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WOW STORIES

CREATING CONNECTIONS WITH LATINO TEXTS

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Volume II, Issue 1

Creating Connections with Latino Texts

WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom is a regular on-line publication of WOW containing vignettes written by classroom educators about children's experiences reading and responding to literature in the classroom setting.

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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.

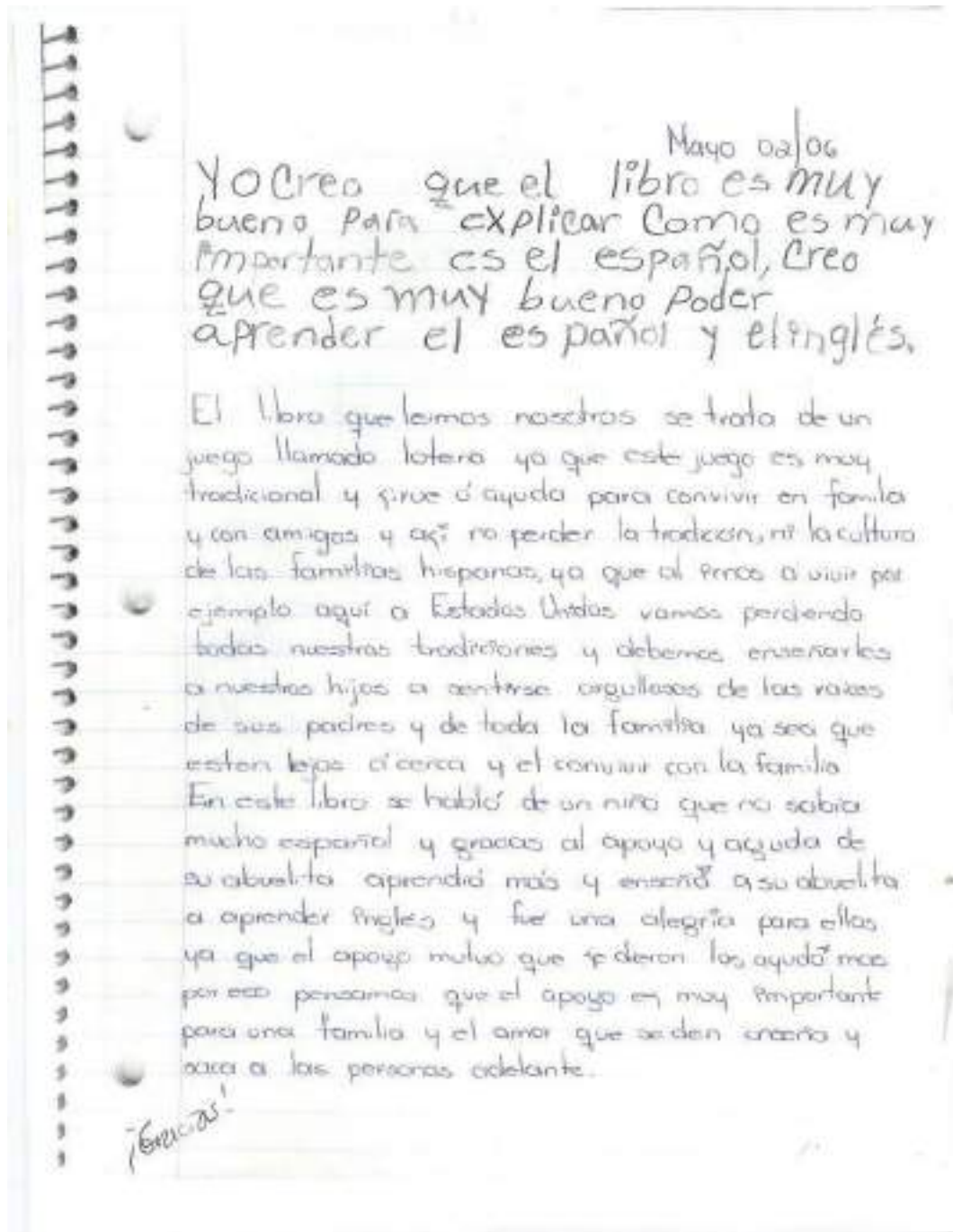


Figure 1. Ana's and Margarita's Response Journal.

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 bebé.
[My mom told me that I played lotería since I was a baby.]

Rebecca: ¿Cómo puede ser si un bebé 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.

"Me parece una excelente oportunidad para establecer una relacion mas estrecha con el niño y intercambiar puntos de vista sobre un mismo tema," states Mrs. H. ["It appears to me an excellent opportunity to establish a deep relationship with my child as we exchange our points of view around the same theme."] The enthusiasm this parent expresses for reading and talking about high quality bilingual children's books illustrates how family-led literature circles in the home provide children with rich opportunities to talk about a book in the language of their choice.



Figure 1a. Father and Son Read Together.



Figure 1b. Family Reads Together.

Robin, a second grade teacher in a predominantly Latino school, and Jeanne, a university professor, are actively engaged in thinking about how parents and their children talk about linguistically and culturally diverse literature within the home and the classroom. We meet regularly and discuss how we can use Latino literature with second grade students and how we can effectively create authentic partnerships with families. We begin this engagement with Latino children's literature each year by holding a bilingual informational meeting about literature circles and welcoming second grade families to join us in reading and discussing literature throughout the school year. Families attend our meeting and we informally dialogue about how we can build connections with Latino literature in their homes and in the classroom. We invite thoughts and suggestions within our discussion and encourage parents to use their native languages as they work as a family to figure out thoughtful ways to talk about the literature in their homes.

