gain trust, realize they can participate in school, are more willing to use English, and improve their self-esteem.

Furthermore, after taking part in the dance group, Hispanic parents feel more at ease coming to school and approaching teachers on their own. In past years, Hispanic parents would come to see Rosa (a kindergarten teacher) and ask her about the requirements of upper-grade classrooms because they did not feel comfortable talking to the Anglo teachers. In contrast, after participating in the dance group and establishing relationships with teachers, parents now say, “OK, I have been with the teacher, I know how she is and if I need anything, I can go talk to her.”

In addition, Hispanic parents who have participated in the dance group come to school more often and generally display greater involvement in other school



**FIGURE 3.** Parents and Teachers Dance Group

activities with Anglo parents. The various dance groups enable Hispanics and Anglos to collaborate in different ways to carry through performances, which ultimately results in positive interactions in school between the two groups. Even their perception of Anglo parents tends to change. According to Rosa, Hispanic parents make comments like, “I thought that mom was a snob, but she is really nice.”

### **Mexican Students**

Rosa’s main intended beneficiaries for the dance groups are students. In tandem, parents and teachers embrace Mexican traditions, and thereby help to reinforce cultural identity among Hispanic students. Seeing their Mexican culture and traditions celebrated at school provides students with an additional sense of appreciation for their culture beyond what parents alone communicate at home. In fact, Rosa relates that students often show a renewed interest in their own traditions and heritage once they see their teachers embrace them. She emphasizes how the

dance group and presentations convey to students the importance of their culture: “It is so important that parents and teachers are learning [the dances].”

Hispanic students also feel great pride in seeing their parents dancing with their teachers. “Children feel proud to see the mothers and teachers dancing together. They say ‘Oh, my mom danced with teacher Johnson!’”

For Hispanic students who live in an Anglo-dominated society, observing their culture valued and celebrated, in combination with watching their parents interact at the same level with teachers, boosts their cultural identity and self-esteem in powerful ways. Indeed, research demonstrates that providing Hispanic students with instruction that values their language and culture helps reduce feelings of alienation and serves to increase school persistence (Lindholm-Leary, 2004; McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001; Wink, 2005). This is certainly not an insignificant issue given the lower than average high school graduation rates among Hispanic students in both the state of Oregon and the nation (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015; Oregon Department of Education, 2012).

## Seeds for Change

Parent and teacher relationships are often limited to the ones created by school. Traditionally, parents are invited to participate in school events, attend conferences, and volunteer at school. School events are often organized by school staff, and parents tend to be educated or informed on how to best support their children at home. According to Wink (2005), school-family relationships and activities are normally framed within a transmission model. In this model, teachers and schools own the knowledge; parents attend meetings and learn from teachers. Wink posited that a transformational approach to parent involvement would view families, students, and teachers all as owners of knowledge. Everyone would learn together. Clearly the relationships developed between parents, students, and teachers involved in the dance groups fall under what Wink would consider transformational interactions.

To some, the Cinco de Mayo Dance Assembly may be seen as a stereotypical way to celebrate Hispanic culture one day of the year. However, the dance groups have more profound effects: Most notable in this regard is the parent-teacher traditional Mexican dance group. It has proven to be a powerful tool to reduce cultural obstacles for Hispanic parents and create greater cultural understanding among Anglo

teachers. The dance group produces a natural and collegial environment where parents and teachers can come together and get to know each other personally. With the possible exception of sports, it is not often that schools provide opportunities for diverse racial or ethnic groups, people with different socioeconomic statuses, and those of differing educational levels to come together, spend time doing a common activity, and be treated as genuine social equals. Rosa has found a powerful way to provide such an uncommon opportunity. One may think that Hispanic parents and Anglo teachers connected by a bilingual school frequently interact with each other. Unfortunately, these interactions are limited in nature and time. They are usually confined to a few events with set agendas that focus on academic and behavioral reports on how children are doing in school. Some of the interactions parents and teachers have are limited to the drop-off or pickup times that may only allow for pleasant greetings or quick check-ins. Even the interactions during teacher-parent conferences are tightly structured and focus on academics. Teachers meeting parents during conferences have little time to expand their conversations outside of what must be covered about student progress. Parents and teachers may share rudimentary information about the children, but one wonders when they have time to talk about themselves and get to know each other as individual people. How does each group become more culturally knowledgeable and competent about the other group unless they spend time together?

Rosa has pondered all these questions. Her initiative has affected the hearts and attitudes of those involved in the dance groups. She has planted critically important seeds for intergroup contact where the “acquaintance potential” (Pettigrew, 1998) can bring about change on how Hispanic and Anglo people relate to each other inside and outside of school. Although some of the interracial interactions may be temporary and merely limited to the time the dance groups are in session, some other interactions have long-lasting effects. During my time with Rosa, she was greatly moved when sharing how Hispanic and Anglo parents interact outside of school after participating in the dance group. She remembered an Anglo mother who came to her once and asked her how to say in Spanish, in preparation for a birthday party for her daughter, “You may stay if you would like. You are welcome to come in.” The mother wanted to invite the Hispanic parents to stay at her home when they came to drop off their children. Neither set of parents spoke the other’s language. They had to rely on their children as translators. Yet, as a direct result of the dance group, after two years of having contact with the Hispanic parents, the Anglo mother opened her home to them, overcoming language and racial barriers.



**FIGURE 4.** Parents and Teachers Dance Group II

Rosa's efforts to bring Hispanic and Anglo groups together will continue to produce cumulative, effective changes in the community. As we spoke together, she assessed the effects of the dance groups. Referring to interracial contact among parents she related,

[American parents] have tried to coexist with them [Hispanic parents], and language would not be a barrier. . . . They have found ways to communicate . . . This tells you that something good is happening and that is creating a relationship regardless of language or place of origin. And they are valuing something and working for the children. After all, this is the community where they live and the people that live here. And this is where their children will be involved until they become adults. This is their community.

The dance groups are not controlled experiments designed to bring interracial groups together to reduce prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). They are real-world

efforts and exemplify the impact educators can have in their local communities. Rosa's work is an inspiring story about the benefits that result when a teacher is committed to enhancing cultural understanding and respect. Rosa successfully brings Hispanic and Anglo groups closer together. She does so not in theory, not in concept, but in reality. Her wise use of dance as a teaching tool and culturally responsive practice has made the school community more welcoming to all parents.

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