

Introduction: Creating Connections with Latino Texts

How can teachers help students and families connect with their own cultural heritage? How can culturally relevant literature facilitate literacy learning and encourage the joy of reading? This issue of *WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom* explores these questions through vignettes of classroom practice that highlight books with a Latino focus. Intercultural understandings are rooted in students' explorations of their own cultural identities. For students who are marginalized in schools due to their language, heritage, or socioeconomic status, literature that reflects their cultures can be an entryway into literacy. The growth of the Latino population within the United States has created an interest in how to successfully integrate literature with a Latino focus into classrooms, so that Latino students can both see themselves reflected in the literature and so their classmates can understand this diverse cultural group. The authors in this issue share how they have connected children with books to promote cultural understandings.

The first two vignettes highlight home/school connections that promote literacy and thinking. Julia López-Robertson describes how she structured *Pláticas Literarias*, book discussions, to take advantage of the cultural and linguistic strengths of her students and their families. Jeanne Fain and Robin Horn discuss parental interactions within home literature discussions that supported children in discussing these same books at school.

The next two vignettes focus on ways of connecting children with literature that reflects their cultural backgrounds. Deanna Paiva describes how her students enthusiastically explored family stories in response to a children's picture book. In his article, Albert Gonzalez tells how he created bilingual picture books to support two middle school students as they struggled with reading and writing. In the final vignette, Angela Grabow reflects on how book clubs helped her students explore difficult issues such as immigration and language use.

How do you connect children and adolescents with literature in ways that promote intercultural understandings? Consider sharing your innovative practices by [submitting a vignette](#) to [WOW Stories](#). We are interested in descriptions of interactions with literature in classrooms and libraries at preschool through secondary levels. See our [call for manuscripts](#) for more information.

Janine Schall
Editor

“No perder la tradición”/Not Losing Traditions: Maintaining Connections with Family Culture

By Julia López-Robertson

I did not see myself represented in the pages of a book as a young Latina until I was a classroom teacher. Latino literature and the life experiences of Latino children are typically not integrated within curriculum (Medina, 2004; Moje, 2004) and so Latino children do not see themselves represented in many schools. With the growing number of Latinos in the U.S. (Census, 2002), this body of literature should become a necessary part of school curricula to make learning relevant for all children regardless of their socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

As a Latina bilingual educator, it is particularly important for me to make Latino literature a part of my curriculum. Providing my second graders with these books offered them “literary mirrors in which they can see themselves and their people and take pride in their heritage” (Day, 2003, p. xiii). I want my students to see themselves represented in the curriculum. I want them to know that they are not alone, to see that there are children like them and families like theirs who share the same language and similar life experiences. I want them to know that they matter. I sought to make my curriculum one that “acknowledges the lives of the very students to whom it is directed” (Nieto, 1999, p.118).

Pláticas Literarias about critical social issues have given me the opportunity to make Latino children’s literature significant within my classroom. Pláticas Literarias are literature circles where a group of students who have read a book or listened to a read-aloud meet to discuss the meanings they are creating from their understandings and personal connections (Short, 1997). The children use dialogue to develop more complex interpretations of the text and are involved in what Rosenblatt (1978) calls a “two-way reciprocal relation” with the text. They change the text and are changed by the text as they examine their understandings of the issues raised in the literature and share these beginning understandings with their classmates and families.

These Pláticas provide linguistically, culturally, and socio-economically diverse children with an opportunity to participate in discussions that encourage critical thinking and require them to do more than fill out worksheets. Children are expected to think about, discuss, and question the issues raised within the books that are significant to them and that they identify with (Muspratt, Luke & Freebody, 1997). Some of the topics we discussed were illiteracy, immigration, language issues, poverty, and racism. The books that were selected for our Pláticas fit the description of ‘critical books’ provided by Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, and Vasquez (1999): books that “invite conversations about fairness and justice; they encourage children to ask why some groups of people are positioned as others” (p.70).