Mrs. R., one of the parent participants, commented:

I think it's a great opportunity to spend time together and share our ideas. I think that these books are wonderful. I get to see and hear her read in Spanish. She is learning to read in Spanish independently without instruction. When I was a child, I couldn't do this kind of project with my parents because they didn't understand English. These books are great for the students' parents who don't speak English.

To engage students with Latino literature, we purposely select four or five bilingual and Latino books connected to themes, such as family, traditions, bilingualism, equity, or a highlighted author. We create a tentative curriculum map with book titles that we think will connect with students and their families. The map is used as an organizational tool and we build space into the map to make changes as we incorporate the interests of students and families into the curriculum.



Figure 2. Curriculum Map.

This map guides our initial selection of literature that is sent home throughout the year (click on map to enlarge). The books for each theme are used for the family literature discussions. These discussions also include family-response journals (lined-notebooks), which are sent home with the second graders. All members of the families are invited to write and/or draw their thoughts and connections to the story in the language of their choice. We also work with the books and the theme through in-school engagements and discussions.

As part of one theme, Robin's class met Juan Felipe Herrera when he visited their school and helped the students reenact his story *Super Cilantro Girl* (2003) at a school-wide family picnic. This visit provided the background for the class to read his books, *Calling the Doves* (1995), *The Upside Down Boy* (2000), *Grandma and Me at the Flea* (2002), *Featherless* (2004), and *Super Cilantro Girl* (2003). The following entry is from a family-response journal to *Super Cilantro Girl*.

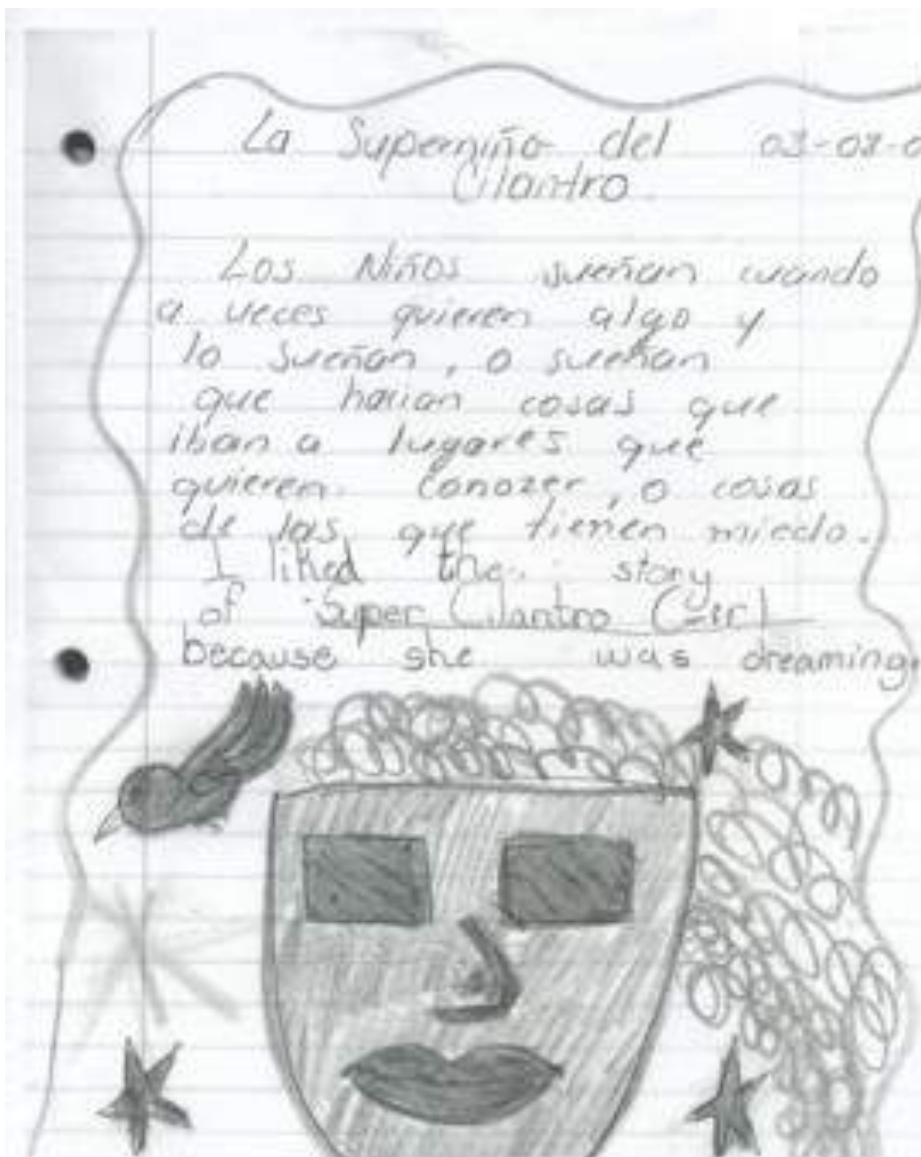


Figure 3. Family Response Journal.

Through our collaboration with families, we hope to gain insights into their perspectives about what makes Latino literature culturally authentic for them (Fox & Short, 2003). Jeanne created a bilingual survey based upon Day's framework (1997) and Robin collected the surveys from families.

