



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2016 Volume III: "Over the Rainbow": Fantasy Lands, Dream Worlds, and Magic Kingdoms

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## **Afirmando Nuestra Identidad (Affirming Our Identity): Exploring Dream Worlds and Storytelling through Alebrijes**

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### **Introduction**

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This past year, my 7 year old son and I attended the National Museum of Mexican Art's Annual Folk Art Market that featured unique examples of beautiful folk art, as well as several of the artists that create them. Upon entering the gallery, it was easy to feel overwhelmed with so many colors, textures, and objects that I couldn't decide which booth to approach first. As I quickly scanned the room and headed to the textiles section, I felt a sudden tug of the hand. In my haste, I had failed to notice that my son desperately wanted to head in the opposite direction towards the area featuring sculptures. I asked if we could go there second, but he protested and immediately proceeded to walk directly to the table of alebrijes—unique, colorful, fantastical animal-like creatures that originated in the dreams of an artist named Pedro Linares in 1936. These in particular were carved in wood. My son had never seen such creatures and had all sorts of questions as he carefully observed their shape, colors and design that incorporated several different animal parts all at once. He was fascinated! It had occurred to me that I had never introduced this art form to him, given that our family collects art. The teacher in me observed him as he moved wide-eyed through the miniature objects and then suddenly turned to discover gigantic alebrije sculptures such as a serpent-eagle and an iguana-bird overtaking the entire next table. Demonstrating this art form was Jacobo Angeles, a renowned wood carver whose work is collected globally. He was demonstrating how he carved these creatures from stumps of wood of the copal, a tree that grows in the region of Oaxaca. As he explained the process of drying the wood before painting it, my son was already placing his hands on the largest of the sculptures, asking if we could take it home. He asked Jacobo what animal it was and listened intently as the artist explained that each alebrije represented animal spirits that watch over and guide us. My son desperately wanted this serpent-eagle to watch over him. Truth be told, I'd never seen him so intrigued, particularly by the patterns of paint covering these sculptures. Through these alebrijes, we learned that many of the most prominent pieces are painted using natural materials such as the resin from the copal tree itself, its bark, local minerals and fruits such as pomegranate and lime. We learned about the Zapotec calendar and animal spirit guides. Having previous knowledge myself of these sculptures, I explained to my son that originally, alebrijes were also made of cartoneria and that today Mexico hosts a parade of alebrijes that people all over the country participate in by creating their own giant sculptures that represent the diversity of Mexico's beliefs, customs, and regions.

In one brief moment, my son had learned a wealth of information about our culture, our history, and our

traditions. He was intrigued and proud that this was something from which he could claim cultural heritage because it was Mexican. Later that day, he decided that he too would partake in collecting art as his parents do by purchasing his first piece of artwork, an alebrije lizard signed by artist, Mauricio Ramirez from Arrazola, Oaxaca. It has since become his special toy that only he can handle because it is art.

This story demonstrates the power of art to connect us to a time and space representative of history, tradition, identity and imagination. Art, like stories, is a vehicle for transmission of culture that engages us, and provides us with ways to connect to our past, to each other, and the world. For my son, learning about alebrijes inspired invented worlds that he plays in whenever he picks up his lizard. His imagination is fueled by the object as well as by the many stories and experiences we've shared of Mexico and our culture. His reflections in the literature we read serve as affirmation of his own voice and stories to tell. These experiences are what I hope to replicate in my classroom.

This unit is dedicated to the work at hand with second grade students of Mexican origin who reside in the world of two languages as emergent bilingual students within U.S. schools. Utilizing Mexican and Mexican-American picture books within the framework of a biliteracy continuum, this unit welcomes students into concepts of the "homeland", that can best be described as that place from which our ancestors come, where our traditions and rituals reside, and where pride in belonging to these rich roots are born. For many Mexican and Mexican-American students, our lives reside in the story of hope and dreams that our parents imagined for us. We are part of a greater trajectory whose destination has yet to be defined. To explore these ideas and more, students will engage with stories that span across geographical spaces, and in particular, visit their ancestral lands of Mexico through the written and oral word, through the visual landscape of el arte popular Mexicano and the dream worlds of alebrijes. Alebrijes provide students with an opportunity to be inspired in the creation of their own stories with unique characters that reflect their cultural funds of knowledge, incorporating their biliterate and bicultural experiences, and opening the possibilities to unimagined spaces in storytelling.

