

Birthdays: Cross-Cultural Celebrations for the Classroom

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Overview

Birthdays. Is there anything that a child loves more than the celebration of his or her own birthday? Children look forward to Halloween, bubbling about “what they will be”. They talk about Christmas and Santa bringing gifts. But a birthday is a holiday that belongs only to that one child, a day to feel special, a day in which that child is the center of attention. Now, why not channel that enthusiasm into our classroom lessons? Using birthdays as an anchor, we can teach children about other children of the world, about lands far away, about the other side of the world. And in the process, we can teach about the planet, the shape of the earth and exactly what constitutes a year- the journey of our planet around our nearest star. To the anchoring concept of birthdays, we can tie lessons about social studies, science, math, art, music, reading and writing.

Here’s the plan- Rather than the expected, “Happy Birthday” song, a birthday sticker and perhaps a cup cake, the birthday child would choose a number from a birthday box. (Preferably, the number choosing would take place the week before the birthday so the teacher would have a chance to prepare.) That number would correspond to a numbered lesson about how birthdays are celebrated in another land. Props would be provided by the teacher and classmates would help with the preparations, so the class could celebrate the child’s birthday using customs from the chosen country. The teacher would show the students where on the globe or world map that country is. She would mark it with a sticker inscribed with the child’s name. The stickers would remain on the globe for the rest of the year, so the children can return to the globe and show their friends the country they chose. Becoming familiar with the globe and with the teacher’s guidance, the children would learn about the rotation of the earth and the earth’s orbit around the sun.

School libraries generally contain many juvenile non-fiction picture books about other countries. By choosing the country the week before, the teacher would have a chance to check out some of these titles for the class, so they could see pictures and learn more about those lands. If classroom time allows, the children could write and illustrate birthday cards for each other, developing their writing and drawing skills. They could help with the construction of piñatas or special birthday crowns and hats, depending on that country’s customs. They could practice counting and do simple, teacher-led math problems using the age of the birthday child or the date of the birthday.

Because I teach an early education class- three, four and five-year-olds- those are the ages for which this unit will be written. But by increasing the difficulty, it would be easy to

adjust it to use with older children. Also in order not to exclude anyone, it's important to celebrate the half-birthdays of the children whose actual birthdays fall during summer vacation or to at least have a class-wide celebration of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, considered to be everyone's birthday in Viet Nam.

Rationale

In preschool and primary grades, the children usually learn about themselves first, then their families and communities (Mindes, September 2005). As the child advances through school, social studies classes gradually continue to branch out into a study of the state, nation, neighboring nations and finally the world. But one look in many of today's classrooms and one sees a microcosm of the world's cultures. In many Pittsburgh communities for instance, we have people who have immigrated here from other countries to attend universities or to find work. Many refugees from Somalia have settled in Lawrenceville. There are settlements of refugees from Sarajevo and Rwanda in the Baldwin Boro. The Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh has settled a group of Haitian "boat people" in Homestead. There is a growing community of Hispanic people in Brookline. From preschool on up, most of our children have a built-in connection to the world, right there in school. What a wonderful opportunity for learning- social studies in the flesh!

Actually, the subject of social studies was created in the early 1900's to help immigrant children learn about the United States so they would become good citizens (Mindes, September 2005). Can't we now teach our American children about other cultures, to help them become good world citizens? According to Piaget and Vygotsky, children are social beings and they learn through their relationships with other people (Koralek 2006, 11-12). When we expose children to stories about other people in other lands with experiences, emotions and issues that are common to all of us, they will begin to develop a sense of empathy and an appreciation for different cultures and different ways of life (Koralek 2006, 14). Everyone in the world has a birthday. Most children who I've known are happy to tell everyone when their birthdays will be and anticipate them as much or more than any other holiday. A holiday, all their own! What an interesting anchor to which we can tie a study of world cultures!

Objectives

The objectives in this unit may be substantiated by the following Pennsylvania Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten Standards. The first standard I'd like to note is in the Pre-

Kindergarten Social Studies Section.- “SS 7.3: Develop an Understanding of Self Within a Community“. The indicators would be: “A- Identify similarities and differences of personal characteristics, B- Demonstrate an appreciation of one’s own characteristics and those of others and others’ cultures, C- Display an awareness of his/her role as a member of a group, such as the family or the class, D- Show an understanding of how individuals work together to achieve group goals and H- Develop a beginning understanding of maps as representations of actual places.” Another Pennsylvania Pre-kindergarten Standard which will be covered is “Standard P.S. 3.3: Develop Social Interactions, indicator PS 3.3 G- Cooperate in small and large group activities.” (Pennsylvania Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare, 2007.)

There are quite a few Pennsylvania Kindergarten Standards that we can cover also. “Standard 1.7-A, Research” could easily be covered by this unit. It states, “Choose a topic of interest to research / talk about/ share with classmates.” B and C also support this unit. They state respectively, “Demonstrate increasing understanding that technology can be used to gain information” and “Recognize the different parts of informational text that are used to locate information (table of contents, index, glossary).” Also, Standard “3.3 N“ would be applicable- “Develop Social Interactions, Show nurturing behaviors through helpfulness to others.” While hearing stories and looking through the books about other parts of the world the children would cover “Standard 3.5 A- Identify flat land, hills and mountains.” When looking at books, maps or a globe to learn about various places, “Standard # 7.1 A” would be covered, “Identify the following geographic tools: maps, globe, map elements, diagrams, and photographs, map key.” (Pennsylvania Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare, 2007.)

Strategies

The way to accomplish the lessons in the unit are simple. At the beginning of the year, put up a permanent display showing the birthday of each child in your class. You can buy a pre-printed birthday bulletin board, but you really don’t need to spend any money to do this. In my class, for example, I cut 12 balloons out of construction paper, wrote the name of a month on each one and then laminated them. Then I used a Dry Erase marker to write each child’s name and birthday on the applicable month, in order. Dry Erase markers are best, because as you gain or lose students, you can adjust the names. I tied ribbons to them and hung them up in the classroom in a visible spot where they can stay up all year. That way, it’s easy to keep track of the birthdays. Besides, the children remind me constantly!