[Preguntas] Questions	Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>¿Cuales son sus pensamientos acerca de los personajes en los libros?</i> ▪ <i>¿Cuales son sus pensamientos acerca de los cuentos (temas, heroínas, héroes)?</i> ▪ <i>¿Cuales son sus pensamientos acerca de los libros escritos por Juan Felipe Herrera?</i> ▪ <i>¿Cuales son sus perspectivas acerca del idioma/las palabras que usan en los libros de los libros?</i> ▪ <i>¿Usted y su familia tuvieron conexiones con los libros? Por favor explique sus opiniones.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>What are your thoughts about the characters in the book?</i> ▪ <i>What are your thoughts about the stories (themes, heroes, heroines)?</i> ▪ <i>What are your thoughts about the books written by Juan Felipe Herrera?</i> ▪ <i>What perspectives would you like to share about the language of the books that we have sent home?</i> ▪ <i>Are there connections that your family has made with the books? If yes, please explain.</i>

Figure 4. Bilingual Survey Sent Home.

We used thematic analysis while identifying and classifying the families' perspectives. We looked at the survey responses in terms of topics, meanings, and themes and we attempted to create a picture of collective experiences (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). We constructed webs of the responses from each survey and identified themes throughout this analysis. We identified four categories of family perspectives related to cultural authenticity: Themes and Stories/*Cuentos*, Qualities of Characters, Language of the Book, and Local Knowledge of Insiders. Families viewed the stories in the literature as holding importance in terms of relationships and teaching that was *muy educativo* [very educational]. They examined the strengths of bilingualism and saw language as a resource (Ruiz, 1984), positioning themselves as learners through learning another language. As insiders, they referred to knowledge of cultural membership and details of authenticity.

Themes and Stories: "We are able to enter the story"

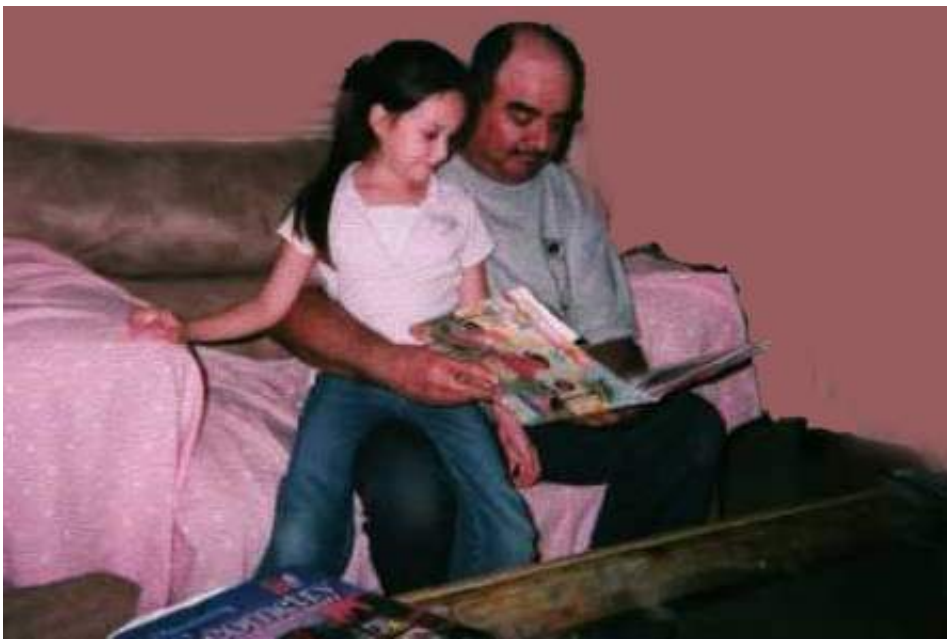


Figure 5. A Father Reads to His Daughter.

This image of a father reading with his daughter reflects the ways in which our families embraced the books and made strong connections to the relationships present in the stories. They connected to the use of kinship terms in the literature by relating the stories to family members in their own lives (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003). Many families connected to *abuelitas* [grandmas] from the stories and talked about the heroines in their families. They responded to the theme of goodness by attending to how good triumphs evil in most stories.

The families also attended to the educational nature of the stories in the literature. For them, the books generated enthusiasm for reading because they noticed the *consejos* [advice] within the stories. The books reflected the ways in which families share local knowledge. Families observed that the stories assisted their children to see the "personal and become better" and that "anything is possible." Their recognition that stories teach was indicated by comments, such as "Our culture is where we came from." The stories represented the vibrant history of their ancestors.

Qualities of Characters: "*Momento de leer juntos*" ["A time of reading together"]



Figure 6. Families Read Together.

This image personifies families making connections with *la gente* [people/characters] from the literature. The qualities of the characters from the literature struck a chord with family members who found themselves in those characters. They focused upon what the characters offered in terms of *consejos*. This relates to how the characters teach their children, particularly in how the characters grapple with adversity. Parents also stated that the characters instilled a love of reading in their children. The "goodness" of characters integrated beauty, good works, and importance. Heroes and heroines were viewed as positive role models. Several families commented that the characters worked hard and often immigrated to the United States from "the other side" (Mexico).

Language of the Book: "We are able to read in Spanish and can read to them in English"



Figure 7. A Second Grader Writes in Her Response Journal.