## Rationale

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Student demographics across U.S. public schools are currently shifting, representing major growth trends for students of color that render non-Hispanic whites a minority population. According to an Education Week article, "The new collective majority of minority school children—projected to be 50.3 percent by the National Center for Education Statistics—is driven largely by dramatic growth in the Latino population and a decline in the white population (...)." <sup>1</sup> A 2015 report by the National Council of La Raza finds that according to the U.S. Department of Education, current Latino student enrollment is just over 25%, and projected to near 30% by 2023<sup>2</sup>. In addition, findings show that Spanish-speaking students represent 80% of the 4.6 millions students classified as English Learners (8). In light of these trends and current widespread anti-Latino and anti-immigrant sentiment across the country, it becomes imperative for teachers and schools to provide culturally responsive educational experiences and opportunities that value our students linguistically as well as culturally. As a nation, we lose if we fail to engage this population of students with educational opportunities that are innovative, equitable, and grounded in the belief that they have a right to access higher learning without having to compromise their culture or language, because the 21<sup>st</sup> century citizen will need to engage the world of multi-literacy and global perspectives. With the implementation of Common Core standards

across the country, we need not forget that effective bilingual instruction can provide a rich and effective context for meeting the demands of these standards and their emphasis on increased language and literacy development by not only developing English competencies, but also allowing students to engage their vast cultural and linguistic resources to learn. Such an approach according to Carmen Martinez-Roldan, “represents an important axis of their construction of identity, specifically their identification with the ethnic-cultural group of their parents. Providing students with access to their native languages as they negotiate cultural identities has implications for students' successful participation at school, which is relevant to goals of equity and justice in education”<sup>3</sup>.

As a Mexican-American bilingual teacher, I identify very much with my bilingual students in the challenges they face in finding their place within an academic world where they simultaneously develop two languages while learn to digest and analyze content. I approach my work from an assets-based perspective that recognizes and celebrates my students' cultural heritage and skills in their home language. I do not refer to my students as only English-language learners because that negates the value of their home language, thus their cultural identity and traditions. Instead my students are referred to as emergent bilingual students. Given the political climate on language that dominates our school systems nationally, bilingual teachers are left with several challenges in order to promote research-driven models that emphasize additive versus subtractive models of bilingual education. A common challenge for teachers like myself is that most curriculums are planned from a monolingual perspective, and at best mention my students as an after-thought who's primary goal is to learn English rather than content. As a teacher of emergent bilingual students I must consider how my students will be exposed to rich complex texts in their home language (Spanish), and how we can create a linguistic bridge to their second language (English), while recognizing that both languages merge into one linguistic register that continues to grow their bilingual skills and evolve their language practices. In addition, while monolingual teachers using a prescribed curriculum are often provided with the texts they will utilize, bilingual teachers are relegated to the work of having to translate given texts on top of having to re-frame whatever skills/strategies, vocabulary and analysis will be covered so that the work of bilingual language development may occur. As stated prior, another aspect of our work involves ensuring that our curriculum is culturally responsive to whom our students are. This means that I must seek opportunities in which my students not only relate to the literature they are reading, but may also see themselves reflected within it in authentic ways.

## Content Objectives

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Through the course of this unit, my students will engage with interactive read-alouds that expose them to stories about Mexican and Mexican-American culture, about imagination, as well as watch several short films featuring alebrijes. Students will respond to stories by engaging in collaborative conversations, expressing ideas, listening, and reflecting on new learning. They will work towards understanding the structures of folk and fairy tales by comparing and contrasting story elements with historical/realistic fiction. Students will also be expected to discuss the central message or the moral of a story by describing details regarding its setting, characters, and/or plot.

As we explore Mexican popular art and specifically alebrijes, students will be expected to explain how alebrijes reflect Mexico's rich cultural traditions by identifying elements of its design and creation. Using the theme of bravery for their stories, students will then research personal stories of bravery by interviewing family

members and each other. Listening to stories and sharing their own will enable them to create and express their newly imagined stories that reflect tradition and culture. As they create their alebrije, students will begin exploring ways of incorporating their alebrije into their stories, adding the element of magic.

Students will collaboratively construct a landscape that reflects historical, cultural, and visual elements of both the literature explored, and that which they are already familiar with in their everyday lives. Alebrijes provide students with an opportunity to create stories that reflect their own cultural funds of knowledge, incorporating their biliterate and bicultural experiences, and thus serving as a form of “identity texts”, best described by language expert, Jim Cummins, as student-produced artifacts that reflect student ownership of learning through a positive representation of that student’s identity. This fosters the kinds of bilingual language and literacy development that propel emergent bilingual students into higher-level learning and application. As students engage in reading articles and watching video clips of alebrijes-in-the-making to learn about this art form and its modern manifestations, they will engage in creating sketches of alebrijes to incorporate as characters in their stories. These sketches will then be transformed into larger scale three-dimensional models that can be used for a storytelling show. Students will engage in elements of cartoneria, the original form of the alebrije, using not just a glue paste, but incorporating everyday recycled materials. Parents and families will be invited to support students in creating this model both at school and at home. Our unit on storytelling through alebrijes will culminate in a public presentation that informs its audience of its intention to reclaim a space of power through the use of bi-literacies, and cultural traditions of popular art forms as well as that of storytelling.

This unit is intended for emergent bilingual 2<sup>nd</sup> grade students who are developing their literacy skills in both Spanish and English. When teaching for biliteracy development, it’s important to consider the balance or strategic use of each language to tackle the objectives of the unit. The use of a biliteracy framework facilitates planning for the development of both languages in appropriate and relevant ways. Strategies introduced through this framework are based on Kathy Escamilla’s *Biliteracy From the Start*, and Karen Beeman and Cheryl Urow’s book, *Teaching for Biliteracy*, both of which are listed in the Resources section. Both resources utilize frameworks for planning that require the development of language objectives and highlight cross-linguistic connections through the content. Escamilla’s framework utilizes the approach of paired literacy in which literacy-based objectives are developed for both native language and English as a second language instruction, while highlighting opportunities for transfer. Beeman and Urow’s framework highlights learning new concepts within a given theme in one language, then bridging and extending to the second language.