Now, I really think that it’s best to celebrate the half-birthdays of the children whose birthdays fall during the summer vacation, because then everyone will have a special day. But if for some reason that’s not possible, or if you’ve already missed some birthdays- perhaps a child started school late- or you just got too busy and missed some- there’s always Tet. Tet is the Vietnamese New Year celebration. In Vietnam, everyone turns one year older on Tet. I’ll go into more detail about that holiday in the classroom activity section and will list it first, with more detail than the others since you can use it for a special class-wide celebration, but I just wanted to mention it separately as one of the options.

About a week before each child's birthday, have that child pull a number out of a birthday box (just a little box that you've decorated with stickers and filled with numbers one through 20). Don't return that number to the box unless it's an activity you want to repeat later in the year. In the classroom activity section of this unit, you will find that each number will correspond to a country and the way birthdays are celebrated in that particular country. The activities are simple and inexpensive, but will take a little planning. It's best to involve students in the planning to give them a feeling of community, ownership and accomplishment. But don't have the child whose birthday will be celebrated do the planning. It will be more fun for a rotating small group of children to plan each other's celebrations and will hopefully help them to develop friendships among the students.

Have the small group of children do some research for the birthday by helping them to look up books in the school library about the chosen country and showing them how to use the Internet for research also. Young children will need lots of help with this, depending on the age-group. For preschool students, you would need to model how to do the research for them, but involve them as much as you can. Some kindergarteners could do some of this on their own.

When it's the child's birthday, carry out a small classroom celebration using the customs of the chosen country. Put a sticker with that child's name on it on a classroom globe or world map. Discuss the location. Also keep a sticker on your own school's location so that the children, with your guidance can compare distances. Let the sticker stay there for the rest of the year, so the children will remember and will talk about each country for the rest of the school year. Discuss the research that either you or the small birthday-planning group did about that country. Display the books or Internet pictures that either you or the young planners have found, so the class can read further about the chosen country.

Classroom Activities

Following is a numbered list of countries, ways that birthdays are celebrated, classroom suggestions and some resources you could use. The list is alphabetical, except for Tet, so you can decide how to use that holiday- whether as a class-wide, multiple birthday celebration, or for a single child. For that reason, Vietnam is numbered "zero", so you can add it to the number box with the other countries, for one child at a time, or not. It's your call.

0. Vietnam- Tet

Tet or "Tet Nguyen Dan" is the Vietnamese New Year celebration. The Vietnamese calendar is lunar and the Chinese calendar is based on other astronomical observations. Usually, their New Years fall on the same dates, but not always. In America, we are often more familiar

with the Chinese New Year celebrations. Vietnamese celebrations are similar to the Chinese.

Tet Nguyen Dan, translated literally means “Feast of the First Morning”. Rather than celebrating individual birthdays, Tet is considered everyone’s birthday. People add one year to their age every Tet. The actual holiday begins on the first day of the first month of the year, falling during our late January or early February, the beginning of the Vietnamese spring, but the preparations begin weeks ahead of time.

Vietnamese people divide their New Year’s celebration into three time periods. The first period is called Tat Nien (before New Year’s Eve). People clean and decorate their houses for the holiday. Traditionally, families have an artificial New Year’s tree- a bamboo pole five to six meters high, decorated with good luck charms, origami fish, cactus branches and flowers. Some families use a kumquat tree instead. Kumquats symbolize fertility and fruitfulness. They also decorate their houses with paper white narcissus, bonsai trees, lavender and calligraphy paintings.

It’s traditional to buy new clothes for children, try to pay off all debts and cook traditional foods such as banh chung. Banh chung is made from sticky rice, mung beans and pork, wrapped up in leaves about four inches by four inches- a little square packet, tied with a string. Banh chung takes about eight hours to boil. They need to be watched until they’re done cooking, so often, people gather together to watch the pots. People exchange banh chung with each other, so most families end up with a pile of banh chung before Tet is over.

Families try to spend the holiday together, so many travel long distances. Most stores and other businesses close for three days during Tet, so people try to stock up on supplies ahead of time.

Vietnamese people practice ancestor worship. They often keep a family altar to pay respects to their ancestors. During the days leading up New Year’s Eve, they clean the altar thoroughly and place a tray of five fruits there. Finger citron and bananas bunches are hand-shaped and represent protection. Kumquats and oranges are for success and prosperity. Pomelos portend a sweet, lucky year. They also put at least one or two banh chung on the family altar for their ancestors to enjoy.

Most people also pay respects to the three kitchen gods- Ong Tao who report back to the Jade Emperor about a week before the New Year with news of how the family has been doing for the past year and if they’re pleased with the family, prayers for a happy, healthy New Year.

This is too gory a story to tell the children, but so you the teacher will understand who Ong Tao is, I’ll tell you. According to legend, a long time ago, there was an elderly couple who was so poor that they had to travel far away to try to earn a living. In the process, they lost track of each other. After many years, the wife married another man. One day, a poor beggar came to

her door. She recognized him as her first husband! She felt so embarrassed and sorrowful that she had married another man that she jumped into the fire and burned to death. Her first husband still loved her and he did the same. When her second, loving husband saw what had happened, he also jumped into the fire. When the Jade Emperor heard about the love the three people had for one another, he allowed them to live together as the Kitchen Gods- Ong Tao.

It's believed that Ong Tao returns to Heaven riding on the backs of carps who pass through the Gates of Heaven to become dragons. So, families often have a little ceremony for Ong Tao before they leave on their yearly journey. They buy three small carp. At the end of the ceremony, they release them into a pond or river. This symbolizes the carp that Ong Tao will ride, but also is a kind-hearted gesture that they hope will influence Ong Tao to give the Jade Emperor a good report. They also prepare sticky rice with sugar porridge, cone-shaped, sticky rice cookies, and flowers. They burn incense and paper offerings. All these are to give Ong Tao a good send off and some food to eat along the way. Illustrations of Ong Tao usually show a chubby, half-dressed, balding man. Although Ong Tao is worshipped and respected, the one who is shown in most illustrations is the first husband who was so poor that his clothes seemed to be rotting off. He is considered a slightly comical figure.

