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## **Children of the Guatemalan Maya: A Handbook for Teachers**

By the Maya Heritage Community Project at Kennesaw State University  
and the National Pastoral Maya Network

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# CHILDREN OF THE GUATEMALAN MAYA: A HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS



This is an informational handbook for schools and teachers who work with Maya children, with the goal to help teachers understand the complex and unique situations of the Maya in the United States.



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## *WHY AN EDUCATOR'S HANDBOOK FOR MAYA SCHOOLCHILDREN?*

Hundreds of thousands of Maya currently live in the United States, and thus have become the most numerous of Native Americans behind the Cherokee Nation. In some classrooms, Maya children make up a large percentage. Very often the children of the Maya blend in with Hispanic Latinos, and their heritage is not known by the teacher. Sometimes Maya children or Maya parents will prefer not recognizing Maya heritage. However, other Maya will be greatly pleased if you recognize their heritage. The goal of this handbook is to highlight the complex and compelling past of the Maya, in order for teachers to know their students better and in addition know the parents of the children better. Above all, this handbook is designed to help the educator in his or her endeavor to promote the academic and social success of their Maya students.

### Objectives:

- Enhance understanding between Maya parents, teachers and administrators in order to promote the educational success of these children.
- Identify concerns and obstacles faced by Maya parents and children.
- Suggest pedagogical approaches to engage and include Maya students.
- Connect teachers with resources such as the Maya Heritage Community Project and the National Maya Interpreter Network.



This teacher's handbook is a joint project of the Maya Heritage Community Project and the Pastoral Maya. These two organizations have worked together for the last twelve years and compiled the material for the Maya Health Toolkit for Medical Providers. The Teacher's Handbook is intended to be a companion piece to the Health Toolkit.



## *WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE MAYA?*

The situation of the Guatemalan Maya in the United States is complex, and we must be careful of generalities. However, in order to better work with the children and help with their academic and social success, we suggest the following bits of knowledge.

### MAYA LANGUAGES

Maya speak native languages that have existed in the Americas for thousands of years. Maya languages are oftentimes the primary languages spoken in the home. Consequently, even though Maya school children might appear (to the teachers) Hispanic or Latino, they may not speak Spanish, or speak the language at a lower level than teachers and school administrators expect. Some early childhood education children will not speak Spanish at all. Often, teachers remain unaware that the children have Maya heritage; and Maya parents and children often will not volunteer their indigenous (Native American) ethnicity.

Language complications are even greater than indicated by the above paragraph, because there are at least a dozen Maya languages spoken in the United States. Guatemala has approximately 22 Maya languages; and when Maya languages spoken in Belize and Mexico are included, the number of distinct languages rises to about thirty. In addition, Guatemala alone has about fifty dialects that further complicate communication, including Spanish-Maya hybrid languages called “la castilla”.

### MAYA DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER:

Throughout their history, the Maya have inhabited an area that includes parts of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize and the western fringe of Honduras and El Salvador. The Maya have become perhaps the most celebrated of the pre-European peoples, in particular for the civilizations of the Classic Period. Remnants of awe-inspiring temples, pyramids and cities can be found in the regions they occupied. Aside from their art and architecture, the ancient Maya had a fully developed written language and sophisticated math and astronomical systems. They also had interactions with other Mesoamerican cultures. History books have taught us that Maya classical period civilizations mysteriously disappeared leaving only the ruins we see today. Many theories regarding their disappearance after the last recorded date on a Maya “stela” in 904AD have been discussed. They range from catastrophic events and environmental change like drought, flooding or famine to warfare and civil strife, or even alien rapture. The fact remains that the Maya people did not disappear completely. Descendants from these ancient people are very much alive in our time.



Until the Spanish Conquest of the early 16th century, the Maya made up part of the geographic region of “Mesoamerica” (middle America) that included the Aztec and hundreds of other native groups numbering approximately 20 – 30 million people. Although there were some commonalities of thought and life, the Maya were also distinct with a common family of languages and highly developed civilizations. While Spanish colonialism had a powerful influence on the Maya, many of their traditions and way of life survived over the centuries, to the extent that the Maya in general have clear distinctions from the Hispanic populations.