When planning for this work, teachers should begin with referencing Common Core State Standards in English and Common Core en español. Doing so enables the teacher to understand how language skills differ within each language to plan appropriately. It also allows for strategic selection of skills that your students may need to work on, while helping teachers to bridge and address cross-linguistic relationships of concepts and vocabulary. Your planning document should include a place to identify these connections in relation to the texts, genre, objectives, or common themes. In this way the teacher is better prepared to facilitate the work of cross-language connections with students. Language objectives can be developed using WIDA’s English and Spanish language development standards. WIDA’s resources also help teachers to scaffold instruction more precisely to help students advance language proficiency levels and meet their goals across the unit. Again, the planning document could include a place for language objectives per domain in each language.

As an additional note regarding preparing for work in a biliteracy environment: It is extremely important to consider texts that you will want to use for your read alouds as well as those that you have multiple copies for

to be used in either guided reading or as students read independently. Remember that you must have books for all of these activities at in both languages at levels that match your students' reading levels for the independent and guided reading portions, while you should go higher on levels for the read-alouds. A suggestion is to search your classroom library ahead of time to ensure that you have multiple stories at different levels.

## Background: Arte Popular Mexicano and Alebrijes

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Arte popular mexicano represents the many art forms of Mexico's rich diversity, history and imagination.<sup>4</sup> Mexico is not only comprised of different ethnic groups, but a range of geographical terrain, that hosts a rich landscape of languages and traditions. Rick Lopez refers to this in his essay titled, "The Noche Mexicana and Popular Arts" and states "...To hold in one's hand a piece of Mexican popular art is to hold something larger than a mere object; it is to hold Mexico in all its diversity, its rich past, its complex present, and its uncertain future." Mexico's folk art, or "artesanía", can be traced back to its indigenous roots prior to the invasion of Spain, when many tribes were already trading goods with one another. Under Spanish colonialism, these lands were renamed New Spain and many of the most valuable objects/spaces of art and worship were destroyed and replaced, along with religious idolatry. While many objects then were made of gold, silver, and precious stones, the most valuable were made of clay<sup>5</sup>. Once Europeans arrived, the looting of these objects took place, relegating many of them to Europe where they were used as tribute for kings and queens, and where today many still reside in museums. Indigenous peoples were persecuted for practicing their art and were forced into adopting Spanish techniques for the creation of their art. Certain forms of folk art survived and ironically Spanish missionary friars and priests promoted their production.

The surge in arte popular mexicano is deeply rooted in post-revolutionary Mexico, beginning in the early 1920s, and tied to the development of *Mexicanidad*, a cultural movement led by the country's elite politicians, artists, and intellectuals that sought to unify the nation's fragmented and disenfranchised communities through a national agenda of identity formation that represented the mestizo. Elevating the status of indigenous culture and history was a way of equalizing their new society. Artists such as Diego Rivera, Dr. Atl, and Miguel Covarrubias were helping to define what this meant. In his study, "Lo mas mexicano de Mexico: Popular Arts, Indians, and Urban Intellectuals in Ethnicization of Post-Revolutionary National Culture, 1920-1972", Lopez states, "Popular arts were singled out as one of the most authentic manifestations of the national soul, and were therefore a focus of the project to create an ethnicized Mexican identity."<sup>6</sup> In order for artesanía to be considered arte popular mexicano, artisans had to embark on the creation of unique pieces of work created solely by hand utilizing traditional craft methods. According to Beezley, "Despite their support for artesanía, many of these individuals did not consider handicrafts to be art. They saw them as examples of native intuition, genius, and tradition but not individual talent." The emphasis was on developing collective meaning for the work within their particular ethnic group. Throughout the twentieth century the government took the lead in this movement and instituted centers or programs for artisans to sell their products. Museums too began to highlight the work as a way of elevating this art throughout the country.

Alebrijes, a form of Mexican popular art, are the fantastical creations of Mexican artist, Pedro Linares, who in 1936 was on his deathbed and entered into a deep sleep. In his dreams, he traveled to an unknown forest in which the landscape morphed into unrecognizable animals, each one a combination of more than one animal.

They surrounded him and repeatedly chanted “Alebrijes!” as he attempted to leave this place. He encountered a man who said he didn’t belong there yet and showed him the way out through a window. Upon his awakening, Linares recuperated and used his craft of “cartoneria” (similar to papier-mâché), to present these creatures to the world.

