

CULTURALLY RELEVANT POETRY

Creating Esperanza (Hope) with Stanzas



FERNANDO RODRIGUEZ-VALLS

Schools in California are populated with hundreds of thousands of students who daily bring to the classroom the richness of diverse cultures. Yet, the majority of these students are exposed to scripted anthologies that neither recognize their diversity nor empower students with multicultural exchanges. Thus, the opportunity to create an environment where literacy stops the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes disappears, impeding students to fully experience the joy of reading as a mechanism that generates multicultural consciousness as well as literary competence.

This article advocates for the use of culturally relevant poetry, which pictures the students' cultures as an asset rather than a barrier. Focusing on the struggles Latino students experience in inner-city schools of Los Angeles, I argue that building a strong sense of cultural identity with the support of active parent involvement and enlightenment (Kant, 1784) facilitates the creation of a global culture. Moving from inside out students, parents, and teachers cooperatively read and analyze poetry to create the *Esperanza* (Hope) that another world is really possible, a world where understanding who we are and where we come from is the first step to embrace other cultures.

Fernando Rodriguez-Valls is an assistant professor in the College of Education at the Imperial Valley Campus of San Diego State University, Calexico, California.

Multiculturalism in the Classroom: Knowledge or Requirement?

During the 2005-2006 school year, I taught fourth grade in a public school located in the inner city of Los Angeles. Within this setting, scripted anthologies maintained a monochrome, mechanistic (Griffiths, 1992) tonality. This tonality "discolored" Latino students and pushed them towards a gray path. Day after day, these students cognitively grew within "single-cultured" walls surrounded by a society that ignored the essence of education, which is to develop "literate cultural subjects, who are neither objects nor machines" (Savater, 1997). Without understanding "*la historia de los colores*," the history of colors (Subcomandante Marcos, 2001) of each culture, represented by the narratives of the community, students' thoughts became segmented; hence, students were unable to think holistically.

My responsibility as a transforming educator drove me to implement scripted anthologies with books that incorporated the lifeworld (Habermas, 1968) experiences and knowledge of the Latino community. These texts were utilized not only during the activities developed in the classroom, but also through meaningful homework, which helped students and their parents to build strong bridges between the academic knowledge initiated within the schools and the vernacular voices echoed at home.

These Latino students as well as children of other various cultural backgrounds looked for educational spaces willing to embrace their cultural diversity. However,

my experience taught me that inner-city schools responded to these needs in three different ways. The majority of schools promoted a pure assimilation/acculturation to the mainstream culture in which students were expected to absorb the new culture and to lose their native culture.

This process was reinforced by anthologies approved by school districts that consistently perpetuate cultural stereotypes (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). In some of these anthologies, the main Latino characters were either dishwashers or bullfighters. When these anthologies were used as the main resource for literacy, students were unable to construct an accurate sense of pride of their own culture.

Occasionally, the schools' reactions displayed more tolerance and shallowly celebrated students' culture during monthly assemblies (i.e., Black History Month, Cinco de Mayo). During these assemblies, students performed sketches that somehow were related with the main theme, however there was not a meaningful alignment with the curricular activities engaged in the classroom.

In some rare cases, schools answered the students' needs by embracing their cultural practices. This third response articulated the idea that each culture has valuable elements, which can coexist together and enrich each other, thus creating true cultural diversity.

In order to find the valuable elements which each culture contains during the back to school night reunion, I talked with the parents and asked them about their

expectations and their thoughts on the materials and books their children had been using at school. At the end of that meeting, parents, students, and I informally read the poem “*in the inner city*” by Lucille Clifton (1980), which I had translated into Spanish, and we talked about their thoughts and ideas on the piece.

This ice-breaking activity had the goal of switching from mainstream models of parent involvement based on “come to my school and I will tell you what to do”, to participatory, democratic models of enlightenment built on “welcome to your school and tell me what you want to do, I want to learn from you.”

Reading with parents and students Clifton’s words “in the inner city or like we call it home...[*en los suburbios de la ciudad o lo que nosotros llamamos hogar*]” taught me that one of the most seamless ways to embrace students’ and families’ experiences in order to build an identity was utilizing poems that recognized and respected their culture. Analyzing culturally relevant poetry allowed students and their community to find their own educational rhythm (Searle, 1993). Interacting with poetry showed parents and students that with passion and commitment it was possible to move from passive learners to become agents of social change (Popkewitz, 1999).