### HISTORIC OPPRESSION:

The Maya have faced many challenges to maintaining their way of life. In this century civil war and violence, land scarcity and poverty, prejudice and persecution have taken a toll on the Maya people. The Maya have been forced from their lands and made to settle in urban areas.



Without their land, they can no longer be self sufficient and must search for ways to provide for their families. In recent years, thousands of Maya have fled from Guatemala to seek opportunity in the United States. Because of the struggles they have experienced, the trauma of war and migration many suffer from anxiety and depression and have a difficult time adapting to life in the United States. Today the largest group of indigenous people north of Peru is the Maya. The Maya number about six million people; they account for more than 50% of the population of Guatemala. Guatemalan Maya have been some of the most oppressed people on earth. During the recent Guatemalan 30-year Civil War they were special targets and over 150,000 Maya were massacred during the 1980s – 1990s. Currently many Maya children suffer from chronic malnutrition, which can reach 80% of children under 5 years of age in some areas. Such historic and ongoing oppression and lack of opportunity or access to education make the needs of the Maya an ongoing issue in Mexico and Central America.

### MAYA IN THE UNITED STATES:

For many Mayas migrating from Guatemala to the United States, the move was the only way of saving themselves from political oppression, brutal violation of human rights, and even genocide. These immigrants, often facing trauma of the violence they had to see and endure, have entered a capitalistic society with foreign customs, different languages and a



fast-paced way of life. As more Maya women have brought their families to join the menfolk in the United States, the struggle to adjust to this new culture and way of life has also affected the Maya children; including those born in Guatemala and those born in the United States. The Maya do not entirely escape their past.

## PARENTS

Parents might have more difficulty communicating with teachers than just language. Respect for teachers might keep parents from questioning what is happening in school work schedule or school policy and instructions to students. Indeed, in Guatemala the teacher is not questioned, and the Maya parent might not feel he or she has the right to questions or dialog with teachers in the United States. Moreover, there is a general lack of knowledge about school systems, lack of transportation to the schools, and shame of their lack of education or indigenous background might be additional factors.

## COMMUNITY, RESPECT, AND HARMONY

The Maya advisors who worked on this Handbook for Teachers explained that Mayan traditional culture and values are centered on the community rather than individualism, and that community supplies values and well-being for the inhabitants. To maintain knowledge and traditions, elders are valued and play a crucial role in passing down knowledge to subsequent generations. Maya understand individual life to be interwoven with all life and life forces, past and present; and they look to each other for advice, knowledge and wellbeing as they strive for harmony within the community and the greater world.



## FAMILY LIFE AND EDUCATION

In the traditional communities in the home countries, children would be under the care and guidance of the extended family and members of the community. In the US most often the community has been lost or greatly altered. In their home and community environment, young children learn from family members what is expected of them. Children develop a pattern of learning and teaching that is different from the system employed in the U.S. public school system. So in addition to the language barrier, this is another source of complexity for young students.



The weakened Maya educational structure is further affected by opposing or contrary methods and expectations of the schools and society of the United States. In the Maya culture, young children learn by observation of others just as they do in the United States. However, what they observe is very different. The role of siblings in a family is to be a guide or teacher for the younger ones. As children are raised in their homes, they learn to become teachers themselves. Observations of Maya children have shown that children teach their younger siblings what is expected of them within their culture. They do this by manual and verbal instruction given in the context of the task and by physical contact between the teacher and student.

In the United States, parents and teachers are the instructors of everyday tasks and siblings are not expected to teach each other. In Maya society, children teach siblings to perform everyday tasks; the children pass these skills from one to another. Children create culture even as they acquire culture. Younger members become competent participants in cultural activities through apprenticeship with teachers of all ages in the Maya community.

Obedience is a virtue that is expected of Maya children. Commands are given by elders (teachers, parents and siblings) without explanation and without the need for extrinsic verbal reinforcement such as praise or criticism. Children learn that they must respect their teachers and follow directions without questioning the authority of their elders. What they observe when they enter U.S. public school systems is very different from this and as they are immersed, sometimes children begin to question the validity of their Maya culture creating difficulties in their family life.