The second grader in this image is responding and making sense of a bilingual text in her response journal. Families reiterated many times that language is a resource in their lives and world (Ruiz, 1984). Our use of bilingual books enriched their own languages as bilinguals. It was significant for the families to have books in more than one language. Families concluded that both languages contributed to their bilingualism and that Spanish assisted them in making sense of English. Language from the literature also led to *aprendiendo* [learning]. Families indicated that it was good to learn more in English and their children were learning different languages. One family shared, "We are able to read them and we want to read so that I can listen and help write the thoughts that we like in two languages." Another parent indicated:

I think that this reading project is great and it really helps my child and I to just be together and what better way than reading. I really like the books because we can read them in Spanish and English. My child is learning how to read in English and Spanish.

Having the story be in Spanish and English helps me and my child understand the story a lot more.

Another family stated, "We are working together and we share turns reading in whatever language and if I can't pronounce it the child corrects me and I learn something new. And my child has helped me to learn." The translations in the literature were not critiqued; instead families emphasized the importance of the presence of two languages in the literature.

Local Knowledge of Insiders: "We are able to connect with the lives of our *familias*"

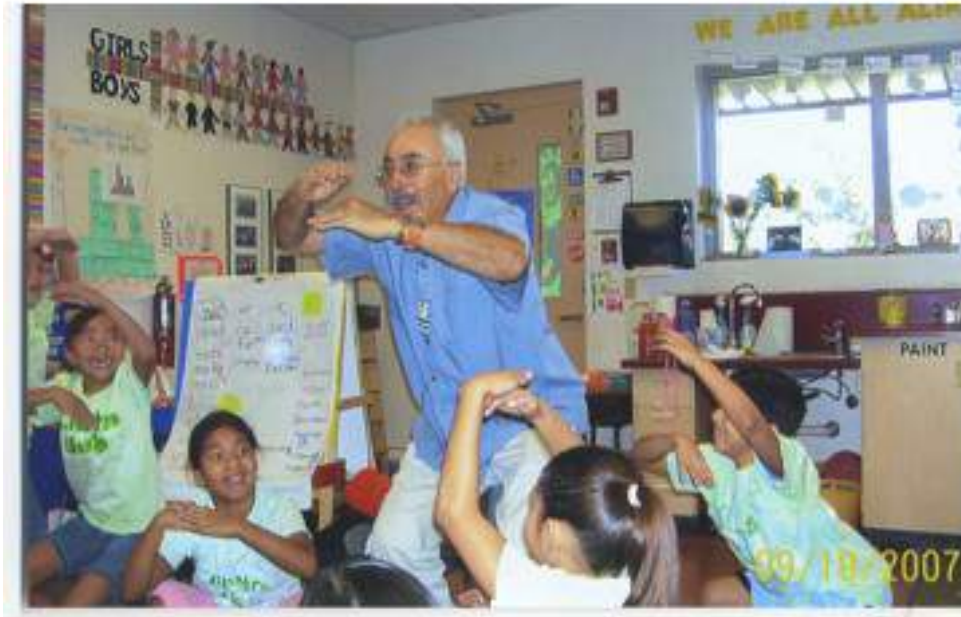


Figure 8. Juan Felipe Herrera Engages Students.

This photo was taken when Juan Felipe Herrera visited the school for a daylong author event. The visit culminated in a school-wide picnic where students dramatized one of his stories, *Super Cilantro Girl*. Families noticed that authors like Herrera wrote books that were based in the knowledge of insiders from their culture. One family indicated, "We are able to connect with the lives of our families in how they live together and eat well and are learning to use my culture with our habit to read. And the books are written in such a way that is simple and we understand the children are like us." Another parent shared, "It's a very exciting feeling when reading a book because it makes you closer. It's awesome and important for her to understand her background as a Hispanic and that if she really wants to be someone she can always make her dream come true, but work for it as well." Culture was viewed as being passed across different generations and included the resources that families tapped into within their daily life.

Final Thoughts

The meaningfulness and importance of the home/school literature discussions were supported by the parents' observations and thoughts in the surveys. One parent stated, "The children love the books and look forward to spending quality time sharing them and discussing them. It has been a very enjoyable experience for us." As teachers and as researchers, it affirmed that bilingual parents should be utilized as a resource in supporting their children's literacy. Given the opportunity and resources, families provided rich literacy experiences for children in their homes. It also affirmed the importance of allowing parents to share their thoughts related to their own child's learning. The surveys provided many insights that would not have been heard without the invitation. We intentionally selected books that we thought were authentic and would relate to the lives of the children and their families. The parents' comments showed us the power of their perspectives as connected to Latino literature.

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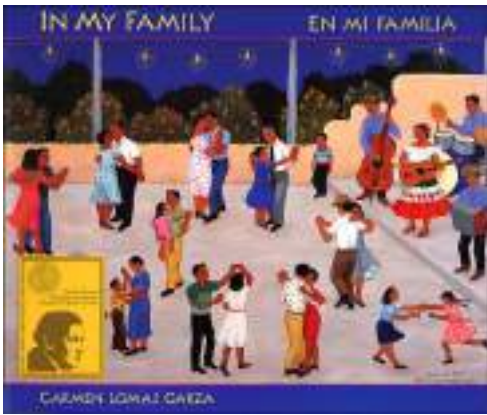
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Family Stories: A Window into Students' Lives

By Deanna Paiva

For many years teaching, I have bolstered a curriculum lacking in multiculturalism with quality children's literature that reflects diversity in heritage, customs, and practices as well as commonalities across humanity. Multicultural literature can evoke a feeling of pride and acceptance when reading about a character who represents the reader's culture. Because many of my students are Latino, we read books representing Latino culture, such as *I Love Saturdays y domingos* (Ada, 2004), *Tomas and the Library Lady* (Mora, 1997), and *Too Many Tamales* (Soto, 1993). One particular book served as my bridge to students' culture and helped me gain an insider's view of their families' beliefs and values. *In My Family/En mi familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza (2000) helped me gain insight to their world by connecting common everyday practices with their families' funds of knowledge. *In My Family/En mi familia* is a bilingual book illustrated in an almost folk style of painting. The paintings tell the stories, but each painting is embellished by short vignettes of the illustrator's memories of life in south Texas.