The Land Genie, "Ong Cong", is also worshipped. He's the manager of each house's land.

The second period is New Year's Eve- Giao Thua. By New Year's Eve, all the preparations should be complete. Traditionally, fireworks were lit, but since 1995, for safety reasons, they have been banned.

The third New Year's period is actually Tet, New Year's Day. The first person who enters a house on Tet will bring the luck for the whole year, so people will usually not visit each other's houses unless first being invited for Tet. It's an honor to be invited to be the first visitor of the year. But often, just to prevent bad luck from an uninvited, unlucky guest, the owner of a house will leave a few minutes before midnight, and return right after the clock strikes twelve, so he or she will be the first visitor.

On the first day of Tet, nuclear families celebrate together. Children give their elders a traditional greeting and then receive "lucky money" from their elders. Lucky money is given in special, red envelopes.

The second day of Tet is celebrated with friends. The third day is celebrated with teachers. People also visit Buddhist temples and cemeteries, have fortunes told, give donations, watch dragon dancers and gamble. Children spend their lucky money on toys.

To celebrate Tet is to "an Tet", literally translated as "eat Tet". Like most holidays, food is an integral part of the celebration. All the foods eaten are vegetarian. It's considered bad luck to eat meat on Tet. Besides banh chung (vegetarian version for the actual first day of Tet), other

special foods eaten during Tet are watermelon seeds, kim chi, pickled onion, pickled leeks, candied fruits, coconut, papaya and mango.

There are many things you can do to celebrate Tet in the classroom. Your class could make a classroom dragon for a dragon dance. Make the head out of a large balloon covered with paper mache'. (A mixture of glue and water with torn strips of newspaper seem to work well.) Show the children pictures of dragon dancers from books or Internet articles and allow them to paint the dragon head with your guidance. Attach a long piece of material to the back of the dragon's neck. It would need to be at least three feet wide and about ten feet long. You don't need to spend a lot of money on the cloth. You could buy a sheet at a thrift shop and cut it into a few long strips. If you don't want to sew the long strips together to reach ten feet long, you could use a hot glue gun (when the students are not around to get burned!). (Staples would not be safe, because the children will be under the cloth, holding it up. A staple could scratch a child or hurt someone's eye.) Allow the children to use markers or paint to decorate the cloth. After it's finished, have one child hold up the head and others line up behind the head, holding up the cloth, making it go up and down to music. Of course there won't be room under the dragon for everyone at once. So, use your judgment and let them take turns doing the dragon dance and being the audience.

If you have an Asian store in your vicinity, you could pick up some inexpensive treats for your class. Crystallized winter melon is a tasty treat used in Tet celebrations. If you can't find that, you could substitute any dried fruit. In Vietnam, dried watermelon seeds are a traditional Tet food. If you can't find them, you could substitute pumpkin seeds, but the dried watermelon seeds are not normally salted, so health-wise, it's better to use them if possible. You could buy some "lucky candy"- special hard candy, wrapped in red papers for the celebration of Tet. If you can't find it, you could use any hard candy wrapped in red. Red Lifesavers are safer, in case you're concerned about choking hazards,

Asian stores often sell the red envelopes for "lucky money". If you can't find them though, you could use plain red envelopes with play money from the dollar store. One thing that would be very difficult to substitute though, is the banh chung. If you can find that in an Asian store, you may only want to buy a few for a taste. Unless you have many Asian children in your class, it may be so unfamiliar to them that much of it may go to waste, so only buy a very few.

Although Tet falls during the North American winter, it marks the beginning of spring in Vietnam. People decorate their houses with flowers. You could brighten up your classroom by having your students make some tissue paper flowers. If you take about five sheets of tissue paper, 8" x 12", whatever colors you choose, fold them in half lengthwise, then back and forth, accordion-style, twist a pipe cleaner around the center, then open the folds and you'll have a bright flower.

Another way to make beautiful flowers is to use coffee filters and food coloring. With young

children, it's important to supervise this closely. Use smocks and rubber gloves. (Make sure no one has a latex allergy!) Take a stack of about five coffee filters. Fold them back and forth accordion-style and wrap a pipe cleaner around the center. Dampen the filters by giving them a quick dunk in a bowl of water. This will help the food coloring to spread. Allow the children to put a few drops of food coloring onto the dampened filters. When they dry, open as you did the tissue paper flowers.

You could also decorate your classroom with a Tet tree. In Vietnam, a long bamboo pole is used. If you can't find a bamboo pole, you could use a long stick. It should be almost as tall as the ceiling. While it's lying flat, have the children make all kinds of paper cutouts for it, carp, flowers, whatever they'd like to cut out of construction or tissue paper, or little pictures they've drawn and cut out. Tie or tape the decorations to the top area of the pole and prop it up in the classroom. Anchor it safely so it won't fall.

Please see Appendix A for a handout that you could give your class to take home and share with their families about Tet and Appendix B for an annotated list of helpful books.

1. Australia

Native Australian people are called Aborigines. Now, many of the Aborigine people have moved into cities and live in a modern way, but many still live out in the "Outback", the wilderness areas. It's traditional that when an Aborigine child is born, he or she is given a special animal name, called their "dreaming". They believe that when they dance a certain way, stamping their feet, that they are connected to all the rest of the earth and the ancient times when everything was created (Reynolds 21).

Australians speak English, so they say, "Happy birthday", just like American children. Since the climate of most of Australia is very mild, most birthday parties are celebrated outside with a barbecue. A special treat for children is "fairy bread". To make fairy bread, just butter a piece of bread, shake on some multi-colored sprinkles and cut it into triangles (Erlbach 8 - 9).

For a classroom celebration, you could have the children help make fairy bread for the whole class, during which you could discuss how to turn a square piece of bread into four triangles-geometry!

You could also have each child choose a favorite animal, make paper animal masks, and dance to didgeridoo music that you helped the children find on the Internet or at the school library.

