

Tia Fortuna's New Home - A Jewish Cuban Journey

CCLS, UDL, SEL, Project Based Learning, Learning Through the Arts and Teaching Activities

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Why I chose it:

For the past 4 years, my students, colleague Dina Annese and I have intensely studied Ruthie Behar's *Lucky Broken Girl*. In a school with diverse learners in need of life lessons as well as literacy skills, all of us marveled at how that work used young protagonist character to model and to nurture family values, relationships, resilience, positivity and proactive responses to whatever life throws at all of us. It was a pleasure to read about and to purchase this new work, aimed at younger readers (ages 4-7) which would showcase Behar's proven ability to depict and to engage readers in affirming family, cultural traditions and ongoing "sharing stories/passing it on" generational talk. While I did not need any confirmation of my selection of this picture book choice, the evocative family centered Devon Holzwarth illustration- in gouache, watercolor and colored pencil- showing Tia Fortuna gazing lovingly at her niece Estrella amid a palm tree setting –assured me that Behar's story telling talents would be very evident in this work for younger readers.

What I like best about this work: Many children are lucky enough to have a special older family circle member with whom they make a personal connection. In Latino tradition, there are many stories featuring a Tia. This story is one of that genre, but goes beyond that in grade and age emotional richness by focusing on Tia Fortuna experiencing a transition that so many are forced to experience in this society, moving out from her beloved building residence into a senior residence. The story models how Tia's pervasive optimism to life and its transitions, allow this to become a positive experience for her. The young Estrella so taken with Tia experiences this "moving" day as a joyous one, a hopeful step on an ongoing journey filled with excitement and community. In addition, Behar emphasizes as these intergenerational relationships foster sharing of cultural artifacts, emblems, language, stories, lenses on life and rituals. So many young children today because of economic vicissitudes, political crises, natural disasters, family

separations/divorce and pandemic concerns, have and are experiencing unanticipated and emotionally traumatic displacement. This work with its story focused on Tia Fortuna explicitly making an adventure of packing up from one residence and “moving on” to another, beautifully speaks to that potential eventuality so many children experience. Of course, also as is the natural consequence of so many cherished special relationships between young children and elders, the children will experience the elder having to move to a care facility and losing the elder’s independence. This beautifully told gentle and optimistic story helps prepare young readers should that become part of their cherished elder’s life journey. Finally what stands out about this book, is the way it highlights cherished artifacts and heirlooms whose stories and emblematic significance are “passed forward” from “generation to generation” as Tia Fortuna symbolically hands over the key to her apartment at Seaway to Estrella. This beautifully realizes a Sephardic Jewish legend Behar mentions in her Author’s note: “the Sephardim carried the keys of the homes they lost wherever they went, and that gave them hope for the journey ahead.”

How teachers can use this book:

1. What we choose to take with us- (Speaking, listening, describing, representing, explaining, arguing /advocating, self-concept-learning through the arts).

The book cover features a suitcase on the left side and when the paper cover is taken off the hardcover binding of the book is both sides of the brown suitcase Tia Fortuna is taking with her from her residence at Seaway she so loved by the beach to her new space. Children can be challenged to decorate a brown box or older suitcase with emblems from their past residences of culture. They can be asked what they have packed or chosen to take when they moved away from one space or locality to another. They can make drawings or paper engineer or play dough create items to place in the suitcase. Then the entire class as a group can dictate or narrate to be recorded what each would take from place to place and why that object is cherished by them.

2. Gifts from generation to generation (Speaking, listening, discussion, narrative sharing, relationships, empathy, goal setting, storytelling, oral history, cultural identification, affirming diversity).

Many young children are given special jewelry or objects by their cherished elders as a way of passing forward a family heirloom plus told a story of why this gift is significant. Challenge children to share the story and a photo or illustration of a gift which they have received from an elder that they cherish because of the story or the culture behind it. These drawings and exhibits can become part of a class family heirlooms bulletin or website display.

3. Glossary- going class-owned global- (Vocabulary-knowledge, research, contextual reading clues, relationship building, empathy, self-affirmation, grade and age appropriate contributions to an informational publication, illustrating in a grade and age appropriate way)

