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Self-published books fete school's diversity

By [Kevin D. Thompson](#) - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

LAKE WORTH —

About six years ago, Rebecca Hinson heard something “painful” while chatting with a fellow South Grade Elementary School teacher, a woman born in Nicaragua.

She told Hinson, somewhat sheepishly, that after moving to the United States, she often felt ashamed of her culture and embarrassed about where she was born, like it was a dirty secret she needed to keep hidden ... or else.

“I hated the fact that this lady, who I had such high regard for, felt that way,” Hinson said.

Shortly after that, Hinson was telling her students about a Mayan prince who heroically fought against Spanish conquistadors. One Guatemalan student, who rarely spoke and sat in the back of the class, got up after Hinson's lesson and thanked her for sharing such a riveting story.

Those conversations, though brief, profoundly affected Hinson, a South Grade art teacher the past 14 years, prompting her in her spare time to write a series of children's books aimed at celebrating diverse cultures and using them as a teaching tool.

The books — there are 25 of them — have covered Guatemala, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and the United States. The subjects range from Mayan backstrap weaving to the art of Haiti to the Emancipation Proclamation.

“I never intended to publish books,” Hinson said, sitting inside her Lake Worth home, sipping iced tea. “I was just going to teach my students about their culture in my class, but when I saw what kind of impact that information had on them, I knew it needed to be shared.”

In a school where more than 40 percent of the student body is Hispanic and as much as 30 percent hails from nations in Central and South America, Hinson is offering a service students can't find anywhere else.

“She's very creative and goes above and beyond her art teaching,” said Michael Riley, South Grade's principal. “It's wonderful when anybody honors the diversity in our school by putting kids in touch with their culture like she does.”

Aileen Josephs, a Palm Beach County immigration attorney who has known Hinson for five years, said Hinson's books are validating those cultures, which aren't taught in public schools — or most schools, for that matter.

“Her books should be bought by every school district with (a majority of) minority students,” said Josephs, who described Hinson as “an angel in our community.”

The first series of books was published in 2011. Hinson, a voracious reader, researches the books, which are only 24 pages, then writes the text in a way that can be easily understood by an elementary-school student.

“You have to simplify it,” she said. “The Haitian Revolution is a complex topic, but the pictures really help to tell the story. For them, it's like pulling out a family album. It's personal.”

