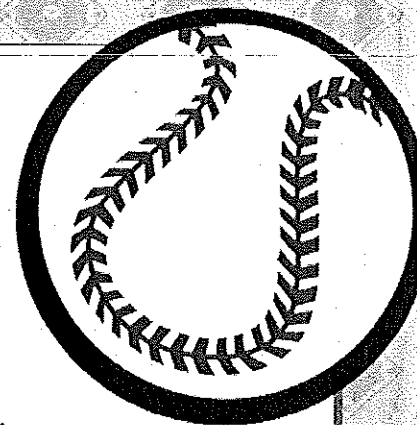


Home Run Books

Connecting Students to Culturally Relevant Texts



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This afternoon I picked up *In My Family: En mi familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza (1996). Time being limited, my purpose was simply to show the new books I had brought to my fourth graders and to encourage them to investigate and enjoy the Spanish and English texts. The fever began as a slow burn as we discussed the wonderful cover illustration depicting an outdoor dance floor, people of all ages dancing, a musical ensemble and simple light bulbs strung from posts. I asked my students what they thought of the cover and where they thought the dance was taking place. A roar went up. "MEXICO!"

I decided to read a bit to see what sort of connections my students would make with the first short vignette described in the book, "The Horned Toads: Los chameleons." The room erupted in wild conversations during the reading. Students were unable to contain their excitement; they had stories to tell and, all decorum aside, they were going to tell them! They shared with their neighbors, friends, and, of course, me. They knew about horned toads, desert environments and fire ants that "really sting." By the next vignette, "Cleaning Nopalitos: Limpiando nopalitos" there was no way to calm the wonderfully noisy ground swell of storytelling and sharing. I was entering **their** culture, a culture and tradition they were passionate to share (D. E. Freeman & Freeman, 2001) p. 109.

These are the words of Suzanne, a teacher who had been concerned that her students, almost all of whom are Latinos, were not succeeding in reading and writing. At a recent state bilingual education conference, she had bought many books, and nearly all had a Latino theme because she knew her classroom library had few books related to her students' backgrounds. Though she expected her students to connect with the books, she had no idea how much culturally relevant books would excite them.

Suzanne's goal is for all her students to develop academic proficiency in English. Her approach to literacy instruction is aimed at helping all her students succeed. Title III of the "No Child Left Behind Act" declares that English learners should "attain English proficiency" and "develop high levels of academic attainment in English..." In addition, the act calls for "high quality language instruction educational programs" to serve limited English proficient and immigrant children (Gómez, 2001) p.271.

Suzanne is aware that the key to quality language instruction is reading. Krashen (1993) points out that

the more people read, the more their reading comprehension will improve and the more capable they will be of finding difficult, academic-style texts more comprehensible. For bilingual children, the best approach is to develop their first language literacy and be sure they have many opportunities to read in both their first and second languages (Cummins, 2000;

develop academic proficiency in English. He still remembers buying Villaseñor's (1991) epic immigrant story, *Rain of Gold* for a college course on multiculturalism. "It was a huge book of 562 pages and only one of several we had to read. I felt overwhelmed and hopeless. Reading in English was slow and such hard work!" That book became Francisco's "home run" book. Once he started reading, he couldn't put it down. He admits today, "That was the first book I ever read from the beginning to the end. It was amazing. I kept reliving my own experiences."

From then on, Francisco began to read books in English for pleasure. He read stories of the recent period of history in his native El Salvador that helped him understand why his mother emigrated to the

United States including *A Place Where the Sea Remembers* (Benítez, 1955), *Bitter Grounds* (Benítez, 1997) and *The Weight of All Things* (Benítez, 2002); stories of migrant children whose experiences mirrored those of his family like *The Circuit* (F. Jimenez, 1997) and *Breaking Through* (Jimenez, 2001); stories of inner city.