Veronica, a colleague at the University of North Texas, brought *In My Family/En mi familia* to my classroom. She was interested in tapping into families' funds of knowledge through a bilingual book of family stories. Because she had recently moved into a consulting position, she was lacking a class of students, so I suggested borrowing mine. Most of my third-grade students are Latino, having at least one parent with a Mexican heritage. Three of my students who self-identify as Latino have families from Cuba, Honduras, and the Philippines. One student has Bosnian

heritage, one is African-American, and one is Anglo. Most students are the first generation born in the United States, and their families maintain strong ties with their families in their home countries.

Veronica came to our classroom three times for about an hour, first to introduce the book and the task; next to collect their stories; last to have a publishing party. On her first visit, Veronica introduced *In My Family/En mi familia*. When she was in the room, I became the observer. On that day, I witnessed a cultural explosion in our classroom. Veronica started with Ventosa, a vignette about how to get water out of your ear. Garza shares the "home remedy" of making a funnel of paper, lighting it, and then quickly placing it in the person's ear. The children squealed with excitement, eager to tell how they had witnessed that practice by adults in their families in Mexico. We had planned to read only two or three vignettes, but had underestimated their excitement as signaled by their electrified chatter connecting the vignettes to their families' experiences. We had such fun hearing their family stories pour into our discussion. I observed the children, who started out sitting quietly and cross-legged, now up on their knees engaged in small conversations with their neighbors telling their stories as Veronica turned the page to yet another



colorful painting and vignette. Veronica left the book for us to enjoy and we used it to begin our daily read aloud time for several weeks with the children wanting to hear more vignettes and requesting their favorites to be read again. Wanting to extend their excitement, I read another volume of Garza's vignettes, *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* (2005).

The vignette from *In My Family/En mi familia* that seemed to encourage the longest-lasting dialogue was La Llorona [Weeping Woman]. La Llorona is the grim story of a woman who drowns her children in a river as an act of revenge against her absent husband and is condemned to endless nights of weeping and searching for her children. Veronica indicated that Mexican parents tell the story of *La Llorona* as a way to scare the children into behaving by threatening a visit from her if children act badly. I had heard many students through the years make a reference to this character, but this was my first time to see the story in print. What I didn't realize were the many adaptations of *La Llorona* told in an oral tradition. For many days following Veronica's initial visit, children brought different accounts of *La Llorona* to school. They were engaging in discussions with their families at home and bringing the stories back to school to share. For quite some time we began each read aloud time with new oral versions of La Llorona.

Two of my students, who are natural storytellers, were proficient with *La Llorona* stories. Mayra shared her own witnessing of *La Llorona* at the window while sleeping in the living room of her father's house in Mexico, as well as a story of her mother's encounter as a young girl.

When my brother and I wouldn't go to sleep, my mother would tell us about the time that she was grabbed by the foot at the *Mercado* [market]. My grandpa had to pull her away and she was sure that it was *La Llorona* grabbing her. My mother heard, "Quiero a mis hijos" [I want my children].

Karen shared the most versions of *La Llorona* with her accounts of personal experiences in her aunt's house in Mexico. While staying with her aunt who lived across from a creek, Karen saw *La Llorona* running at night with a baby that looked like a devil in diapers. Another night, she was wakened by a white shadow "floating with no legs" at the foot of her bed screaming, "Te voy a agarrar otra vez!" The shadow was pulling on the bed and Karen's sister was pulling her back. "My mom and dad sleeping in another room past the kitchen, heard someone yelling, 'No, No!' Then a white shadow flew out the window and blended in with the house."

In My Family/En mi familia and *Family Pictures/Cuadros de familia* describe ordinary everyday practices that draw from Latino families' funds of knowledge. This knowledge includes *The Healer*

and the all day process of making empanadas that fill every space in the kitchen and dining room. The vignette Blessing on the Wedding Day, which details a bride kneeling on a cushion and receiving a blessing from her mother, inspired Stacey to bring her special pillow to school to share. It was an intricate handmade white pillow that was blessed by the church in a ceremony when she was three years old. She explained to the class that she will use that pillow for the blessing when she gets married and other important times in her life.

I have struggled with my role as a teacher in a public school related to literature that directly involves religion. I kept skipping over two vignettes about the Virgin of Guadalupe, wondering if the public school was the appropriate place to share and discuss religious beliefs and practices. The children noticed that I was avoiding these vignettes and asked questions. I realized that despite the fact that I was uncomfortable opening the floor to that topic, religion is important to their identities. As expected, the vignettes brought many authentic responses and family stories about the Virgin of Guadalupe. These vignettes also allowed students who were not of Mexican heritage to contribute their family stories involving religion.

