

Lesson 2: Celebrating Identity

Grades 4 - 6

Birthdays are celebrated differently all over the world; in some countries like Vietnam, individual birthdays are not acknowledged. In countries where birthdays are celebrated yearly, the day not only marks the anniversary of a child's arrival into this world, it's also a time to celebrate that person's unique identity. Birthday symbols and activities can reveal aspects of our identity like our age, likes, and ethnicity. In this activity, students will examine how birthday customs and activities shape identity.

Students will

- Examine birthday symbols and customs from around the world
- Investigate the traditions and celebrations that connect people in a community
- Compare the significant traditions and celebrations of families of various cultures
- Present information about children around the world
- Describe factors that shape and change personal identities

Materials

- Chart paper and markers
- Map or globe
- Copy of *Birthdays in Vietnam*

Time 45 minutes

Activity I – Birthday Traditions from Around the World

Instructions

1. Without naming the title, hum or play this online version of "[Happy Birthday](#)".¹ Ask students what images or words first come to mind when they hear the tune. Record students' responses on the board. Ask: Who here celebrates birthdays? Why do you celebrate birthdays? Who might not know this song or be familiar with the symbols that many of us associate with birthdays?
2. Organize students into pairs and describe to their partner their favourite birthday activity or a family birthday tradition.²
3. Ask students to share what they know about birthday celebrations and customs in other countries. Explain that you are going to read a story about birthday customs in Vietnam. Before reading identify Vietnam on a map.

Discussion

- In what ways are Linh's birthday traditions similar to or different from your own?

¹Source:

http://www.nifter.com/music_tracks_loops/birthday_songs/music_jazz_blues_happy_birthday_NifterDotCom.wav

²You may need to review the meaning of tradition and custom, or give examples.

- What did you learn about Linh from her birthday activities and customs?
- How do cultural traditions and activities influence or change our identity?

Extension Activities

- Ask students to research birthday traditions and customs from another country and compare it to their own. Here are some sites to get you started: <http://www.kidsparties.com/traditions.htm>, <http://www.birthdaycelebrations.net/traditions.htm>
- Research the history and meaning of birthday symbols. Create a class mural of birthday symbols and their meanings. Have students add writings about the relevance of those symbols to their own birthdays. Invite students to add new symbols to represent their own family birthday traditions.
- Create a class book of students' favourite birthday games or recipes. Include photos and students' writings about the story behind the game or recipe. Publish the book for the school library or to sell as a fundraiser.
- Silhouette Collages: Create a [silhouette](#) of students' heads. Have students fill the silhouette with magazine images to represent what their birthday traditions and activities say about them. Here are some sample silhouette collages: <http://art-paper-scissors.blogspot.com/2010/12/silhouette-collage.html>, <http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/elem/selfport.htm#collage>

Birthdays in Vietnam

My name is Linh.³ I was born in Vietnam, a tropical country south of China. I was six when we immigrated to Canada and had never had a birthday party that I could remember. The Vietnamese custom is to celebrate only a child's first month and first year of life as birthdays. After that, we don't celebrate a person's birthday on the day they were born. Everyone turns a year older at the same time – on New Year's Day during the Tết festival!

Why do we celebrate a baby's one month birthday? Many Vietnamese women follow the old Asian tradition of staying home for the entire month after a child is born. It is believed that staying indoors will prevent the mother and baby from being exposed to illness and disease. It's also a time for the mother to recover. Some even believe that if a mother goes out before the month ends, she will suffer health problems later in life. It sounds silly, but it's a strongly held belief by many. After the long month, the family throws a big party! Friends and family come to meet the baby and offer best wishes for a long, healthy and happy life. The best part is that guests bring gifts of money, called lucky money, in small, red envelopes.

The first year of life is considered the hardest year for a child. If a baby survives its first year, there is cause for celebration. The first birthday is called THÔI NÔI, which means "leaving cradle". The baby is now ready to move from the mother's bedroom into its own room. The family cooks a feast. Friends and family come bearing gifts of gold jewellery or lucky money. A fun birthday custom is to place a tray of objects in front of the birthday child. The first object the child picks up is thought to predict the child's future. For instance, picking up a book might indicate the child will do well in school; picking up scissor might mean they child will become a tailor. There are no set rules for what objects can be placed on the tray.

When my family came to Canada I was at first confused and then fascinated with birthday parties! I wanted to celebrate my birthday like the other kids in school – a special day just for me, with presents, games and cake. Blowing out candles on a cake was a whole new experience!



On my last birthday, I blew out more than 30 candles and had supper at my favourite Vietnamese restaurant. My friends gave me books because they know I love to read. I also went kayaking – one of my favourite sports! Although my mother sends me a card every year on my birthday, she still sends me lucky money on the Vietnamese New Year. Some traditions never die.

³ Not her real name, but based on a true story.