

## Teaching Eric Velasquez's *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gift*: A Teachers' Guide

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The ideas presented in this guide are intended to enhance the conversation around Eric's books, *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gift*. This guide also illustrates some ways teachers can promote authentic interdisciplinary learning within the ELA curriculum. Comprehension, vocabulary, and written analysis are, of course, important literacy practices and should be fostered through teaching these two texts; however, the purpose of this guide is to explore how to extend conversations about these texts. Each of these activities can help you to meet the Common Core State Standards; however, each teacher must decide how best to implement these activities to foster deeper understandings of the texts. Thus, each teacher will select those standards that s/he believes are most addressed by how s/he teaches through these activities.

To help empower students to be engaged readers, it is important that we have aesthetic conversations and activities that can help students explore how literature captures elements of the human condition. Doing so not only fosters deeper connections between students and the literature they read, such practice also helps them to explore literature affectively, working through questions of morality and human behavior, considering their emotional reactions to literature, learning to appreciate literary texts, and developing their own aesthetic tastes for reading. While Eric's stories may be culturally relevant, and therefore personally meaningful, to students whose stories are not often found in published literature for children, there are many universal aspects of Eric's stories that appeal to all children. All students should be encouraged to understand how Eric's books explore the human condition, considering shared experiences while also appreciating the diversity of lived experiences.

### **Appreciating an Author's Job**

Eric's stories, *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gift*, are very powerful and universal. Even though students in elementary school are young, they do have stories that they can begin to nurture, and this can be fostered through memoir-writing activities conducted in many schools. As such, both *Grandma's Gift* and *Grandma's Records* serve as mentor texts for the writing process and can help foster students' appreciation of their own life stories, some of which might be harder to find mirrored in children's literature. With young students, we may need to share the pen; however, as students age, they should be encouraged to think through their senses and explore how to bring them to life in their writing. Thus, students may need exposure to descriptive vocabulary aligned to the senses. Students might first talk into a tape-recorder (especially students who are learning language) so that they are able to focus on producing thoughts; they can then transcribe from the recordings with intent to revise.

There are multiple connections to make between Eric's books and the writing that students do for memoir writing, but one prompt from which we might encourage students to write is, "Describe a moment you had with a grandparent." While teaching students descriptive words and how to bring to life a moment, you're also empowering them to realize that moments they write about do not need to be "important" or "life-changing;" these moments may be simple that are emotionally powerful, such as sitting at a dock fishing with a grandfather and watching the water crest against the pillars. What makes any narrative compelling enough to entice readers'

interests is how it is shared and how we form emotional connections through these experiences. (As a note, while some students may live with their grandparents or have grandparents who are active in their lives, not every student may have access to, memories of, or knowledge of their grandparents, so we may want to alter the prompt to consider the lived experiences of students.)

We might also ask students to “Describe a moment when you received a gift” and allow them to think about what makes a particular object important and meaningful in their lives. Because young children are developing moral awareness and exploring values, these questions can help them to think about what is most meaningful; thus, these conversations may also be a bridge to character education lessons. They will hopefully discover that the most meaningful or important of gifts are not those of the most monetary worth, but those that have personal significance based on the thought behind the gift. Because students often engage in craft-making around the holiday season, Mother’s Day, or Father’s Day, they can also think about a gift that they have given to someone and what made it personally meaningful to them and the intended recipient.

### **Appreciating an Illustrator’s Job**

Illustrators and authors often work independently of each other—unless, as in this case, the author and illustrator are the same person. Illustrators often start with a manuscript provided for them by a publisher (or if they are one in the same person, a manuscript they wrote that an editor has approved). From the manuscript, illustrators create illustrations to accompany text, making decisions—some of which come directly from text, some which might not—about character (e.g., race, age, gender, overall appearance), plot, and setting (e.g., time, place) as well as text placement and overall book design (sometimes the latter happens in conversation).