Context of the Classroom

I taught second grade in one of the last remaining bilingual schools in the Tucson Unified School

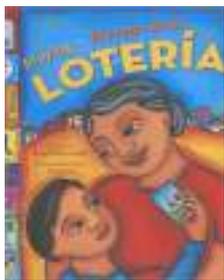
District, Wyman School (pseudonym). Wyman was located on the south side of Tucson in a predominantly Mexican and Mexican-American community with high poverty. The school population was about 98% Mexican and Mexican-American, and 99% of the children received free or reduced lunch. Of the eighteen children in my classroom all but three were bilingual -- they read, wrote, and spoke Spanish and English. The other children were recent immigrants from México and did not yet speak proficient English. All of the children in my classroom participated in the Pláticas.

The Pláticas took place twice a week during our language arts block. In order to assure that every child heard the book at least once before we discussed it as a group, I read it aloud in English and in Spanish the week before our groups met. Half of the children took the book home in their dominant language (parents were asked their language preference) at the beginning of the week. A response journal and sticky notes accompanied the book in a plastic bag. Families were asked to read and discuss the book with their child at home for two nights. On the second night while discussing the book, the families were asked to help their child select at least three parts in the book that were significant to them and mark them with the sticky notes (these would be used to start off our in-class discussion). Also on this second night, the families were encouraged to write a response to the book in the journal along with their child. The children brought the baggie with the book and journal to school on the third day for our in-class discussion. On this third day, the other half of the class followed the same procedures with their families. By the end of the week, all of the children and their families had participated in the Plática.

Since I asked the families to participate in the discussions with their child, I wanted to give priority to their voices and what they thought about the books and the issues that were raised in their home discussions. Jennings and O’Keefe (2002) believe, “Family dialogues like these can help build the foundational knowledge and communication skills children will need to continue to interrogate social inequality and to take action toward meaningful changes” (p. 414). Because the books contained issues that had affected some of the families, they were able to discuss these issues with their children in a safe environment. In return the children became part of the familial communication network, learning about issues that were touching their families and about their family histories. Learning about the joys and struggles that their families have lived through also gave the children an opportunity to gain a better understanding of who they are; the children’s sense of their culture and their sense of self was “clarified and affirmed” (Day, 2003, p. xiii).

This vignette focuses on a range of engagements around the picture book *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería* (Laínez, 2005). We began with a classroom read aloud, the children then took the books home to read and discuss with their families, and finally each child participated in a small group Plática Literaria.

Reading Aloud La Lotería



The expression on the children's faces as I introduced them to our literature discussion book, *Playing Lotería/El juego de la lotería*, was of surprise and delight. They were surprised that there was a book written about a game that they knew well and played frequently with their families. In this book a little boy is reluctant to visit his grandmother in México because he doesn't speak Spanish and she doesn't speak English. Through playing *lotería*, the Mexican version of BINGO, the grandmother teaches him some Spanish and he teaches her some English.

During our read aloud, Jasmin (all names are pseudonyms) excitedly shouted "¡Maestra, yo juego ese juego con mi nana cuando voy pa' México!" [Teacher, I play that game with my grandmother when I go to México!] A chorus of "Yo también" [me too] animatedly followed Jasmin's declaration. The children immediately identified with the book and the experiences of the little boy and his nana, and more importantly, they felt a sense of affirmation. Day (2003) argues, "when the experience is similar to ours, we feel validated, often finding that our awareness of ourselves has been strengthened and extended" (p. xi). Shortly after Jasmine's comment, Alberto added, "¡No sabía que habían libros así, sabes, como de mí y cosas de mí!" [I didn't know that there were books like that, you know, about me and things about me!]

The children were so excited that I wasn't sure that I would make it through the read-aloud. It seemed that every sentence I read was followed with a connection.

- Yo voy en el bus a que mi nana [I take the bus to my grandmother's].
- Mi ma' me deja en que mi nana en el verano también [My mom leaves me with my grandmother in summer too].
- Maestra, yo voy a jugar ahora con mi pa' y mi ma' y mi nana y mi hermanito y mi hermanita [Teacher, I am going to play now with my dad, and my mom, and my grandmother, and my little brother, and my little sister].

The more that I read, the more animated the children became.

At the end of our read aloud, Ana quietly shared,

Mi mamá dice que debemos leer más de estos libros porque son como nosotros porque así entendemos a nosotros mejor. Mi abuelita vino de México a leer y leyó el libro con mi mamá y está tan feliz. Dice que le acuerda de su casa. [My mom said that we should read more books like these because they are like us and because they help us understand ourselves better. My grandmother came from México yesterday and read the book with me and she is so happy. She said that it reminds her of her home.]