2. Brazil (best if this one is chosen by a girl.)

In Brazil, a child receives a pull on the earlobes for each year and her friends break a raw egg

on her head as a symbol of birth! They also celebrate with birthday cake, but the birthday child gives the first piece to her best friend (probably the one with the egg!).

A Brazilian girl's 15th birthday is special. On that day, she dances the waltz with her father, grandfather and uncles. She dances with 15 different partners, one for each year (<http://www.kidsparties.com>).

Beautiful candies, shaped like fruit and vegetables are served on Brazilian birthdays. Also, houses are decorated with pretty tissue paper flowers (Erlbach, 1997).

To celebrate in the classroom, you'll need to be careful with the ear-pulling tradition. I would suggest that only you the teacher do this and to do it very carefully, with the child's permission!

Many children bring in birthday cakes or cupcakes. If this child does, you could have her choose a best friend to give the first piece to and then to assist with passing out the rest. If this child does not bring in a cake, you could buy some pretty candy to pass out to the class, if you'd like.

Another way to put the Brazilian traditions into practice would be to play a waltz for the class so they would know what a waltz sounds like. You could help the children find one on the Internet, or in the school library. If you'd like, and if the birthday child isn't embarrassed, you could dance the waltz with her and then have the whole class dance to the music. Don't expect everyone to know how, just let them try and enjoy moving to the music.

The children could decorate the room with tissue paper flowers. If you take about five sheets of tissue paper, 8" x 12", whatever colors you choose, fold them in half lengthwise, then back and forth, accordion-style, twist a pipe cleaner around the center, then open the folds, you'll have a bright flower.

About the birthday egg- you probably should *never* break a raw egg on a child's head! Think of the law suits, the newspaper headlines, yikes! But you could fill a plastic Easter egg with coins or candy and open it gently over the child's head, just for fun. I'll bet no one would sue you for that!

3. Canada

Canadian children have their noses greased so they will be too slippery for bad luck cannot catch them! They also receive a punch for each year and another for good luck (<http://www.kidsparties.com>). You'll need to be very careful with both of these traditions. Some children would laugh and enjoy the silliness of having his or her nose greased. Others would be embarrassed. If you have a birthday child who wouldn't mind, you could use a little dab of hand lotion to rub on his or her nose. You could also give very *gentle* pretend punches, but it's wise not to let the class give punches. Some children are just not gentle!

English speaking Canadians would say, “Happy birthday,” but French Canadians say, “Bonne fete” (pronounced “Bone fet.”). You can teach the class this French phrase.

Another Canadian custom is to hide a coin, wrapped in wax paper in a piece of cake. Whoever gets this coin is the first to have a turn at party games. That sounds a little dangerous for a class. What if a child would break a tooth or choke? Here’s an alternative: If the birthday child brought in cupcakes, you could hide a sticker under one of them. Don’t let the class know ahead of time, because they’d look for it before everyone has one. That person could be chosen to be the birthday child’s special helper, or first to line up later.

One other Canadian custom is to have “crackers”, not saltines. Crackers are similar to party poppers, but besides the pop, also have a prize or fortune inside. To make them, the party planners in your class can use toilet paper tubes. It would be nice to have one for everyone, so this will take some planning ahead! Put a fortune (Since the children are so young, you could type up some simple, good luck fortunes ahead of time for them to use.), and/or a piece of candy, a sticker, or little, inexpensive toy inside each one. Then wrap them up in tissue paper, tape them and tie each end. If you have lots of stickers, the children could use them to decorate the crackers. To open them, the children pull on each end and surprise! The prizes will fall out (Erlbach 12 - 13).

4. China

In China, the most important birthday is a baby’s first birthday. But in China, a baby is considered one year old when she is born, so this is really when Chinese people would be calling the baby two years old and Westerners would say she was only one. Anyway, on that birthday, all kinds of things are placed within a baby’s reach, such as writing materials, tools, books, toy animals, toy vehicles, etc. It is believed that whatever the baby reaches for first, gives a clue as to what that child will do when all grown up. For instance, someone who reaches for the hammer may become a carpenter.

Another first birthday custom is for the family to share a meal of extra long noodles. The extra long noodles represent an extra long life.

In China, people believe tigers will protect little children and give them good luck, so often, baby clothes are decorated with tigers and babies are given stuffed tigers instead of Teddy bears (Mason 12 - 13). Your class could draw tiger pictures for the birthday child.

The next important birthday celebrated in a Chinese person’s life is the 60th (Erlbach 14 - 15). In the classroom, you could count to 60 with your students, maybe measure out 60 inches or 60 centimeters and do some math problems using the number 60 and the number one.

Another related activity would be to play a game where the birthday child is blind-folded and reaches for pictures of different items pertaining to a future job. (If you'd use actual, three-dimensional objects, the child would be able to feel them before picking them up. If pictures are used instead, it would be harder to cheat.) After the birthday child, everyone else could take a turn.

Spaghetti noodles are extra long and were invented in China. You could also use them for an activity. Besides serving the class spaghetti and sauce or spaghetti as a pasta salad, the children could use dry spaghetti noodles for a pick-up sticks game. Spaghetti would also be an interesting collage material, dry or cooked. If the spaghetti is cooked, children can form various shapes or letters with it and glue it to paper. It will harden as it dries.

5. Denmark

When it's someone's birthday in Denmark, the whole neighborhood knows! A flag is hung outside that child's window for all to see. Children don't have to wait for their presents, either. As soon as a child wakes up, birthday presents are right there around the bed (<http://www.kidsparties.com>). What a nice way to wake up!

To use a custom from Denmark, your class could decorate a birthday flag and fly it out in the hallway, proclaiming the birthday child's birthday. You could also have the class look up Denmark's and other flags in books or on the Internet, draw them and hang them around the classroom.

6. Egypt

Birthday parties in Egypt are big affairs. So many people are invited that they often serve *two* birthday cakes, one with the candles and one without. Cookies, small cakes, sesame sticks, and little French bread sandwiches are usually served at the same time as the birthday cake.