Linares described his work in a documentary by Judith Bronowski as work inspired by macabre ideas from dreams. Describing his process for creating these figures using the molds and free form design that he typically used in his work, he simply stated that at the moment of creation he decided which animal parts to combine stating that the figures were ugly and scary, but at once beautiful<sup>7</sup>. His designs feature more of the morphed images and combination of different animal parts to construct alebrijes. His creations reflect a broader fantastical and dreamlike approach to the work. In his piece, “Alebrije” featured in the permanent collection of the National Museum of Mexican Art, we see a creature standing on hind legs that resemble rooster legs, but lizard-like hands with five fingers on either side. The head is proportionately much larger than the body that is positioned in a human-like pose. The head is not that of a lizard, but of another creature that could be part human or animal, with jagged teeth and a long lizard tongue. It features pointed ears similar to that of a coyote. Its body also carries wings patterned with a landscape design that is repetitive. Once observed, the object is emblematic of its origin and story, while open to be interpreted in countless ways through personal connections and contexts. Linares’ creations were so well received that they caught the attention of art collectors and prominent artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Soon his art form, shared until then with his family who were involved in the process of creating and painting these creations, spread to wood carvers of several regions, including the state of Oaxaca.

In 1980, Don Manuel Jimenez Lopez, a wood carver from Oaxaca began producing them from the wood of the native copal tree. He utilized shapes, techniques, and materials rooted in his indigenous roots to paint and form the figures. His work was so popular and sought-after by collectors and museums that other family members and soon many in his community became involved as well. Today, numerous artists have emerged from within communities of that region including the villages of San Antonio Arrazola, San Martin Tilcajete, La Union Tejalapa, and San Pedro Cajones.<sup>8</sup> The production of alebrijes has transformed the economies of these communities. What traditionally was produced with men as sculptors and women as painters has evolved to interchange roles amongst both genders. As this art evolved, it also helped transform the economy of local communities who have elevated this craft into fine works of art through generations of practice. Today, alebrijes are considered one of Mexico’s many popular art forms representative of its rich tradition of folk art and celebrated on a national level through museum exhibitions, national competitions, and parades.

In his book, *Alebrijes: Masterpieces by Mexican Sculptors and Painters*, Zantke describes four types of alebrijes traditionally produced by artists. Some alebrijes are animal-like mythical creatures, some are more naturalistic with surrealist themes, others are just naturalistic, while the last category includes all wood-carved made partially by hand and partially machine-made and mass-produced sold as souvenirs. The first two categories are typically considered genuine works of art and represent the unique imaginative elements that alebrijes have come to be recognized for. The works of Linares and Jimenez belong to the first category of alebrijes, while artists working within the second category could incorporate ornamental and modern patterns and motifs.

The works of Maria and Jacobo Angeles highlight the ways in which artists incorporate elements of indigenous history, customs and iconography into their work. Many of their alebrijes pay homage to the animal spirits representing the 20-day cycle of the Zapotec calendar, which correlates an animal or symbol to each of its twenty days. These symbols or creatures reflect human characteristics that guide a person through their life.

According to Zapotec beliefs there are three animals that signify power: the jaguar, the eagle, and the serpent. Other elements of the world are represented through animals as well. The element of learning is represented in the iguana, the chameleon, and possum; the butterfly, the rabbit, the deer represent the element of movement; the element of advice is represented by the dog, the hummingbird, and the frog; and the owl represents the healer. Maria and Jacobo's work feature many of these animals covered in design patterns and motifs that reflect Zapotec symbols and art. Their use and combination of colors, shapes and patterns interplay to add additional layers of complexity to their design. In addition, the use of natural pigments to paint their objects reflects their beliefs about the value they place on connections to nature. In describing his process for creating these natural pigments, Angeles discusses how the unique colors produced connect to ideas about the world. For example, yellow refers to legend or the village; black refers to the underworld; and red denotes power. Jacobo also describes how vital the copal tree is to their work as wood carvers, because it allows them to make a living and create art. He describes the tree as "sacred" and discusses how his shop, along with the larger communities participate in reforestation projects. In several videos on his work, Jacobo makes a deliberate connection to the importance of respecting the earth and its resources as he describes the choices he makes in creating his alebrijes<sup>9</sup>. In an interview conducted by Congreso Detona, Angeles also talks about how the market for popular art has changed his craft in much the same way a storyteller adapts to his/her listeners. The animals that customers sought were not being produced, so they created them based on demand. In discussing tradition and popular art, Maria discusses how for some time they hesitated to share their craft because of fear of appropriation. Today she says that they've realized how important their work is in maintaining this tradition alive and to do so, they must teach others. They are content with creating something positive that at once observed reminds people of their love for Mexico.

## Literature Selections

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*--Vivimos en un mundo distinto, pero estaré contigo siempre que me recuerdes.--El partió silbando, pero me dejo su chirimía. Desde entonces suelo salir por las tardes a caminar en el llano, y allá lejos..., toco en la flauta las canciones que aprendí en la región donde vive mi abuelo.*

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--"El zopilote y la chirimía" by Gabriela Olmos

These words from Gabriela Olmos' folktale, "El zopilote y la chirimía", reflect a powerful exchange between the main character, Concha and her grandfather in a story about the power of memory, tradition, and identity. They evoke a sentiment that speaks to the need of belonging to something greater, a sentiment common to those who search for their place in history, to make sense of their past, their traditions, rituals and language in order to form identity. As teachers, it is critical to understand who our students are by considering those forces in their lives that bind them, motivate them, and ultimately propel them to embark on their own journey in life. Stories too can help us make sense of these ideas and the world. Through words and images, they can also transport us to new worlds where dreams are possible.