To help students appreciate an illustrator’s role in making a children’s book, you can give them text from a story and ask them to illustrate scenes from the story based on the manuscript you provide. To more closely mirror what Eric does, you can help them explore cultural or family stories from which they can illustrate. Not only are you fostering an appreciation of illustration and art, you are also able to have conversations with children about how they come to the scene, showing what it is they understand from the text (thus promoting lingering in text and deep reading). You might also encourage students who are writing their own stories (or recording them at young ages) to take a scene from their own lives and illustrate out the scene (see most previous activity). Either way you conduct the activity, you are building connections with the art curriculum, helping students to think more deeply about the texts they are reading. You are also helping students to think about illustration as a viable career path that they might want to pursue, addressing career and college readiness.

To modify the activity for all learners, you can collaborate on an illustration with your students or partner students to work together. Students who are English language learners and have access to language in a native language might also be encouraged to illustrate from a story in their native languages or from their life experiences, allowing you to assess their reading comprehension at a level not impacted by their language familiarity. You might also want to read Molly Bang’s *Picture This!: How Illustrations Work* published by Chronicle Books to help you plan meaningful lessons that can help older or more advanced students think about artistic design. Placing this resource in your classroom library from grades three and up can also be useful for students who are more artistically inclined.

## Visual Literacy

There are many beautiful illustrations in both *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gift*. Comprehension of picturebooks requires comprehension of illustrations as the illustrations do not only support text—they also add layers of understandings to the texts. Building visual literacy skills helps students consider the language of images, the meaning embedded in the image, emotions that come from images, and the relationship between stimuli/language, meaning, and emotion. As a teacher, you can choose specific illustrations to which you want students to attend—illustrations that are emotionally important, defining moments in the story, etc.—and help them to think critically about what is happening in the illustration by asking guiding questions, teaching them the language of visual analysis. Helping students to “read” images allows them to understand what illustrators do, how images are made, and how particular techniques or styles cause particular effects.

One image that might be very striking is when grandma and the boy are on the bus in *Grandma's Gift*. Eric shares that each of the people on the bus have particular significance, and he captured this significance in his illustration. Riders on the bus include the newly arrived immigrant who, like grandma, needs someone to serve as a language broker. There is also a stoic man who takes a keen interest in the boy's role as language broker for the grandmother; Eric shares that this man represents a teacher who empowered him when he was in school. There is also a young woman whose sole desire is to leave *El Barrio* and thus has a daydream quality to her posture. Another illustration to consider is when grandma and the boy are climbing the stairs to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the painting of Juan de Pareja. We can draw students' attention to the coldness of the tone, discuss how no one is looking at the boy and grandma as they climb the stairs, the sense of distance created by the stairs and people on the stairs, and the majesty of the museum itself captured through the architecture. We can juxtapose this illustration with the one featuring the boy and grandmother facing the painting by Juan de Pareja or even the last image in the book, asking students to think about the different emotional reactions evoked by each. Velasquez clearly make decisions to control readers' moods and understanding of the text.

Finding and discussing key illustrations that we feel are important helps to foster students' comprehension of text. Picture books are not only text-driven, but the story is told—perhaps more saliently—through the images. Much of students' understanding and response to text comes from illustrations, and students integrate between image and text. As such, we can also have students engage in conversations about illustrations they thought were integral to the story. We can ask them guiding questions that help break down the illustrations. Further, we can also query how emotion affects viewing by asking students to think about those illustrations that were the most emotional and to explore why. We can encourage them to think about the emotions that are evoked, and we can then ask them to think about how it is that these emotions are evoked through the illustrator's use of design techniques. Again, Molly Bang's *Picture This!* might prove

useful to guiding these conversations.

### **Media Literacy**

With both *Grandma's Records* and *Grandma's Gift*, we can help students to practice media literacy by questioning how it is older people are depicted compared to Eric's books and real life. Many texts that students interact with—stories, TV shows, films—depict grandparents specifically, the elderly generally, in stereotypical ways. For example, an older TV show, *Jimmy Neutron*, showed the title character's grandmother as overly medicated for ailments, constantly talking, unaware of surroundings, and generally a burden to others. As teachers, we can bring in examples of the elderly from media and ask students to think critically about the depictions while comparing these depictions against the grandmother in both books as well as knowledge they have from real life. As students work through these activities, you can also encourage them to find examples each day when they go home to bring to class for discussion, perhaps creating a class bulletin board that offers competing depictions of the elderly. Depending on ability level and age, you might be able to introduce students to questions of social capital, such as “why are these particular beliefs/stereotypes about the elderly perpetuated?” “why are the elderly depicted in humorous ways in children's media/literature?” “who benefits from these depictions, and who is injured by them?”