After this preliminary, informal exercise the 4th grade Latino students and their families engaged in a critical thinking process implemented through lesson plans that utilized poetry as the tool to reach each level of language proficiency. When interacting with poetry, we read, re-enacted, played, painted, deconstructed, and sang the text in order to meet the different learning styles of all my students. What follows are some of the reflections and poems gathered during that school year.

Experiencing Culture through Poetry

The week after our informal poetry reading, we began a more academic poetic journey by reading the poem *Curtains* (1987) by Sandra Cisneros. The first day into this activity, the students and I read and discussed the poem together. Once we concluded the discussion, I asked the students to create poems reflecting on the second stanza of the poem, “Inside they hide bright walls... Good colors in another country...[*Dentro esconden paredes brillantes... Buenos colores en otro país*] and on the different type of neighborhoods (Rodriguez-Valls, 2007) they encountered on their trips to the big metropolis of Los Angeles.

One of the students, Gemma (all

names are pseudonyms), wrote, “When I drive North to Los Angeles, I see that little by little neighborhoods are looking better...” After she read her poem to the entire class, I asked the students to reflect on Gemma’s thoughts. The debate that followed was what I called the final expression of meaningful learning. Students shouted, “Those places have more money.” “Whites live there, that’s why.”

After this debate, I assigned for homework a cooperative, parents and students, reading and discussion of the poem, guided by the same question we used in our classroom dialogue. In order to engage parents on this independent work at home, I translated, Sandra Cisneros’ poem “*Curtains* [*Cortinas*]. Oftentimes, I had heard students saying, “My parents cannot help me with my homework because they do not speak English.” By assigning cooperative homework that included bilingual texts, I wanted to eliminate the picture that defined Latino parents as passive participants in the learning process and install a portrait that displayed all the features Latino and other parents of color in general possessed as cultural agents with strong social capital, capital defined by Putman and Feldstein (2003, p. 1) as “networks of relationships that weave individuals into groups and communities.”

The goal of these home discussions between students and parents was to promote a new participatory opportunity where all the agents of the learning process—students, parents, and teachers—validated each other. To support this participatory element during the second day working with *Curtains*, students read and discussed the reflective family poems written by parents and students.

Reading and listening to poems like the one Marcos, a parent wrote, “My home is a place where we could fulfill our potential as human beings, a place where our rights are respected [*Mi hogar está donde podemos desarrollarnos como seres humanos dignos donde nuestros derechos se respeten*], and the one written by his son, Pedro, “My home is my culture my house is my shelter my pictures are memories” opened my eyes to a new way of teaching, a socially responsible teaching, committed to transformation.

Gemma’s, Marco’s, and Pedro’s poems and others exemplified the possibility to utilize their histories to build the solid foundation needed to propel Latinos to the highest levels of critical thinking as well as to increase their linguistic proficiency in their second language, English. Parents and students, utilizing the lyrical, colloquial voice that came from their hearts

and was filled with all the memories carved by their ancestors, engaged in a learning process that became an artistic activity.

Through stanzas, students and families easily mirrored their household experiences with the written word. Those words, without grammatical constraints, gave meaning and context to their culture and the knowledge gained outside academic settings. In doing so, the community moved from static multicultural frameworks where two cultures tolerate each other, to a dynamic multicultural experience that embraced cultures (Ansell, 2003) into new collective, cooperative traditions defined by the idea of a global village.

Even though “*Curtains*” facilitated the analysis of the history and the story of their neighborhoods and the other neighborhoods that surround theirs, I wanted to know more about the community that was generating the history of people [*la historia de gente*] like Gemma, Marcos, and Pedro, a history called by Howard Zinn (1980) “*the people’s history of the United States*.”

Thus, to accomplish this goal, I became an ethnographer conducting home visits and sitting and reading books at the community bookstore that students and parents frequented in search of books. Being there, listening and talking to them, it was clear that effective lessons needed a silent period (Krashen, 1984) where teachers hear, smell, see, touch, and feel the community before they began to speak.

