Developing Literacy through Culturally Relevant Texts

Iliana Alanís

Recently I was working with a group of elementary bilingual teachers along a remote section of the Texas/Mexico border. I had been asked to facilitate the development of their social studies curriculum for their new dual-language program. I realized that although these teachers had experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) children, they had little experience using books that related to their children’s cultural backgrounds. Teachers were able to offer a definition of culturally relevant texts (books that related to the child’s background in some way); however, they could not articulate how to implement such texts in their lessons. Teachers had questions about how often and at what point to supplement adopted reading curriculum. Furthermore, teachers were more likely to include culturally relevant texts during reading than in any other content area, which seemed self-limiting.

If social studies standards call for “experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity [as well as the] study of individual development and identity,” how effective could elementary teachers be if they were missing such a critical piece of the curriculum? Attempting to answer that question spurred me to write this article. In order to successfully prepare young students for active citizenship in a democratic society, effective teachers recognize, honor, and incorporate children’s voices in all areas of curriculum. Given the growing percentage of Latino/a youth in our schools, I offer three strategies for facilitating the development of Mexican American children’s cultural and linguistic identities as they acquire language and literacy: (1) listening to oral storytelling, (2) creating individual historical narratives, and (3) using biographies to develop a broader historical understanding of the Mexican American experience in the United States. In addition, I offer considerations for choosing culturally relevant texts as well as a list of suggested literature for Mexican American children.

Incorporating Culturally Relevant Texts

The teachers I was working with were preparing to implement a Spanish/English dual-language education program where students develop bilingualism, biliteracy, and biculturalism as they learn about and from each other. Dual language programs attempt to develop children’s identities with culturally responsive pedagogy. One crucial strategy is the use of culturally relevant texts, which can be defined as texts where mention is made of events or information that is within children’s experience, and which draws on their background and culture. Culturally relevant texts help students understand who they are and where they come from because they connect to students’ lives, not just to their cultural heritage. For example, I Love Saturdays y Domingos
by Alma Flor Ada describes the joy of a young girl’s weekends: Saturdays spent with her Euro-American Grandma and Grandpa, and Sundays with her Mexican-American Abuelito [Grandfather] and Abuelita [Grandmother]. The author paints a portrait that reflects the family setting of many youths in classrooms today who struggle to develop their own identity as they straddle two cultural worlds.

Personal identity is shaped by one’s culture, by groups, and by institutional influences. Children’s literature that shares the experiences, contributions, and perspectives of various cultural groups can help young children develop a sense of belonging and identity. It also provides the critical link between prior knowledge and texts. Such materials are essential if Mexican American children are to succeed in their progress toward literacy, and reading comprehension is perhaps the key to literacy. Connecting children to culturally relevant texts facilitates that comprehension.

Background Knowledge
The importance of background knowledge for successful reading comprehension has become an accepted principle in reading instruction. When teachers use culturally relevant texts, students have a better understanding of the books and, as a result, become more engaged in their reading. Their enjoyment and interest increase, and they become motivated to read more.

Students’ background knowledge helps them make predictions about the story. For example, one study found that links students made between culturally relevant texts and their own backgrounds created opportunities for making inferences and asking questions. Another study used miscue analysis to compare students’ reading of a culturally relevant book with their reading of another book that had little cultural relevance. Students made higher quality miscues and produced better retellings when the culturally relevant story was used. (Reading Miscue analysis assesses the strategies that children use in their reading. Miscues include substitutions of the written word with another, omissions, additions, and alterations to the word sequence.)

A number of studies show that providing instruction that is culturally responsive promotes high achievement among CLD students. Teachers who exhibit culturally responsive pedagogy:

- bridge the gap between the school and the world of the student
- provide positive perspectives on parents and families
- demonstrate cultural sensitivity
- use active teaching methods
- provide culturally mediated instruction.

Culturally responsive instruction is consistent with the values of the students’ own culture, and encourages teachers to adapt their instruction to meet the learning needs of all students. Using culturally relevant texts draws on the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance style of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. Consequently, teachers who use culturally relevant texts affirm CLD students who may be struggling with their linguistic and historical identities in schools that often times deny those essential elements of a students’ culture.