### **Appreciation of Literariness**

One of the skills that students must learn under the Common Core State Standards is an ability to close read literary text. That is, they must not only form opinions about text, they must be able to justify how these opinions are formed by the language and structure employed by the author, specifically through his use of literary elements. Understanding that reading is affective as well as meaning-based, students should, while reading, be encouraged to note particular passages that are poignant, passages that are important, and passages that stand out but they're not quite sure why. After reading, students can share passages in their groups and negotiate their understandings of the text by defending the passages they selected.

As students wrestle with and think about the emotional aspects of the text (reading for affect), they are simultaneously thinking about the meaning of the text—not just in terms of literal, inferential, and critical comprehension skills, but also contemplating literary analysis by thinking about topics such as theme (in a literary sense, the statement the author is making about an idea). As students think about the emotional responses they have to the text, they should be encouraged to find out why—through what language—these emotional responses come. As they form understandings about theme, they can also be encouraged to find text-based evidence to support or justify the theme. This, in turn, promotes lingering in text, and this will help foster students' critical reading of text.

### **Cultural Literacy**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we know that students' ways of knowing and learning are shaped by

the interactions they have within their families and within their schools. Students come to school with a great deal of cultural knowledge—experiences with family life, cultural heritage or traditions, exposure to music/clothing/food, and conversations about life experience. We need to make room for this knowledge in the curriculum to ensure that students feel validated. Students look to authority to develop a sense of their worth, and using diverse titles and exploring students’ knowledge bases helps them to know that they are valued and appreciated. Both *Grandma’s Records* and *Grandma’s Gift* push teachers to think about the ways in which they use children’s literature in the classroom and to think about how they support multicultural practices.

When students attend classes in which their own identities are not supported or fostered, they may come to feel that they are less valued or important, both within the classroom and within larger society. Eric shares that the boy’s visit to the museum to see the portrait by Diego Velazquez was the first time he saw that people of African descent could be artists, specifically realists, who are recognized and celebrated. This is based on real-life experiences Eric had that helped him to see that people African descent could be artists, particularly at a time when most media and books featured only white characters and there were few positive role models for children from cultural minority groups.

Diversifying our curriculum is essential, as is inviting students to think about how their family and cultural backgrounds provide them knowledge and lenses with which to view the world. That said, we also want to encourage students to think beyond their own experiences and look for universal human experiences that transcend family and cultural boundaries. As Eric did, we also want to encourage students to think about how they can be agents for social change. Where Eric saw a lack of representation in children’s book illustrations, he became an illustrator who works to include multiple points-of-view into the books he illustrates. He took his cultural and family knowledge and used it to define elements of his work, particularly with both *Grandma’s Records* and *Grandma’s Gift*.

### **Activities Specific to *Grandma’s Records***

#### **Oral History (Grades 3-5)**

In *Grandma’s Records*, a young boy learns, through music and conversations, about connections his grandmother has to Puerto Rico. As a joint literacy and social studies unit, we can use *Grandma’s Records* to teach students to engage in oral history projects. Learning to ask questions (speak with purpose) and to actively listen to the respondent, oral history invites authentic ways to increase students’ literacy skills while also helping them to learn meaningful content knowledge. Students can identify older members of their families who have family history/cultural knowledge. Based on who they select, they can then develop meaningful questions through the workshop process. Students then ask these questions while recording the interview, learn to transcribe the responses, and learn to use the information to offer a historical statement. Students can be taught to look for themes/ideas and discuss what they learned. Students can then share, as a class, what they learned and can be encouraged to find patterns across students’ interviews.