As I began my search for children's literature regarding alebrijes, I soon came to the realization that it was a

very difficult task. In efforts to provide my students with authentic multicultural literature that could serve as a mirror of who my students are, my initial search criteria sought a fairy tale geared towards Latino/a primary students that dealt with the topic of alebrijes; one that was comprised of complex text in Spanish or both, Spanish and English; that offered vibrant illustrations resembling actual alebrijes; and that was authored by a writer/illustrator of Mexican descent. After several extensive searches I managed to find three titles, of which only one was a fairy tale, and none fulfilled everything on my wish list. As a teacher it is important to seek out literature that reflect and speak to the experiences of my students. Rudine S. Bishop has written much on the idea of literature functioning as a vehicle for social agency that imparts cultural values, behaviors and norms. She writes:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.<sup>11</sup>

In examining Bishop's ideas, Tschida, Ryan, and Swenson add, "The significance of providing students with a host of books that represent both windows and mirrors cannot be more important in our world today."<sup>12</sup> As teachers this is our charge—to provide students with the opportunity to engage in relevant and empowering experiences that bridge their funds of knowledge to the content being learned in the classroom.

In her Ted Talk presentation titled, "The danger of a single story", Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie discusses the power of stories to shape and reflect our views of each other and the world and the implications of a single narrative approach, particularly for children who come from marginalized communities. She discusses how vulnerable we are in the face of a story and points to how they can hold power over others in how they are told, who tells them, when they are told, and how many stories are told, emphasizing that without many stories, we are limited in our scope of a people or an issue. She states, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."<sup>13</sup> In seeking to avoid this single narrative approach, I made the choice to dig into other rich narratives that speak to stories of identity and dreams. Some of these stories represent voices similar to those of my students, other do not. Instead, I seek a balance of the "windows, mirrors, and sliding doors" that Bishop referred to. In this way, I believe that in spite of a lack of literature for this topic, I have many other forms of narrative ranging from folk tales to realistic fiction that can supplement our understanding of identity and culture, and that compliment our exploration of arte popular mexicano and alebrijes. In addition, the use of my students' personal connections to these texts, coupled with their own alebrije stories present an opportunity for students to participate in creating the multiplicity of stories that we seek.

In "El zopilote y la chirimía", Concha travels to the land of the dead to reconnect her grandfather with his flute through which he helped preserve cultural traditions for their community. To prevent the music from being appropriated by the evil buzzards, Concha and her grandfather use their Huichol language to communicate, then later they are able to return to the land of the living with the flute when her family and others prepare altares for Day of the Dead. Told through vibrant examples of Huichol visual art and folklore, this story helps



readers imagine the land of the dead as the world in reverse: up is down, down is up; the sun rises at night, while the moon shines when the dead awake. Even food is backwards where they eat delicious worms and bugs. It is not only a visually beautiful story, but it's compelling and its language complex. This story can be viewed through many lenses. Lettycia Terrones discusses how visual elements in picture books help us understand how story works through its narrative. She states, "Because the visual elements in picture books complement the textual narrative, it becomes important to evaluate how images are presented and how they interplay with the text and to question the intentionality of the artistic choice behind the image."<sup>14</sup> This book can also be used to discuss traditions, family bonds, beliefs and religion, language, and fantasy. In "Letting Stories Breathe", Arthur Frank writes, "Stories animate human life; that is their work. Stories work with people, for people, and always stories work *on* people, affecting what people are able to see as real, as possible, and as worth doing or best avoided." He asks what is it about stories that enable them "to work as they do?" and argues that human life depends on stories because of "the sense of self the stories impart, the relationships constructed around shared stories, and the sense of purpose that stories propose and foreclose"<sup>15</sup>. In short, stories hold power in how we act, how we perceive, and in how relate to another.

## Fairy Tale or Folk Tale?

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Seeking to understand the relationship between the genres of fairy tales and folk tales, I discovered that the two are indeed interconnected. I was interested in the fairy tale for its aspects of fantasy and magic, but interested in the folk tale for the cultural transmission and history. In his book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, Jack Zipes discusses how both genres can trace their origins to the oral tradition, but points to the dissemination of fairy tales in the written form as one distinguishing factor. Another distinction is that fairy tales were told by those who could read and write serving those in power who had no interest in stories of "common folk". He goes on to point out how all tales have been aided by memes to transmit stories from one generation to the next. In this way, "The intricate relationship and evolution of folk and fairy tales are difficult to comprehend and define. In fact, together, oral and literary tales form one immense and complex genre because they are inextricably dependent on one another."<sup>16</sup> Fairy tales over time evolved and have been shaped by both its oral traditions, and the extensive transmission via print and other forms of technology.<sup>17</sup> They also carry the element of magic. Zipes states, "the world of the fairy tale has always been created as a counter-world to the reality of the storyteller, by the storyteller and listeners."<sup>18</sup> He states, "These primary tales enabled humans to invent their lives—and create and re-create gods, divine powers, fairies, demons, fates, monsters, witches, and other supernatural characters and forces. An *other* world is very much alive in fairy tales, thanks to our capacity as storytellers."<sup>19</sup> In discussing fiction in general, Karen Lord writes, "Fiction is both process and mystery, knowledge and imagination. It lies somewhere on a spectrum that begins with poetry and ends with statistics. It is art. It takes the forms and shapes of the real world and re-views them with new perceptions: the shade, texture, and weight of the subconscious and unreal."<sup>20</sup> One distinction regarding fairytales and folk tales made clear in our seminar speaks to the implications of a printed story—that can be placed on a shelf and forgotten, while folk tales might be shared and retold countless times in new ways, not to entertain but to teach or share sacred cultural stories. In this way, the storyteller is obligated to share precisely because they don't want them to be forgotten. Thus, we keep these stories alive through rituals. In this way I've learned to grow comfortable with my original idea of sharing folk tales because of the worlds they represent for my students, but I invite them to the unimagined through fairytales.

