

# Connecting Students to Culturally Relevant Texts

Yvonne Freeman and David Freeman

Francisco came to the United States from El Salvador when he was fourteen. He had learned to read and write in his first language, but he was struggling to develop reading proficiency in English. He still remembers buying Victor Villaseñor's (1991) epic immigrant story, *Rain of Gold* for a college course on multiculturalism. Francisco recalls, "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!" However, once he started reading the book, Francisco couldn't put it down. Later, he reflected on the experience: "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 had immigrated to the United States. These books included *A Place Where the Sea Remembers* (Benítez, 1955), *Bitter Grounds* (Benítez, 1997), and *The Weight of All Things* (Benítez, 2002). He read stories of migrant children whose experiences mirrored those of his family, like *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997) and *Breaking Through* (Jiménez, 2001). In addition, he read about Latinos living in Fresno, where he went to high school and college, in *Buried Onions* (Soto, 1997) and *Parrot in the Oven* (Martínez, 1996). He has also read two of Villaseñor's more recent books: *Thirteen Senses* (2001) and *Wild Steps of Heaven* (1997).

The books Francisco chose are ones 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 includes some of his own immigrant stories that he plans to submit for publication. One culturally relevant book helped launch Francisco on his path to academic success and has fueled his desire to become a published author.

## Why Use Culturally Relevant Texts?

Readers like Francisco can more easily construct meaning from a text that contains familiar elements because their background knowledge helps them make predictions and inferences about the story. Francisco could picture the events Villaseñor described in *Rain of Gold* because he had been in similar situations.

Freeman (2000) reports on research she conducted with students in Arizona in which she used miscue analysis to compare students' reading of a culturally relevant book with their reading of another book that had little cultural relevance. She found that students made higher quality miscues and produced better retellings with the culturally relevant story.

When teachers use culturally relevant books, students understand the books more fully, and, as a result, become more engaged in their reading. When students become engaged in texts, they are motivated to read more. Rather than plodding through the lengthy novel, Francisco lost himself in the world Villaseñor created, a world that Francisco could easily imagine.

*"That was the first book I ever read from the beginning to the end. It was amazing. I kept reliving my own experiences."*

*Schools with enlightened language policies ensure that students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are represented in the curriculum.*

Another important reason for using culturally relevant texts is that they help students understand who they are. Cummins (2000) points out that schools are places where students negotiate identities. Schools can either affirm or deny those identities. Many young English learners enter school as monolingual speakers of their heritage language and leave as monolingual speakers of

English. In the process of losing their language, they lose essential elements of their culture, as well. Older students, like Francisco, may retain their language but end up culturally ambivalent. But schools with enlightened language policies ensure that students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are represented in the curriculum. Using culturally relevant books is one way that teachers can do this.

Not every book a student reads needs to be culturally relevant. Books open up new worlds to students, and students need to read from a variety of texts. Many teachers include multicultural literature in their curriculum to expose stu-

dents to a wide range of experiences. However, multicultural books are not the same as culturally relevant books, and at least some of the books students read should be culturally relevant. A book about a girl growing up in Spain or Mexico or a book written in Spanish is not necessarily relevant to a Mexican American child who has lived her whole life in the United States. Culturally relevant books connect to students' lives, not just to their cultural heritage.

### **What Makes a Book Culturally Relevant?**

Drawing on earlier work by Y. Goodman (1982), who identified features beyond ethnicity that help readers connect to texts, Freeman (2000) developed a rubric that students and teachers can use to determine how relevant a particular book might be. This rubric contains a list of questions that teachers, or students and teachers working together, can use to evaluate a book. The rubric can be used with mainstream students as well as with students from different cultural backgrounds. The questions focus on ways the characters and events in the book match up with the

lives of the students in the class.

The examples we use in this article come from books about Latinos because that is the context in which we now live and work. In South Texas, almost all the English learners are Hispanics. When we lived in the central valley of California, the student population was much more varied. In that setting we searched for books that represented a wider range of cultures. For example, many of the California students were Hmong, so a book like *Dia's Story Cloth* (Cha, 1996) was culturally relevant for them. Another relevant book, *Jouanah: the Hmong Cinderella* (Coburn, 1996), is available in Spanish and Hmong as well as in English. A good book for Arabic students is *The Day of Ahmed's Secret* (Heide & Gilliland, 1990). Another story that many students related to was *Sitti's Secrets* (Nye, 1994), which tells of a girl whose grandmother lives in Palestine.

There are books available that reflect a variety of cultures. *Walking the Choctaw Road* (Tingle, 2003) is a fascinating series of tales about the Choctaw people and their forced removal to Oklahoma. Allen Say has written a number of stories about the experience of Japanese Americans. *Tea with Milk* (1999), for example, relates the experience of a young girl who grows up in San Francisco and then returns to her native Japan. *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2001) tells the story of a new immigrant from Korea, Unhei, who is worried about making friends in her new country. Alike has written and illustrated two wonderful stories about a girl who comes to the United States without a word of English but with a true gift for art: *Marianthe's Story* (1998) is in two parts, *Painted Words* and *Spoken Memories*. The first part tells of Mari's struggles in starting school in a new country, and the second part tells of her life in a village and the reasons her family immigrated to the U.S.