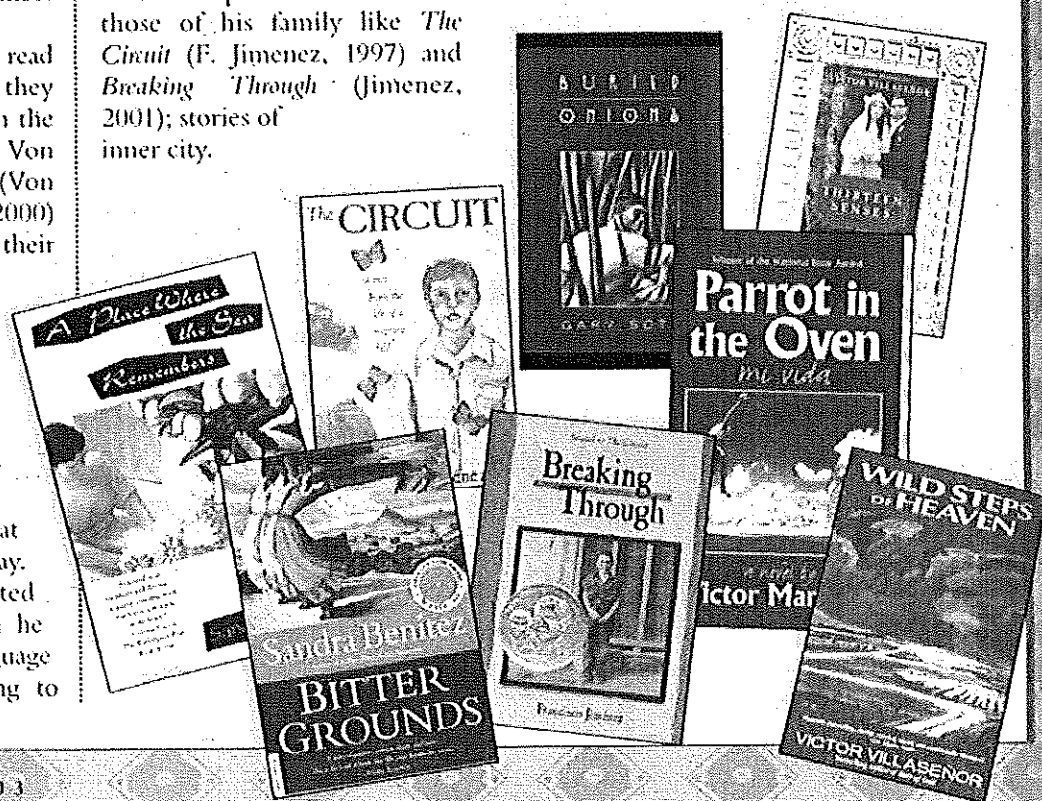
Hispanics living in Fresno where he went to high school and college like *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997) and *Parrot in the Oven* (Martinez, 1996), and two of Villaseñor's more recent books *Thirteen Senses* (Villaseñor, 2001) and *Wild Steps of Heaven* (Villaseñor, 1997). The books Francisco chose are books that he connects with, books that draw on his background and culture. Through this extensive reading, Francisco developed the academic English proficiency he needed. He graduated from college, became a bilingual teacher, and recently completed his Master's degree. In fact, his M.A. thesis included some of his own immigrant stories that he plans to submit for publication. One book had helped launch Francisco on his path to success that ultimately has led him to want to become a published author.

Culturally responsive teaching is one of six factors the Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence identified as leading to the educational success of Hispanic students (Padrón, Waxman, & Rivera, 2002). One way to engage in culturally responsive teaching is by using culturally relevant books. For Suzanne's students and for Francisco the reading of one culturally relevant

Krashen, 1996; Thomas & Collier, 2001). Suzanne knows her students, who are being instructed in English, their second language; need the additional support that comes through engagement with texts that connect to their cultural backgrounds.

Research shows that students read better and read more when they make personal connections with the books they are reading. Von Sprecken and colleagues (Von Sprecken, Kim, & Krashen, 2000) found that students took off in their reading once they found a "home run book," a term they borrowed from Clifton Fadiman. Suzanne could tell she had found a home run book when her students erupted with such enthusiasm to the Lomas Garza reading.