The picture book is filled with expressions from Spanish, Yiddish, Japanese, Portuguese, French, Arabic, and Hebrew, while Tia's native language is Spanish, these expressions in the book are the consequence of her aunt living in diverse Miami-a city filled with many persons from various linguistic backgrounds interacting as a community. Teachers can facilitate the children "translating" the new word into English by using contextual clues. This will of course build those contextual "translation" skills for advanced independent reading. Behar wisely provides a glossary in the back to support independent older reader comprehension of the words inserted. The diversity of the class can be emphasized and celebrated by challenging the students to build on the book glossary by providing expressions, words and phrases in languages spoken in their homes and among their relatives. Depending on the family generational circle culture mix of even a seemingly native United States born, the student heard and used other language words for such expression as thank you, goodbye, house, and tomorrow can quickly broaden the glossary language scope. If the teacher chooses to also focus on cultural foods that fit into the boreka or empanada category, the glossary will surely grow as well. Students can draw these foods or download and print them out. The results of this now class owned

family centered multi-lingual glossary can be posted on the wall as a word wall or in the school library or posted on the school website. If desired, this glossary can be printed out as well. Individual student contributor names should be published, so they are authentically recognized as cultural contributors to a glossary. This becomes an authentic younger child PARCC- preparation and readiness for college and career activity as well as recognition and integration of cultures into the ongoing early childhood literacy curriculum. Young readers realize that they are part of a circle of cultural speakers who use their native language backgrounds to authenticate the stories which they tell.

4. Oral Historians – Never too young to start- (Speaking and listening, recording, illustrating, discussing, learning through the arts). Estrella's relationship with her Tia Fortuna is built on Tia's sharing with her, Tia's stories of a life journey from Turkey to Cuba to Miami. These migrations from place to place were of course not arbitrary nor were they done as a joyful adventure. For this project, the teacher should see if a class "Tia Fortuna" is willing to come and to share with the children a story of that relative's geographic moves and illustrate that story with memorabilia, objects, and music. If possible and the speaker is genuinely from the class families, this models for these young learners and potential legacy recipients, how to listen to, question and then retell a family story so others can derive life lessons from it. The storytelling can be recorded with the guest's approval. After the visit the children can draw pictures to illustrate some of the key story scenes and depending on the story build artifacts that represent key heirlooms or cultural connections within the oral history. Geographic mapping skills in terms of a clay or 3 D mapping of the relative story should be introduced as cognitively and age appropriate. While formal oral history techniques are often introduced in high school, ultimately these family shared stories keep family traditions and memories alive for the next generation. Through making art, interacting as a group with a "tia" figure and retelling and reacting to that figure's story, young children become knowing and diligent oral history audiences at an early age.

5. Words of wisdom- making comprehension and compassionate connections with story quotes.
(Close reading, reading for comprehension, nuanced vocabulary, reflective reading, reader responses, empathy building, optimism, relationship building).

What makes the beautifully illustrated Tia Fortuna's New Home such a rich story are the words of wisdom spoken by her to Estrella throughout.

Teachers should highlight a few of them which are age and grade appropriate. Among those might be:

1. It's time to say goodbye and wish for mazel bueno (good luck).
2. Look at that bright blue sky! The sun gives everyone its light for free.
3. Let's enjoy today.
4. We come from people who found hope wherever they went.
5. I have many memories in my suitcase right here. (points to her head)
6. Estrella quote: "Look, Tia. The first star is lighting up the darkness everywhere."

Children should be asked to retell the quote in their own words and share whether they agree with it as a life lesson or disagree. The teacher may want to facilitate the children to realizing the extent to which Tia Fortuna sees the world and all events as potential positives and sources of joy.

6. Together we _____, the Tia Fortuna in my life (Close reading, visual literacy, picture walking the story, introduction of memoir and snapshot writing, narrating, building a self with a positive relationship history, and setting foundations for documenting in terms of digital technologies and art and parent/family collaboration memories). Obviously the fictional Estrella in this story and Ruthie Behar who has a Sephardic aunt who lives in Miami, comprehend the value of sharing and documenting memories of experiences that bond the generations one to another. The book is a retelling with illustrations

of the experience filled relationship that Estrella shares with Tia Fortuna. Among these experiences: going to the beach together, building sandcastles, eating borekas filled with esperanza (hope), packing to move, moving in to a new place, and watching the first star lighting up the sky.

To fully engage all learners and to access visual learners or children from an ESL background, the teacher can have the students solely using the pictures detail the activities that Tia Fortuna and Estrella do together. They can provide descriptions in their own words. Once this is accomplished with as many students participating in the discussion as possible.

Open the discussion to the students sharing someone in their lives who is their Tia Fortuna. The teacher might start by sharing the story of her Polish immigrant Aunt Sophie who shared with her as a child stories of working in a factory for 18 hours a day and not having any money to buy new clothes for herself. This aunt visited, told stories and went to museums with the teacher. This same aunt like Tia Fortuna gave the teacher a silver star which remained precious to her over her life. With this adult sample of a teacher Tia Fortuna, allow students to detail an older relative (not a grandmother or grandparent) who shares life and experiences with them. Have them individually tell what things or activities they do with this relative. List those experiences on a chart or Smart Board. Then distribute copy paper so students can draw the relative and the two of them participating in the experiences. If possible and desired, record the students talking about the Tia Fortuna in their lives. The student drawings and recorded comments can be posted on an interactive bulletin board or the school website, presented as part of an open school day or shared as a Power Point slide presentation with the actual student voices. What is key is that this activity immerses the students as knowing agency focused storytellers sharing growing relationships as family members. Much focus is made in education on family partnership and family engagement. Books like Tia Fortuna's New Home truly authenticate opportunities for young learners and their family members to demonstrate that indeed the family is the first and integral source of life learning.