Egyptians speak Arabic. To wish an Egyptian "Happy birthday!" a friend would say, "Every year I wish you good things." But saying that to a girl or a boy is different. To say it to a girl, it would sound like, "Koo-LEH SAH-na win-TEE tah-YIB-buh." But to a boy, it would be just a little different: "koo-LEH SAH-na win-TEH tah-YIB" (Erlbach 18 - 19).

Egyptians decorate their houses with "zeena" for birthdays. They look a lot like paper snowflake garlands. This is something that could be made in the classroom- good scissors practice! To make them, fold square pieces of colored paper in half and then in half again, so that each piece has four equal squares. While it's folded, cut small pieces from the corners and sides just like you would if you were cutting out a snowflake. Open the paper. It should have little lacy holes. You'll need about 24 for each garland. Tape them together and hang them around in the classroom.

7. Finland

In Finland, birthdays are celebrated much like they are in America with a party, birthday cake, even the same “Happy Birthday” song, but sung in Finnish, of course. To say “Happy Birthday” in Finnish, say, “Onneksi Olkoon!” which means “To your happiness!”

Finnish birthday cakes are a little fancier than American cakes. Usually, they have three layers. In between each layer is a mixture of whipped cream, strawberries and bananas. Besides the candles, on top of the cake is a mixture of whipped cream, strawberries, kiwis, and candies-sounds delicious!

A game that many Finnish children play on their birthdays is called “Onginta”. To play this game, an adult holds up a sheet, behind which are hidden prizes. Each child takes a turn with a fishing rod, fishing behind the cloth. Another adult behind the sheet attaches a little basket with a prize in it for each child to reel in. (Lankford 10 - 11). You could easily adapt this game to your classroom using a puppet stage if you have one, or just having the child “fish” across a table that has a cloth over it and another child sitting on the floor on the other side putting the prizes into the basket. (Just don’t use a real fish hook!)

8. Germany

It’s believed that children’s birthday parties originated in Germany. “Kinderfeste” or “child’s feasts” began 800 years ago to celebrate children’s birthdays. Until around 1900, there was the “Birthday Man”, a bearded elf who brought presents to good children on their birthdays. (Hmm...sounds familiar.) In those days, a child was treated to a marionette show for her birthday.

Instead of putting candles in a cake, they used to put them in a wreath on the table. They’d light them in the morning and replace them as they burned all day. To this day in Germany, when a child is born, she is given a “life candle”, a candle with twelve notches on it. It is to be burned a bit on every birthday until a child turns twelve.

This is where blowing out the candles with one breath began. If a child blows her birthday candle out in one breath, her wish will come true.

For her birthday, a child in Germany will have no chores and no homework. In the classroom, you could have the children decorate candles or put on a puppet show. Make sure the whole class has no homework!

9. Ghana

Even though the official language in Ghana is English, many tribal languages are spoken. One of those languages is “Ewe,” pronounced “Eh-vay” To wish someone a happy birthday in Ewe, one would say the following, written phonetically, “Mehd-ZEE gih-BAY nuh-KAY-KAY new-EH nah woe!” You could try saying that with your class.

For members of the Twi (Twee) tribe, it’s customary to name children in Ghana after the day they were born. The names are different if it’s a girl or a boy. For a girl born on Monday, her name would be (written the way it is pronounced), “Ad-JOE-ah”; Tuesday would be “Ah-bean-UH”; Wednesday is “Ah-KOO-uh”; Thursday is “Yah”; Friday is “Ah-FEE-ah”; Saturday is “Ah-MUH” and Sunday is “Ah-koh-SOO-ah”. Boys’ names are as follows- Monday is “Koe-JOE”; Tuesday is “Koe-bean-UH”; Wednesday is “Kweh-KOO”; Thursday is “Yah-OH”; Friday is “Koe-FEE”; “Kwah-MEE” is Saturday; and Sunday is; “Kweh-SEE”. This would be a difficult lesson for younger children, but if your class consists of kindergarteners near the end of the school year who are doing pretty well about writing and sounding out words, you could give each one a large name tag sticker and have them write their own day of the week names and wear them for the rest of the day. Everyone would have to try to sound out the names and call each other by their Ghanan names for the rest of the day. Most children probably don’t know on which day they were born. You could have them ask their parents ahead of time, or they could just pick one that they like.

Instead of birthday cakes, Ghanan children have a treat called “oto”. Oto is a little patty made from eggs and mashed sweet potatoes, fried in palm oil. For their birthday party, they would traditionally eat stew, rice and “kelewele” (kelly welly). Kelewele is fried chunks of plantain, similar to bananas.

Following is a game that many Ghanan children play at their birthday parties. It’s called “Ampe” (AM-pay). Six to twelve children stand in a circle with the birthday child in the center. The birthday child is the leader and picks the first player. The leader stands right in front of the first player. They clap hands and jump up and down. They choose a foot to kick forward. If they choose different feet, the leader gets a point. If they choose the same foot, the leader does not get a point. The leader goes around the circle, repeating the process with everyone. Everyone gets a turn to be leader. At the end, whoever has the most points wins.

10. Israel

“Yom holedet sameach!” (pronounced, “ Yome hoe-LEH-det sum-MAY-ahk.”) or “May the day of your birth be happy!” is the birthday greeting one would hear in Israel. On one’s birthday, a person is treated like royalty, given a crown made of leaves or flowers and a chair decorated like a throne, with festive streamers. A child’s parents will lift the “throne” with the child on it and the party guests will dance around the child and sing. After singing, everyone will share the cake, shaped to show the child’s interests- like a special animal or sports equipment, for example.

In Israel, certain birthdays are extra special. In Jewish Orthodox families, when a boy turns three years old, he's treated to his first haircut. During a special ceremony called "Upsherin", his hair is cut, except not around his ears. This is to honor a Scripture from the Torah saying that hair should be left long on both sides of the head (Mason 18 - 19).