The key is to find books that students connect to in some way. Francisco came to the United States from El Salvador when he was fourteen. He had first language literacy, but he was struggling to



text paved the way for the kinds of extensive reading that leads to high levels of academic English proficiency. Research by Jiménez (R. Jiménez, 1997) confirms the importance of using texts that connect to students' lives. Jiménez studied struggling Latino/a readers. These students' literacy needs were best met by using culturally familiar text:

The links that students made between culturally relevant text and their own backgrounds created opportunities for making inferences and asking questions. These strategic activities, in turn, provided the participating students with further opportunities for developing their metacognitive awareness of reading (p. 241).

Goodman (1982) reported on extensive reading miscue analysis research with different populations of students across the United States including native Navajo, Hawaiian Pidgin and Samoan, and Spanish speakers. The research showed that readers understood what they were reading better when they read books that connected to their own experiences.

...the more familiar the language of the text, the actions of the characters, the description of the setting, the sequence of the events—the closer the readers' predictions will match the author's expression and the easier the text will be for the reader to comprehend (p. 302).

Clay (1991) notes that emergent readers need materials that are predictable and that a source of predictability "comes from the child's knowledge of what makes sense in the real world of his own experience..." (183). When readers can connect what they read to their own lives and background, they are more engaged and have more success in reading. Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) makes this point powerfully by telling us that "Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world (p.29).

Freeman (A. Freeman, 2000a) explored the topic of culturally relevant texts with Hispanic middle and high school students in an Arizona border community. She had students read the excerpt "Birthday Party/Cumpleaños" about a birthday celebration with a piñata from Garza's *Family Pictures: Cuadros de familia* (Garza, 1990). Freeman found that the students made many personal connections with this book. Both their miscues and their retellings of the story reflected a high level of engagement with the text. In contrast, when these same students read a story that was not culturally relevant, their miscues and retellings indicated much lower levels of comprehension.

Considerations for Choosing Culturally Relevant Texts

Teachers like Suzanne are convinced of the importance of finding culturally relevant texts for their students. Suzanne realized that the school resources were inadequate, and so she spent her own money to buy the books her students needed. Developing a collection of culturally relevant texts takes a concentrated effort. Not all books about Spanish speakers, for example, are relevant to all Hispanic students. Some books merely perpetuate stereotypes. Others, especially those published in Spain, contain settings and events that are unfamiliar to most Latino students in the United States. Still other books contain fairy tales or legends, and students have trouble connecting personally to such books. However, there are also an increasing number of books being published that students can connect with. In the next section, we offer a rubric designed to help teachers choose appropriate books.

A Rubric for Choosing Culturally Relevant Books

Freeman (A. Freeman, 2000b) points

out "While studies have shown that culturally relevant texts help support the reading development of English language learners, there has been limited discussion about how to determine the cultural relevance to individual students" (p. 28). One way to decide whether books are culturally relevant is to involve students in assessing them. Freeman developed a

Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world.

rubric (see *Cultural Relevance Rubric* on the following page) by modifying an earlier list of questions from Goodman (1982). Students are asked to rate each book on several criteria including sociocultural factors, the setting, the time period, the age and sex of the characters, and the language characters use. By discussing the answers with their students, teachers can better judge whether or not a book is culturally relevant for a particular group of students.

Teachers we have worked with have used the rubric in various ways. Some have read a book that they thought might be culturally relevant to a single English learner and then asked the questions on the rubric. They have been excited about how the children connect to the events and can extend the reading by comparing characters and events to their own families and experiences. Other teachers of older students have read a book they believed fit the questions on the rubric and then had students individually fill out the rubric. Still others have used the rubric as a basis

Cultural Relevance Rubric

- 1) Are the characters in the story like you and your family?
Just like us. Not at all
4 3 2 1
- 2) Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?
Yes. No
4 3 2 1
- 3) Have you lived in or visited places like those in the story?
Yes. No
4 3 2 1
- 4) Could this story take place this year?
Yes. No
4 3 2 1
- 5) How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?
Very Close. Not Close at all
4 3 2 1
- 6) Are there main characters in the story who are: boys (for boys) or girls (for girls)?
Yes. No
4 3 2 1
- 7) Do the characters talk like you and your family do?
Yes. No
4 3 2 1
- 8) How often do you read stories like these?
Often. Never
4 3 2 1

for class discussion of a text they read aloud to the class or that the class reads for a literature study. In the following section, we give examples of books that fit each question from the rubric.