7. Paper engineering the Picture Book- (close reading, reading across print and other platforms, learning through the arts, story narrating, speaking and listening, collaboration, team work, jigsaw puzzle learning, problem construct, problem solving, Steam connected). This activity produces an immediate class display plus demonstrates a range of reader responses to a given text (Louise Rosenblatt-Reader Receivership). It also helps students to team at a young age to solve a problem construct. Just as in life, this literacy text- Tia Fortuna's New Home- challenge allows children who are excellent engineers, designers, problem solvers and artists to shine at a literacy task.

Materials needed:

One cardstock file folder in the same color for every two students and given young children probably at least 10 extras.

Scissors, glue ticks, construction paper, markers, glitter glue and if desired or available crafts materials-ribbons, buttons, feathers, sparkles etc.

Copies black and white –if not color printer available of all the text pages of the story.

Show the students a sample pop-up book from their school library or your own collection. Tell that many wonderful stories which readers love are taken by editors and publishers- those who take the author's story from its initial words to a published book- and represented as a pop-up book story.

Explain to the students that this way of telling a story takes its name from the way each page of the story includes a pop up with some art glued on to the pop-up.

Demonstrate a very simple technique of making two inseam paper cuts, folding or if the children are very young pre-line the cuts so they just need to make them on their own.

Take a sample text from a page or two of the story and show the children how the teacher would “transform” or tell the story as a narrative with a 3 D pop up component. The less talented the teacher is as a visual artist, the better. If desired use [HOW TO MAKE: Pop-up Book for Kids \(Easy!\)/](#)

This video is effectively led by a child.

Divide the class into pairs and challenge them to tell the same part of Tia Fortuna' story on the page as a pop-up page. Give each team at least 5 minutes to work together to problem solve. Circulate among the teams to make certain that each team is working on a problem construct response. Take time to call the class's attention to particularly wonderful ones which use the format and artistic 3 D representation platform well. If viable, even allow a particularly successful team to help others with their pages.

The outcome of this project will vary in artistic achievement and storytelling success but will bond the class in an introductory jigsaw puzzle activity and will provide a wonderful chance to video and to photograph each team telling how they "popped-up" Tia Fortuna's story. In addition as children consider elements of the story to pop up represent such as trees, butterflies, the key, sandcastle, borekas and beyond, they are authentically closely analyzing craft and storytelling in a grade and age appropriate way.

8. Plethora of other projects options:

Depending on the class and the teacher children might also participate in any one or more of the following project adventures/journeys:

1. Read and compare other Tia stories- such as Meg Medina's Tia Isla Wants a Car-

Or

Julia Alvarez's How Tia Lola Came to (Visit) Stay (The Tia Lola stories)

They can draw representations of the various tias and their character traits and even develop an intersecting Venn diagram showing character traits and values they share.

2. They can author a sequel based on the information about Tia Fortuna's new home la Casa de los Viejitos-Home for the Aged. This sequel will detail the walk in the garden and butterfly watching that Estrella anticipates.

3. They can retell the story from a supporting character's perspective- Estrella's mother who drives Tia Fortuna to her new home.
4. There are many seemingly inanimate objects in this story who could have a narrative of their own to tell. Among them: the banyan tree hugged by Tia Fortuna, the Mezuzah that finally comes with her, the key, the suitcase, and the photos. Telling these stories can involve the children in age and grade appropriate cultural and science research.
5. Students can also create posters and bookmarks encouraging younger peers to read the book.
6. Finally if the class is diverse, students can also retell the story in their native language and share why it is also one that tells about their lives as child members of families. That storytelling can be recorded for a school website or shared at a family expo.

The above detailed projects represent only a finite number of the possibilities and directions early childhood educators, reading specialists, literacy coaches and librarians can take this work. It is also useful for guidance counselors and for school psychologists wanting to introduce a sweet optimistic story to young children who have experienced displacement or loss of key family figures or transitions of seniors to assisted care or senior living facilities. The richness and emotional depth of Tia Fortuna's deliberate perspective on the challenges life can bring and how to continue the journey optimistically, can serve to comfort and inspire so many young readers. It can also alert them to the Tia Fortunas already in their lives and to carrying forward their stories.