

# Telling Our Stories Using Chicano Literature for Children and Young Adults as a Means of Promoting Cultural Awareness and Self-Worth

By

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*My grandmother Josefa Alcaraz was born on a little ranch called La Viga near Puruándiro, Michoacán, México in 1899. After her father died, my grandmother, her four sisters and mother left México to come to the United States. Many people from Michoacán began traveling north to the United States during the revolution in México that began in 1910. They would travel in groups and only during the night, since it was too dangerous to be seen during the day by the troops of men that would travel across the land. During the day, they would rest. They traveled for many, many nights walking over a thousand miles until they got to the border at Juárez, Chihuahua. Even though people could cross the border freely from México into the United States by paying 2¢ to cross the bridge, Josefa and her family went into the river and crossed the Río Grande into El Paso, Texas because they did not have enough money to pay for the entire family. Within a few years, Josefa met Gregorio Arroyo and they were married. (Arenas, 2002, p. 3)*

## The Context

Stories of our rich past give us a glimpse into the lives of those that came before us, shaping our history in ways that seldom are recognized. These familiar stories told by family members at the kitchen table or under the shade of the avocado tree in the yard hold the key to the discovery and development of our identity—as a people and as individuals. Some of these stories have made it into the world of published books for children and young adults. These books written and illustrated by Chicano authors and illustrators give young Chicano students a different perspective to life that contrasts that of traditional school textbooks. They depict life as it was and continues to be. However, during the past few years, educational policy and law in California has imposed a strong focus on the teaching of reading skills, of phonics and decoding, of spelling and writing, that has all but eliminated the use of children’s literature in its original form from the curriculum. Although,

major language arts textbook publishers (i.e. Houghton Mifflin, Open Court) report that they include authentic literature in the selections found in anthologies. It is not uncommon to find abridged versions with crucial information missing from the text and the illustrations. It is true that proficiency and fluency in reading is essential for having academic success but it is also necessary to access literature and be able to make connections to that literature in order to make a difference in the lives of the children we teach. Ada (2003) says, “*Good literature delves into the human soul, expressing its feelings and emotions, its hopes and its dreams. And good literature gives life to the full range of human relations*” (p. 2). These hopes and dreams are expressed in the simple beginnings of many Chicano families like the Arroyo family.

*Gregorio and Josefa moved to the Los Angeles area of southern California and settled down to have their family. Gregorio worked hard out in the field during the day and after work, he would come home to work on the house he had begun to build in Watts. During the time he was building it, they had five children—Francisco, Angelita, Amparo, Aurora, and Reynaldo. They grew up in this house and Josefa continued to live in it until the Watts riots of 1965. (Arenas, 2002, p. 5)*

## Current Research

The role of children's literature in the lives of the children, who read it, encompasses many areas. One can take a book and evaluate it solely on the topic of the story. The topics addressed in children's books may reflect the child's life and experiences. Ada (2003) says, "Every child needs to reclaim and revitalize his or her sense of self" (p. 8). One of the best ways children can achieve this is to have access to carefully chosen children's literature. Children can see themselves in literature and clarify their sense of self when they see books that mirror their existence, written by authors that share their own experiences in the books they write (Ada, 2003; Ada & Campoy, 2003; Day, 2003). This type of literature will allow children to look at their lives and know that others share similar experiences and that it is normal to have had those experiences. "When children enjoy books because they relate to characters, identify with situations, and understand personalities or behavior, they come to the realization that there are others like themselves" (Marantz & Marantz, 2000, p. 7-8). When children read books that reflect their culture, they realize they are not alone. These books validate who they are and give them a sense of belonging.

However, when we think of culture and identity we must reflect upon what Greene (1995) stated, "*Cultural background surely plays a part in shaping identity; but it does not determine identity. It may well create differences that must be honored; it may occasion styles and orientations that must be understood; it may give rise to tastes, values, even prejudices that must be taken into account.*" (p. 163) Literature takes on the role of giving students the opportunity to see other perspectives and interact with all of the elements of the story critically. Morales (2001) says, "Promoting a shared experience, yet fostering an exuberance for one's own identity, will generate a multicultural classroom that empowers all students." (p. 18) This is one of the outcomes of using Chicano children's literature in the curriculum. By choosing literature carefully and incorporating it within all areas of the curriculum and ensuring that regardless of the percentage of Chicano students we have in classrooms, we are developing skills in our students that enable them to reflect upon who they are in this world and be able to live with others in a peaceful way (Banks & Banks, 1997).