Listening to Oral Storyreading
One simple activity teachers can use is to read books aloud that are culturally relevant to children, and to do so on a regular basis. One example of such text is Gary Soto’s Big Bushy Mustache, in which a six year old boy turns down his mustache, the boy feels that he looks just like his father. After the oral reading, teachers can ask students to discuss with a partner any similarities between Soto’s character and themselves. Ask students to identify one feature or characteristic of their parents or older siblings that they too would like to emulate. Children can draw and write about their ideas and then share their thoughts with the class. In the early grades, observing brothers, sisters, and parents are appropriate activities because young children develop their own identities in the context of families.

A second idea is for teachers to invite a guest speaker into the classroom who reads from a book in either English or Spanish. Listening to stories read aloud in a native or second language develops vocabulary, story structure, and listening comprehension. Children enjoy the familiarity of the text, plot line, and scenarios as well as the opportunity to connect their experiences with those of the author. Once children become familiar with how stories are structured, they can begin to develop their own stories. Bridging the gap between home and school by inviting family members to read stories aloud provides children with the experience of people sharing their culture with others. It also develops children’s sense of belonging within their own cultural history.

Creating Individual Historical Narratives
Children’s stories can be complex in voice, style, construction, and content. Children can imitate the models provided by stories they have read or heard, or they can develop stories based on their own experiences. Every story a child tells develops an understanding of the storyteller. Through students’ stories, teachers learn of their children’s cultures, of their diverse experiences, and of their connections to family and friends.

Students can engage in small group discussion about culturally relevant texts. An excellent selection for this activity is Carmen Lomas Garza’s In My Family/En Mi Familia. Garza’s vibrant paintings and personal stories depict memories of growing up in
the traditional Mexican-American community of her hometown of Kingsville, Texas. Each picture reflects her pride in her Mexican American heritage. If only one copy of the book is available, the teacher may scan for this lesson selected pictures from the text, so that each group has a large image for viewing. Teachers can introduce the text and the activity by sharing one image that connects to students’ background; enjoying a family birthd...
• Will the stories encourage discussions?
• Do the illustrations avoid societal stereotypes?
• Do the stories promote understanding of our diverse society?
• Are the stories age-appropriate to ensure children understand what is presented?

One way to determine whether books are culturally relevant is to involve students in assessing them by using a Cultural Relevance Rubric, in which students are asked to rate each book on several criteria including the setting, socio-cultural factors, and the language characters use. By discussing students’ responses, teachers can judge whether a book is age-appropriate and culturally relevant for a particular group of students.

Educational Implications

Given the complexity of the Latino population, effective teachers will attend to the native country, language proficiency, socioeconomic status of their students and students’ families. Incorporating culturally relevant texts for Mexican American children in all content areas, in Spanish as well as in English, contributes to the academic success of this growing population. Effective social studies teachers include children’s voices in the curriculum and enhance classroom community and cultural identity by asking students to tell and write their own historical narratives, by seeking out students’ families as resources for knowledge, and by asking students to learn from important historical figures in their culture’s history. Using the experiences and skills of all families to encourage student learning is a more productive way of approaching education than the all-too-common viewpoint that students have only deficits that must be repaired. Using students’ “funds of knowledge” can make the classroom an environment in which all children feel a sense of belonging and accomplishment.

If we regard students as active knowledge generators who are capable of thinking critically and creatively, then we will work to ensure that students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds are represented in the curriculum. Using culturally relevant texts can provide a crucial link between prior knowledge and reading comprehension. More importantly, however, social studies teachers create experiences that provide for the study of culture, individual development, and time, continuity, and change as students engage in the literacy process.

Notes
16. Many past issues of Notable Trade Books for Young People are available free at www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable. The most recent issue is available online only to members of NCSSE. The list is also published each year in the May/June issue of Social Education.

Ilana Alanís is an assistant professor in the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at The University of Texas at San Antonio.