### SPECIFIC POINTS IN REVIEW

1. Professionals in education and other authorities are often unable to distinguish between Latinos and Maya (or unaware of the differences). Misidentifying the Maya creates multiple problems in regards to understanding their needs. The Maya have their own languages and traditions that differ from Latino cultures. They also have a unique history and background that is relevant to their overall education, health and wellness.
2. Some parents will have taught the child about their Maya heritage, and may have tried to instill a sense of Maya pride, but most parents do not discuss this with the children. The individual teacher will have to explore issues of identity cautiously with new students.
3. Some but not all Maya speak Spanish. They may try to communicate in Spanish but often lack the proficiency to understand as well as might appear to the observer. Without an interpreter, Maya students and their parents may have difficulty understanding the situation or circumstances being explained to them. (See the final section on the Interpreter's Network for detail.)



4. Students and/or their parents that are illiterate or have low literacy in Spanish and English have difficulty understanding materials and completing lengthy, complicated paperwork. Many Maya in Guatemala lack access to education, resulting in high levels of illiteracy or limited literacy skills. This creates particular challenges for filling out paperwork. Some schools have forms translated into Spanish, but for Maya who do not read, this is not helpful. Literacy is also a major issue when educators need written permission for specific activities.

5. Many parents have their children interpret for them. This is not ideal because children can intentionally or unintentionally omit or edit information. By Federal law, schools must provide services in equal manner to all students (Equal Educational Opportunities Act, EEOA, of 1974) which includes assuring that parents understand what is being said. The school systems should provide foreign language interpreters and should not rely on children to relay pertinent information to their parents.

6. Confusion occurs as students are registering for school regarding names. Initial confusion occurs because many of the Maya, as customary in Maya villages, take only first names for the entire name, which in the Spanish style numbers four. For example, it is possible to have the name: Juan Juan Juan Juan or Juan Francisco Antonio Lucas. In addition, Maya wives keep their maiden names and take their husbands “last” names. This can be very confusing when registering students in the United States school system. Thus names are entered into the computer incorrectly, files are lost or difficult to locate, children’s’ names are confused, and Maya feel less respected.

7. Many of the Maya living in the United States lived in Guatemala during the civil war. They may have been born during the war or lost family in the violence. Therefore, some of the Maya do not know their birthdates. They may give an estimated date when questioned, or be unable to answer. This can lead to frustration or suspicion by the school administration.

8. There may be difficulty obtaining vaccination records or medical history and family history information. For the reasons stated above, many Maya do not know about their medical history or vaccination records. Some records may still be in Guatemala or they may not have any.

9. Maya may not admit to being indigenous because they believe they may be treated worse. Discrimination and prejudice against the Maya people is common in Guatemala. After suffering this treatment in their home country, many Maya are apprehensive about how their Native American heritage may be perceived in the United States.



## *CASE STUDIES / EXAMPLES*

The following case examples highlight specific incidences of misunderstandings and miscommunications between Guatemalan Maya people and the U.S. systems of education and social services. Language and cultural barriers are the prime culprit in each of the instances under study. All of the names have been changed. Case examples came via direct testimony from the people involved.

### *CASE #1: CHILD REFUSES TO EAT SCHOOL LUNCH*

A Maya child in Florida would not eat the school lunch given to him each day. He was new to the United States and he spoke neither English nor Spanish, hence he was unable to communicate why he refused. Teachers and staff became forceful in their insistence that the child eat. However, the boy was unfamiliar with foods like milk, cheese, and peanut butter; he found these things repulsive and nauseating since he did not grow up consuming these types of foods. His inability to communicate his reasons did not stop the forceful reactions by the school staff.

### *CASE #2: CHILD CLAIMS HERSELF TO BE MEXICAN*

A young girl student in Colorado on the first day of school claimed she was Mexican, because she had learned that Mexican people had a higher status than Guatemalan or Indigenous peoples.

