

Culturally Relevant Books: Culturally Responsive Teaching in Bilingual Classrooms

Alma D. Rodríguez

University of Texas at Brownsville

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Abstract

This article discusses the results of a study conducted to identify Latino/a children's perceptions about and responses to culturally relevant books. The findings show that culturally relevant books facilitate culturally responsive teaching in bilingual classrooms. Participants responded positively to children's literature that was representative of their culture. Children identified themselves with cultural traditions portrayed in the books and with the characters' identities and personalities. Latino/a children also made connections with the language used in the stories. Some of the themes that were relevant for Latino/a children of Mexican descent included birthday celebrations and interactions with grandparents. Children expressed interest in reading more books that were representative of their realities. Examples of culturally relevant children's literature for Latino/a children in bilingual classrooms are included.

Keywords: culturally relevant books, culturally responsive teaching, Latino/a ELLs

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Culturally Relevant Books: Culturally Responsive Teaching in Bilingual Classrooms

Latino/a children deserve meaningful and relevant experiences with literature to positively influence their academic achievement. This article describes the perceptions and responses of a group of Latino/a children to culturally relevant children's literature. The importance of addressing the educational needs of Latino/a youth is well documented. The Latino population is the largest minority group in the United States, and it continues to grow (Good, Masewicz, & Vogel, 2010; Villalba, Akos, Keeter, & Ames, 2007; Zychinsky & Polo, 2011). Moreover, 34% of Latino/as are children and adolescents, many of whom are doing poorly in school (Villalba et al., 2007). Latinos/as have lower levels of education and higher drop-out rates than any other ethnic group in the United States (Gándara, 2010). Therefore, bilingual teachers of Latino/a students have a great responsibility to provide meaningful learning experiences to change the subtractive nature of schooling that Valenzuela (1999) identifies as the cause of their low achievement and loss of cultural identity.

Latino/a English Language Learners

According to the U.S. Census, about 40% of Latino/as are immigrants, and almost 80% speak a language other than English (Zychinsky & Polo, 2011), making Latinos/as the largest group of English language learners (ELLs) in the United States (Gonzalez, Yawkey, & Minaya-Rowe, 2006). Freeman and Freeman (2007) explain that teachers of ELLs must provide meaningful literacy instruction while tapping on students' first languages and cultures. Latino/a ELLs who receive quality bilingual instruction have the advantage of receiving literacy instruction in Spanish as they acquire the English language. Moreover, bilingual teachers who have Latinos/as in their classes can also show they value students' languages and cultures by including bilingual books and books in Spanish in their classroom libraries.

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Children's Literature for English Language Learners

Krashen (2004a) advocates for the improvement of schools' and classrooms' libraries given the positive effects that reading has in language acquisition. Free voluntary reading improves reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary in both the first and the second languages. That is, individuals who read more, attain higher levels of literacy and language development (Krashen, 2004b). In addition, when children read a book that they truly enjoy, or a "home-run book" as Trelease called it, they develop greater interest in reading (Ujiie & Krashen, 2002).

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Freeman, Freeman, and Freeman (2003) claim that culturally relevant texts can become home run books for Latino/a ELLs. They define culturally relevant books as those "that students can connect with" (p. 7). They also provide a Cultural Relevance Rubric to help teachers and students determine whether a book is culturally relevant. The rubric focuses on the relevancy of the book's characters, setting, theme, plot, and language in relation to the reader. To select a book, it is important to consider the students' ethnicity, age, and gender to find a book with matching character traits. It is also important to know the students well enough to determine if they have lived in or visited the places where the story takes place. In addition, the theme of the story should be contemporary so that students can relate to the events and situations presented in the book. Finally, it is important to clarify that culturally relevant books can be written in the students' first language, in English, or can be bilingual books. The key is the connection that the children can establish between the way the characters speak and their own way of speaking. Therefore, books that are culturally relevant may include idioms, dialects, and code-switching between two languages.