Ana's comment demonstrated the importance of children and their families reading books with which they can identify to further their understanding of their culture and family, which in turn helps them learn about "their sense of who they are" (Day, 2003, p. xiii).

Ana's Response Journal

Ana and her mother, Margarita, read, discussed, and wrote about *La Lotería* in the response journal. Since the families read and discussed the books with the children at home before we discussed them in small groups at school, the children were able to draw from those conversations as they formed opinions and participated in the classroom discussions.

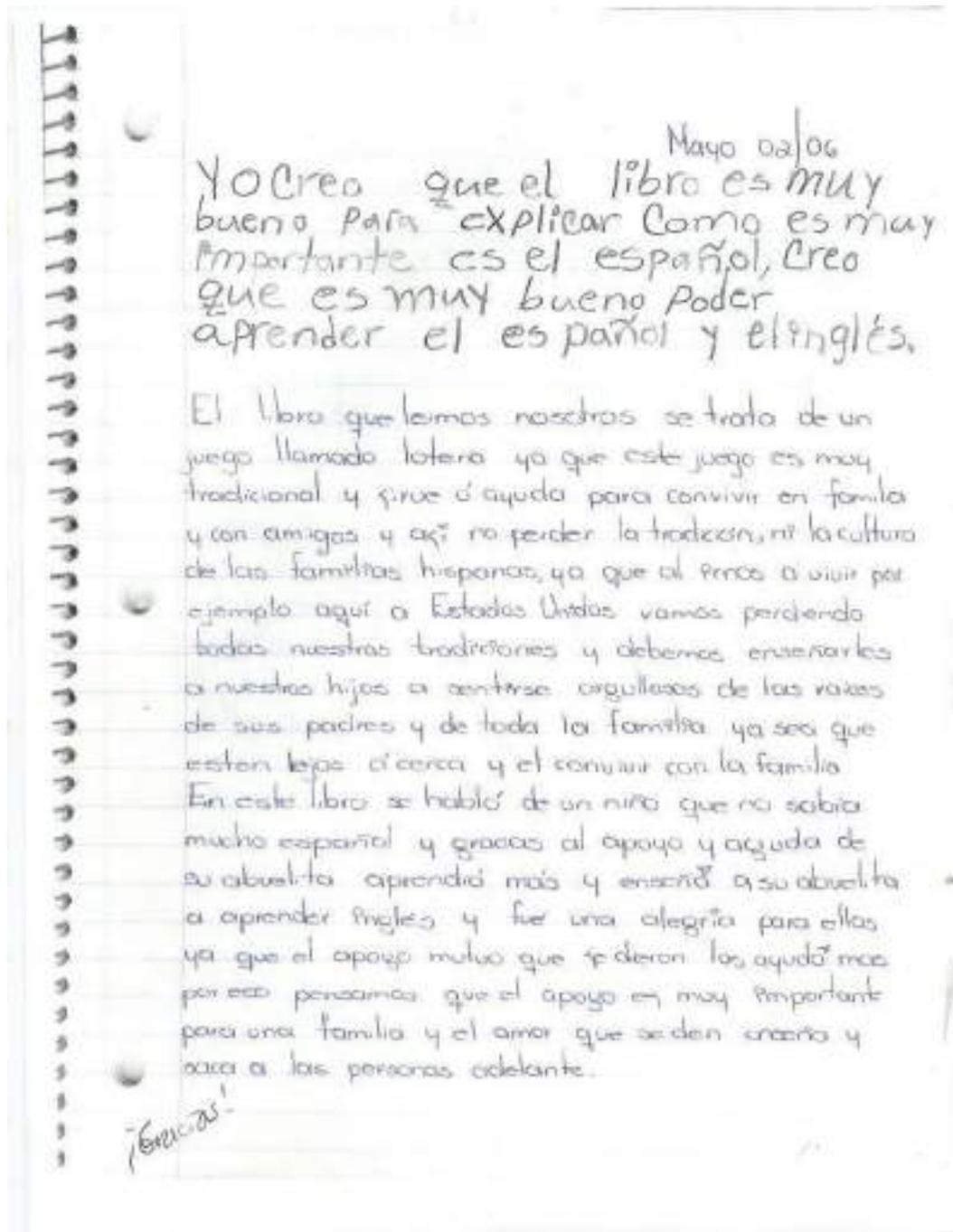


Figure 1. Ana's and Margarita's Response Journal.