Are the characters in the story like you and your family?

Francisco, described at the beginning of the article, is a third grade bilingual teacher working with Hispanic children in a small city on the California coast. He recently received Ada's *I Love Saturdays and domingos* (Ada, 2002) as a gift because he and his Anglo



wife have just had a baby girl. The characters in this book mirror his family situation. The book is about a girl who spends Saturdays with her English speaking Anglo grandparents and Sundays with her Spanish speaking Hispanic grandparents. Francisco read the story and then explained to his third graders that his baby girl, Maya Esmeralda, has English-speaking and Spanish-speaking grandparents like the characters in the story. This led to a discussion of what the children in the class did with their grandparents, whether they spoke English or Spanish with them, and lots of questions for the teacher about his new daughter, what languages he and his wife spoke with their baby, and how important it was to be bilingual.

Have you ever had an experience like one described in this story?

When Sandra read *La Tortillería* (Paulsen, 1995) to her limited formal schooling newcomers who come from rural



México, she discovered how culturally relevant texts can lead to content learning, reading, and writing. This book describes how corn seeds are planted, grown, harvested and made into tortillas which nourish the workers who then plant more corn. As Sandra read the book, her indigenous students from Oaxaca, Mexico, kept interrupting her telling her they had planted corn, they had harvested it, they ground corn into flour and made tortillas by hand like the pictures in the book showed. The class decided that the students from Oaxaca should demonstrate all the steps from the corn to the tortilla as a real life example. After the class had discussed the process and the materials needed for the activity, Sandra bought the ingredients, and the students brought the necessary utensils from home. Her indigenous Mexican Triqui and Mixteco students, who usually were ashamed of their culture and language limitations, became the experts. These students demonstrated the steps while the other students took notes on the whole process.

The entire classroom was engaged. The students observing and taking notes were respectful of those working, and they were attentive to the whole process. Everybody was an active participant, and the cooks shined at being the experts in front of their peers and the teacher. By drawing on her students' cultural knowledge and using a culturally relevant text, Sandra found a way to help them succeed in school. They expanded their literacy, their content knowledge, and their English.

Another book that relates to students' experiences is *Friends from the*

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Other Side: Amigos del otro lado (Anzaldúa, 1993). This book is especially appropriate for third through fifth graders who live along the border of the United States and Mexico. When teachers in south Texas read this book about a young girl who helps a young boy and his mother from "the other side," discussion often turns to undocumented immigrants, an often-ignored reality along the border. Students who were born in the United States study alongside others who either live on both sides of the border or who live in fear of deportation until they can arrange legal U.S. residence papers. Discussion of the events in this story helps students think about the dynamics in their own classroom community. The book brings the human elements of suffering and alienation to the surface and encourages students to talk about their prejudices and fears.

Have you lived in or visited places like those in the story?

Oscar, a high school reading and language arts teacher in a rural community, works with long term English learners who have been in the United States from early elementary school, never received a consistent bilingual program or learned to read and write in Spanish, and struggle now with reading and writing in English (Y. Freeman & Freeman, 2002). Oscar



reads *The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1997) to and with his students because their families have worked in agriculture all their lives. The author writes about the area Oscar's students live in, talks about places that these students know, and describes experiences they or their relatives have had. The students are interested in the short stories in the book, and they eagerly discuss the events in the story.

Could this story take place this year?

When Yvonne read *Going Home* (Bunting, 1998) to her graduate class, she realized quickly that this book was especially relevant to educators. In this story two children brought up in the United States reluctantly travel back to rural Mexico with their parents to spend Christmas with relatives there. On the trip they discover their roots and begin to understand the sacrifices their parents made for them. After reading the story, one teary-eyed teacher raised her hand and said, "That story taught me how important it is that my students go back to Mexico for the holidays. I've always complained and wondered why parents take their children out of school. I understand a bit better now." The following week, a high school teacher reported that she had read the book to her students that week and that reading led to a discussion that caused several of her students to talk about how their views of living in the United States were different from their parents' views and how hard it was for them and their parents to understand and appreciate each other. The book is especially valuable because it connects with the current reality of many Mexican American students.



