

A Magical ENCOUNTER

LATINO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE
IN THE CLASSROOM

SECOND EDITION



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own by reading books of their own choice. It is a good idea to set aside a period every day for independent reading. At the start of this period, the teacher should remind the students that pleasurable moments await them. Indeed, by silently reading a book along with the students, the teacher serves as a valuable role model. You might want to have classical music playing softly while the students are reading and enjoy your own reading alongside them.

The bibliography on books by Latino writers will give you an ample selection of books to incorporate into your classroom library for students to select quality books for their own enjoyment.

3 THE CREATIVE DIALOGUE

Traditional schooling tends to be text centered. Paulo Freire (1970, 1982) described it as "banking education," because the teacher, relying on information in the textbook, "deposits" facts in the students much as one deposits money in a bank account. The assumption is that the act of reading is completed the moment the reader has absorbed what the text has to say. Reading ability is thus measured in terms of literal comprehension: Can the student repeat what is written in the text?

In Transformative Education, by contrast, the goal is not merely to transmit information but to help students analyze that information in light of their personal experiences, reflect on it critically, and then incorporate it into their own concepts of reality. In other words, reading is far from being simply a conduit of information; it becomes a dialogue, however silent, between the reader and the text.

This approach to reading, which I call Creative Reading (Ada, 1988, 1991) and described in the first section of this book, begins but surely does not end with the text. Instead, the reading experience continues until the reader has reflected on the information provided in the text and, in a sense, has come to a new set of terms with reality. It might indeed continue to inform the growth process of the reader for the rest of her or his life. Accomplished readers, who are likely to view life critically, go through this process almost automatically. However, because they are still unsure of their identity, unaware of their potential, or trapped in passive schooling, some children may never have a chance to discover Creative Reading.

In our effort to give these children access to the full power of reading, nothing is more important than helping them realize the extent to which reading can affect their whole lives. To this end, it is advisable to follow the act of reading with a Creative Dialogue in which the students discover how reading can enrich them by giving them greater self-awareness and greater understanding of others, a more realistic view of the world, and the ability to use what they have learned in making meaningful changes in their own lives.

The Creative Dialogue is carried out simply and naturally. It is a conversation of interest to the teacher and students alike, not a question-and-answer session in which the teacher knows the single correct answer to each question. In the lively exchange of ideas, open-ended questions are raised, various alternatives are suggested, and the conclusions reflect the views of the individual students themselves.

A four-phase series of questions come into play. In a real dialogue, of course, the phases overlap and the questions are interrelated. Here, however, each phase is presented separately in order to identify and stress its importance.

Descriptive Phase

Approaching the text, the readers discover what the text has to say. At this moment, the traditional questions—Who?, What?, When?, Where?, How?, and Why?—find their answers.

The students delve deeper into the text as they are encouraged to find such elements as recurring words, images, and metaphors, as well as to identify the point of view of the narrator.

Personal Interpretive Phase

After assimilating the information given in the text, the readers can be expected to react by expressing their own feelings and emotions. In the Creative Reading approach, the students should be made to feel that they too are protagonists and that their personal experiences are valid and important.

Questions along the lines of *Have you ever seen (experienced, felt) something similar? How would you feel if what happened to the character should happen to you? and What would you do?* are designed not only to validate the students' personal experiences, but also to make it clear that the act of reading, like the act of learning itself, begins when new information is placed in the context of previously acquired knowledge.

At this stage, it is important that students compare and contrast the new information with what they already have and the characters' experience and reality with their own. *How are they similar? How are they different?*

Critical/Multicultural/Antibias Phase

The information that the students have received and viewed in light of their own experience is now subjected to critical analysis. In this phase, it is important that students realize that every situation has different potential outcomes and that they must be aware of the likely consequences of the various alternatives if they are to choose freely among them.

The questions are generally of this kind: *What other possibilities exist? What would their consequences be? Who could benefit (or suffer) from each one? Are they all logical, healthy, just, generous? How would people of a different culture, age, place, time, genre, or social class react to this? Are all points of view, all voices, recognized? Are some silenced or ignored?*

Besides developing critical reflections, such questions will help the students understand that attitudes vary because of people's circumstances and that we should be aware that others may have attitudes and beliefs that are different from ours but equally deserving of respect. These reflections should have a goal of encouraging the students to learn about others and to develop understanding of and appreciation toward them as well as to build solidarity with members of other groups.

Creative/Transformative Phase

The culmination of the reading process is reached when the students see a connection between their own lives and the thoughts and feelings to which the text has given rise and then consider taking actions and adopting attitudes that will enrich and improve their own lives.

EXAMPLES

For the Lower Grades (K-3)

Maurice Sendak's widely celebrated book *Where the Wild Things Are* has been selected to demonstrate the dialogue questions for two reasons. First, because it is known to most readers, it will make the example clearer. Second, it shows that even a book with short text and addressed to the very young child offers the opportunity for rich dialogue.

- Maurice Sendak. 1963. *Where the Wild Things Are*. New York: Harper Collins. (Also in Spanish: 1984. *Donde viven los monstruos*. Translated by Agustín Gervás. Madrid: Alfaguara.)

Descriptive Phase

To lead the students to retell the story and show their understanding of the text.

1. Why was Max's mother upset at him?
2. How did she punish him?
3. How did Max get to the land of the wild things?
4. Why did the wild things choose him as king?
5. Why did he decide to return home?
6. Observe the book illustrations. Notice how they become larger and larger until all the white margins disappear. When does that happen? What does it mean?

Personal Interpretive Phase

To lead the students to become aware of their feelings and emotions and to discuss their own experiences in relation to the text.