Responding to these two bilingual books had a long-lasting positive effect in our classroom as seen by students' oral and written stories. A climate of acceptance and appreciation was established and the students felt a respect and value for their cultures that allowed them to continue to dig deeper into their family stories. They saw family stories as a valuable genre and continued to share these stories in varied contexts. For example, when asked to bring an artifact from home that had a memory, Victor brought a yellow monkey, named Bananas, which inspired this memory:

Bananas was made by my granddad. When my granddad died, he gave it to my dad. When I was born, my dad gave it to me. When I was two years old, I named him Bananas. Now I'm eight and I still sleep with him and I'll always love him. When I grow up, I will give it to my son. If I have a daughter, I have Strawberry for her. Strawberry is a pink bear that my sister gave me. I just realized that I'm starting an heirloom.

Students gained an understanding that their young lives are full of rich memories and that writing their stories attaches value as well as saves and preserves these memories.

Our appreciation of multicultural literature continued through our year as we read more Latino books as well as books representing many cultures and parts of the world. We started juxtaposing international and multicultural literature with literature required by our curriculum, analyzing common themes, character development, settings, and conflict or tension.

Each week, when we visited the school library, a student would point to our librarian's display of Garza books and we shared a "do you remember?" smile. For the student the smile meant, "Do you remember when we had so much fun with those books?" For me the smile meant, "Do you

remember when a book was so powerful that it allowed a middle-aged Anglo teacher to gain a view inside of her students' lives?"

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Reading and Writing Stories: Making Personal Connections through Latino Children's Literature

By Albert Sosa Gonzalez

Latino literature can support Latino students in making connections to their lives and encourage them to improve their reading and writing skills. When I was asked to work with two middle-school Latino students who were considered "at risk," I decided to engage them with literature from their own culture and invite them to write their own bilingual books.

Jose and Marcos, both seventh graders and second language learners from El Salvador, attended a middle school in Tucson. They had difficulty in speaking, reading, and writing English and were placed in an after-school reading and writing program. I met with them to improve their reading and writing skills. I worked with them in English, but took time to explain terms or words they did not understand in Spanish. The literature provided by the school district featured mainly mainstream American culture. Jose and Marcos saw little of their culture, peoples, beliefs, and traditions portrayed in the stories. After having limited success, I decided to introduce stories from the Latino culture that they could relate to and understand. This literature was an important means of enabling them to make meaning of their world and motivating them to become better readers.

Cultural Connections

It was my hope that Jose and Marcos would make connections between books and their own life experiences through reading Latino stories. By introducing stories that engage students through making important life connections, students can see themselves and their own worlds represented

and examined in the text and illustrations. (Huck, 1998; Romano, 2006).

I introduced Jose and Marcos to several Latino children's books. I began by retelling *La Llorona*, a story from *The Corn Woman: Stories and Legends of the Hispanic Southwest* by Vigil (1994), which contains traditional tales, stories about animals, and contemporary stories. The tale of *La Llorona* is similar to the tale of *La Tulivieja* from Panama that I heard as a child. A crying woman looks for her long lost children and comes at night with a sack to kidnap children who misbehave. Jose and Marcos indicated that they had heard similar stories from their elders and were eager to start the readings.

The other books we read were *Abuela's Weave* by Omar S. Castañeda (1993) and *De Colores and Other Latin-American Folk Songs for Children* by Jose Luis Orozco (1994). *Abuela's Weave* portrays the richness and culture of Guatemala through a picture book about a young girl and her grandmother who make weavings to sell at the village market. *De Colores and Other Latin-American Folk Songs for Children* includes a wonderful bilingual collection of folk songs from Mexico and Central and South America.

Jose and Marcos took turns reading the stories. We stopped and discussed the readings and I noticed that Jose and Marcos were interested in talking about the stories. "Esto es muy parecido a mi pueblo" [This is very similar to my town], exclaimed Jose. The students started to make meaningful connections with their own life experiences and were active participants in the discussions. Their responses indicated they were comprehending what they were reading. "Yo conozco ese cuento" [I know that tale], stated Marcos.

Creating a Bilingual Book

Because Jose and Marcos were making so many connections between the books and their own lives, I decided to have them create their own bilingual books. I gave them the choice of topics and encouraged them to write about something that was enjoyable, funny, or appealing in their lives. Jose decided to write about a hunting trip he took with his father and uncle in El Salvador in his book, *The Great Outdoor Experience/La gran experiencia al aire libre*. Marcos wrote about interesting encounters with animals in El Salvador in his book, *All Types of Animals/Todos tipos de animales*.

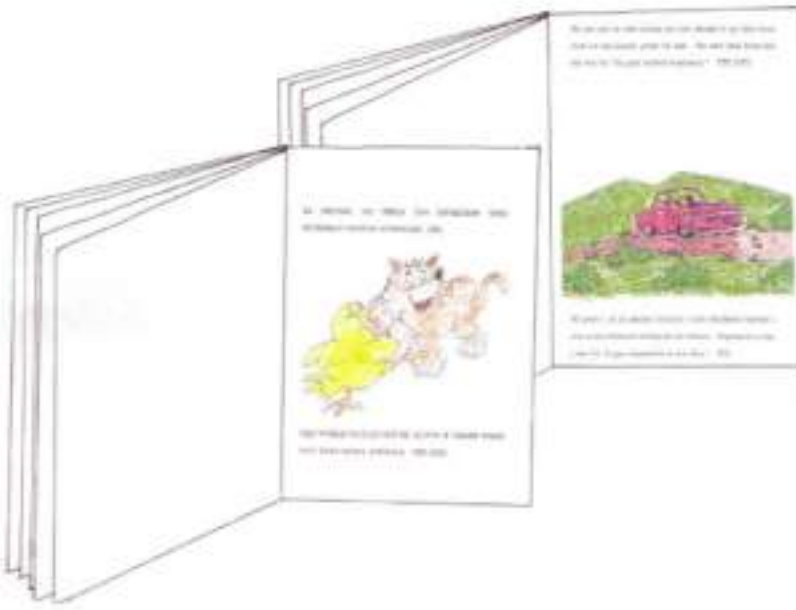


Figure 1. Jose's and Marcos's Bilingual Books.

