

In Search of *El Pueblo Unido*: Children's Picture Books and Teaching about Community

Anna Ochoa O'Leary
Mexican American Studies and Research Center
University of Arizona

I received my training at the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology before earning my doctorate in cultural anthropology at the University of Arizona in 1999. The various research projects in which I participated were within the Anthropology and Education program. The program pioneered research in multicultural education by developing the "funds of knowledge" approach where classrooms incorporate localized, bicultural forms of knowledge into the curriculum. Currently, I hold an appointment at the University of Arizona in the Mexican-American Studies and Research Center where I teach and continue to be involved with education initiatives that help build partnerships between researchers and communities.

Abstract

The social network concept has been amply validated as effective for strengthening ties between communities and schools and for improving educational outcomes. However, there appears to be a dearth of picture books that Latino children (K-6) might use that would enhance their understanding of social networks. I argue that by integrating social networks into classroom learning, cultural practices that Latino children are familiar with would be validated, and this would help defeat the process that has historically depreciated their culture. In keeping with the principles of multicultural education that seeks to improve academic achievement through the incorporation of meaningful subject matter, I review a short list of picture books that might provide a base around which the study of social networks might be organized for early primary grades. I also offer suggestions for thinking about why such an important feature of social organization has been historically disregarded.

Recent efforts to develop a project in multicultural education led me into the area of Hispanic children's literature. In particular I was interested in how picture books for early primary grade readers might be used to complement a "funds of knowledge" approach in multicultural education. A "funds of knowledge" approach seeks to document and integrate community forms of knowledge into the curriculum (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992). This approach has been used to make learning more meaningful for ethnic or language minority children. It also undermines the conventional use of more static cultural artifacts (e.g. folklore, music), "a relic to hang on the bulletin board" (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, p. 147) to teach children about culture. It is my contention

that social networks, a feature of social organization, are largely overlooked within multicultural education. By integrating social networks into content areas, cultural processes and ideologies that Latino children can identify with would be validated and thus help countermand the historical depreciation of their culture.

A social network can be described as a web-like system of relational ties between individuals and families that facilitate the procurement and exchange of resources. A sense of social solidarity promotes bonds of mutual trust between individuals that make resource exchange possible and desirable. Resources can be of a material nature, such as goods, services, or information. They can also be of an intangible character, such as advice and trust. The persistence of economic instability and poverty among Mexican-origin populations can be used to explain the presence and perseverance of social networks as a way of adapting to their economic and social environments, (Chavez, 1985; Keefe, 1980, Lomnitz, 1994a [1970], 1994a [1970]), Selby, Murphy, & Lorenzen, 1990). How Latinos overcome obstacles posed by poverty and discrimination must be seen as part of a more extensive system of human development, in which obstacles to education are also negotiated.

In this paper I briefly summarize the importance of social networks to efforts to improve educational outcomes. However, while academics recognize the value of social networks to academic success, the lack of picture books that primary grade Latino children (K-6) might use to learn about them suggests that there may be a gap between academic knowledge and classroom practice. My search for resources in Latino children's picture books resulted in a short list of books that I feel could be used to illustrate how social networks operate. These provide a foundation upon which classroom activities and the study of social networks might be built. Finally, my short discussion of Bourdieu's theory of how education reproduces social inequality offers an explanation for why such an important aspect of social organization—one grounded in the history and culture of Mexican heritage students—might be neglected.

Social Networks and Educational Outcomes

The importance of social networks to the schooling process has been well documented. Social networks have proven to be instrumental in strengthening ties between communities and schools, leading to improved access to educational programs in a variety of ways (Maeroff, 1998). Delgado-Gaitan's (2001) ethnographic study of a small working class Latino community of Carpinteria show that with increased social network activity, parents emerged from isolation to form a group to address issues in their children's schools: Comité de Padres Latinos (COPLA). Before the group formed, the silenced voices of these parents allowed for the school's total control over students. Over time, COPLA helped establish a sense of trust and cooperation between them and the schools, and helped give parents a voice in the school decision-making process (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, p. 142). Empowered by their collective voice, parents were able to push for a more inclusive process by which improvements in the schools were possible. Lareau (2000) explains

that unlike middle class parents, working class parents are more likely to be intimidated by the professional authority of teachers and may seldom try to influence the core of the educational system. In Delgado-Gaitan's study, the networks empowered parents and resulted in changes in their schools. Networks provided the outreach tool by which workshops were organized and knowledge and information was disseminated. Workshops further engaged parents, enabled them to critically reflect about the process of mobilization, and act consciously (Delgado-Gaitan 2001, p. 152).