The stories that Chicano(a) authors and illustrators tell about their own childhoods, about who they are in this country, in this culture are very similar to our students' lives. As educators using children's books that reflect the Chicano culture of the students in our classrooms we must note that we need to carefully choose books that do this in positive ways. Canning, Salazar-Guenther, Polanco-Noboa (2002) stress,

*It is important for Latino students to see themselves reflected in positive ways so that they develop self-esteem for the person they are and self-images of success. When students see themselves in school—their histories, heroes, customs, and issues—they are more likely to feel included and to envision for themselves a future in school. It is important that our Latino students develop pictures of themselves as included in productive, empowering citizenship. At the same time, it is important for all our students to see Latinos and Latino perspectives reflected in their schools so that Latinos do not seem like foreigners and so that all our students develop expectations of a productive citizenry, which includes Latinos. (p. 2)*

Ada (2003), reiterates what Canning, Salazar-Guenther & Polanco-Noboa (2002) believe by saying, "*It is important that the people of every culture study, analyze, and define themselves. There is otherwise the risk that we end up believing that we must look, think, feel, as others outside the culture have interpreted us to be*" (p. 37).

At a conference celebrating multicultural literature for children and young adults, Joseph Bruchac (2007), a Native American author, spoke about the circles in life's journey. He shared with the audience of 300 librarians, teachers, and educators that we must all have pride in what we are as we take "*steps into the circle of a journey.*" The steps of that journey that Bruchac referred to were 1) listen to and respect each other, 2) observe what is around you, 3) remember what you have heard and what you have seen, and 4) share with others what you

have come to know. This is how stories emerge from our existence—as values, beliefs, and stories come to be and it is only in sharing them with others that we give validity to those stories. The journey begins from within as Villaseñor (2004) affirms with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quotation, “*What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within out into the world, miracles happen.*”(n.p.)

The use of literature in the classroom written by Chicano authors can make magic for our Chicano students who are not only struggling in the classrooms to achieve academically but also struggling with identity issues. As a young Chicana, I clearly recall being ashamed of the color of my skin, not because I did not want to

### **Selected Literature for Children and Young Adults**

Literature for children and young adults depicting the Chicano culture is still not prevalent enough to really have a strong impact on the cultural awareness of children. In looking at the literature that has been published over the past twenty years about the Chicano way of life, children’s picture books and young adult novels seem to fall into three categories. The first category includes books written by Chicano authors about their own experiences growing up in the United States, knowing that there was always a disconnect between the home culture and the school culture. The second category represents books written about Chicanos by Chicanos and third—books about Chicanos that are written by authors outside the culture, which will not be addressed in this article.

One of the most powerful forms of literature for Chicano students are books written by Chicano authors about their own experiences growing up in the United States. Several authors such as Juan Felipe Herrera, Amada Irma Pérez, Francisco Alarcón, Pat Mora, and George Ancona are all Chicanos who have contributed outstanding books that address these common issues among Chicano students.

Author Juan Felipe Herrera wrote *Calling the Doves/El Canto de Las Palomas*

be Chicana, but simply because the people around me at school were not like me and my color, my language, and my culture was never validated and was never represented in the stories or illustrations in the books I read. And so, I would never speak up and spent many years as a silent observer instead of an active participant in my education. As educators, we know that children should not have to endure such feelings of not belonging.

about his experience growing up in the Central Valley of California and living with the people, su familia, as a migrant farmworker child. For children whose parents are migrant farmworkers, this book depicts the beauty of living and working the land, celebrating the language and culture of the Chicano. Moreover, Herrera also wrote *Upside Down Boy/El Niño de Cabeza* about the difficulties adjusting to a new life, a new school, but having one teacher that encouraged him to excel using his talents. Herrera’s books encourage students to celebrate those parts of the culture that are unique to Chicanos.

Amada Irma Pérez, author of *My Very Own Room* and *My Diary from There to Here* where she shares about her childhood experiences as an immigrant, the despair of having to leave her home but making the best of things in a new country and a new situation. Both of her books are illustrated by Chicana artist, Maya Christina Gonzalez, who also wrote, *My Colors, My World/Mis Colores, Mi Mundo*, a simple yet powerful children’s book about the colors of the world in which she grew up and the simplicity of opening your eyes to the surroundings to see the beauty all around you. Gonzalez’s illustrations represent the Chicano faces and colors that had been missing from children’s picture books.

Poet Francisco Alarcón wrote a series of poetry books with themes ranging from his surroundings, to families, to heroes, but always based on his experiences growing up Chicano. One of his poems from *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems/Jitomates Risueños y Otros Poemas de Primavera* (1997) says, “My grandma’s songs would follow the beat of the washing machine, turning our kitchen into a dance floor.” (p. 9) His poems based on the four seasons of the year are short, bilingual, and connect so well with Chicano students who have experienced the same things Alarcón did as he was growing up.