1. Have you misbehaved sometimes? What happened? How did you feel afterward?
2. Do your parents ever punish you? Do they punish you in a way similar to the way Max's mother punished him?
3. Have you ever wanted to run away? Where would you go?
4. If you could go in a boat to a wild place, as Max did, what would it look like there?

Critical/Multicultural/Antibias Phase

To lead to critical reflection and examine the book in view of Transformative Education's tenets of justice and equality.

1. Max was sent to bed without dinner. Would your parents send you to bed without dinner? Would they punish you in a different way?
2. Max told his mother, "I'll eat you up!" Do you think Max meant what he said? Why do you think he said such a thing?
3. Max's mother had called him "Wild thing!" So he decided to go where the wild things are. What can happen when we call people nasty things?
4. After two people have called each other names, it is not easy for them to like each other again. What can be done?
5. Max could have remained as the king of all wild things, but he decided to return home. What would you have done? Why?

Creative/Transformative Phase

To encourage students to see themselves as protagonists of their own lives and promote creative transformative attitudes.

1. What are some things you do that upset your parents? What can you do about it?
2. What can you do if someone calls you names? What can you do if you hear someone else calling somebody names? What can you do if you have called someone names?
3. When Max felt wild, he was able to visit the place where wild things are. Later, he felt much better. What can you do when you feel angry or upset? What can you do if you see that someone else is feeling upset or sad?

For the Upper Grades (4 and up)

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1993. *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado*. Illustrated by Consuelo Méndez. San Francisco: Children's Book Press.

In this picture book for students of all ages, Prietita, a brave Mexican-American girl, befriends Joaquín, a young boy who has crossed the river with his mother to try to find work in the United States. She defends him from the other children who tease him by calling him "wetback," and she helps him find a place to hide from the Border Patrol.

The book addresses a profound social issue. Many immigrants who have suffered discrimination and difficulties in being accepted and integrated into a society tend to, in turn, oppress the newly arrived immigrants.

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, several reasons may explain this generalized phenomenon: The internalization of oppression causes those who have been oppressed to imitate the actions of the oppressor. Newly arrived people constitute competition for low-paying jobs. The assimilated immigrant or descendant of immigrants might feel embarrassment because the newly arrived immigrant often does not know the language and customs of the place and may besides be very economically disadvantaged. The groups may have immigrated at different times and constitute members of different social classes. The assimilated, feeling themselves superior, might believe they will get "tainted" or that outsiders will consider them the same as the newly arrived immigrants. The assimilated might also feel some unconscious jealousy at the newly arrived immigrants' fluency in the heritage language and closer ties to the heritage culture.

Whichever the reason or combination of reasons, the resulting effect is very detrimental. Harboring feelings of superiority with regard to other human beings is self-destructive, as is the lack of compassion or solidarity. The gang phenomena that are prevalent in some Latino, Asian, Southeast Asian, and Pacific Islander communities are often related to this rivalry between assimilated and newly arrived groups. Gloria Anzaldúa addresses these issues in *Friends from Other Side* at a level appropriate for children.

Descriptive Phase

To lead the students to retell the story and show their understanding of the text.

1. In which ways did Joaquín look different from the other children?
2. How did the other children treated Joaquín?
3. What did Prietita do to protect him?
4. Why do you think she challenged the others?

Personal Interpretive Phase

To lead the students to become aware of their feelings and emotions and to discuss their own experiences in relation to the text.

1. Have you ever been teased for being different in any way? How did it make you feel?
2. Have you ever seen someone else being teased? How did it make you feel? Were you too embarrassed or afraid to stop the teasing?
3. Do you know people who have come to this country very recently? What are some of the difficulties they face?

Critical/Multicultural/Antibias Phase

To lead to critical reflection and examine the book in view of Transformative Education tenets of justice and equality.

1. What causes people to immigrate? What are some of the sufferings connected with immigration? What are some of the things people lose or give up when they immigrate? What are some of their hopes?

2. There are many reasons why people tease or discriminate against other people. Some have to do with the way others look, speak, dress, or show their feelings. Are any of these reasons valid? Why or why not?
3. Who were the original inhabitants of the United States? Could it be said that everyone else is an invader? What is most helpful to the nation: that people cooperate or that they fight with each other?
4. What would be some reasons why it is valuable and important for people to maintain the language of their ancestors?

Creative Transformative Phase

To encourage students to see themselves as protagonists of their own lives and promote creative transformative attitudes.

1. What can we do to interrupt the teasing when someone is being called names or made fun of?
2. Is there someone in the class or in the school who is a newly arrived person? How can we make that person feel welcome and appreciated?
3. Are there students who tend to be picked on by others? Without naming those students, what decisions can we make to get to know them better and discover their good qualities so that we can learn to appreciate them?
4. What would you like other people to know and appreciate about you?

There needs to be time and place in the classroom to lead students to reflections that can open the way to more supportive attitudes toward each other. An excellent demonstration of how this can be accomplished in the class appears in the PBS documentary "Oliver Button Is a Star," featuring Tomie de Paola's beloved book. The video can be obtained from the TCGMC-Oliver Project, 26 Ayers Rd., Monson MA 01057; (www.oliverbuttonisastar.com).

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PROMOTING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Good literature is an excellent tool for the development of language at any developmental stage. There is no better way to develop language than to use it. Students need to hear the sounds of words and glean their meaning through attentive listening; they need to read and be read to extensively; they need to play with words, their multiple meanings, their sounds, and the rhythm that can be created with them; and they need the opportunity to develop their own voice in spoken and in written form.

Language needs to be used in real situations, for authentic and meaningful purposes, and in a variety of circumstances if its whole range of possibilities is to be made accessible to the students.

All the activities suggested in this book are, in a sense, activities for developing language. This chapter emphasizes vocabulary building and expressive language skills.