## Storytelling and Language

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The oral tradition of storytelling provides an opportunity for students to extend stories and connect with them in personal ways. As a child growing up in the U.S., I didn't have the privilege of reading books in my first language; they did not exist for me growing up in an English-only world. However, this does not mean I didn't know and appreciate great stories. I was fortunate to have a wonderful storytelling father who, on his days off of work, filled my weekends with tragic, triumphant and fascinating stories of his past, as well as mesmerizing legends of our ancestral homeland, Mexico. In her book, *Bilingual Education in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Ofelia Garcia quotes a member of the Zuni community who states "Our language tells us about our umbilical cords that go out across the landscape, the valleys, the texture of the mountains, canyons, climate, the creation of beings. Because we have been in the same place for a very, very long time, through this language, we can affect something. My understanding is in my vocabulary." These words resonate with me because storytelling provided me with a sense of identity, and fostered my ability to appreciate books through illustrations when I couldn't read them because of its written language (English). Storytelling taught me how to honor our past, celebrate important events, and heal. As a teacher, I seek ways to teach my students that storytelling is a powerful art form that allows us to interact and communicate with others in multiple ways. Stephanie Curenton writes about how storytelling can prepare children for school because they engage in decontextualized talk—that is not bound by the immediate context. She states, "Decontextualized talk is about objects, feelings, and ideas experienced in the past or expected in the future, whereas contextualized talk is only about the present...(It) promotes higher-order thinking such as reminiscing and planning. Regardless of whether children relate their fantasies or real-life experiences, their stories tell of events that either have happened or may happen."<sup>21</sup> Storytelling according to the author has additional benefits; it aids in reading comprehension, in developing perspective of others, and promotes self-identity. In addition, spontaneously created stories or retellings of stories, are the most accurate method for assessing children's language skills, grammatical skills, dialect, and narrative construction and memory skills. Oral storytelling is an art form that allows children to express their individuality as well as their socio-cultural heritage. Art serves as that thread that integrates them into a larger social network.

## Strategies

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*Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)* focus on art as way to guide thinking and visual literacy. It is a specific way of leading children into exploring artwork as a means of interpreting. Three specific questions are used to guide discussions with students. You begin by asking: "What is going on in this picture?" and elicit responses. You follow up comments with: "What do you see that makes you say that?" Your final question prompt is: "What more can you find?" Note that words are critical. Changing the phrasing for example to, "What do you see?", could lead students to merely list words rather than elaborate. As a facilitator, you must guide this process by pointing to what they refer to, paraphrase student responses, remain open and accepting, let students talk, link thoughts, be mindful of timing.

In this unit, this strategy is key as students explore alebrijes design, by interpreting their forms, patterns and sculptor. Use of VTS as they observe and analyze images or hands-on examples of alebrijes can lead to a generative discussion that can help inspire their own designs for their alebrije.

*Collaborative conversations* foster the development of speaking and listening skills for students in structured, collaborative and measurable ways. Common Core Standards place an emphasis on increasing student-to-student interactions and dialogue in efforts to provide varied opportunities for students to develop their communication skills by engaging with each other and exchanging ideas effectively to reach higher-level applications of learning. Doug Fisher and N. Frey outline four areas of development that are addressed through collaborative conversations: First, student preparation for conversations is critical; second, students need to engage in discussions with a wide range of peers; third, students are expected to build on each other's ideas; and fourth, students must be able to express themselves clearly and persuasively. Instructional implications include taking structured approaches to the way students engage by a combination of note taking via a graphic organizer that requires individual reflection, listening and sharing of ideas, building on each other's ideas in order to arrive at new understandings that are again noted on their graphic organizers. The use of sentence frames to assist students in effective exchanges that help build dialogue is also necessary. Finally, students must become skilled in these exchanges by establishing and adhering to a set of rules for conversing.<sup>22</sup>

For my unit, the use of this strategy is key to establishing the expectations for discussions that are productive and thought-provoking, particularly for emergent bilingual students who need to build oracy skills via varied opportunities for talk. Thus, language development requires opportunities for production of language that is relevant and precise to the content. These conversations are vital to the analysis of literature that students will embark on in this study. Using these structures will allow students a thorough analysis of story elements such as setting, characters, morals and patterns amongst the different tales they will encounter. They will also set the tone for collaboration in their storytelling application.

