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Mrs. Mortenson

OBU Connections

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Latino Immigration and the Importance of Bilingualism in Children's Literature

Sometimes, in life, a person goes through a struggle they cannot identify or explain, but when a book portrays their struggle it helps them come to terms with it. Books do not necessarily solve problems, but they can give people the confidence to name and think differently about them. This notion remains especially true for children because their limited vocabulary hinders their ability to communicate their problems to adults since they themselves cannot put it into words. When they see their struggle played out in books, they gain tools to express themselves. One obstacle children endure but cannot identify is bilingualism and the language barrier it can create. Although some think children growing up in a bilingual environment develop bilingualism easily, they actually struggle with it extremely. This struggle is portrayed and sometimes even sympathized with in the three children's picture books titled *Juana and Lucas*; *Mango, Abuela, and Me*; and *My Grandma Mi Abuelita*.

Before addressing the books themselves, understanding the cultural and historical background as well as prejudices that exist among and about this topic is vital. Three important aspects to note are immigration, the treatment of immigration in classrooms, and bilingualism at home. The treatment of Latino immigration in the American South has been a topic of importance in recent years. For example, the government in Alabama created strict immigration laws in 2010, but "seldom mention...nationality...instead [they] focused on the problem of 'illegal' immigrants" because "the organization sought to put a respectable face on immigration

restriction” (Odem 87-88). Since the state government sets a standard, they communicate the acceptability of discriminating against a people group for their nationality. This creates a significant “legal” bias against Latinos, whether they immigrated or not; this bias goes deeper and assumes they commit crimes or destroy trust. The event of 9/11 also created prejudice because Immigration and Customs Enforcement upheld “enforcement programs as a means of” catching “‘dangerous criminals’...” but “in practice, these programs...[included] large numbers of people who” did not commit serious offenses (Odem 90). Government employees took advantage of people’s desire of safety by labeling all immigrants, illegal or not, as dangerous. This created the culture’s callous attitude towards immigrants. People’s perspective towards immigration, somewhat affected by the responses of the government, also influences their attitude toward immigration in school.

Though the stance toward immigration mostly involves adults, it trickles down to students in school through different ways their teachers handle the subject of immigration. One teacher, Ms. Vega, thinks “that learning about a family’s” immigration status “[is] parallel to learning about other illegal behavior...which she would have to report,” so she applies a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (Gallo and Link 10). Her refusal to speak about immigration reinforces a bias against immigration amongst her students; she makes the topic unapproachable. However, Ms. Costanzo used a different strategy; when she learned her student’s father had been deported she “created outlets for [her]...such as...accessing counseling services...and encouraging her to journal about [it]” (Gallo and Link 12). Her involvement with the student shows a small part of the culture towards bilingual students that attempts to fight back against the majority’s prejudice. She shows her students that most immigrants are not “criminals” but people with families and

feelings. Moving from the view of society's view of immigration to how schools treat immigration sets up the background for attitudes towards bilingualism in the home.

These two aspects act as a backdrop to the main character of bilingualism in the home. Parents of children in bilingual homes think their children will develop their bilingualism easily. However, one such set of parents seemed surprised when their daughter "answered questions in English when...addressed in Spanish, showing she...did not feel as comfortable speaking Spanish as speaking English" (Rodriguez 11-12). The fact that even the parents thought it would come easily shows that the reality is easily misunderstood. This shows that the bias surrounding bilingual culture also exists within it, which partly causes the confusion surrounding the struggle of it. Parents trying to raise bilingual children "seem to understand the impact of society's pressure on children...to master English as soon as possible" (Rodriguez 14). Even society impacts the bilingual culture because it controls motivations to become or refuse to become bilingual. Though parents desperately want their children to become bilingual, they miscommunicate that desire when they focus on one language more, making it seem more important. Adults realize the difficult battle to develop bilingualism in a child when they see the results, but children grasp their struggle when they see it in the books they read.

