

No Culture Left Behind: Reaching the Purepecha Indigenous People

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Many K-12 educators wonder why some of their students from Mexico are having more difficulty than other students in learning to articulate English sounds, read, and write. With many of these students, strategies successful with other English language learners from Mexico just don't work. Educators

from the Reynolds School District (RSD) in Fairview, Oregon researched this issue over a five-year period.

They discovered there were over 100 Purepecha (sometimes referred to as Tarasco) families from Michoacan living in their attendance area. For these students, Spanish is their second language, and English is their third. After pursuing extensive Internet information and contacts, a team of three from RSD traveled to Michoacan to do on-site field research. Time spent in the villages their students came from made it abundantly clear that the learning challenges were as much or more rooted in cultural and literacy issues as in the fact that English was the students' third language. Most importantly, they confirmed that the problem was neither an indigenous student nor a Purepecha learning problem; it was a teaching problem. Teachers tend to treat all students from Mexico as if they share a common cultural background, unaware of the substantial cultural differences within that country.

Clearly, the quest for better teaching methods has just begun for those working with indigenous peoples in general and with the Purepecha in particular. More insight is needed so that more practical methods can be developed. The authors are passionate about networking with others who are learning how to better support the learning process of all indigenous students and in particular, the Purepecha. We soon hope to have a website on the Purepecha that will be of value to educators in the US.

Barbara Swanson, Katharine Ballash, and Michelle Kost are teachers in Reynolds School District in Portland, Oregon. [Ed. note: See their bios on the website.]



Figure 1. Mural by Diego Rivera, Palacio Nacional, Mexico City. Photo by Deborah Healey.