We started the process by brainstorming ideas about what they might write. "Yo he visto a muchos animales" [I have seen many animals], began Jose. After sharing ideas, they wrote one page at a time in Spanish. After each page we discussed what they had written, and then I asked them to translate the page into English. I helped them if they had trouble translating a word or phrase. We followed this procedure for each page of their stories. I asked them questions about each page they had written. We discussed the text and came up with recommendations for revision if needed. I reviewed the text for spelling and grammar editing as well.

I asked Jose and Marcos if they wanted to illustrate the books. Both declined, stating they did not know how to draw or paint pictures. I told them I was an artist and would be happy to illustrate each of their books. After an enthusiastic *Sí*, I made preliminary sketches of each written page and shared these drafts with them for their comments and revisions. After their approval, I completed the illustrations, using pen-and-ink drawings and colored pencils.

Yo he visto a muchos animales y mis animales favoritos son el perro y el caballo. Una vez mi perro y yo fuimos al parque y jugamos con unos 'planchillos voladores.' Mi perro los agarraba con el hocico.

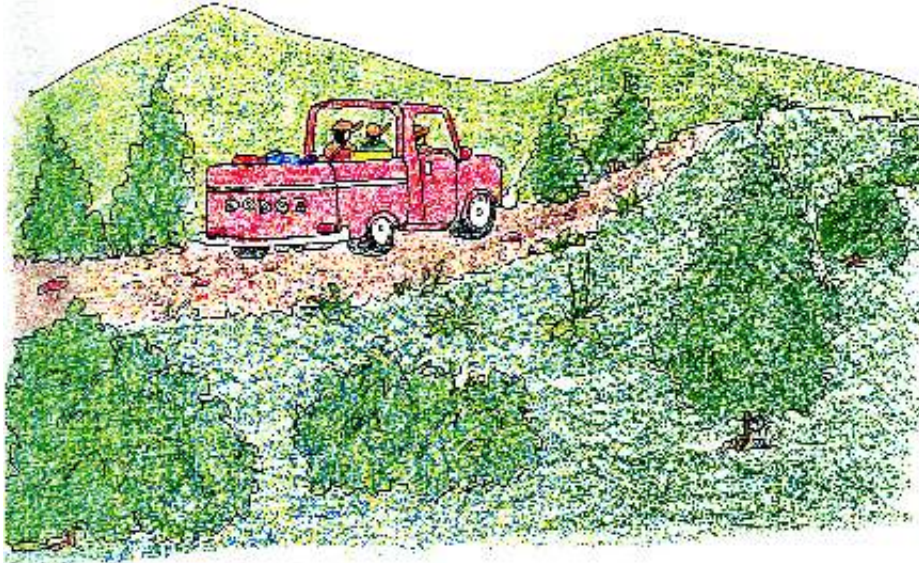


I have seen many animals and my favorite are the dog and horses.
One time me and my dog went to the park and played with some
"frisbees." My dog would catch them with his mouth.

Figure 2. Marcos's Bilingual Book.

Jose and Marcos reviewed the text and illustrations to make sure that everything matched and were in proper order. Then I had the stories and illustrations professionally bound. Jose and Marcos were eager to see the final product.

Once when I was ten years old I went hunting with my dad Conrad
and with my tio Conrad. We went in my tio's truck. My tio's
truck was a Dodge Ram 1995. We took our bows and arrows.
We also took a rifle. The rifle was my 22 caliber.



Una vez, cuando tenía diez años de edad, fui de cacería con mi
padre Conrad y mi tío Conrad. Fuimos en el camión de mi tío.
El camión de mi tío era un Dodge Ram, 1995. Llevamos arcos y
flechas. También llevamos un rifle. Mi rifle era calibre 22.

Figure 3. Jose's Bilingual Book.

When I presented the final books to them, Jose and Marcos were proud of their efforts and I was happy for their commitment and dedication to become better readers and writers. They shared their bilingual books with classmates and everyone applauded. The principal displayed their books in the reception area of the school for everyone to admire.

Conclusion

By making connections through stories about their peoples, languages, traditions, and cultures, Jose and Marcos enhanced their reading and writing skills by creating bilingual stories of their real-life experiences in El Salvador. Viascellaro and Genishi (1994) advocate the importance of students writing their own stories and picture books. Students are able to make personal connections with the child's voice within themselves. A positive learning environment for reading

and writing is created by introducing culturally relevant literature that is meaningful to students, and by providing choices and opportunities for them to create their own stories. Of course, a little help from *La Tulivieja* also makes a difference.

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"This book is the most Spanish I ever got to talk in school": Culturally Relevant Texts within Prescribed Curriculum

By Angela Grabow

Like many teachers in Arizona, I am required to follow a prescriptive curriculum that leaves little room to engage kids in real talk about meaningful texts. I wanted to give students a realm in which to talk about texts in the same ways that they talk about the latest movie, a popular song, or an event in their lives. I wanted to facilitate a coming together of readers around a text that was voluntary and governed by their self-created structures, so that they could each read their worldviews, experiences, and concerns into that text (Smith, 1995).