In the journal, Ana wrote, "I think that the book is very important to explain how important Spanish is. I think that it's important to learn Spanish and English." Ana's mother, Margarita, responded:

The book that we read was about a game called *lotería*. This is a very traditional game that serves to help get along with friends and family and not lose our traditions or culture of Hispanic families. Since we leave our homes and come to places like the United States we can lose our traditions. We should teach our children to be proud of their parents' roots and of their families, even though they may be far away and this will also show how to live together. This book talked about a child who didn't know much Spanish and thanks to support from his grandmother he learned more Spanish and taught her some English and it was joyful for them. The help and mutual support that they gave each other helped them. That's why we think that the love and support that families give each other is very important for families; it teaches and helps us get ahead.

Margarita was concerned that children retain their cultural traditions, take pride in their families, and support one another. Several families expressed these concerns. At the end of the trimester, each family received a survey that asked them to comment on the books that were used for the Pláticas and on their participation in the discussions. One mother commented,

Es importante hablar de estos temas. Uno, como trabaja tanto, no tiene tiempo de hablar con el niño. Ahora que nos mande hacerlo, veo que es muy necesario. [It's important to talk about these topics. Because we work so much, we don't always have the time to talk with our children. Now that you make us do it, I see that it is very necessary].

The Plática in the Classroom

Later that week in the small group Plática, Samuel, Pati, Leonardo, and Rebecca talked about the importance of family helping each other. Samuel began the Plática by referring to his home discussion with his mother. Children frequently used the home discussions as starting points for our small group literature discussions in school.

Samuel: Mi mamá me dijo que yo jugaba lotería desde que yo era un bebó.
[My mom told me that I played lotería since I was a baby.]

Rebecca: ¿Cómo puede ser si un bebó no sabe leer?
[How could that be, a baby doesn't know how to read?]

Samuel: Porque me ayudaban leer.

[Because they helped me read.]

Pati: Sí, porque las familias ayudan, como en el libro, vez, el niño le enseñó inglés a su nana y ella español.

[Yes, because families help, like in the book, see, the little boy taught his grandmother English and she Spanish.]

Leonardo: En mi casa todos ayudan, porque así es. Dice mi pa' que todos tienen que hacer algo, no pueden hacer nada.

[At my house everyone helps, because that's how it is. My dad says that everyone has to do something, they can't do nothing.]

The children's connections to their home discussions during our read aloud and the small group *Plática* speaks to the need to include Latino families in children's education. Latino families want to participate in their children's education and want their children to be successful. Additionally, they want their children "to develop the values and traditions of their cultural heritage" (Riojas-Cortez, Flores, Smith, & Clark, 2003, p. 69) and not to lose their heritage. For the families of the children in my classroom, including Latino literature (literature that they can relate to and identify with) in the curriculum is one way of bridging the school literacies with those of the home.

Latino children and their families should not be made to feel that they are deficient simply because their way of making sense of the world does not mirror that of the mainstream culture. Children's ways of constructing literacy should not be seen as an obstacle to their education, but should be the foundation we build upon in classrooms. Including Latino literature in the curriculum and sending the books home to be shared by the family provides an opportunity for children and their families to see themselves, their culture, and their language in a book. More importantly, by participating in home *Pláticas*, the families are invited into the curricula and are asked to participate in meaningful ways in home/school partnerships. It is time that we actively include families in our curricula rather than ask them to take spectator roles.

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Exploring Family Perspectives of Latino Children's Literature

By Jeanne G. Fain and Robin Horn

Second-grade bilingual students in Robin's classroom engaged in family literature discussions by first selecting one book out of four possible choices every three weeks to share and read with their families at home. Students excitedly chose books in the language that resonated with their family -- Spanish, English, or both languages. Through this kind of home/school collaboration, students find a comfortable place to experience the joy of reading with a relative or caregiver. Families open the book and see their culture represented across the pages. Rich literacy experiences are created in Spanish and/or English and knowledge of literacy is shared as families read and discuss the literature. To document family-led literature discussions in the home, students' families used disposable cameras to capture these experiences and invite teachers to see the power of literature in their lives.