### *CASE #3: DIFFICULTIES OF INTERPRETATION*

Many times the parents regret not teaching their children their Maya language, and sometimes the children after reaching adulthood complain to their parents for not having taught them. Sometimes the children begin learning their language and heritage again after they graduate from school. Here is an actual written testimony from a Maya mother in the state of Washington: "I tried to teach my children my language 10 years ago, however the elementary teachers in NY (where we were living at the time) discouraged me in order to avoid having the children be placed in special ed classes. Now the children wish they would have learned the languages while they were younger, but we keep working on teaching them all 3 languages. Now that my mother can visit us, the children teach her English and she teaches them K'iche', weaving, and other aspects of the culture."

## *INTERPRETER NETWORK*



Although increasing numbers of Maya interpreters are available throughout the United States, the need continues to be great. Languages from the most poverty intense areas of Guatemala are some the languages most in need of interpreters, for example Chuj, K'iche', Mam, and Q'anjobal. These groups have significant numbers of Maya-speakers in the United States with basic illiteracy and low Spanish language skills due to a lack of access to education in Guatemala. Maya who most need help with communication neither read nor write, and Maya interpreters with training in interpretation and translation are few in number. Where the Maya know Spanish or have some basic ability in Spanish, they report being frustrated with a Spanish non-indigenous interpreter who interprets with accents or words that are unfamiliar to the Maya.

We encourage teachers to make use of the national network of Maya interpreters. The network will sometimes find you interpreters for the phone free of charge, or will find resources for you in other cases. Very commonly, Maya parents are uncertain and confused about the education of their children, how the process of registration works. They don't understand what documents are needed for school and why they are required and they may not even have those documents at all. Parents have difficulty with parent/teacher conferences or if they are called to the school during the day. They may have transportation related issues, or childcare problems for younger ones who are at home with them.

Spanish interpreters are sometimes available, but not adequate, as Maya who speak Spanish have trouble with interpreters from other nationalities who speak fast, use a different vocabulary, and treat the Maya as if they are native speakers rather than secondary speakers. Often the Maya use their children as interpreters, which can be problematic for families in many ways. Maya language interpreters have limited training, if any. The interpreters network helps preserve the Maya languages and promote respect and dignity for the Maya, as they see their native language accepted as worthy of equal treatment.

The National Maya Interpreter Network  
can be accessed at:

[www.mayanetwork.org](http://www.mayanetwork.org)





To initiate closer relationships with students, it may be useful to identify a few words that can be used as icebreakers for conversation. Talking about things that are familiar to them and easy to identify may be helpful.

### SUGGESTED EXERCISE FOR MAYA CHILDREN

For the teacher to learn more about the children of Maya heritage, and to assess more about their home life and their parents, the teacher might ask the student to identify some words of Maya language. For example, words such as those listed below could be given to the students to either translate in school or take home to the parents.

parents	los padres
mother	la madre
father	el padre
siblings	los hermanos
brother	el hermano
sister	la hermana
grandparents	los abuelos
grandmother	la abuela
grandfather	el abuelo

#### School related words:

Library/Media center	la biblioteca
Classroom	la sala de clase
Teacher	la profesora, el profesor
Student	el estudiante, la estudiante
Books	los libros
Pencil	el lapiz
Pen	el esfero, el lapizero
Marker	el marcador
Lunchroom	la cafeteria
Gym	el gimnasio
Friend/s	el amigo, la amiga, los amigos
Principal	el director, la directora de la escuela
Car	el carro
Bus	el bus

# *METHODOLOGY*



The Handbook On Teaching Students of Maya Heritage is a product of the Kennesaw State University Maya Heritage Community Project (MHCP). The handbook was produced in close alliance and partnership with Maya consultants. The handbook/toolkit for teachers followed some of the methodology employed during the construction of the Maya Health Toolkit for Medical Providers, which was completed in May 2011 and has been downloaded nationally over 28,000 times during the first two years of availability. Under the Boyer Model, this project fits Boyer-defined methodologies of Application and Engagement, i.e. problem solving on a large scale for a unique situation through a process and product that does not exist elsewhere. In addition to the Boyer model, this project has similarities with Service Learning, Applied Anthropology, and Participatory Action Research (PAR), and an approach used by the Maya Heritage Project called Participation Research and Production (PRP) which establishes partnerships in research, interpretation, and production, making the participant allies (in this case the Maya) co-authors of the finished product. It is hoped that the handbook framework and methodology might serve as a model for working with other indigenous immigrant populations.