My interest in the hidden potential of social networks as a means by which education can be attained emerged from dissertation fieldwork in a border community, Nogales, Arizona (O'Leary, 1999). The data from this anthropological study showed that increases in the level of education for women significantly raised the total amount households materially invest in the education of its members. Furthermore, the research suggested that supportive practices, such as those facilitated by social networks, were instrumental in helping women reach their educational goals. It suggests further that culturally-embedded networks of support might be key to improving both economic and educational outcomes of the wider Mexican-origin population. However, the fits-and-starts patterns of women's education participation indicated that as a strategy, social networking was underutilized.

Other studies center on the benefit of social supportive practices and values, such as familism that strengthens children's scholastic progress (Israel, Beaulieu, & Hartless, 2001, Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994). Bö's research, for example, indicates that there is strong positive correlation between social network size and school performance. This study helps confirm the theory that increasing children's contact with many different life-styles and role models enhances their cognitive abilities (Bö, 1994, p. 375). In another study, Cochran and Riley (1990) argue that with more contact with kin and nonkin members, children learn the social skills they need to form friendships and construct social networks of their own, which helps them negotiate better their own educational environments. In the Cochran and Riley study, women with higher education are shown to have larger supportive networks, and thus exposed their children to larger groups of kin and nonkin. Women's education and employment were seen as stimulating the social development for their children, and ultimately, enhancing the social skills needed for higher education. The authors suggest that social networking thus becomes a "nonrandom selection device" through which higher education becomes easier for those who are already socially skilled (Cochran & Riley 1990, p.176).

Hence, social networks have been confirmed to be beneficial to the schooling process in a variety of ways. However, it appears that while social networks are understood and recognized as important by scholars, as a classroom topic it remains little explored. The reason for this is unclear, but Stanton-Salazar's work (2001) suggests a possible explanation. He concurs that social networks are important to the construction of relationships that would help youth access educational resources and orient them towards developing the supportive relations

that would enable them to persist in school. Yet, in spite of the evidence, the process by which social support is mobilized to improve education is inhibited—often by the youth themselves. He argues that the communal orientation of Latinos is increasingly under attack by the American preference for individualism (that complements a capitalist ideology), discrimination, and pressures to assimilate. Under this light, the social interdependency that Latino children see as part of their culture appears deficient. Because of their desire to fit within prescribed behaviors of the dominant society, children become unreceptive to the supportive behaviors of those around them, and in this way, help-seeking and network building processes are short-circuited.

The alienation that Latinos experience as a result of the unmaking of a communal orientation might be addressed by the integration of the social network concept within the auspices of multicultural education. A funds-of-knowledge approach that builds upon and capitalizes on community knowledge of social networking might prove useful in this regard. In addition to providing meaningful topics for classroom learning, this approach would systematically and deliberately validate resources children have that have already been proven to enhance their chances for academic success. Finally, the intersection of learning, culture, and resource mobilization will also offer the context for reflection, and in the Freireian sense, serve to promote the consciousness-raising that is important for generating knowledge for less-advantaged communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; Friere, 2000 [1970], Villalpando, 2003)