Once I gathered this ‘five-sensed’ information, I felt better prepared to read stanzas *to* and *with* my students and their parents. Understanding the community groomed my transformative teaching (Romo, Bradfield-Kreider & Serrano, 2003), a teaching-learning experience that recognizes and validates the remarkable histories and stories students and families bring to school.

Moving Cultures, Crossing Cultural Borders

Conducting micro-ethnographies bestowed my search for better teaching practices with a new way to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) within the community. Where the first poetry reading during back-to-school-night and the analysis of *Curtains* facilitated the communication between the community and myself, the ethnographic study alerted me to the need to find new texts that would empower the community to construct a Zone of Cultural Comfort (Rodriguez-Valls, 2007)—ZCC—in which all the participants could become at some point knowledgeable others (Vygotzky, 1930).

Following Vygotsky's concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), defined as the variance between what a person can do with the expertise of the knowledgeable other and what s/he can do without the supervision of that person, the ZCC (See Figure 1) is described as an area where all the participants—parents, students and teachers—could assist each other to reach higher levels of cultural and linguistic awareness. Within this zone, parents, teachers, and educators reading culturally relevant poetry were constantly interacting with and enriching all the participants through their personal experiences. In order to solidify this ZCC, students and their families engaged in the analysis of new poetic texts.

In my search for other authors like Sandra Cisneros who also explore this concept of culturally relevant poetry, I found Juan Felipe Herrera's culturally responsive voice expressed in his book "the upside down boy/*El niño de cabeza*" (2000). Herrera's colorful images oozed the same flavors of each individual reader [*sabores de la gente que lo lee*]. Reading Herrera's stanzas helped us to extend the first poetry exercises to a deeper level of analysis.

Conducting Socratic seminars with students and their families, we had the opportunity to incorporate culturally relevant poetry with people's flavors and stories [*los sabores e historias de la gente*], while also implementing the standardized education required by the State Department of Education.

Each time we read a couple of pages of Herrera's book, I asked, once again, for the students and their parents to complete double-entry journals; writing and drawing on one side of the paper the sentence they had read that had struck them the most and on the other side of the paper writing and drawing their personal

reflections on that sentence. Paola, after highlighting Herrera's sentence—said by the main character, Juanito—"I do not speak English," wrote, "My culture is cool when I go to school, after you learn you could go to many places to see people and their races," and then drew a heart colored like a rainbow. These reflections and drawings were supported with Venn Diagrams designed to identify differences and similarities between the characters' lives and the lives of my students.

To facilitate the participation of parents in more formal learning activities such as double-entry journals, drawings, and comparing and contrasting exercises, I wrote open-ended questions in English and Spanish:

Have you ever felt like the main character? / *¿Alguna vez te sentiste como el personaje principal del libro?*

How did you feel when you came to this country? / *¿Cómo te sentiste cuando llegaste a este país?*

How does your tongue feel when you try to speak English? / *¿Cómo se siente tu lengua cuando hablas inglés?*

Posting the questions in both languages helped parents to realize that speaking a language other than English is not a barrier to being an active part of the learning process. Working together, we, parents and students and myself, defied mainstream-monolingual programs imbedded in implicit curricula (Banks, 1995a) through culturally relevant poetry. My role in this process was to empower students and their families by recognizing common strengths and weaknesses in the lives of others even if the latter were only characters in a book. Scaffolding their learning process with a variety of strate-

gies and activities triggered the primeval wisdom students carry in their backpacks, wisdom that constantly reveals equity and social justice.

As fruit of that wisdom, Anahi wrote, "In my community we are different but we talk with each other. We do not care who they are, we share because we care." This poem displayed all the visual pictures I engraved in my mind when I was visiting Anahi's home and talked for hours with her parents. Reading and writing poetry to and with Anahi helped her to find a way to fully express her thoughts and provided me with a context for my teaching that otherwise would have been lost in scripted, impersonal anthologies.