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Reading culturally relevant books results in greater student engagement in reading and in learning (Feger, 2006; Hunsberger, 2007). When children of immigrants with limited literacy share the reading of culturally relevant books with their parents, the adults increase their levels of literacy. The parents, in turn, help the children develop their cultural identities (Packard, 2001). Alanís (2007) agrees that culturally relevant texts help students discover their own identities when they are able to recognize their own realities portrayed in the books. In addition, students develop a sense of belonging. Culturally relevant books also allow students to develop voice in their writing by enabling them to validate their own experiences and empowering them to share them (Alanís, 2007; Keis, 2006). Moreover, students are able to connect to culturally relevant texts (Hunsberger, 2007), which results in improved reading comprehension (Alanís, 2007; Ebe, 2010; Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003). Bilingual teachers can facilitate those connections when they implement culturally responsive teaching (Hunsberger, 2007).

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teachers are those who incorporate students' cultures, ethnicity, and social realities into instruction (Shelley, 2007). Therefore, teachers must understand their students' cultures, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs to provide culturally responsive instruction (Black, 2006). A culturally responsive learning environment helps diverse students become more interested in school and more engaged in learning (Gay, 2003). Gay argues that the curriculum for culturally diverse students must be representative of all diverse groups and portray their realities. School librarians must also adopt culturally responsive practices to make culturally appropriate materials available for students (Mestre, 2009), including culturally relevant books.

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Method

This article reports the results of the second part of a study in which one of the purposes was to discover Latino/a children's perceptions about and responses to culturally relevant books. The children were purposefully selected by a group of pre-service bilingual and ESL teachers as part of a class project. The pre-service teachers were enrolled in a course that covered the foundations of bilingual education and ESL instruction. Among the learning outcomes of the course was to become familiar with appropriate materials to impart instruction in bilingual and ESL settings. Because these pre-service bilingual and ESL teachers attended a Hispanic-serving university located in south Texas, on the border with Mexico, it was important for them to identify quality materials for Latino/a children. Pre-service teachers learned about culturally relevant books through readings, lectures, and examples. They were then expected to demonstrate their ability to select and use culturally relevant books by choosing a book for a Latino/a child and engaging the child in responding to the book. In order to have the ability to select a book that would be culturally relevant for the child, pre-service teachers had to work with children whom they knew. Therefore, they were advised by the professor of the course, who was the principal investigator, to select an acquaintance or a family member. The pre-service teachers were asked to take into consideration the age and gender of the child, the child's ethnicity and language, as well as life experiences of the child when selecting the book. In order to participate in the project, pre-service teachers were trained on the protection of human subjects to ensure they would maintain ethical behavior throughout the study.

Participants and Setting

The participants in the part of the study described in this article were 22 children ($N=22$) who were between 4 and 11 years of age. Most of them were between 6 and 9 years old. There

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were 15 female and 7 male participants. All of them were Latinos/as, although two of them were of mixed ethnicity. That is, one parent was Anglo while the other parent was Latino/a. Eleven participants indicated they were Spanish dominant, 3 indicated they were English dominant, and the remaining 7 participants indicated they were bilingual. Most of them (15) received instruction in bilingual education programs. Participants lived in south Texas, on the border region between the United States and Mexico. The population in this bilingual community is predominantly Mexican-American.

Data Collection

Pre-service teachers were required to read a book to the participating children, have the participants complete an 8-item Likert-type questionnaire, and answer 4 open-ended questions. The 8-item Likert-type questionnaire or Cultural Relevance Rubric was developed by A. Ebe (Paulson & Freeman, 2003) and asked participants to rate the relevancy of the following aspects of the book: setting, theme, plot, language, events, and characters (including age and gender). One item in the rubric also asked participating children to rate how frequently they read culturally relevant books.

