Hispanic Heritage Month

Montessori Educator Spotlight: Marina Sáenz

What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

As a child, I had confusing experiences that upheld negative stereotypes and racist tropes. Regardless of how we individually identified, all of us were made to dress in “costumes” and dance to songs that were not culturally relevant to me or my community. As an adult, I have had the opportunity to analyze and heal from these experiences and provide something different for my students and families. I focused less on theatrics and more on individual family traditions that help humanize people of Latinx heritage.

As part of my preparation of the guide, I have studied how racism, colorism, classism, and colonization has had an adverse effect on me and my education. I especially remember the Anti-Black and Anti-Indigenous comments and actions of my teachers. Montessorians can do more to learn about how these attitudes present in our school communities. We can also do more to learn about gender binaries and how misogyny influences Spanish and other Romance languages. Language is not fixed and is in fact, ever-evolving to reflect our changing world. Administrators and leaders in Montessori training centers should also consider how Black and Indigenous Latinx Montessorians will be compensated for their time and expertise on this subject.

How can Montessori schools critically and respectfully celebrate and honor Hispanic Heritage Month?

Books and literature can be a great “window” into other cultures but should be analyzed to ensure they reflect positive representations of Latinx people. Several Latinx booklists exist—buy books written by Latinx authors, particularly Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ Latinx authors. We are not a monolith and this should be obvious in your school library.
If you wish to celebrate Latinx Heritage Month, start by examining your intentions. If a school is lacking in Latinx representation, that school can start by examining why the Latinx community doesn’t feel safe in their school environment. Latinx artists and musicians can also be invited to schools and should have opportunities to not only perform but speak about their art in an academic setting (while compensated) as it adds to our humanity.

Finally, I cannot stress the importance of humanizing a culture that is often demonized and othered by inviting your Latinx families to be the experts of their own lived experiences. In the past, I have had a variety of foods, drinks, and activities prepared and shared by several families throughout the month. Some of those stories are unique perspectives of 2nd generation Latinx parents and 1st generation grandparents offering a more complex lens for children. I also make an effort to include the Latinx child as much as possible. Over the years, I have had several children (ages 6-12) present on their culture and have developed extension activities with them. I have spent my own money to purchase authentic items or specialty foods that are significant to me and my family. Ideally, this is an area where school administrators can also support this work. Practice good relationships through reciprocity and gift-giving when receiving visitors. Our class has shown reciprocity through thank you notes and letters for families and homemade gift baskets for visiting artists and speakers.