Accessing Education: Historical and Political Underpinnings

Multicultural education recognizes that there are cultural differences between groups and that with increased understanding of the cultures of other groups, we can expect a more learned, diverse, and increasingly tolerant society. More importantly, multicultural education is about the practice of making education more accessible for racial, ethnic, and linguistic minority students (Tanemura Morelli & Spencer, 2000). Culture might appear to be unrelated to the process of “access” if we overlook the role of culture as processual (González, 1995). The history of the Chicano Movement of the late sixties provides a historical framework for understanding culture as a unifying force within the larger process of community empowerment. Often marching to the rhythm of the now-famous chant: “*El Pueblo Unido, jamás será vencido...*”/“The people united, will never be defeated...” the Movement helped galvanize an ideology of social solidarity that succeeded, to a large degree, in improving the Chicano condition on a variety of fronts. To be sure, the Movement is credited for some of the important gains in educational reform. Movement activists and scholars demanded from learning institutions more truthful representations of Chicano/a histories and cultures; and by the 70s, the idea of incorporating a child’s cultural heritage in the curriculum became more accepted. A refocus on this history could very well provide the backdrop to approaches within multicultural education that represents Latinos as proactive participants in determining educational outcomes. The process by which

individuals were enjoined in a sense of community is still present in Latino neighborhoods. The exposure to this history in early primary grades might very well undermine the sense of isolation and alienation that comes from the pressures to assimilate in later, adolescent years (Stanton-Salazar 2001). As such, the number of picture books that Latino children (K-6) might use in the classroom that would focus on the importance of social solidarity for accessing educational institutions appears limited.

Critics might object to the underlying politics that learning about community-building processes assumes. However, to these I would submit that the idea of mixing children's literature and politics is not new. In *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*, Phil Nell (2004) points out how progressive political beliefs were often expressed in children's story books and how in fact, Dr. Seuss used his position as a popular children's book author to try to convey progressive social messages. One of the most popular of his books, *Yertle the Turtle* (for ages 4-8) was a parable about the rise of Hitler. In the story, Yertle the Turtle literally builds his throne on the backs of other turtles, who all suffer under his rule until the lowliest turtle at the bottom, the one upon whose back Yertle's fragile empire is built, sneezes and the empire is toppled.

The Sneetches was written as a lesson in anti-Semitism, but applies to all forms of racial discrimination. The somewhat controversial *The Lorax* illustrates how parts of an ecosystem are interdependent and interrelated and paints a negative picture of corporate greed, which left unchecked, leads to environmental destruction. *The Butter Battle Book* was written in opposition to President Ronald Reagan's escalation of the nuclear arms race. In *Horton Hears a Who*, the important concept of Voice is illustrated. Horton, a large elephant, helps children understand the concept of how those with power, can help those with none, those too small to be heard. An important lesson, too, is that in order to halt injustice, everyone—"no matter how small"—has to speak up. It is in this popular children's story that little Jo-Jo, the smallest Who of all, saves his little world from certain destruction, by joining the rest of Whoville, shouting the famous "Yawp!"

My search for classroom picture book resources with stories that articulated social solidarity or collective action resulted in a short list that I submit below. I found that while many story lines emphasized the importance of family and culture, few referred to the power that comes with the webs of social interaction that we commonly understand as community. Even less dealt with the power that women have to create and maintain ties with other families; and ultimately, to ultimately mobilize the resources contained therein to resolve a variety of problems. Nonetheless, the examples I offer can be used to highlight the topics of social solidarity and collective action and might provide a starting point around which the study of social networks might be further organized.

Picture Book Themes: In Search of El Pueblo Unido

An inspirational bilingual reader for children (ages 4-8) is *Sí, se puede!/Yes, we can!* by Diana Cohn (2002). This is a story that recounts the successful Justice for Janitors strike in California. The story is told from the perspective of a young boy, Carlitos, whose mother helps organize the struggle for higher wages for the janitors of Los Angeles. In addition to offering children

the opportunity to envision women as agents of social change (as labor organizers), there are several lessons that center on the value of social solidarity. The most obvious comes from the role of Carlitos' mother as spokesperson for the janitors' union. Another lesson comes from Carlitos' understanding of his mother's role during a difficult time, as a person not only concerned for her family, but for many others. The fact that Carlitos is a child is not an obstacle for either comprehending the importance of social solidarity or acting in a complementary manner. At first, he cannot think of a way to join his mother and show his support for the other janitors until he sees her on television making a speech. He then gets his class to help him make a sign to show his support. In this way, he demonstrates his own ability to consolidate support. The story ends with Carlitos joining his mother in a mass demonstration.