The four open-ended questions that participants also answered were the following: (1) What did you like best about this book? (2) Do you remember doing something like what happened in this story? If so, tell me about it. (3) Are any of the characters like you? Which one? How is the character like you? (4) Would you like to read more books like this one? Why? These standardized open-ended questions focused the participants' responses to the books on certain topics of interest without limiting the possible responses (Patton, 1990). The questions were available in English and in Spanish, so pre-service teachers were asked to use the language of the child's preference. Participating children were asked to write their responses. However, if they

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were too young or otherwise unable to do so, the responses were transcribed by the pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers reflected on their own learning by writing an essay where they elaborated on their experience and submitted the data to the professor.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by the professor. The overall score of the Cultural Relevance Rubric was the sum of the scores of 7 of the 8 questions. The question that asked children how often they read culturally relevant books was not included in the overall score since it did not directly rate the cultural relevance of the book. The highest possible overall score was 28. The possible scores in the rubric ranged from 4 - most relevant, to 1- not relevant. A score of 20 or higher on the Cultural Relevance Rubric indicated the book to be culturally relevant. The results of the rubric were also analyzed by item. Each of the items was considered culturally relevant if it received a score of 3 or 4. Subsequently, the percent of participants who scored each item as culturally relevant was computed.

The responses to the open-ended questions underwent a systematic textual analysis. Responses were read three times. The first reading verified completeness. During the second reading, the data was segmented by question. In addition, a thematic analysis was conducted identifying repeated ideas. A block and file system as well as conceptual mapping were used to organize the resulting themes (Grbich, 2007). A third reading of the open-ended responses served to identify confirming evidence supporting the themes or disconfirming evidence.

Results

As was mentioned earlier, participants completed an 8-item rubric to determine if the book to which they listened was culturally relevant to them. Some of the books selected were written in English and others in Spanish. There were also bilingual books selected, in which case

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pre-service teachers read the books in the language of the child's preference. The books selected for this study are listed in Table 1, which also indicates the language in which the book was read to the child. It is important to note that several pre-service teachers selected the same book to read, so there are less than 22 books listed.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Cultural Relevancy of the Selected Books

The scores in the rubric indicated that 77% of participants found the book culturally relevant. Two books got the highest possible score on the Cultural Relevance Rubric. Those books were *The Perfect Piñata/La piñata perfecta* (Domínguez, 2002), and *Magda's Piñata Magic/Magda y la piñata mágica* (Chavarría-Chairez, 2001). *Just Like Home / Como en mi tierra* (Miller, 1999) scored the second highest, followed by four books: *Abuela, cuéntanos un cuento* (Martínez, 2002), *Family Pictures / Cuadros de familia* (Garza, 1990), *Abuela* (Dorros, 1991), and *¡Que sorpresa de cumpleaños!* (Lopez, 1997).

Each item in the rubric was also analyzed individually to determine the percent of participants who rated it as culturally relevant. See Table 2. The first item asked participants if the characters were similar to them, and 73% of the participants agreed indicating that they related to the ethnicity of the characters. In response to the second item, 77% of participants found the setting of the story relevant. Scores for the third item showed that 73% of the participants thought the theme was contemporary. Relevancy in regards to character age and gender was determined by items 4 and 5, each of which was relevant for 85% of participants. Scores for item 6, showed that only 64% of participants found the language used in the story to be relevant. It is important to note that this item indicated more than the language in which the story was written, but the way characters talked in the story, including dialect, code-switching, or

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idioms. The last item in the rubric showed that 77% of participants had experiences like the ones described in the story. Finally, when asked if they read similar books often, 68% of participants agreed.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Children's Responses to the Books

Participants were also asked to answer four open-ended questions. As was mentioned earlier, the questionnaire was provided in English and in Spanish. All the participating children, with the exception of one, answered the questions in the language in which the book was read to them. One participant, however, was read a book in Spanish, but chose to answer two of the questions in English and two in Spanish. It is interesting to note that the participant is in a dual language program where instruction is imparted in both English and Spanish. It is also interesting that the two first questions, which were answered in English, had very brief responses. For example, one of the questions was answered with a simple "yes." On the other hand, the last two responses, which were answered in Spanish, were more elaborate and one even included a picture.

Children's favorite parts of the books. The first open-ended question asked participants what they liked best about the book. The textual analysis revealed four themes: *events*, *ending*, *characters*, and *story and illustrations*, as indicated in Table 3.