I presented my third grade class with the idea of meeting to talk about a book read in their spare time. Meaningful connections with text cannot happen without meaningful texts (Egawa, 1990). My classroom is a self-contained ESL classroom comprised of twenty-eight students who were primarily first and second generation migrant, refugee, and immigrant children. Frustrated with a mandated curriculum and limited text selection featuring realistic stories with Caucasian

characters or fantasy texts with animal protagonists, I chose a text with characters that were more reflective of the students I teach. *My Name is Maria Isabel*, by Alma Flor Ada (1993), is "an engaging story that combines the efforts of a Puerto Rican family to adjust to a new sense of life with a shared sense of pride in their heritage" (Day, 1993, p.15).

After giving a short presentation on the book, twelve students decided they would like to participate. They split themselves into two groups that met during their 20 minute independent reading time twice a week. One group was composed of Latino students and the other was composed of Muslim students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Initially I met with students to discuss their goals and to ask permission to record their conversations. To introduce discussion, I recorded a session in which students discussed their favorite TV shows. We listened to the recording and commented on how people "talk" with each other. When I shared that I wanted them to talk about the book in the same way that they had talked about TV shows, they looked confused. In our next meeting, students did an on-line search for book clubs and we watched clips of adults meeting and talking about books. This prompted a lot of excitement and they were ready to begin. Over the next eight weeks, students engaged in several conversations that demonstrated deep understanding of the text and meaningful connections to recurrent themes within Latino literature.

Most importantly students discussed and connected the text to their own lives and experiences in complex and thoughtful ways. One compelling dialogue from the Muslim group centered on sociopolitical themes of "border crossing" and immigration. Medina and Enciso (2002) state "the border exists as a constant, lived experience of surveillance that monitors immigration status, political affiliations, citizenship, and identity" (p. 37). Students clearly evidenced this understanding in an exchange that led the group to seek my intervention on the issue of whether or not people other than Mexicans speak Spanish.

Judin: American poor is better than being poor in other countries.

Mohammad: She's American.

Sala: No it says Puerto Rican.

Serai: But she speaks Spanish so she is Mexican.

Judin: She is in America so she is American like Mohammad said. She can be American and Mexican like the some kids at our class.

Sala: Some kids are American Mexican some are Mexican Mexican. They could go to jail or get kicked out; they are not American.

Serai: You are not an American without papers. You can have immigrant papers, refugee papers, or Mexican papers and then you are an American.

Judin: She is from Puerto Rico.

Sala: Then maybe she gets Puerto Rican papers.

Judin: Then she could be an American like Mohammad said.

Serai: But a Mexican American 'cause she speaks Spanish.

Sala, Mohammad, Judin, Adair: NO!

All: TEACHER!

These students were either immigrants or refugees to the United States, so I was not surprised they had some familiarity with "papers" and issues of citizenship. Because of their community and peer group, it also made sense they would have insights and opinions on border crossing from Mexico. What surprised me was the depth of understanding from which they drew in the process of trying to reason through the main character's citizenship status based on country of origin, language, and how she came to live in the United States.

The Latino group looked at the significance of language within the story:

Ida: Stupid is only a bad word in school.

Nina: Like Spanish is only bad in school.

Nina: But not in 3rd grade.

Carlos: Maybe not in 4th grade too.

Maya: My brother said in high school you can say "stupid" but Spanish is still bad. Talking in Spanish means you're a bad kid at high school.

Ida: At Maria Isabel's school she can talk in English and Spanish.

Joel: That's because it is in *Nueva* York.

Jorge: This book is the most Spanish I ever got to talk in school not at recess.

(Others agree)

This type of dialogue was common in the Latino group's transcripts. Students were immediately

captured by language used in the book. Joel commented, "I like this book because there are LOTS words in Spanish." The students showed an understanding of varying language uses according to context, which demonstrates a developed view of language and language usage. Unfortunately they also have caught on to the stigmatization of Spanish in school. I was saddened by student comments that Spanish was a "bad" language, likened to the use of "stupid." While I was comforted that students did not feel Spanish was bad in third grade, I was also humbled that they felt this could and would change throughout their schooling. This belief is so engrained that they had talks with siblings and other family members on the subject of when and where Spanish is looked down upon, even geographically, as indicated by Joel's statement, "That's because it is in *Nueva York*."

Their comments indicated the messages being delivered to students consciously or unconsciously by schools and the importance of teacher role in the delivery of these messages. The dominance of the English language is felt by students who speak languages other than Spanish as evidenced by a comment made by Serai, a tri-lingual student, during a whole group discussion:

I told my mother I did not want to speak my other languages anymore, only English. She started crying. She will be happy, teacher, that you say it makes me special and to practice them.

Teachers play a crucial role in providing students with a rich variety of texts, including those that might serve as a catalyst for discussion or reconciliation of the social issues they observe and that affect them. In this case, such dialogue was accomplished by inquiry surrounding the short chapter book, *My Name is Maria Isabel*. Martínez-Roldán (2005) states that inquiry involves a speaker who "attempts to elicit another's help in getting beyond his or her own present thinking" (p. 23). As teachers we have an obligation to provide our students with opportunities and texts that recognize that all persons need to see themselves in the books that they read and be validated by the images in the literature available to them (Day, 2003). Moving in this direction requires taking risks and lots of creativity as a teacher. My students' talk about texts has motivated me to keep finding time in my class, limited as it is, to provide the children with this experience.

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