In *Friends from the Other Side/amigos del otro lado* (1993) by Gloria Anzaldúa, the protagonist, Prietita, is "a brave young Mexican American girl" who defends a new friend, Joaquin, who is recently arrived from the "other side" (Mexico). Prietita demonstrates her social solidarity with Joaquin, an immigrant boy, who is being mistreated by a group of other boys from the neighborhood. Prietita stands up to the group of boys poised to throw stones at Joaquin. She escorts him home, and the fundamentals of communal exchange are simply understood:

"She [Prietita] saw pride in their faces and knew that they would offer a guest the last of their food and go hungry rather than appear bad-mannered (Anzaldúa, 1993)."

Later in the story, Prietita brings Joaquin and his mother to the neighborhood herb woman who shelters them from a raid of the border patrol. Prietita's act of compassion and solidarity with those that are less fortunate has prepared her for the larger role as member of the community, and signals a coming of age.

The inspirational story of Rosa Parks is recounted in surrealistic fashion in *If a Bus Could Talk* by Faith Ringgold (1999). In this story for ages 5-9, the protagonist, Marcie, finds herself in a bus that talks. The bus proceeds to trace the life of civil rights leader and lifetime activist Rosa Parks. In the brief biography of Rosa Parks, children learn about racism and the power of collective action. The story takes the young reader through the arrest of Rosa Parks for civil disobedience, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the 1956 Supreme Court decision that made segregation on public roadways illegal. In this way, important themes of social solidarity and the collective struggle for social justice are intertwined. Although this is not a story about the struggles of Latinas/os in particular, in general the theme highlights social solidarity that Latinos can relate to. It recalls a history of civil rights equally important to Latino mobilization. The story can also easily be compared to the history of the grape boycott organized by Cesar Chavez and United Farm Workers Union.

Cosechando Esperanza by Kathleen Krull is a picture book in Spanish, which depicts the life and coming of age of Cesar Chavez. From the onset, the story highlights the importance of family and the importance of emotional and spiritual

support people give to each other in times of hardship. This support helped young Cesar's family endure the traumas of migration and the farm worker experience. The story traces his beginnings as an organizer, and the importance of peaceful resistance. Social solidarity is an important feature of the march from Delano to Sacramento that drew hundreds of followers and resulted in the first union labor contract between growers and agricultural workers.

The last of the books reviewed here is *Grandma and me at the flea/Los meros meros remateros*, by Juan Felipe Herrera (2002). This is a bilingual picture book that highlights the common workings of reciprocal exchange, which is fundamental to social networks. In this story, Juanito accompanies his grandmother, Esperanza, to a flea market in southern California, where he helps her in her sale and trade of used clothing. At the flea market, Juanito runs happily through the stalls with his friends, and between the innocuous exchange of anecdotes and errands, the vendors repay Esperanza's many acts of kindness with gifts of their own—belts, fruit, jewelry, and blankets. Through such exchanges, they validate the many roles that women like Esperanza have played, providing assistance for new immigrants, translating, offering food, comfort, and support, and their important role to the formation of community.

A Bridge between Practice and Theory

The relative invisibility of culture-as-process within the classroom denies children much meaningful and useful information that comes from lived experiences. Its exclusion from the classroom is an artifact of a social process that has historically devalued the histories, experiences, and cultures of subordinated group and conferred value on those of the dominant group. Our understanding of this process has advanced, in part, due to the work of Bourdieu (1977). Although largely concerned with the reproduction of inequality in France, Bourdieu outlines a process by which elite power and privilege is sustained through its appropriation and manipulation of cultural capital. Cultural capital is described by Bourdieu as the accumulated knowledge that is passed down from generation to generation and all that is necessary (knowledge, ethics, skills) for transferring that knowledge. The important idea is that cultural capital translates into wealth for those who possess it; hence, it has "value." By this logic, poor people do not have cultural capital. In other words, the culture of those without wealth has no value. If it did, they would not be poor. Its implication for poor Mexican-origin communities is tautological. They also lack cultural capital: the accumulated knowledge found within them, that which is also passed down from generation to generation, their knowledge, ethics, and skills for transferring that knowledge lacks "value" given that their culture failed to translate into wealth.