[Insert Table 3 here]

The most salient theme was *events* since 41% of participants mentioned very specific parts of the story as their favorite. Some of them indicated they liked the "funny parts", while others indicated that the particular event they liked was "fun" or "nice." The second most popular theme was *ending* since 23% of participants found the ending to be meaningful. These

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participants focused on the moral of the story or positive outcomes. Several participants liked how characters in the story “become friends” or “were happy” at the end. The rest of the participants equally mentioned *characters* or *story and illustrations* as their favorite part. Originally, there was an additional theme identified as *attitudes*, which was later merged into *characters* since the attitudes were displayed by the characters. For example, one participant mentioned he liked “how they [the characters] get along.” Therefore, the theme *characters* also includes certain attitudes the characters displayed. The theme *story and illustrations* was originally identified only as *story*, but was modified since half of the responses in this theme specifically mentioned “story and pictures” as their favorite part.

Children’s experiences portrayed in the books. The second open-ended question asked participants if they remembered experiencing something like what happened in the story. The great majority (91%) of participants provided an affirmative response. Table 4 shows the three themes that emerged from the responses.

[Insert Table 4 here]

The most salient theme was *cultural practices*. Participants were familiar with various Mexican traditions mentioned in the stories. They related to making or “wanting a *piñata*” for their birthday, or playing *lotería*, which is a Mexican form of bingo. They had also experienced holiday traditions such as celebrating *posadas*, which are celebrations that take place before Christmas, or making altars for deceased family members for *día de los muertos*, or Day of the Dead. Other responses reflected cultural beliefs such as being cured by a healer. And finally, one response reflected cultural values such as the central role of grandparents in Mexican-American families, which was expressed by the participant who wrote, “...and most important spending time with my grandparents.” Many other responses revealed a second theme: *everyday practices*.

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Participants related to playing house, eating watermelon, and going to a farm, to the beach, or to the park. Finally, a third theme emerged: *school experiences*. One participant wrote in Spanish that she sometimes would get bored in school like the character. Another participant also wrote in Spanish that her brother did not want to go to school because he did not speak English, like the character. One more participant wrote that she “had to translate for a newcomer at school.”

Children identified themselves with the characters. The third open-ended question asked participants if the characters in the book were like them. Almost all participants provided an affirmative response (95%). Only one participant wrote that the characters were not like him because they were animals. Affirmative responses were categorized into five themes, which are shown in Table 5.

[Insert Table 5 here]

There were two themes that were most salient. First, many participants indicated that they were like the characters in *ethnicity and language*. One participant wrote that the characters’ “grandparents are... from Mexico [and her] dad’s parents are also.” Another participant noted that the character had the same hair and eyes as her. Interestingly, one participant pointed out that the character was “half White and half Hispanic,” just like her. One participant wrote, “We both speak Spanish” referring to the character and herself. Finally, one participant explained, “He knows how to speak English and Spanish like me and he likes to help others. I was a good friend for the person I had to translate for.” The second salient theme was *likes*. Participants identified themselves with the characters because of what they liked to do, play, or wear. The third theme was *cultural practices*. Some participants felt they were like the characters because they engaged in the same cultural practices such as breaking *piñatas* in birthday parties, and celebrating certain holidays. The fourth theme was *age and gender*. Several participants focused

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on whether the characters were boys or girls, and whether they were close in age. Finally, a few participants related to the characters in *feelings*. For example, one participant wrote in Spanish that the girl in the story was also saddened because of what happened to the grandmother, and because her cousin did not play with her at school either, just at home.

Children wanted to read more culturally relevant books. The fourth and last open-ended question asked participants if they would like to read more books like the one to which they listened. Almost all participants (95%) said they would like to read more culturally relevant books. Only one participant said he did not want to read more books because he was tired. Table 6 shows the four themes that emerged after analyzing the reasons participants gave for wanting to read more books: *topic*, *learning*, *reality*, and *culture*.