Juana Medina portrays frustration with bilingualism in her book, *Juana and Lucas*. This exemplary author and illustrator won the Pura Belpré Award for this book, and yet does not have an interview with or a biography about her. However, on the back fold of her book, her autobiography states that she "was born and grew up in Colombia" and then lived in various places across the United States before finally settling "in Washington, D.C." (Medina). This gives her authority because her book takes place in Bogota, Colombia and also in the U.S., so she understands what she writes about from her experience. Medina also remembers how her city

looked and felt to her growing up, so she understands how to portray that city through a childlike wonder. Furthermore, she experienced learning English as her second language, so she accurately portrays the difficulty that her main character, Juana, faces. Though biographies on Medina are hard to find, her accurate portrayal of the settings and Juana's frustration shows that her experiences give her author authority.

Medina reveals her excellent author authority in her text through the setting, plot, themes, and the languages she uses. The character Juana describes her city, stating how "there's a financial district, a flower district, galleries" and that the weather "is mild, as if it is eternally springtime" (Medina, Juana 4). Medina uses vocabulary that children might not understand, but she uses them in such a way that children infer their meaning based on surrounding words. Her vibrant words depicting the city invite children to imagine the city along with the main character. She communicates directly to children as she develops her plot. The climax of the story happens when Juana receives a bad grade in English, leading to "a very serious talk" with her mother who says Juana must "improve...or there will be no visit to Spaceland" (Medina, Juana 62). A reader easily follows the story because they recognize a report card, whether or not they speak English fluently. They also understand rewards versus consequences because their parents do the same. Though children may not relate specifically to the story, Medina writes in such a way that they immerse themselves in the setting and sympathize with Juana's plight.

The well-woven theme in this story also helps to engage children. One theme is learning a new language. When Juana questions her mother on why she should learn English, her mother tells her to ask other people what they think. Juana does ask; her aunt says she should learn English "to be able to sing a lot of great songs" and her grandfather tells her that English helped him "make great friends, and to read almost all of the books in his massive library"

(Medina 45, 59). Her family's her unique reasons to learn English motivates her learning since they speak positively. In the culture of bilingualism, the family plays a significant role in communicating to the child the importance of a language through how much or little they speak it to them. When Juana learns English later on, the story illuminates "Juana's infectious enthusiasm for language and all its possibilities" which is "much needed for the gap it fills in American children's literature" (Gross 8). Though children may not have struggled with learning English like Juana does, they learn to empathize with her struggle by reading this book. Children understand the difficulty of learning something new, and so they learn to connect the dots between a familiar feeling and an unfamiliar situation. Medina makes Juana's difficulty in learning English easy for a child to understand.

Another aspect that Medina uses well in her writing is inserting Spanish into the story without confusing or forcing it upon readers. She "frequently [intersperses] Spanish words which the reader" can "identify in context" (Gross 81). Though she never explicitly defines these terms, she helps the reader learn Spanish since she teaches its' use over communicating what it means. For example, when Juana cannot sleep she thinks "I wonder if I should...ask Mami for a glass of *agua*" (Medina 50). Though Medina never defines this drink, even young readers identify what Juana says because they have done similarly when they have not been able to sleep. By putting Spanish in universal situations, Medina helps her reader comprehend the language, not just know what it means.

Medina communicates well through her text, but connects through her illustrations as well. Her "dynamic ink and watercolor illustrations bring Juana's sometimes misdirected energy to life" (Gross 81). Watercolor's desaturated hues offer a friendly and gentle impression, making easy for little eyes to follow. Her use of ink helps her define important parts of the images. She

depicts people with rounded faces and dots for eyes, but gives each a different nose, skin tone, and hair color. Their round faces portray a welcoming atmosphere and makes them visually understandable. However, Medina's simple illustrative style does not prevent her from portraying the diversity of the city, making each character visually fascinating which displays the variety of the culture. *Juana and Lucas* portrays the difficulty and the culture of bilingualism through the setting, plot, theme, and language of the story as well as the illustrations all executed with excellent author and illustrator authority. Juana Medina takes from her personal experiences to write this story, while the next author, Meg Medina, gets her story from other's experiences.