How close do you think the main characters are to you in age?

Barbara finds that her native Spanish speaking first graders love to hear her read stories that relate to their experiences culturally and socially, and are also about children their own age. Barbara teaches in a rural school where many of the students are migrant children. *La mariposa* (Jiménez, 1998) was orig-



inally part of Jiménez' *The Circuit* (F. Jiménez, 1997) and is now a children's book beautifully illustrated by Simon Silva. Barbara reads the Spanish version of the book first and the students discuss it. Later in the year, while the students are engaged in an insect unit, she reminds the students of the story she read earlier in Spanish as a preview and reads them the English version. Her students tell her, "Es triste porque Francisco no tiene amigos." (It's sad because he doesn't have friends.), and they connect to his brother Roberto helping him. "Mi hermano me lleva a la escuela también, maestra." (My brother brings me to school too, teacher). In addition, the students notice the part of the story where the caterpillar turns into a butterfly and connect that to the cocoon they have been watching in their own classroom during their science unit.

Are there main characters in the story who are: boys (for boys) or girls (for girls)?

Linda teaches English as a Second Language in an urban high school. She reads her students the book, *América is Her Name* (Rodríguez, 1997). This book is about a Puerto Rican girl in the big city. Linda's female students find this book especially relevant because the character is a high school girl in a city who struggles with teachers and school officials

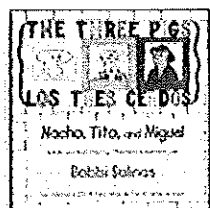


who don't understand her. Linda's students see the main character, América, develop pride in her cultural roots. In the book América has a teacher like Linda who encourages her students to write poetry and write about their lives and experiences. Linda has found other books that boys in her class connect to more fully. One book almost all the boys enjoy is Gary Soto's *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997), a story about a boy who is trying to escape the violence in the

big city where he lives. Many of the boys in Linda's class can see themselves in the main character of this powerful story.

Do the characters talk like you and your family do?

Bobbie Salinas' *The Three Pigs: Los tres cerdos, Nacho, Tito and Miguel* (Salinas, 1998) served as an exciting shared reading for Manuel as he worked with a small group of struggling middle school Hispanic readers. These boys immediately connected to the language of the characters and the



detailed art in the book as well as the humorous characters and events. They noticed the details in the book and one boy commented that Nacho's house looked like his abuela's in México. Another commented that the souped up car looked like a primo's (cousin's) car, and all noticed that the pigs liked to eat homemade tortillas. They laughed that the wolf's name was José and the pigs said, "No way, José," when they wouldn't let him into their houses. They even noticed that one pig, Miguel, had a bilingual tee shirt reading "Leer es poder: Reading is power." This familiar story connected to these readers because this version includes in the text language, places and things in their own lives.

How often do you read stories like these?

Recently, as an assignment for Yvonne's graduate class, students were asked to read a culturally relevant book to a student or group of students and administer the rubric. Yvette, a bilingual teacher, was appalled when the student she interviewed answered, "Nunca." (Never) to the questions, "How often do you read stories like these?" ¿Nunca? Yvette asked. "Never." her student insisted. Our concern and our experience is that bilingual students in

schools we visit in California and more recently in Texas are not reading culturally relevant books very often in schools. Classroom libraries do not have enough books and certainly not enough in students' primary languages. Even when there are books in English or in native languages, few of those books have the characteristics that the culturally relevant rubric calls for: few books are about the present experiences of the students, few books have characters that look like and talk like the students, few books have settings the students recognize, and few books include the kinds of everyday experiences the students have.

A few years ago one might have argued that there were not many culturally relevant books available. However, now, at least for Hispanic students and especially those with Mexican origins, there are books that connect to students' present lives and realities. Bilingual and ESL conferences at state and national levels display many such books and on line resources are available with simple searches.

Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) has summarized for us the importance of connecting what students read to their lives, and we as educators should not forget his words as we work to make sure that no bilingual child is left behind. Freire wrote: "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p.35). The teachers we describe here have used culturally relevant books to ensure that their students always connect reading the word with reading their world. ●

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