A month to honor people from more than 20 Spanish-speaking countries

By Hanna Guerrero, adapted by Newsela staff on 09.14.17
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As students at Alpha Cindy Avitia High School in East San Jose, California, began the new school year, five students walked into a classroom. They gathered to talk about Hispanic Heritage Month, which starts September 15.

“Do you know what Hispanic Heritage Month is?” the students were asked.
A resounding “no” filled the room.

Michelle Ortega said that it sounded like a celebration for the children of parents from Latin America. In other words, she felt it was not for her.

Michelle, a sophomore, identifies as Mexican-American.

Hispanic Heritage Month is a national effort to pay tribute to Hispanic Americans who have contributed to the United States, and it was first celebrated in 1968.

What Is Hispanic Culture?

Hispanics themselves don’t have a strict definition because they share some similarities but differ in many ways. Hispanics come from 20 Spanish-speaking countries. There is no single history of Hispanic immigration to the United States. Each story is unique.

To these students, Hispanic Heritage Month did not seem to celebrate all of their cultures. Celebrating the many different traditions of all the Spanish-speaking countries can be difficult. Day of the Dead is an example. It is celebrated differently in several Latin American countries.

Zuleyma Ponce is from El Salvador where, she says, Day of the Dead is not celebrated like it is in Mexico. It is a more somber affair. The colorful skull-decorated festivities are scaled down to a simple cemetery visit to leave roses.

The students echo a common feeling among most Hispanics in the United States. One study found that 7 of every 10 Hispanics believe Hispanics all have different cultures.

Majority Is Mexican

During Hispanic Heritage Month, much of the focus is on Mexican history and culture. The United States has a history with its southern neighbor that goes back more than two centuries. The latest U.S. Census, a population count, says most of the Hispanic population in the United States is of Mexican origin. About one-tenth of Hispanics are Puerto Rican, and smaller fractions are Salvadoran and Cuban.

The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” can be confusing. Hispanic refers to Spanish-speaking individuals including those from Spain and most of the communities in South America, except for a few. Brazil, the largest exception, is home to 207 million people who speak Portuguese, not Spanish.
Latino refers to people from countries in Latin America including Brazil who live in the United States. It does not include all Spanish-speakers, such as people from Spain.

Both of the terms were coined for the U.S. Census. In 1976, U.S. Congress passed a law that created the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” to make it easier for the census to collect the information of U.S. residents of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Central American, South American and European ancestry.

**How Students Identify Themselves**

Tenth-grader Abraham Espina believes the two terms are an easy way to include people from Latin America or who speak Spanish, but he doesn’t identify as either. He explained, “Referring to me as a Latino can be anyone. I can be called Latino even though I’m Mexican.”

None of the students called themselves Latino or Hispanic. Tenth-grader Cesar Lopez identifies himself as Honduran.

The Spanish language is from the Spanish conquistadors. It is one thing Hispanics have in common, although different regions speak differently. Cesar talks about his experience while making his journey to the U.S. The Honduran had to drop his native accent and adopt Mexican terms to blend in while in Mexico. Now that he is in the U.S., he is often mistaken for being Mexican.

Zuleyma shares that she, too, is often mistaken for being Mexican. Some people assume that all Spanish-speakers are from Mexico.
A Number Of Languages

Indeed, there are many languages in Latin America. Mexico alone has a variety of cultures and languages.

Abraham, who is from Mexico, also pointed out that there are indigenous people like the Maya who speak Zapotec. Indigenous people lived in Central and South America before the arrival of Spanish conquistadors. Is it right to name these communities with words that were created in the U.S.?

“I sincerely think they have been there since the beginning and that is where we trace our roots from,” he said.
If language, culture and traditions are different among Hispanics and Latinos, is there anything that unites them? Michelle believes that Latinos in the United States share values that brought them here, such as “hard work, education and better opportunities.”

Michelle wants to give back to her community by becoming a lawyer. Other students hope to pursue engineering, criminology and professional soccer.
Teased For Having An Accent

Students who speak English with an accent are not always treated well. Zuleyma and Cesar said other students have made fun of them.

Cesar says it’s easy to learn a new language as a child, but when you get older, learning a language can be difficult. He wishes his peers understood that.

“They don’t understand. They don’t put themselves in our shoes and see how difficult it is to learn (the language),” he said.

Michelle feels similarly. She said she’s most comfortable practicing English in a bilingual class, where she can also speak Spanish if needed. She loves the challenge of learning a new language. Since coming to the U.S., she has been able to learn about other cultures, too.

Hispanic Heritage Month begins on September 15 to mark the independence days of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. On September 16 Mexico celebrates its independence. On September 18 Chile celebrates its independence.

On October 12, Columbus Day is celebrated in the United States, but countries such as Argentina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Venezuela celebrate their culture instead of the Italian explorer who began colonization of the region.
Quiz

1. What is the author's MAIN purpose in including the following information in the section “Teased For Having An Accent?”

Michelle feels similarly. She said she’s most comfortable practicing English in a bilingual class, where she can also speak Spanish if needed. She loves the challenge of learning a new language. Since coming to the U.S., she has been able to learn about other cultures, too.

(A) to argue that bilingual education is the best way for Hispanic students to learn English
(B) to prove that Spanish-speaking students can still learn English in high school
(C) to indicate that many Hispanic students are actually interested in other cultures
(D) to show a common struggle among Hispanic students from different countries

2. Think about how the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" relate to a person's cultural identity. How does Abraham Espina's opinion of these terms differ from Zuleyma Ponce's opinion?

(A) Abraham feels that the terms are too general, while Zuleyma feels people make inaccurate assumptions about their meanings.
(B) Abraham doesn't identify with the Spanish language, while Zuleyma believes it's the tie that connects Hispanics.
(C) Abraham feels "Hispanic" and "Latino" are easy terms that include many groups, while Zuleyma thinks they're too general.
(D) Abraham is frustrated with the term's connection to Spanish conquistadors, while Zuleyma identifies only as El Salvadorian.

3. Which paragraph from the section "Majority Is Mexican" is BEST illustrated by the graphic in that section?

4. How does the graphic in the section "A Number Of Languages" explain why some people do NOT identify with the labels "Hispanic" and "Latino."

(A) It shows which languages people spoke before European colonization began.
(B) It shows why some people might identify more with their individual country.
(C) It illustrates the huge diversity of nations and people included in the terms.
(D) It illustrates why some countries choose not to identify as Hispanic.