[Insert Table 6 here]

Many participants mentioned a specific topic of the story as a reason to want to read more books. One participant wrote in Spanish that she likes to read books about children who become friends. Participants also found the topics interesting or exciting. The second theme was *learning*. One participant expressed that the book had “a lesson that helps you in life.” Another participant wrote that the book gave her “something to think about and to wonder how you want to be treated.” The third theme, *reality*, was clearly expressed by participants. One wrote that the book told “about real life.” Several other participants wrote that the books reminded them of their family and things they have done. Finally, several participants indicated that they wanted to read more books because they liked cultural aspects narrated in the story such as celebrating certain holidays or birthdays.

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Discussion

This study was conducted in an attempt to discover Latino/a students' perceptions about and responses to culturally relevant books. Young students listened to culturally relevant books read by bilingual and ESL pre-service teachers. Participants completed a rubric and open-ended questions in response to the books.

Relevant Themes for Latino/a Children of Mexican Descent

The results of the Cultural Relevance Rubric revealed books that received higher scores were those that described birthday celebrations, followed by those that described interactions with grandparents. These are two important activities in the lives of Latino/a children of Mexican descent. Birthdays are celebrated with large parties to which many extended family members and friends are invited. *Piñatas* are central components of the celebrations. Participants expressed their excitement with *piñatas* and with the many candies they receive at birthday parties. In addition, grandparents are fundamental in the lives of Mexican-American children. Children spend a lot of time with grandparents since many of them are highly involved in the upbringing of the children. Although the extended family is usually very important, grandparents have a special place in the hearts of Mexican-American children. To better understand their students, culturally responsive bilingual teachers must become aware of what constitutes a family in their students' culture as well as important traditions of diverse students. This would facilitate the process of valuing students' cultures as recommended by Freeman and Freeman (2007).

Children Identified Themselves with the Characters' Culture and Personality

The relevance of specific aspects of the book was analyzed using the Cultural Relevance Rubric as well as open-ended questions. The results of the rubric showed that more children identified age and gender of the characters as being similar to theirs than identifying the setting,

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language, or experiences as relevant. However, when asked through an open ended question how the characters resembled them, more children mentioned their likes, ethnicity and experiences such as cultural practices. This indicates that although participants were well aware that the characters were close to them in age and of the same gender, when asked to respond to the book, the children focused more on traits that are more particular to their culture and personality. Therefore, culturally responsive bilingual teachers should make an effort to select books not only based on the age or gender of their students, but on specific cultural practices and personality of their students that would enable them to establish deeper connections with the reading.

Similar results were obtained when participants were asked about their favorite part of the story or if they had done something like what happened in the story. Participants shared personal stories and personality traits. One participant even mentioned that he doesn't like to take showers, just like the character. It was interesting to find that participants focused on the overall theme of the story and appreciated happy endings. They were also able to relate to the character's feelings. This shows that students had a thorough understanding of the stories and made personal connections when they extracted meaning from the story as found in other studies (Alanís, 2007; Ebe, 2010; Freeman, Freeman, & Freeman, 2003; Hunsberger, 2007).

The Value of Children's First Languages and of Bilingualism

Special attention must be given to the connections participants made between the books and their experiences at school. While one participant mentioned her brother did not want to go to school because he did not speak English, another participant was proud of being bilingual and being able to help those who still did not speak English. This shows the importance of raising students' self-esteem by highlighting their talents. Bilingualism should be admired and celebrated. The importance of valuing students' first languages was also corroborated by the

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quality of participants' open-ended responses. For example, the student who answered very briefly in English, but provided much more elaborate responses in Spanish complemented by a drawing, would not have had the opportunity to fully respond to the book had she not been given the opportunity to do so in her dominant language. This evidences the importance of validating students' first languages as much as their cultures (Freeman & Freeman, 2007).

Children Want to Read Books That are Representative of Them

The results of the Cultural Relevance Rubric showed that 68% of participants read these types of books often. However, their response to an open-ended question showed that 95% of participants wanted to read more culturally relevant books. Therefore, culturally responsive bilingual teachers should make an effort to include more culturally relevant books in their classroom and school libraries and make them accessible to their students. This would raise the quality of libraries as recommended by Krashen (2004b). It must be stressed that finding books that are truly relevant for students requires a genuine understanding of students' cultures and personalities by teachers.