Creating *Esperanza* (Hope) with Stanzas

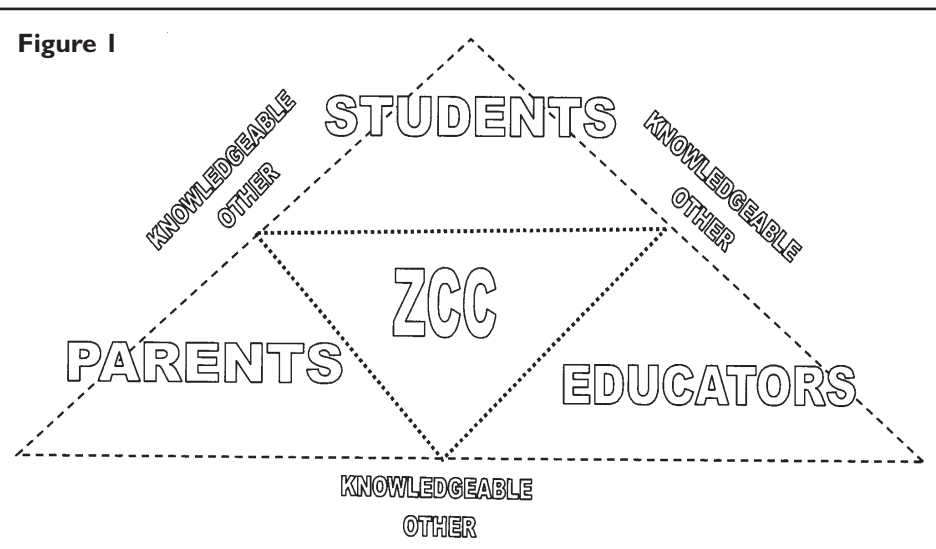
Anahi's and Paola's poems were followed by other stanzas expressing the hopes and dreams of success of journeys that began when their parents decided to cross the border searching for a better education for a better future. Some of these parents made it, but many of them did not attain their hopes for greater levels of success.

Thus, continuing my research on the community, and after reading more pages of Herrera's book, I asked my students to conduct research with their own parents by asking them about their personal journeys into the United States and how their views of the American Dream shifted once they settled in the neighborhoods of Los Angeles.

Jorge reflected on his family's journey by writing, "My mom came to this country looking for success, but she could not find it, [*Mi mamá vino a éste país para encontrar éxito pero no lo encontró*]. Reading these poems, I understood that, we as transforming educators have to empower our students through critical literacy (Freire, 1970). We have to find stories where the main characters show the struggles many suffer when arriving to this country as well as the possibility of being successful without losing their identity.

The main characters of *The Upside Down Boy*, Juanito, his mom, and his dad, illustrate all the fears and anxiety that hundreds of students and their parents experience when, like Juanito, they first open the door of a classroom to attend a compulsory educational institution. These students bring their homemade lunches—made with care and love—plus culture, spirit, and wisdom—funds of knowledge (Moll, 1992)—all cultivated at home, to a setting (the school) that can assimilate,

Figure 1



tolerate, and/or empower them by extension throughout the social system. After the door is closed, individual educators have the power to determine which way they and the new students will begin the long journey called education.

Conclusions/Suggestions

There are thousands of students like the ones mentioned in the classroom in this article that are growing and learning in the inner city of Los Angeles, a city where culture is built around standards that foster and harden the mainstream system. These children tend to be assimilated by the educational system without recognition of their different cultural views (Stephan, 1999). Often times, these students are asked to leave their own culture outside the classroom door in order to become acculturated to the institutional standard.

It is hard for students coming from different backgrounds to find their identity among academic tasks that fail to embrace all the cultures which students bring into the classrooms. Ignoring these valuable cultural assets, education becomes a meaningless instructional process. Skills are instructed according to traditional views. This instruction demands that students sit still, be quiet, and respond to questions that follow the program's script.

Thus, the voices of the students that were formed in the barrio are powerless against the standardized code approved by the state, a mainstream code that claims (Asante, 1994) to represent all the cultures, yet ignores the sounds of the inner city and the sounds of all ancestral cultures except the traditional White culture.

As educators we must be aware that ignoring what can be gathered from this community-based, critical approach to learning, turns the teaching process into pure repetitive instruction. Recognizing the spiritual side of the educational process, we can reach students who often are ignored in mainstream curricula. Scripted programs are written for the average mainstream reader. Stories in these programs offer only a segmented representation of all the cultures present in the classroom. Thus, how do we engage students who have different backgrounds than the ones portrayed in the scripted programs?