Photographer George Ancona wrote *Barrio/Jose’s Neighborhood* about a young boy growing up in the Mission district of San Francisco and follows a day in the life of Jose. Realistic depictions allow children to see the daily events in an inner city child’s life.

Several authors have written books for young adults around the same themes but at a higher level than the picture books mentioned. Pat Mora, author of several children’s books but also of young adult novels, writes about life as a southwest Chicana in *House of Houses*.

*I walk back and sit under the garden cottonwood with my aunts, the Mora sisters, feeling the tensions between them, the different lives they chose, the bodies fate gave them. They talk about their mother, her hands always busy, crocheting or cooking, about her crying, the grandmother who seasons her food with tears, recetas de lágrimas. I ask again for any stories, cures, prayers, recipes.*

*“There’s nothing Mama can’t do in the kitchen, m’ija,” her daughters say.*

*“Abuela Tomasa had a metatito,” says Aunt Chole, “and she and my mother grind pumpkin seeds to make pipián, make galletitas y gorditas y sopaipillas y menudo y tamales y champurrado.” (Mora, 1997, p. 97)*

Mora’s use of familiar themes and authentic language provides young adults with a strong affirmation of the Chicano culture.

Rudolfo Anaya, the author of the classic young adult novel, *Bless Me Ultima*, has also written several children’s books entitled, *Farolitos for Abuelo and Maya’s Children*, a milder version of *La Llorona*. His books delve right into the heart of the culture with the themes and language that many times are left out of books because they might not be understood by other audiences (referring to non-Chicanos). However Anaya has used both themes and culture effectively within his books through his beautiful use of language.

Two books that are a must, especially for children living in the Central Valley of California or those from farmworker families,

are Francisco Jiménez’s, *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through* that give honest descriptions of the struggles of every day lives of farmworkers. These honest depictions are also included in *Walking Stars* and *Burro Genius* (2004), by Victor Villaseñor in an almost magical use of the language. He states, “Unlike most books, mine are not read once, but five or six times, and then they’re passed around to the whole family. Why? Because my writing provides real-life experience that people want to share with their friends and family.” (p. 12)

There are several other Chicano writers such as Gary Soto, illustrator Simón Silva and Victor Martínez who have also contributed novels or poetry books for young adults. They give an honest account of the daily struggles of Chicanos trying to make it in a world that seems foreign at times.

## Implications for Educators

In many cases, the only way children are exposed to literature, in particular Chicano literature is if their teachers are knowledgeable about the positive effects of using children's literature, are creative in its uses, and incorporate literature into all areas of the curriculum. However, there is much more to literature than just simply being able to read it or being exposed to it. Banks (2007) summarizes several studies that support the use of culturally responsive pedagogy, which includes multicultural literature and concluded that when teachers understood the funds of knowledge their students possessed, achievement increased and students were engaged as active learners in their education. Moll (2005) reaffirms this idea as he describes these prior experiences as the funds of knowledge that students and families possess

when encountering new experiences. This is how we motivate students to become engaged in learning—by empowering them and their families as resources of knowledge that can connect with what the educational goals and outcomes are at their school sites.

When used appropriately, it can allow children's minds and spirits to open up windows to other parts of the world and to other experiences in addition to allowing them to see themselves in these stories. According to Ada (2003), "...good literature aspires to more than mere communication of information or just to be an entertainment: Good literature moves the readers. It broadens the readers' horizons, validates their experiences, invites reflection, and awakens an aesthetic sense". (p. 2)

*On August 1, 1942, Amparo married Andrés Gallardo Arenas. Since Andrés was in the Army, stationed in San Diego and had only been granted a two-day furlough, Amparo went to meet him. They went to the cathedral in San Diego where many couples were waiting to be married. The priest married one couple after another. The ceremony took place at 7 o'clock in the evening and was very short. Amparo did not wear a wedding dress but a skirt and blazer. Their "padrinos" were Andrés' older brother and sister-in-law. After the ceremony, they all went to have a dinner of roast beef and potatoes. His brother and his wife decided they should all go to Tijuana to celebrate but Andrés was not allowed to cross the border because it was wartime. So their wedding night was spent waiting at the border for their "padrinos" to return from Tijuana. Early the next morning they drove to Chino where the Arenas family lived and when Andrés returned to San Diego the next day, Amparo stayed at the ranch in Chino until she joined him in San Diego a week later. This was the beginning of a lifetime together of adventures. (Arenas, 2002, p. 22)*

It is not enough to use Latino children's books but strive to represent the heterogeneity within the Chicano community by using literature with authentic cultural and language practices (Alamillo & Arenas, 2007). This is the

only way Chicano stories will be heard and appreciated not only by Chicano students but by all students seeking their own identities and striving to make this a better world by recognizing the similarities instead of the differences.

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