

Passports to better understanding

Marymount's travel documents help promote awareness

Last Spring I was chatting with the Head of Elementary about how I felt we needed to do more in international education to promote not only bilingualism but also biculturalism. I lamented that our International Food Day Event was not enough and that we had to find ways of promoting languages and cultures every day.

A few days later, my principal came back to me and said, "Why don't we spend the first two weeks of term next year exploring the diversity within our school and you can coordinate it?"

Great! I thought, then panic set in. Yikes! The first two weeks of term are an awful time for everyone, and in my role as ESL teacher I am very busy getting all our new arrivals settled and adjusted. As I thought about it, however, I became convinced that this was an ideal opportunity to make the whole school aware of the cultural diversity within Marymount. It was an ideal time to focus on the ESL children's mother-tongue, to send out an important message to both parents and children alike that *we value your language and your culture*.

So, at a planning day last June I worked with a group of colleagues to try to create a ten-day project for Grades 1-5. We came up with four key questions that we wanted the children to be able to answer:

What does the word international mean?

What makes us an international school?

What sort of things make us different from each other?

In what ways are we united?

We decided that each grade level should have a specific theme linked to understanding multiculturalism, work on this for nine days and on the morning of day ten the whole school would go walking through the Marymount World and children would teach children what they had learnt. In the afternoon the ESL children would present an International Fashion Parade. Our themes were:

Grade 5 **Racism (social justice)**. What is it? Does it exist in our world? Does it exist in our school? How can we combat it? Research the different ways of learning in different cultures and consider what is appropriate behaviour in learning situations that involve different cultures.

Grade 4 **Religions in Marymount**. Discover how many different religions we have in our school. Research each of these religions in order to explain them to other grades.

Grade 3 **Where do we come from?** Discover all the different countries that students come from.

Grade 2 **Music and games from all over the Marymount World**. Research music, games, play-ground games and rhymes from other countries.

Grade 1 **Fables from different countries**.

Each grade level planned a multicultural unit of learning for the first two weeks of school. We called this the Marymount Passport Project. The passport was our symbol of unity in the school colours (royal blue and white). When each class visited other classes they had their visa stamped. When children visited Grade 5 they saw skits on social justice issues and learnt a song that one of the Grade 5 teachers had written, *Tell the world everything you know*. Visitors to Grade 4 learnt about the five major religions of the world: booklets, posters, timelines of when these religions started, bar graphs showing the numbers of people practicing these religions and maps showing where in the world these religions are practiced most. In one Grade 4 class different groups of children explained three altars with Hindu, Buddhist and Christian artifacts, a Passover plate with food, a prayer mat, prayer beads and a Koran. How these religions worship was explained.

Grade 3 children used maps and bar graphs to show their visitors where Marymount children come from in the world. The Grade 3 children acted as representatives from the various countries and taught the visitors important geographical facts. In another Grade 3 class the visitors were invited to work with a buddy who explained a patch that he or she had made for a Marymount International Quilt. Each patch was about a different nationality and told how many children we had from that country within our school, what money is used, what continent the country is in, what sort of clothing is worn there and what language is spoken.

The Grade 2 classes were alive with ethnic music, and visitors were entertained by children dancing in traditional costumes. Different classes performed in Italian, African and Asian dance. Different ways you can play hopscotch and many other games from all over the world were demonstrated.

Grade 1 children made stick puppets and painted backgrounds for their stories, teachers and children told fables from Scotland, India, Nigeria, and Native America visitors left with goodies such as a bannock from Scotland.

The school was full of learning, movement, excitement and passport stamping! All through the nine days we were also preparing for the International Fashion Parade. Parents and children were involved in making or finding traditional costumes, working together to describe how and when these costumes are worn and helping to write and then read what they were going to say in their native tongue and then in English.

At 2:00 all the children in the elementary went to the auditorium and sat on the floor on both sides of the catwalk. As a Grade 5 boy from Thailand welcomed everyone and presented the children from 35 different nationalities, children, parents and teachers sat in awe listening and observing the beauty of internationalism. As a banner across the stage said, 'celebrate the difference in every face and every race'.

The Marymount project began on the 10th September, the eve of the tragic happenings in America. Classes resumed on the 13th and I think all of the educators involved felt our multicultural unit of learning was the best thing we could be doing at this uncertain time.

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