In times past, when a boy turned five or six and was ready to begin Hebrew school, he would have a special ceremony, signifying the importance of learning. The teacher smeared honey over the letters of a writing tablet and instructed the child to lick it off. The boy would be given special cakes and hard-boiled eggs with Bible verses inscribed in them to eat. All of this signified the sweetness and life-giving properties of learning (Marcus 1). This could be modified in a modern-day classroom for a birthday celebration using pancakes with syrup or cookies with initials and honey.

The twelfth or thirteenth birthday is a very important milestone in the life of a Jewish boy or girl and a bar or bat mitzvah ceremony is celebrated around that time, as a coming of age celebration.

Lots of fun games are played at Israeli birthday parties. One of them is the potato on the spoon game. Two people carry a potato on a spoon, holding the spoon carefully in the mouth. The person who can carry it the farthest wins and plays against the next person (Erlbach 28 - 29).

11. Japan

The Shichi-go-san Festival in Japan is held every November 15th for children who have reached the age of three, five and seven years old. These birthdays are believed to be extra lucky. "Shichi-go-san" means "seven five three" in Japanese. During this festival, children turning three, five and seven dress up in new clothes and visit Shinto shrines. They are given gifts and have a special meal. The family eats special candy called "chitose-ame" which means "long-life sweets". The candy comes in bags decorated with cranes and turtles. Cranes and turtles are symbols of long life (Mason 10 - 11).

Now, in preschool and kindergarten, it would be very difficult for the children to make origami cranes, but they could make long-life turtles. One way to make a turtle that would be fun to play with is to use a paper bag. Cut a finger-sized hole in the end that has no opening. Have the child decorate the bag to look like a turtle's back and glue four legs on it, one at each corner. Then, have the child decorate and cut out a head for the turtle. Make sure it's double-sided, with a top and a bottom glued around the edges. It will need to fit around the child's pointer finger. You could use construction paper for the head and legs, but brown or green felt would be better. When complete, the child should be able to put the turtle head onto her pointer finger, put the bag over her hand, and poke the head in and out, like a real turtle.

(Another option would be to use fingers cut from a glove for the turtle heads.)

12. Mexico

Mexican children are lucky! They have *two* birthday parties each year, one for their own birthdays and one for their name's day celebration. Many people in Mexico are Roman Catholic and a name's day is the birthday of the saint for which someone was named. For a name's day celebration, a child goes to mass with his family. The priest will give him a special blessing. Then he'll go home and have a party. The name's day party is quieter than the child's actual birthday party (Erlbach 30 - 31).

For the child's birthday, lots of friends are invited and a piñata is broken. For your class, you can make a piñata using a balloon and paper mache. Use strips of newspaper and a paste made of glue water with flour mixed in. Instead of the traditional piñata though, for a class project, you could use brown paper lunch bags. Cut off the top half of the bag, fill it with candy or small toys if you are planning to break them, or just stuff them with newspaper if not. After filling the bags, fold the top over and staple it. This will be the body of the piñata creature. For the head, fold a piece of paper in half, draw the head on it, cut it out and attach it to the body with a glue stick. Let the children come up with their own ideas. They can add arms, legs, tails, wings, whatever they choose.

13. Netherlands

In the Netherlands, the birthday child's chair is decorated for his birthday. Sometimes garlands called "slingers" are hung up on the walls. The child gets to choose his birthday meal and gets to stay up later than usual. Fancy pastries are served as well as a birthday cake with no candles. The birthday cake is called a "verjaardaghtaart"! What a mouthful!

Netherlanders play two fun games that could be played in the classroom. The first is called "koekhappen". To play this, each child is blindfolded and has to try to catch a soft cookie that's tied to a string.

The other game is "drop the handkerchief" or "zakdoekje leggen". It sounds a lot like "Duck, Duck, Goose". Everyone sits on the floor in a circle. One child is "it", walks around the circle and drops a handkerchief right behind another child. That child picks up the handkerchief and runs around the circle, trying to tag "it" before "it" returns to the empty spot. If the child is successful, it is still "its" turn. If not, the second child becomes the new "it" (Lankford 16 - 17).

Classmates could decorate the birthday child's chair and desk and besides the two games, it would be fun to share the long, foreign words with the class.

14. New Zealand

When a child wakes up on her birthday in New Zealand, right away her family gives her a gift. Her birthday will be announced on the radio, if her family sent it in. She'll receive a special birthday mention in school and a birthday badge or hat to wear all day. At her birthday party, later at home, she'll get to choose the menu. Of course she'll have a birthday cake, but fairy bread is also a favorite in New Zealand, just like in Australia. The recipe is easy. Just put sprinkles on buttered bread and cut it into nice shapes.

"Share the chocolate" is a popular game played at birthday parties. To play, you'd divide the guests into two teams. Each team gets a chocolate cake on a table close by. Each team member must take a turn to run up to the cake, put on a hat and gloves, cut and eat a piece of the cake, take off the hat and gloves, and run back to their team. The team that finishes their cake first wins.

Another fun, sharing game is "pass the parcel". To play this game, you'd need to wrap up a present and then continue wrapping it in as many layers of paper as you expect guests. Under each layer, hide a little present. Then, play music. As the music plays, the guests pass the parcel. Whenever the music stops, the guest holding the parcel gets to unwrap a layer and keep the gift that was hidden there. If she's already had a turn, pass it to the next person who hasn't. The last person gets to keep the present in the box (Lankford 18).

15. Norway

In Norway, birthdays are usually celebrated with chocolate cake with chocolate icing and red gelatin with vanilla sauce. Candy and streamers decorate the table. The birthday guests go fishing for popsicles! Most Norwegians have a balcony. The children stand out on the balcony with a long string or fishing rod. An adult stands underneath and using a spring-type clothespin, attaches a popsicle to the end for the child to reel in (Erlbach 36 - 37). It would be dangerous to do this from a high place in the school, but if you have a puppet stage, you could play this game over it, or perhaps over a desk or other piece of furniture. You could use lollipops instead of popsicles.

Another Norwegian custom is that the birthday child may choose a friend to stand alongside in front of the class and share a birthday dance as the class sings "Happy Birthday" (<http://www.kidsparties.com/>).