*Translanguaging pedagogical strategies* derive from the notion that translanguaging is a normal language practice that occurs amongst bilingual people. In translanguaging people merge two languages into one register in order to communicate or understand. Translanguaging is not code-switching, positing that two separate language registers exist; rather, it is the ability of a bilingual person to fluidly and flexibly understand or communicate in a mix of both languages in varied contexts. This understanding is critical because when we observe students engaging in such discourse, we must recognize and appreciate that they are using their entire linguistic repertoire to facilitate development of academic language and their understanding of rigorous content. Because this unit emphasizes literacy development in both Spanish and English through engagement with texts and artworks, translanguaging amongst students is an expected practice.

*Total Physical Response (TPR)* is a strategy utilizing physical movements to help children understand and remember key vocabulary or concepts within a text. Students engage in a series of physical movements in order to retell a story or demonstrate understanding of key concepts. TPR is also used to facilitate "bridging" vocabulary and concepts from one language to another in order to help facilitate higher-order application of said vocabulary or concepts in the second language.

Given that specific selected readings will be done in English, TPR is an engaging approach to help scaffold second language acquisition. Students for example can use this strategy to highlight and recall key vocabulary as they discuss or retell a story or details of a story, and later use this same physical movement to link to the vocabulary word in a second language as they learn how to move from the word to a phrase, and later a complete sentence.

*Student as Expert* is an approach that you can take each and every day. It reminds us that our students don't walk in as empty vessels waiting to be filled. Rather they are full of life experiences that are relevant to the

learning occurring in the classroom. It is especially vital to practice this in light of the student not yet mastering proficiency levels in their target language.

*Guided Reading* refers to small group reading instruction that is targeted to the students reading level in both Spanish and English. Because this is a biliteracy classroom, we work both languages alternating days throughout the week for each. Small group instruction occurs at least 2 times per student every week and presents additional opportunities for the students to engage in reading folktales and fairytales.

*Independent Reading* is the time spent for students to read on their own with minimal support from the teacher. Use of a log that asks students to note or reflect on their independent reading experiences may help in determining how much exposure they may have to particular genres or texts.

## Activities and Essential Questions

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The following essential questions can serve as guides to help shape selection of children’s literature and collaborative conversations in Reading:

### **How do people shape our lives?**

Students will discuss the impact of important people in their own lives and discuss and write about this. Students can extend this question to home and interview parents. Students will have an opportunity to listen to the story, *El zopilote y la chirimía* by Gabriela Olmos. In this story we will look at the elements of character and discuss the notion of family bonds and traditions. Through supplementary activities students will bring back information from home to help us distill additional components of this story such as rituals and traditions.

### **How do places/spaces shape our lives and experiences?**

To explore this question, students will read *Dream Carver* by Diana Cohn and will discuss important places to their lives as well as that of their families and they’ll identify those places within the stories that we read. We will also supplement this book with real-life pictures of these landscapes to help generate vocabulary in both English and Spanish.

### **What can magic look like in a fairy tale?**

Students will read the wordless picture book *Journey* by Aaron Becker, and begin analyzing the illustrations to find meaning. Visual thinking strategies can be used to closely read into images. Students will receive copies of images and practice storytelling with partners and then at home to someone in the family. Discussion should focus on what they imagine happening in the story and seeking evidence for their ideas.

### **How can objects symbolize or represent larger ideas?**

Creating alebrijes is central to the unit. The alebrije will be introduced through video shorts. Students will read *El ladrón de sueños* by Sid Fleischman and consider the manner in which the character interacts with the alebrije. Students will embark on a mini-research project noting the how and why of an alebrije image. The

card will list details on the back and they will select two animals to report on with their groups. These two animals will be used to create their sculptures. Students will begin sketching animals and then share out about them through small group discussions. Eventually, through the week, they will embark on short exercises in which they mix parts of their alebrijes with others to create new ones. Students will also re-visit the Dream Carver to further explore the craft. Students will also read *Tsipeni y Joselito* by Patricia Dominguez. We will discuss the relationship between the main character and compare and contrast this to Fleischman's book.

### **What stories of bravery exist in your history?**

Using the book, *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* by Duncan Tonatiuh, students will revisit the concept of journeys and explore a story of bravery that is presented in this tale. Students will look at the structure of this story and consider the moral that emerges regarding family and trust. They will interview family members about their journey to the United States and bring those stories back to the classroom through collaborative conversations. These stories will serve as inspiration for the alebrije stories providing the common theme of bravery.

### **Field Trip**

Students will take a field trip to the National Museum of Mexican Art to see real-life examples of alebrijes and other forms of popular art, and then visit the community of Pilsen, known for building size murals depicting many common themes related to Mexican and Mexican-American history and culture. In addition, we will engage in visual literacy exercises using strategies such as VTS focusing on two alebrijes that are part of the museum's permanent collection: Pedro Linares' "Alebrije", and Manuel Linares Mendoza's "The Worm". Using open-ended inquiry questions to guide their exploration of the art pieces, they will consider the following questions: What do you notice about this work of art? What does this piece remind you of? How would you describe its design? What influenced the artist to create this? What story does this tell?