Students can also share this information with their families through posters, brochures, presentations, etc. For students who don't have access to older people in the community, you might want to partner students to collaborate on the oral history project.

For younger students, we might encourage students to talk to their grandparents and ask them questions about their lives, experiences, and/or points of historical importance. This can be conducted by having students interview grandparents individually while recording the interviews. We can then take the information the students have collected and share it with them in writing, making a class text. We can also ask grandparents to come to class to answer questions from students. We might record responses digitally or on paper and share them with the class to discuss the importance of the ideas shared by the grandparents. Again, the emphasis here should be on helping students to speak with purpose, considering question effectiveness, and to listen actively.

### **Musical Exploration (Grades 3-5)**

*Grandma's Records* focuses on a young boy's experiences listening to his grandmother's records, particularly a song of personal significance to the grandmother. By partnering with the music teacher, teachers can develop interdisciplinary units that bridge music, ELA, and social studies. Students can interview their parents and grandparents to find the names of songs that were personally meaningful when they were growing up or have significance to a particular moment (e.g., wedding). You may want to encourage students to see if they can uncover a particular cultural song that is significant, but this may be difficult for some students to find. The emphasis should be on songs of significance rather than just popular songs to which people listened.

Students can then be introduced to records, cassette tapes, and even CDs as musical artifacts that say something about a culture. Students will bring to the classroom the song titles they have collected and compile a list, seeing if there are any repeating titles. Keeping in mind the role of personal significance, students will then look, in groups, for the music, listen to the music, and think about what trends/ideas/patterns might emerge in the music. Students will then discuss why music is an important historical artifact and what they learned about their parents'/grandparents' experiences and generations.

Younger students can be introduced to records, cassettes, and CDs as musical artifacts and can listen to one or two songs that are available on each and think about the affordances of each medium. We can also have students interview their parents/guardians for meaningful song titles and listen to them and learn to sing them in music class. The students could then put on a concert for the parents/grandparents, singing songs that are personally meaningful to the audience. While older students can be introduced to tier-three words related to music and use this content language to speak about the music, both younger and older students should be encouraged to use tier-two words in their discussions. Words such as records, cassettes, and compact discs, which are not as commonly used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but are important for discussing musical

history, are examples of terms we can introduce and have students use.

### **Musical Appreciation (All grades)**

Though young, the boy in *Grandma's Records* comes to appreciate his grandmother's music because of the significance it carries for her. Tied to the previous lesson, a music teacher can teach students to not only listen to popular music but can also help students to think about their personal tastes for music. Students can explore the difference between when a song is popular and engaging and when a song is personally meaningful. We can structure lessons to help students identify songs to which they tie emotional experience (e.g., a song played by their mom when they cuddle on the couch, songs they heard at a wedding) and help students to consider why certain songs are more personally meaningful than others. Depending on developmental readiness, students can also be asked to write about how they would explain one song they find to be personally meaningful to someone in future.

### **Activities Specific to *Grandma's Gift***

#### **Recipe Recording (All Grades)**

Eric spends time discussing a recipe of family and cultural significance in *Grandma's Gift*. Students can learn to write process (process/procedural writing) by recording the steps involved in recipe recording. Through this activity, students can practice problem solving (e.g., we only have x amount of y, what do we do we do?; x is diabetic and the recipe calls for sugar, we can instead do y); they practice mathematical reasoning through measurements, addition, and subtraction; and they also practice writing imperative statements or statements of command (e.g., "Add to this, 1 cup of y.").

Students should find a meal of cultural or family significance (or, for some students who do not live with their families or people of their cultural backgrounds, personal significance), perhaps one tied to a specific time/moment/event (e.g., Christmas). Students will then record the recipe instructions provided by their parent/grandparent/family member while helping them in the process of making the meal. In process, older students might notice that there are some elements of recipes not discussed directly (e.g., how much salt to add) and should be encouraged to make note of these in their recipes. Students will bring in the recipes and they will compile a cookbook for their class that they can share and bring home. Students should be encouraged to try out, with parental guidance, their classmates' recipes. If teachers have the capacity to do so, students could actually bring in the meals they prepared with their family members and share the food with their peers/family members on a family-recognition day.