Bourdieu goes on to explain that the reason that the culture of the dominant classes has value is because those classes have the means by which value is assigned to certain cultural activities¹ and withheld from others. Moreover, by constructing obstacles by which value is determined, the dominant classes assure themselves of a monopoly of material and symbolic wealth and power. The educational system is the dominant group's biggest accomplice in this process. According to Bourdieu, educational systems have internalized the values of the dominant society, ratifying its

¹ Bourdieu uses measures of cultural activity that include theatre and museum attendance and reading habits.

system of cultural capital by academically rewarding those who possess it, while simultaneously depreciating the cultures of subordinated groups (working classes) by denying members of those groups academic success. The result is that members from subordinated groups give up on education altogether as academic success is continually made unattainable.

The rather pessimistic conclusions posed by Bourdieu makes it difficult to imagine education as the likely avenue by which underprivileged, impoverished Latino populations might advance educationally or economically were it not for the collective voices calling for reforms in education. The ideologies articulated in the U.S. Civil Rights era were used to effectively argue against the education system's neglect of minorities. The Chicano Movement, in particular, raised protest over the systematic devaluation of their language and cultural values, resulting in a disenfranchised Latino student population, and educational social inequalities that followed ethnic and racial lines. Indeed, the mass unrest of the time succeeded to a large degree in improving the minority condition on a variety of fronts, one of the most important of which was the adoption of multicultural education in the schools.

By tapping into sources of knowledge that comes primarily from a community's capacity to build and engage relational ties to lessen its disadvantage, practitioners have the opportunity to enhance student's learning and fulfill a commitment to multicultural education. Research on social networks has validated their importance to accessing educational institutions and confirmed their role in the cognitive development of children. The suggestion offered here is to offer instruction to children about social networks. Given that systems of social support are salient in the organization between and within Mexican-origin households and maintained over time and geographic space through patterns of social interaction, their presence provides the starting point for that instruction. This integration could be complemented by integrating culturally relevant literature into the curriculum and by providing corresponding perspectives from family members and teachers. Ideally, the collaboration between practitioners and parents would foster a positive picture of social networks for early primary graders, before becoming invalidated by an individualistic orientation. That is to say, by validating cultural processes such as the social network in the classroom, a parent/teacher partnership might circumvent the process that has historically devalued the culture of minority students and contributed to the reproduction of social and educational inequality. Furthermore, once validated and sanctioned, systems of support can be made more deliberate and more invigorated in support of educational activities, thus remaining consistent with the research where such processes are known to help students realize academic goals.