### **Artist Residency**

Visual arts sessions in partnership with the National Museum of Mexican Art will also be integrated into this unit. First, students will create the visual landscape/setting for their story. Students will be discussing color and space by examining terrain of specific parts of Mexico that represent the homelands of the family. We will also explore the urban landscape of Chicago and incorporate elements of both spaces into one setting. Students will then look at the materials that are utilized to create alebrijes and begin assembling their own. The use of an open studio approach becomes important to invite opportunities for collaboration between friends or family. The arts will also be a vehicle for creating the landscape for our stories. This "Creative Lab" will allow children extended time to create their alebrije either with each other or family members afterschool using a variety of miscellaneous materials and objects that have been collected through the class and across the school.

## Assessment Ideas

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Students will be assessed on their participation in collaborative conversations. Graphic organizers used for reflections can also be collected as evidence and graded on a rubric. There will be a performance rubric as students present their stories, as well as a group assessment rubric for participation on the landscape/set design. Students will respond to one last question through the form of a poster with their alebrije sketch: How does your alebrije tell us about you? Students will be asked to consider what elements of design they chose and why; what animals they chose to represent and why; what part of the landscape did they choose and why? This can also be graded through a rubric.

Vocabulary that is to be used strategically in a target language can also be assessed through the use of rubrics. Consider key vocabulary that is highlighted in discussions/lessons that should be utilized in student reflections or written responses.

## Appendix A

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Reading Standards covered in this unit:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.1

Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.2

Recount stories, including fables and folktales from diverse cultures, and determine their central message, lesson, or moral.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.5

Describe the overall structure of a story, including describing how the beginning introduces the story and the ending concludes the action.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.2.9

Compare and contrast two or more versions of the same story (e.g., Cinderella stories) by different authors or from different cultures.

Writing Standards in this unit:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.1

Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect opinion and reasons,

and provide a concluding statement or section.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.2

Write informative/explanatory texts in which they introduce a topic, use facts and definitions to develop points, and provide a concluding statement or section.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.3

Write narratives in which they recount a well-elaborated event or short sequence of events, include details to describe actions, thoughts, and feelings, use temporal words to signal event order, and provide a sense of closure.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.7

Participate in shared research and writing projects (e.g., read a number of books on a single topic to produce a report; record science observations).

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.2.8

Recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.1

Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.2

Recount or describe key ideas or details from a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.2.5

Create audio recordings of stories or poems; add drawings or other visual displays to stories or recounts of experiences when appropriate to clarify ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.2.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade 2 reading and content, choosing flexibly from an array of strategies.

#### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.2.5

Demonstrate understanding of word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

WIDA Language Development Standards:

WIDA/SLA link address: <https://www.wida.us/standards/sla.aspx>

WIDA/ELD link address: <https://www.wida.us/standards/eld.aspx>

## Appendix B

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### *Proposed Unit Map for Writing/Storytelling*

#### Pre-Assessment:

Students must be pre-assessed on their ability to produce a story (orally or in writing) that follows a structure and contains basic story elements. This will serve to measure growth of such components by the end of the unit.

Phase 1: Students begin learning about alebrijes through videos and non-fiction newspaper articles found online. Suggestions are listed in the Classroom Resources section. This is an opportunity for them to explore Zapotec culture as well through music and videos that are found on YouTube. In their writing or project notebooks, students can begin collecting ideas for their alebrije, including symbols, motifs, elements, or animals they want to explore. Students should have time to share out with each other in small groups or partnerships to discuss their thinking and generate excitement. This is also a good opportunity to assess students by observing and coaching into discussions. Students may also begin collaging cut-out images from magazines of animals or patterns they like.

Phase 2: Students begin building stories by either copying the structure of a story they've heard, but changing or adding an element, or they may be creating one from scratch. A great way to help them get started is to start with stories they're exploring in their families on bravery, or exploring a dream that they've had. Remind students to stick to the theme of bravery. It is up to them which character will rise as the hero or protagonist. A lesson may be included on exploding post-its or writing long (or talking long) for character or a setting. In this way students really focus on adding details to enrich their writing. Vocabulary banks can be considered for students struggling with writing. Another option for such students is to have them illustrate their story in three boxes going across the long way on a sheet of paper. Then they may work with a partner or teacher to build vocabulary for their picture. This enables students to build sentences for their writing or add details. At this stage these exercises are very helpful to build conversations about reading and writing.

Phase 3: Students build details regarding their element of magic. This is a good opportunity to discuss or review stories that contain magic that they've read. Discuss the use of objects that could serve as portals for this element. Students should begin writing or discussing ideas in their drafts about how magic will be used in their stories. For those storytelling exclusively, writing plans that they use is still critical. This keeps them on their own map of their story. Students look for ways to include this in the setting that collectively they build (mural or in small groups for all of their characters).

Phase 4: Completing their story maps or writing piece by sharing and telling their story in partnerships. Students may also use Ipads to record themselves and playback their voice. Students could also begin recording movies of their alebrije with their story, focusing on use of movement, voice, and gesture to share their story. When students are ready to perform or have completed writing their pieces, a celebration should be planned to generate excitement and pride in their accomplishments.



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