#### **Objects of Personal Value (all grades)**

In *Grandma's Gift*, the boy receives two major gifts from his grandmother. The first is a trip to the museum to see a painting of Juan de Pareja by Diego Velazquez, an assignment required for school. His grandmother has to leave *El Barrio*, her safe space, to help her grandson complete the assignment. Because of this trip, the boy is inspired by

the portrait, seeing that individuals of African descent can be represented artistically. After the trip, the boy receives, from his grandmother, a set of colored pencils and a sketchbook for Christmas. The last page of *Grandma's Gift* illustrates that the most important gifts we receive are those we intrinsically value.

Ask students to identify something of personal value. It does not have to be a gift related to a time of the year (e.g., Christmas, birthday). In fact, it is encouraged that you not tie the activity to a holiday as students do not have the same experiences with gifts. However, we can have students identify something of personal value. Teachers should emphasize the differences between items/objects that are personally meaningful and items/objects that have value in society. For instance, while it might not be worth much to other people, a wooden spoon that a grandmother carried with her when immigrating has significant personal value. Using tier-two vocabulary, students can then present the items of significance to their peers and even write a story about those items. Depending on developmental level, teachers can have students explain the objects to their peers or explain the object as if they were discussing its significance to someone in the future.

Alternatively, students can discuss a journey or trip that they took that was personally meaningful, similar to that of the young boy and grandmother. Students can discuss these experiences in class, with the teacher recording elements of their narratives and looking for patterns. Students who are able to write can be encouraged to focus on a moment of personal significance as the basis for a memoir moment. Students can bind their collective stories into an anthology that can be used as a classroom text. You might also send the anthology to parents/guardians.

### **Artistic Appreciation/Museum Trip**

The boy's experiences in *Grandma's Gift* helped him to appreciate a piece of art that he might not have encountered solely through school-based experiences. Teachers can collaborate with the art teacher on a unit plan that helps students to explore quality and diverse pieces of art and help expand students' understanding of art as an area of interest. Depending on developmental levels, students can also learn about how art relates to historical context. For instance, teachers can help students understand the cultural significance of Juan de Pareja in his time. Teachers can also help students understand why the display of Pareja's portrait by the Metropolitan Museum of Art was culturally significant during the time period in which the narrative is set.

If it is feasible, teachers might use *Grandma's Gift* as an introduction to art museums and plan a trip to an art museum through which students can see diverse pieces of art. If this is not feasible, you can conduct a classroom museum experience. Some teachers might conduct a virtual museum, creating a WebQuest that provides links to artistic pieces shown in museums and provides background normally shared by a curator. Other teachers might create an experience in the classroom, posting up prints of pieces of art throughout the classroom (or even school building, with administrative permission) with

note cards. Teachers might serve as curators or tour guides in their classrooms (or school building, if a whole-school experience; or perhaps in partner classrooms). We can encourage students to learn about each of the pieces of art through these experiences, each dependent on the resources and time available to us.

We might also have students become experts on pieces of art. Teachers who do this group students to become experts about a particular piece of art and/or an individual artist. The art pieces are then displayed throughout the classroom with note cards written by the students. Other classes, parents/guardians, and other members of the school community visit the classroom and learn about the pieces of art from the students who serve as tour guides. Students can also learn to record information digitally and to provide visitors with listening devices with the recordings of their discussion points. This might be useful for students who are nervous about speaking in front of others and allows students to practice speaking fluency. This activity allows students to speak and write for meaningful and authentic purposes and fosters non-fiction/informational reading.

### **Parents/Guardians/Families**

Many of the activities discussed in this guide can be modified and implemented by parents/guardians/grandparents/families to promote literacy at home. The main thing that parents/guardians/grandparents/families should consider is their role in the child's life and how they can form bonds, through genuine family activities, with children. Sharing life stories, sharing music, and sharing recipes not only help to keep alive family/cultural knowledge and history, they also help parents/grandparents and children to communicate authentically about family experiences.