16. Peru

Peruvian birthday guests receive party favors at birthday parties called "recordatorios" which means "souvenirs". They usually get a goody bag similar to the kind American children get, but they also receive a special birthday pin, made just for the occasion. This is something that the children in your class could make. You can buy blank pins or buttons with a pin on the back of

each from a craft store or Oriental Trading Company and have the children decorate them. They could use markers and glitter to make them fancy. Or you could cut small circles out of cardboard for them to decorate and then tape them onto their shirts.

Another favor that Peruvian children receive are paper crowns. This would be an easy project for your classroom. Using large sheets of paper, you could cut it into strips and have the children cut zig-zags into each strip and decorate them with stickers, sequins, glitter, etc (Erlbach 38 -39).

17. Philippines

Many people in the Philippines speak Tagalog. “Happy birthday!” in Tagalog is “Maligayang kaarawan!” When someone receives a gift, he politely says, “Salamat!” or “Thank you!”

People have settled in the Philippines from many different cultures, so their customs come from a combination of countries- Spain, Japan, Portugal, England, the Netherlands, China and United States. Birthday party food may include pineapple, cherries and jackfruit. Jaz would be served. Jaz is a kind of cola drink with no fizz, like flat Pepsi. Long noodles, called pansit would be served- long noodles for long life. They’d have a piñata made out of clay like in Spain rather than paper mache like in Mexico. (It seems that a hard hat would be in order!)

A safer birthday game to play in the classroom would be “Pusa at Aso” or “Cat and Dog”. One child is chosen to be the dog and sits on the floor near a pile of something. A pile of shoes could be used, or blocks or stuffed animals, whatever you have handy. The dog must protect the pile. Everyone else is a cat. The cats try to steal from the pile. If the dog tags a cat, they must switch places. If everything is stolen from the dog, they need to begin a new game with the same child playing the dog (Lankford 20 - 21).

18. Russia

Teachers in Russia usually give their students presents for their birthday, a special pencil, a book, or even a flower. Classmates often give a birthday child small, homemade presents also.

Instead of cake, many Russians have a birthday pie instead. The birthday child gets the first piece.

Children often play a clothesline game and it could easily be played in the classroom. You’ll need to tie up a clothesline across the room, or outside if the weather permits. Give the children who are planning the celebration some paper bags, enough for each classmate, and little, inexpensive prizes. Have them decorate the bags and put a prize in each one. Then, tie or clothespin the bags to the clothesline. When you’re ready to play, let the birthday child go first. Blindfold her and let her choose a bag. Let her choose the next player and repeat until everyone has had a turn (Erlbach 42 - 43). (A more fair way of choosing the next players would be for

each bag to have a classmate's name on it and whoever's name was on the bag would be the next player. Leave the birthday child's name off, since that's the first player anyway.)

19. Sudan

In Sudan, usually only urban children celebrate birthdays. They celebrate much like American children with pizza and a cake with candles. They drink something different though; it's a red punch made from hibiscus flowers, called karkady (pronounced "car-KUH-day"). Most Sudanese children don't receive presents for their birthdays, but money instead. After the pizza and cake, they play lots of games.

One game they play is called "The Sheep and the Hyena". You could have your class play this game. To play, you need from six to 20 children. The birthday child chooses a sheep and a hyena. They all make a tight circle around the sheep, trying to keep him safe from the hyena. The hyena tries to enter the circle and tag the sheep. When the hyena finally tags the sheep, he becomes the sheep and another hyena is chosen. The game goes on until everyone has had a turn to be the sheep and the hyena (Erlbach 42 - 43).

20. United States, Native American, Winnebago Tribe

It's traditional for the Winnebago people to invite lots of people to a birthday party. The party usually begins in the evening and may last all night! The birthday child gets to choose her own menu. But the birthday cake is usually a large sheet cake. It's considered a great honor to be chosen to cut the cake.

Everyone shares a meal and then the children play games. Here's a Winnebago hand game you could teach your class: Divide the children into teams of five. You'll need to give each team a bone or a stone. (Decorated, if desired.) One team member holds the bone or stone, not letting anyone see which hand it's in and moving it from left hand to right hand. To make it harder, sometimes two people are in charge of holding it. The next player on the other team guesses which hand it's in. The team that had the most correct guesses wins. While they're playing, everyone else sings or plays drums. You could play some tribal music for your class in the background (Erlbach 44).

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Birth and Growing Up Celebrations. Chicago, IL: World Book (Celebrations and Rituals Around the World Series), 2003. Good resource. Includes activities and recipes.

Darling, Kathy, Holiday Hoopla: Multicultural Celebrations. Palo Alto, CA: Monday Morning Books, 1994. Interesting, but more for older children and about more than birthdays. Good for looking up more information about the various cultures, though.

Erlbach, Arlene, Happy Birthday Everywhere! Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, 1997. Describes birthday celebrations in 19 different countries. Very helpful! Excellent Resource!

Gall, Timothy, editor, Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1998. Not so much about birthdays, but good for looking up additional information about various cultures. Good photographs for young children to look at, but writing level is beyond their age group.

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Jones, Lynda, Kids Around the World Celebrate!: The Best Feasts and Festivals From Many Lands. 2000. Very interesting, but too long for very young children. Pertains to various celebrations rather than birthdays, but a good resource when looking for follow-up information and teaching about world cultures. Includes activities and recipes.

Koralek, Derry and Mindes, Gayle, editors, Spotlight on Young Children and Social Studies, Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2006. Lots of good information about social studies, the history of it and developmentally appropriate ways to teach it to young children.

Lankford, Mary D., Birthdays Around the World. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2002. Describes birthday celebrations in seven different countries. Excellent!

Marcus, Ivan G., Rituals of Childhood. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996. Page one discusses the young Jewish boy's initiation ceremony in Medieval times.

Mason, Paul, Birthdays. Chicago, IL: Heinemann Library, 2004. A short picture book

containing lots of interesting information about birthdays in various countries and other celebrations also. Very helpful.

Millen, Nian, Children's Festivals from Many Lands. New York, NY: 1964.