Meg Medina, along with the illustrator Angela Dominguez, also demonstrate the culture and frustration of bilingualism in the book *Mango, Abuela, and Me*. Meg's family immigrated from Cuba before her birth, so she grew up with "their fondness for telling family stories" which helped "keep [her] connected to [their] culture and...extended family" ultimately affecting her writing as she "[uses] bits and pieces of [her] family's stories in every book" (Schröder 1). Though she did not immigrate like the grandmother in the story, Medina has authority because of her familial connection with immigration. In contrast, Dominguez immigrated as she was "born in Mexico, raised in Texas and now" lives in California, according to *Something About the Author*. This gives her incredible understanding of the difficulty of moving to a new country which she uses to brilliantly illustrate facial expressions of the grandmother and the main character Mia. Her illustrator authority not only lies with where she has lived, but what she has experienced. Both the author and the illustrator are connected with immigration and the difficulty of the language barrier it creates, and the text and illustrations reflect that.

Medina portrays the awkward dynamic of language barrier between the grandmother and the main character, Mia, through her setting, plot, theme, and language that she uses. The unnamed city where she lives can reasonably be assumed to be in the United States. Mia introduces Abuela into the story through the lens of setting as “she comes to us in winter, leaving behind her sunny house that rested between two snaking rivers” (Medina 2). The differences of where Mia lives and where Abuela comes from shows the stark contrast between them. Without even mentioning the language barrier, Medina introduces a source of tension between Abuela and Mia without even mentioning the language barrier. The plot furthers this tension as they struggle and then learn to communicate. At the climax of the story when Mia tells her mother that she cannot talk with Abuela, her mother reminds her of her friend Kim, and Mia recalls that “when she was new, our whole class helped teach her English words” (Medina 12). This plot reveals the struggles of bilingualism but also offers solutions, creating a realistic yet positive view of the it. Mia’s example empowers readers to think creatively instead of miserably about problems. The setting and plot divulge the tension of bilingualism, but the theme and languages give readers an overarching perspective of it.

Medina weaves bilingualism in her story through the theme and the languages. Though the unexpected theme of the importance of storytelling seems incompatible with bilingualism it actually helps involve characters with language. Abuela’s inability to read Mia’s book calls attention to the language barrier, but by the end of the story, she “reads [Mia’s] favorite book with only a little help, and she tells [Mia] new stories about Abuelo” (Medina, Meg 27). The importance of storytelling motivates the destruction of the language barrier between them. This relates to the culture of bilingualism because, as Medina pointed out in her interview, storytelling connects children to the culture of their family; they learn the language in order to listen to the

stories that their families want to tell them. Medina reveals that learning language is hard, but she does not let that stop her from inserting Spanish into the story. In one scene, Mia feels inspired by her friend Kim to teach Abuela while they make a snack together. They have a playful back-and-forth with Abuela identifying the ingredient in Spanish ““Carne” and Mia in English ““Meat!”” (Medina 13). The culture of bilingualism reveals itself as they mix their two cultures while folding the meat into the dough. Medina’s fearlessness to introduce Spanish invites readers into the story as they learn the words along with Mia. Her use of text to communicate the struggle and culture of bilingualism works seamlessly with Dominguez’s illustrations.

The text defines bilingualism and language barrier, but the illustrations help readers grasp how it feels. Dominguez brilliantly commands gouache, marker, and ink with, as *Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books* says, a “casual yet precise style...touchers of humor...and the occasional perspective shift” of a “wistful Abuela as she sits in the park” which “adds emotional resonance.” The warm and soft tones of these mediums invite readers to persevere through the uncomfortable situation Abuela and Mia are in. When they look at the pictures, they understand how Abuela feels, even though she does not have the ability to speak English for the first part of the book. Dominguez depicts struggles of bilingualism but keeps it from seeming intimidating. Her main characters possess unique features, such as facial features, hair, and clothing, and yet they do not read as stereotypical. When other figures exist in the background, their facial features seem similar, though their skin tones and hair is not. However, this is not done as a form of tokenism, but rather to contrast with the main characters and make them seem more distinct so the readers focus on them. Another aspect to note is Dominguez’s use of color; she uses oranges and pinks and reds which helps the text seem warm and friendly, despite the ice-cold nature of a language barrier. Overall, the illustrations of the book effortlessly communicate the complicated

culture of bilingualism and language barrier in a simple straightforward way. *Mango, Abuela, and Me* helps readers understand the frustrations of language barrier and the culture of bilingualism in a child-friendly approach through Medina's use of setting, plot, theme, and language as well as Dominguez's warm and simple pictures. Though the first two books have a plot with intricate characters, the next book has a simple narrative.