Although a wide range of books is available, determining cultural relevance should go beyond the nationality or ethnicity of the main character and include a number of other factors. The rubric that we designed invites students to examine cultural relevance. To exemplify the use of this rubric, we address each question by discussing books appropriate for Latino readers living in this country.

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

Two culturally relevant books with Latino characters living in different settings are *Abuelita's Heart* (Córdova, 1997) and *¡Sí, se puede! Yes, We Can* (Cohn, 2002). Despite the

differences in locale, both stories emphasize family relationships. The first story tells of the relationship between a young girl and her grandmother, who lives in the mountains of the Southwest. When the girl goes to visit, her grandmother introduces her to the plants and animals of the rural area where she lives. As they share experiences, the family relationship is strengthened, and the girl learns to appreciate her grandmother's cultural knowledge.

*¡Si, se puede!* tells of a janitors' strike in Los Angeles. Carlitos's mother works as a custodian, but she doesn't make enough money to support her family, so Carlitos is very worried when she tells him the custodians will go on strike. He wants to help, but he is afraid his mother will lose her job. This true story has characters whose lives may mirror the lives of other urban Latinos.

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

Immigrant families from Mexico and Central America often come to the U.S. to work in agriculture. Books about the experiences of migrant workers are relevant for the children in these families. *Amelia's Road* (Altman, 1993) tells the story of a young girl whose family is constantly on the move. The story starts with the line, "Amelia Luisa Martínez hated roads." Like many migrant children, Amelia has no permanent home. Even her teachers don't learn her name. However, Mrs. Ramos does learn her name and encourages her to draw a picture of her favorite place. Amelia adds the picture to a memory box that she buries under a favorite tree, a place to which she can return.

A book about migrant workers for older students is *Breaking Through* (Jiménez, 2001). This book continues the saga of a migrant family in California, begun in *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997). In *The Circuit*, Jiménez tells of his early years spent picking cotton and strawberries. *Breaking Through* then recounts his middle school and high school years. He tells about the people who helped him succeed in school while he was living in a migrant camp and working to help support his family.

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

*The Treasure on Gold Street/El tesoro en la calle oro* (Byrd, 2003) is the story of a mentally retarded woman who lives with her elderly mother and plays with the neighborhood children. This woman is the treasure of Gold Street. The

young girl who narrates the story is amazed when she discovers that this woman played with her mother when her mother was a young girl. This true story shows how a whole neighborhood can join together to support all members of their *barrio*.

*My Very Own Room/Mi propio cuartito* (Pérez, 2000) tells of a girl with five younger brothers whose dream is to have a room of her own. With determination, imagination, and the help of her family, she converts a storage closet into a room with her own bed and a lamp so she can read every night. This book reflects the experiences of many children living in crowded homes where privacy is a luxury.

***Could this story take place this year?***

Young readers especially enjoy stories that are set in the present. *Jalapeño Bagels* (Casilla, 1996) uses a contemporary situation to bring out the richness of bicultural identity. Pablo can't decide what food to bring to school for International Day. His parents own a bakery, and he thinks about bringing *pan dulce*, the Mexican sweet bread that reflects his mother's heritage. But Pablo isn't sure. Maybe he should bring the bagels that his Yiddish-speaking father makes. Finally, Pablo hits on the perfect solution: he will bring jalapeño bagels. As he tells his parents, "They are a mixture of both of you. Just like me!"

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

Children like to read stories about characters who are their age. *Pepita Talks Twice/Pepita habla dos veces* (Lachtman, 1995) is the story of an elementary age bilingual girl who resents having to translate for those in her neighborhood who only speak one language. Having to "talk twice" slows Pepita down and keeps her from doing some things she likes, so one day she decides to speak only English. She even starts calling her dog "Wolf" instead of "Lobo." Pepita insists on speaking English until Lobo runs in front of a car. When she yells, "Wolf!" her dog does not respond, and it is only by "talking twice" that she saves him. This experience convinces her that "it's great to speak two languages." This book touches on an important conflict that many young bilinguals face.

*Culturally relevant books connect to students' lives, not just to their cultural heritage.*

words in the native language or a familiar name can help a student connect with a book.

### ***Are the main characters in the story boys or girls?***

Books about girls may be more relevant for girls. *The Bakery Lady/La señora de la panadería* (Mora, 2001) tells the story of Mónica, who wants to be a baker like her grandmother. She loves spending time in the family bakery. According to Mexican tradition, the person who finds

the Baby Jesus in the special bread made to eat during the Epiphany gets to cook for the next party. Mónica's dream of being a baker comes true when she finds the doll in the last piece of the bread at the Epiphany celebration.

Likewise, boys often like to read about other boys. In *A Gift from Papá Diego/Un regalo de Papá Diego* (Saenz, 1998), a young boy misses his grandfather who lives in Mexico. Little Diego is determined to see his grandfather, so he finds a solution—a Superman outfit that will allow him to fly to Mexico. He gets the outfit for his birthday, but when he tries to fly, he falls to the floor. He is bitterly disappointed. However, his family, impressed by his determination, surprise him by bringing Papá Diego to visit.