Overall, young Latino/a students enjoyed reading culturally relevant books. They found them interesting and fun, and expressed a desire to read more books like those. Moreover, Latino/a students felt represented in the books. They identified themselves with the characters in many ways. They emphasized the characters' experiences, which were similar to those they had had. Nevertheless, they did not ignore their physical appearance. Ethnicity, language, age and gender were identified as relevant characteristics. Finally, Latino/a children felt the books conveyed reality. They expressed the events in the books were similar to those they had in real life, and that the characters reminded them of their families. Therefore, culturally relevant books are an excellent option to use in bilingual classrooms, especially if the goal is to provide

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culturally responsive instruction. Gay (2003) emphasizes the importance of reality and representation in the curriculum. That is, instructional materials should portray or represent diverse learners in realistic ways. The results of this study show that quality, carefully chosen culturally relevant books provide both of those components.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that young Latino/a students had positive perceptions of culturally relevant books as they related to the themes, events, and characters in the stories. In addition, participants responded positively to the books, understood the stories, and expressed a desire to read more culturally relevant books. Moreover, culturally relevant books validated students' identities, cultures, and languages. By providing diverse learners with culturally relevant books, bilingual teachers can be responsive to cultural diversity. With the increasing number of diverse students, culturally responsive teaching is necessary in bilingual classrooms today, and culturally relevant books can make it happen.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Culturally Relevant books for Latino/a Children Used in the Study

Author	Title of the book	Language in which the book was read
Ada, Alma Flor	<i>I love Saturdays y domingos</i>	English
Casilla, Robert	<i>Jalapeño bagels</i>	English
Chavarría, Becky	<i>Magda's piñata magic / Magda y la piñata mágica</i>	Spanish
De León, Nephtalí	<i>I will catch the sun: A story for grownups and children</i>	English
Dominguez, Kelli K.	<i>The perfect piñata / La piñata perfecta</i>	Spanish
Dorros, Arthur	<i>Abuela</i>	English
Galindo, Mary Sue	<i>Icy watermelon / Sandía fría</i>	English
Garza, Carmen Lomas	<i>Family pictures / Cuadros de familia *</i>	English
Jimenez, Francisco	<i>La mariposa *</i>	English
Johnston, Tony	<i>Day of the dead</i>	English
Lopez, Loretta	<i>¡Que sorpresa de cumpleaños!</i>	Spanish
Lowell, Susan	<i>The three little javelinas</i>	English
Martínez, Rocío	<i>Abuela cuéntanos un cuento*</i>	Spanish
Miller, Elizabeth I.	<i>Just like home / Como en mi tierra</i>	Spanish
Perera, Hilda	<i>Pepín y el abuelo</i>	Spanish
Rohde, Teresa	<i>El día de los muertos</i>	Spanish
Salinas, Bobbi	<i>The three pigs / Los tres cerdos: Tito Nacho y Miguel</i>	Spanish
Stevens, Jan Romero	<i>Carlos and the squash plant / Carlos y la planta de calabaza</i>	Spanish

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Zepeda, Monique	<i>Las piñatas</i>	Spanish
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*Book was used twice

Table 2

Percent of Participants who Rated the Books as Culturally Relevant in the Culturally Relevant Rubric

Item in the Rubric	Percent of Participants
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Characters	73%
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Age	85%
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Gender	85%
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Setting	77%
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Theme	73%
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Language	64%
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Events	77%
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Table 3

Percent of Children's Favorite Book Elements

Book Elements	Percent
Events	41%
Ending	23%
Characters	18%
Story and Illustrations	18%

Table 4

Percent of Similar Experiences between Children's Lives and Story

Experiences	Percent
Cultural Practices	45%
Everyday Practices	27%
School Experiences	18%

CULTURALLY RELEVANT BOOKS

Table 5

Percent of Similar Traits between Children and Characters

Character Traits	Percent
Ethnicity and Language	27%
Likes	27%
Cultural Practices	23%
Age and Gender	23%
Feelings	9%

Table 6

Percent of Children's Reasons for Reading More Culturally Relevant Books

Reason	Percent
Topic	45%
Learning	23%
Reality	18%
Culture	9%