The third book that depicts bilingualism is *My Grandma, Mi Abuelita*, written by Ginger Foglesong Guy and illustrated by Viví Escrivá. According to *Something About the Author*, Guy "grew up in Mexico, Arizona...and Costa Rica before training as a teacher" (82). The experiences of growing up and moving between these places gives her author authority to portray bilingualism because she went through its' struggles it herself. Her role as a teacher gives her even more author authority to tell a story on a child's level because she knows what they need and like in books. Unfortunately, Escriva has no interviews with or biographies on her, which indicates that she may have little authority in her illustrations. This may be because of the little popularity bilingual books have or the little recognition that Hispanic illustrators receive. Because of the author's authority on bilingualism, Guy uses simple words with to tell a story along with Escrivá's illustrations.

Unlike the other stories, full of complex sentences and emotion, this story has two to four words per page, making it somewhat difficult to analyze the text. Instead, the illustrations and the text work together to communicate the setting, plot, and languages used, although the illustrations perform the majority of the work. On the opening page, the iconic George Washington Bridge peaks out behind a curtain, indicating that the family lives in New York. Readers can only assume, however, that the family visits a Central or South American country because of the vegetation and style of houses depicted along their travels. The illustrations of the

setting reflect a bilingual culture as the “more rural, tropical setting at the grandmother’s home contrasts with the children’s urban neighborhood” (Phelan 114). This relates to the culture because children of bilingual homes often travel, literally and figuratively, between cultures and language. The setting may appear unclear, but the illustrations make the plot recognizable. This story follows a father and a young boy and girl “as they get up...take a taxi from their city apartment to the airport...and fly” to visit their grandmother “who plays with them and tucks them into bed” (Phelan 114). Such a passive plot may seem unexciting, but illustrations bring it to life through friendly pastel colors, expansive landscapes, and excited faces of the two children as they travel. This portrays a bilingual culture because children who become bilingual have to learn to bridge, or travel between, two different cultures as well as languages. Readers may misinterpret the setting and plot of the story since an illustration-heavy story allows for open interpretation, but the author makes sure readers understand the languages used in the story.

Guy makes an interesting choice of choosing to use only two or four words per page with half of those words in Spanish, the other in English. In *Something About the Author*, her “books are geared for young children and feature simple stories,” so that young readers become a part of the reading world by understanding what they read (82). When the family flies to see the grandmother, the little boy presses his face against the airplane window with the words “Estoy volando! I’m flying” (Guy 8). The author ensures that readers understand the text by touching on two aspects. First, readers see the Spanish words before the English words which helps them connect the two. Secondly, she writes simple sentences so early readers understand the English words as well as the Spanish. Though the simple text seems ridiculous contrasted against other, more complex, bilingual stories, Guy uses simple words and sentences to include inexperienced readers, helping them make the leap to those complex stories later on.

Children's limited vocabulary complicates their ability to conceptualize, much less communicate, their struggles, but books give them examples and words as tools. The culture and problem of bilingualism of dealing with two languages further complicates identifying it, but the three books *Juana and Lucas*; *Mango, Abuela, and Me*; and *My Grandma Mi Abuelita* endeavor to communicate this struggle. The first picture book communicates the culture and the problem of bilingualism in an entertaining, but not idealizing, way. Children of all cultures should read this book as it can act as a mirror for those who struggle with the problem, and a window for those who do not. *Mango, Abuela, and Me* helps those who deal with the problem of a language barrier but leaves readers with a solution, not just a comprehension of the problem. For children who do not struggle with bilingualism, this book helps them develop empathy. The last picture book may not communicate and solve a struggle, but it does give early readers a steppingstone into more complex stories later on. Young children should read this book, but if given a choice, the other two books are more beneficial. All in all, these books portray the culture of bilingualism in an entertaining, non-stereotypical way. Because of these books, bilingual children take pride in their culture and other children understand a culture they may have previously never met.

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