Mostly text, small, black and white sketched illustrations, but includes birthday celebrations from five different countries. Not a good book for young children, but a teacher may want to use it for a reference. Outdated, only use when unable to find anything newer, or for extra details.

Mindes, Gayle, Social Studies in Today's Early Childhood Curricula. Beyond the Journal: Young Children on the Web. September 2005. Interesting article about teaching social studies in relevant, developmentally appropriate ways to young children.

National Celebrations. Chicago, IL: World Book (Celebrations and Rituals Around the World Series), 2003. Describes various holidays from different countries. Not so much about birthdays, but good for learning a bit more about customs and cultures.

Pennsylvania Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare. Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten Standards, February 2007. Lists all the Pennsylvania Standards for teaching pre-k and kindergarten students.

Reynolds, Jan, Celebrate! Connections Among Cultures. New York, NY: Lee & Low Books, Inc., 2006. Only two items refer to birthdays, one about the birth and naming of Aboriginal children, the other about United States customs but the photographs and comparisons of celebratory customs are phenomenal! A wonderful, multicultural book for children to look through.

Wallace, Paula S., The World of Birthdays, Life Around the World. Milwaukee, WI: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 2003. Lists ten different countries and describes birthday customs for each. Very helpful.

Wilcox, Jane, Why Do We Celebrate That?. London, England; New York, NY: Franklin Watts, 1996. Not just about birthdays, but describes a variety of holidays. Interesting for children to look through.

Web Sites

<http://www.allbaby.com/babyinfo/birthdays.htm> Information about birthdays, not only customs, but more for expectant parents.

http://www.gecdsb.on.ca/d&g/ss1/SS/SOCIAL_S/hc2.htm Good information about Vietnam and Tet.

<http://www.kidsparties.com/TraditionsInDifferentCountries.htm> The most helpful web site of all these.

<http://www.tokenz.com/history-of-birthday-cake.html> Good information about birthday customs and the history of birthdays.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birthday> Good information about birthday customs.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rite_of_transition Includes customs about rites of passage.

Appendix A: Tet handout to share with families:

Dear Parents,

Your child's class celebrated Vietnamese New Year, also known as Tet. Here are some tips for a good Tet celebration:

Happy Tet!

Traditional Tet Greetings:

"*chúc mừng năm mới*"- Happy New Year!

Sống lâu trăm tuổi (Live up to 100 years):

Tiền vô như nước (May money flow in like water):

Vạn sự như ý (May a myriad of things go according to your will)

Cung hỉ phát tài, from the Cantonese *Gung hay fat choy* (恭喜发财)

For good luck during Tet:

Give presents, new clothes, peach branches (to expel evil), cocks (for good manners), new rice (to have enough food all year), Saki in a gourd (for a rich, comfortable life), banh chung (for ancestor worship), red things (for luck) and lucky, calligraphied paintings. Also, it's lucky to give watermelon, dogs and medicated oil because the Vietnamese word for them sounds a lot like "giau", which means "luck".

Buy lots of water so that money will flow like water.

Sprinkle lime around the house to expel evil.

Return everything that you've borrowed and pay off all debts before Tet.

Go gambling right after the celebrations.

Things that would bring bad luck during Tet:

Don't do or say anything bad.

Don't hurt or kill any plant or animal.

Don't sweep the house or take out the garbage. Your good luck may go out with it!

Don't give anyone a watch or a clock. Their time may be up!

Don't give anyone a cat. The Vietnamese word for cat is "meo" (not pronounced like the sound the cat makes, but rather like- "ngh'eo"), and the same word also means poverty.

Don't give anyone medicine, or they'll get sick.

Don't give anyone knives or scissors because they'll sever your relationship.

Duck meat will bring unluckiness.

If you eat shrimp, you'll move backwards like a swimming shrimp, and will not succeed.

Don't wear or give white clothes since white is the color of funerals in Vietnam.

Don't give anyone a cuttlefish (It's ink is black like an octopus) or writing ink, because black is also an unlucky color.

Finally, don't let your rice-hulling mill go empty, or you'll have failed crops!

From web site- http://www.gecdsb.on.ca/d&g/ss1/SS/SOCIAL_S/hc2.htm

Appendix B: Books about Asia, Vietnam and Tet:

Erlbach, Arlene, Happy New Year, Everywhere! Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, Inc., 2000. Lists only two pages on Tet, but very informative and includes another activity for children.

Chin, Karen, Sam and the Lucky Money. New York: Lee & Low Books, 1995.

Not about Viet Nam, or Tet, but a lovely story about a Chinese boy celebrating Chinese New Year, enough shared holiday information to make it appropriate.

Sayre, April Pulley, Greetings, Asia! Brookfield, CT: Millbrook Press, Inc., 2003. Not specifically about Vietnam, but about all of Asia. Contains maps and beautiful photographs.

Seah, Audrey and Nair, Charissa M., Cultures of the World- Vietnam. Tarrytown, N.Y., Michael Cavendish, 2004. Much longer than appropriate to read to preschool / kindergarten children, but lots of good information and photographs of Vietnam.

Willis, Terri, Vietnam, Enchantment of the World. United States and Canada: Children's Press, a Division of Scholastic, Inc., 2002. Also too long to read to young children, but interesting to look through. Lots of photographs.

Appendix C: Standards Supported by Unit

Pre-Kindergarten Social Studies Section.- SS 7.3: Develop an Understanding of Self Within a Community.

Standard P.S. 3.3: Develop Social Interactions

Kindergarten Standards:

Standard 1.7-A: Research. Choose a topic of interest to research / talk about/ share with classmates.

Standard 1.7- B: Demonstrate increasing understanding that technology can be used to gain information.

Standard 1.7- C: Recognize the different parts of informational text that are used to locate information (table of contents, index, glossary)

Standard 3.3- N: Develop Social Interactions, Show nurturing behaviors through helpfulness to others.

Standard 3.5- A: Identify flat land, hills and mountains.

Standard 7.1- A: Identify the following geographic tools: maps, globe, map elements, diagrams, and photographs, map key.

(Pennsylvania Department of Education and Department of Public Welfare, 2007.)