### ***Do the characters talk like you and your family do?***

Sometimes a few words in the native language or a familiar name can help a student connect with a book. A modern-day version of Cinderella, *Cinderella Latina/La cenicienta latina* (Salinas, 2003), contains both Spanish words and current English expressions. For example, Cinderella's father, Don Pedro, is considered *guapo* (handsome) by all the women who flirt with him when he drives to the *pulga* (flea market).

### ***How often do you read stories like these?***

Students need opportunities to read books that reflect their cultural heritage. *Harvesting Hope: The Story of César Chávez* (Krull, 2003) recounts the historical events that led to the United Farm Workers being given union status and better working conditions. This book presents events from Chávez's life in a form that young Latino readers can easily understand. Another relevant book is *El Cucuy!*, Joe Hayes' (2001) retelling of the familiar boogeyman story. El cucuy is a giant with one large ear who hears children when they

misbehave. Children in many Latino families are threatened with el cucuy if they misbehave, so elements of the story may be very familiar to them.

### **Conclusion**

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. After reading *En mi familia/In My Family* (Garza, 1996), Yvette, a bilingual teacher, asked her student the questions on the rubric. She was appalled when her student answered, "Nunca" (Never) to the question, "How often do you read stories like these?" "¿Nunca?" Yvette asked. "Never," her student insisted. Our concern and our experience is that many English learners 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 available, few of them have the characteristics that the culturally relevant rubric calls for.

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 for those of Mexican origin, 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 online resources can be found with simple searches.

Paulo Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1987) has summarized the importance of connecting what students read to their lives. He wrote: "Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world" (p. 35). When teachers use culturally relevant books, they ensure that their students always connect reading the word with reading their world. ●

### **References**

- Aliki. (1998). *Marianthe's story*. New York: Greenwillow Press.
- Altman, L. J. (1993). *Amelia's road*. New York: Lee & Low Books.
- Benítez, S. (1993). *A place where the sea remembers*. New York: Scribner.
- Benítez, S. (1997). *Bitter grounds*. New York: Picador USA.

- Benítez, S. (2002). *The weight of all things*. New York: Hyperion Press.
- Byrd, L. (2003). *The treasure on Gold Street/El tesoro en la calle oro*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Casilla, R. (1996). *Jalapeño bagels*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cha, D. (1996). *Dia's story cloth: The Hmong people's journey of freedom*. New York: Lee and Low Books.
- Choi, Y. (2001). *The name jar*. New York: Knopf.
- Coburn, J. (1996). *Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella*. Arcadia, CA: Shen's Books.
- Cohn, D. (2002). *¡Sí se puede! Yes, we can!: Janitor strike in L.A.* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Córdova, A. (1997). *Abuelita's heart*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Tonawanda, NY: Multilingual Matters.
- Freeman, Y. (2000). *Considerations for the selection of culturally relevant text*. Unpublished article, University of Arizona, Tucson.
- Freire, P., and Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey.
- Garza, C. L. (1996). *In my family/En mi familia*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Goodman, Y. (1982). Retellings of literature and the comprehension process. *Theory into Practice: Children's Literature*, XXI (4), 301-307.
- Hayes, J. (2001). *El cucuy: A bogeyman cuento in English and Spanish*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Heide, F., & Gilliland, J. (1990). *The day of Ahmed's secret*. New York: Scholastic.
- Jiménez, F. (1997). *The circuit: Stories from the life of a migrant child*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Jiménez, F. (2001). *Breaking through*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Krull, K. (2003). *Harvesting hope: The story of César Chávez*. New York: Harcourt.
- Lachtman, O. (1995). *Pepita talks twice/Pepita habla dos veces*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.
- Martinez, V. (1996). *Parrot in the oven: Mi vida*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Mora, P. (2001). *The bakery lady/La señora de la panadería*. Houston: Piñata Books.
- Nye, N. (1994). *Sitti's secrets*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Pérez, A. I. (2000). *My very own room/Mi propio cuartito*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Saenz, B. (1998). *A gift from Papá Diego/Un regalo de Papá Diego*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Salinas, B. (2003). *Cinderella Latina/La cenicienta latina*. Oakland, CA: Piñata Publications.
- Say, A. (1999). *Tea with milk*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Soto, G. (1997). *Buried onions*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.
- Tingle, T. (2003). *Walking the Choctaw road*. El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Villaseñor, V. (1991). *Rain of gold*. New York: Dell.
- Villaseñor, V. (1997). *Wild steps of heaven*. New York: Delta.
- Villaseñor, V. (2001). *Thirteen senses*. New York: Harper Collins.

**Yvonne Freeman** is a professor of bilingual education and **David Freeman** is a professor of reading at University of Texas-Pan American. Both are interested in literacy education for English language learners. Their most recent books are *Closing the Achievement Gap: How to Work with Limited Formal Schooling* and *Long-Term English Learners and Essential Linguistics: What You Need to Know to Teach Reading, ESL, Spelling, Phonics, and Grammar*, both published by Heinemann.