My experience has taught me that these students and their families can become engaged with literacy if we provide them with meaningful texts, that they can manipulate and deconstruct (Derrida, 2003) to understand their personal experiences. Working with my students and families, I learned that powerful resources are outside the schools waiting to be in-

vited in. After reading poems together, parents and students began to utilize the local bookstore and the public library as places where they could find the tools that schools sometimes lack because they are too constrained, too busy being compliant to mainstream standards.

In an era of globalization, in which immigrant students and second language learners are treated as numbers within the learning process, we have to promote an education that truly understands the community and utilizes it as an asset (Nieto, 1995) rather than as a barrier. The education of the future needs to recognize cultural diversity as its *leitmotif*, understanding this as individuality framed within a global view on humanity. We cannot allow students to constantly see learning as an upside-down process. Education should provide enough cognitive, creative tools to all the participants—parents, students, and educators—thus giving them the ability to draw their own path to success.

References

- Anderson, G. L., & Irvine, P. I. (1993). Informing critical literacy with ethnography. In C. Lankshear & P. L. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis, and the postmodern* (pp. 81-105). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Ansell, C. (2003). Community embeddedness and collaborative governance in the San Francisco Bay Area Environmental Movement. In M. Diani & D. McAdam (Eds.), *Social movements and networks: Relational approaches to collective action (Comparative Politics)* (pp. 123-146). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Asante, M. K. (1994). Multiculturalism: An exchange. In F. L. Pincus & H. J. Ehrlich (Eds.), *Race and ethnic conflict: Contending views on prejudice, discrimination, and ethnoviolence* (pp. 307-313). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Banks, J. A. (1995a). Approaches to multicultural curriculum reform. In J. A. Banks & C. A. McGee Banks (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (pp. 315-339). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cisneros, S. (1987). *My wicked wicked ways*. New York: Turtle Bay Books.
- Clifton, L. (1980). *Good woman: Poems and a memoir 1969-1980*. Rochester, NY: Boa Editions.
- Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (1998). Social stigma. In D. T. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (pp. 504-553). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Derrida, J. (2003). Following theory. In M. Payne & J. Schad (Eds.), *Life after theory* (pp. 1-51). New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Cultural action of freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Review.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Reading the word and the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Griffiths, B. (1992). *The golden string*. Springfield, IL: Templegate.
- Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interests*. (J. J. Shapiro, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1968).
- Herrera, J. F. (2000). *The upside down boy/El niño de cabeza*. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.
- Kant, I. (2006). *Toward perpetual peace and other writings on politics, peace, and history*. P. Kleingeld (Ed.). D. L. Colclasure (Trans.). London, UK: Yale University Press. (Original work published 1784).
- Krashen, S. (1994). Bilingual education and second language acquisition theory. In *Schooling language minority students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 47-79). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.
- Moll, L. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Nieto, S. (1995). From brown heroes and holidays to assimilation agendas: Reconsidering the critiques of multicultural education. In C. E. Sleeter & P. L. McLaren (Eds.), *Multicultural education: Critical pedagogy and the politics of difference* (pp. 191-220). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Popkewitz, T. S. (1999). A social epistemology of educational research. In T. S. Popkewitz & L. Fendler (Eds.), *Critical theories in education: Changing terrains of knowledge and politics* (pp. 17-45). New York: Routledge.
- Putnam, R. D., & Feldstein, L. M. (2003). *Better together: Restoring the American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rodriguez-Valls, F. (2007). The barrio where vernacular voices engaged in conversations about transculturation: A critical ethnography of inner city schooling in Los Angeles. Dissertation, Claremont Graduate University.
- Romo, J. J., Bradfield-Kreider, P. S., & Serrano, R. A. (2003). *Reclaiming democracy: Multicultural educators' journeys toward transformative teaching*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Savater, F. (1997). *El valor de educar*. Barcelona, Spain: Ariel.
- Searle, C. (1993). Words to a life-land: Literacy, the imagination, and Palestine. In C. Lankshear & P. L. McLaren (Eds.), *Critical literacy: Politics, praxis and the postmodern* (pp. 167-193). New York: State University of New York Press.
- Stephan, W. (1999). *Reducing prejudice and stereotyping in schools*. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Subcomandante Marcos. (2001). *Questions & swords. Folktales of the zapatista revolution*. El Paso: TX. Cinco Puntos Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge: MIT Press. (Original work published in 1930).
- Zinn, H. (1980). *A people's history of The United States*. New York: The New Press.