References

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1993). *Friends from the Other Side/amigos del otro lado*. San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press/Libros para niños.
- Bö, Inge. (1994). The Sociocultural Environment as a Source of Support. In *Social Networks and Social Support in Childhood and Adolescence*, Frank Nestmann and Klaus Hurrelmann, (Eds.), pp. 363-384. New York and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. (1977). Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. In *Power and Ideology in Education*. Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey (Eds.), pp. 487-511. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cochran, Moncrieff and David Riley. (1990). The Social Networks of Six-year-olds: Context, Content, and Consequence. In *Extending Families: the Social Networks of Parents and their Children*, pp.154-178. Cambridge University Press,
- Cohn, Diana. (2002). *Sí, se puede!/Yes, we can!* El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press.
- Chavez, Leo (1985). Households, Migration and Labor Market Participation: The Adaptation of Mexicans to Life in the United States. *Urban Anthropology* Vol. 14 (4), pp. 301-346.
- Delgado-Gaitan, Concha. (2001). *The Power of Community: Mobilizing for Family and Schooling*. New York: Rowan and Littlefield
- Freire, Paulo. (2002). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. NY: Continuum International Publishing, Inc.
- González, Norma (1995). Processual Approaches to Multicultural Education. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, Vol. 31 (2), pp. 234-344.
- Herrera, Juan Felipe (2002). *Grandma and me at the flea/Los meros meros remateros*, San Francisco, CA: Children's Book Press.
- Israel, Glenn, D., Lionel J. Beaulieu, and Glen Hartless. (2001). The Influence of Family and Community Social Capital on Educational Achievement. *Rural Sociology* Vol. 66 (1), pp. 43-68.
- Lareau, Annette. (2000). *Home Advantage: Social Class and Parental Intervention in Elementary Education*: NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Keefe, Susan Emily. (1980). Personal Communities in the City: Support Networks among Mexican Americans and Anglo-Americans. *Urban Anthropology* Vol. 9 (1), pp. 51-74.
- Krull, Kathleen. (2003). *Cosechando esperanza: La Historia de César Chávez*. NY: Libros Viajeros/Harcort, Inc.
- Lomnitz, Larissa Adler, (1994a. [1971]), "El compadrazgo": reciprocidad de favores en la clase media urbana de Chile" in *Redes Sociales, Cultura y Poder: Ensayos de Antropolgogía Latinoamericana*, pp. 19-46, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ceincias Sociales, Sede México (D.F.): Miguel Angel Porra, Grupo Editorial.
- Lomnitz, Larissa Adler, (1994b [1971] Supervivencia en una barriada en la ciudad de México" in *Redes Sociales, Cultura y Poder: Ensayos de Antropolgogía Latinoamericana*, pp. 47-98, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ceincias Sociales, Sede México (D.F.): Miguel Angel Porra, Grupo Editorial.

- Maeroff, Gene I. (1998). *Altered Destinies: Making Life Better for Schoolchildren in Need*, New York: St Martins's Press.
- Moll, Luis C., Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma González. (1992). Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms. *Theory Into Practice* Vol. 31, pp. 132-141.
- Nel, Phil. (2004). *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*. New York: London: Continuum Publishing Group.
- O'Leary, Anna M. Ochoa. (1999). Investment in Female Education as an Economic Strategy among U.S.-Mexican Households in Nogales, Arizona. Ph.D. diss., Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona.
- Ringgold, Faith. (1999). *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks*, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.
- Rochín, Refugio I and Dennis N. Valdés, (Eds). *Voices of a New Chicana/o History*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Selby, Henry A., Arthur D. Murphy, and Stephen A. Lorenzen. (1990). *The Mexican Urban Household: Organizing for Self-Defense*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Stanton-Salazar, Ricardo. (2001). *Manufacturing Hope and Despair: The School and Kin Support Networks of U.S.-Mexican Youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Tanemura Morelli, Paula T. and Michael S. Spencer. (2000). Use and Support of Multicultural and Antiracist Education: Research-Informed Interdisciplinary Social Work Practice. *Social Work*, Vol. 45 (2), pp. 166-176.
- Valenzuela, Angela and Sanford M. Dornbusch. (1994). Familism and Social Capital in the Academic Achievement of Mexican Origin and Anglo Adolescents, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 75 (1) March, pp. 18-36.
- Vélez-Ibáñez, Carlos G. and James B. Greenberg. (1992). Formation and Transformation of Funds of Knowledge among US.-Mexican Households, *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 23, pp. 313-335.
- Vélez-Ibáñez, Carlos G. (1988). Networks of Exchange among Mexicans in the U.S. and Mexico: Local Leveling Mediating and International Transformation. *Urban Anthropology*, Vol. 17 (1), pp. 27-51.
- Villalpando, Octavio (2003). Self-segregation or self-preservation? A critical race theory and Latina/o critical theory analysis of a study of Chicana/o college students, *Qualitative Studies in Education* Sept. -Oct. Vol. 16 (5), pp. 619-646.

