

College of Education **News**

Author, Poet and Literacy Advocate Pat Mora on Bilingual Literacy, Bookjoy and the Start of Children's Day/Book Day (El Día de los Niños/El Día de los Libros)



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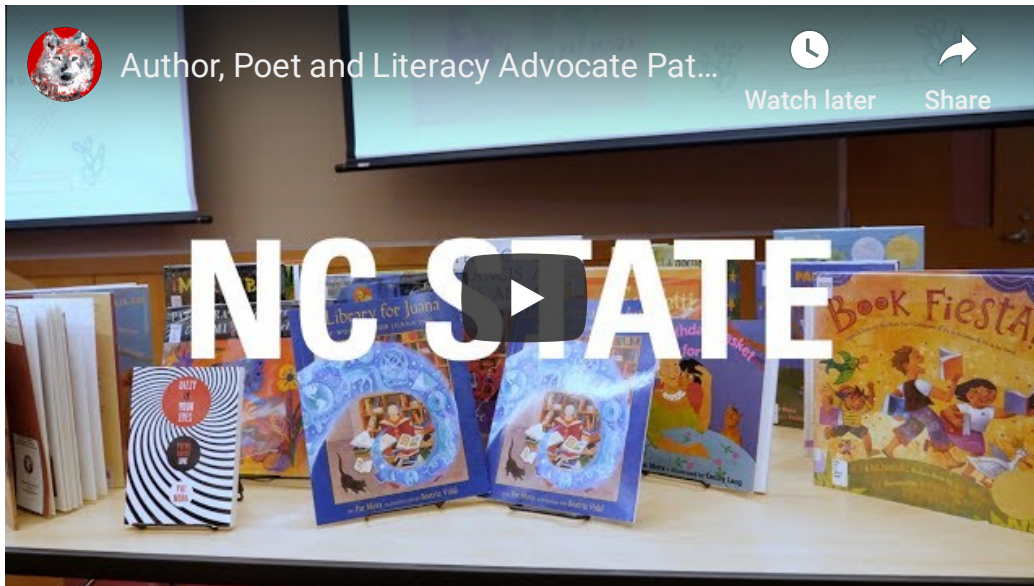
As NC State celebrates Latinx Heritage Month Sept. 15-Oct. 15, the NC State College of Education sat down with author, poet and literacy advocate Pat Mora to talk about bilingual literacy, what she means by bookjoy and why she created Children's Day/Book Day (El Día de los Niños/El Día de los Libros).

A native of El Paso, Texas, and a bilingual speaker, Mora has published several collections of poetry for adults, young adults and children, as well as written many children's books in both English and Spanish,

a collection of essays and the highly acclaimed memoir *House of Houses*.

She was recently on NC State's campus to hold a series of workshops and deliver a keynote address on [creative practice for educators](#).

The following Q&A is from an interview with Mora and is edited for length and clarity.



You have called being bilingual a great blessing. Why?

I've had the advantage of discovering how powerful, how convenient and how useful it is to be bilingual. Being bilingual is as if you have a piano and you can use both the white and the black keys because you have two language registers and you can say 'Do I want to say tree or do I want to say 'árbol?' And they are very different sounds, so when you are writing poetry or even when you are speaking, it's an advantage to have these two languages to use.

You're an advocate for bilingual literacy. Why is it important to you, and why do you think it should be important for other educators, too?

The reality is that most educators in this country may have students who are bilingual and are Spanish dominant. That doesn't mean Spanish inferior. That doesn't mean Spanish burdened. It means that their home language is Spanish. It is also a reality that often, though not necessarily always, some of those students are also facing economic issues, so we can have, for example, in North Carolina, students who are bilingual or Spanish dominant who are also facing economic challenges at home. So it is incredibly important. I am very impressed that this university is committed to supporting diversity and to helping all of our students succeed in our schools.

What can educators do every day to ensure that they are addressing the literary needs of every child, regardless of linguistic or cultural background?

It's a challenge. Every student is different. Add to that the linguistic challenge that we may have some students who arrive at school with a very limited English vocabulary. I think we need to feel compassion for their challenge. Children want to be different when they are the best. They don't want to be different if they are made to feel that their language is an embarrassment or that their language is a handicap. We feel that way about our skin color or about our athletic ability. I think it's a challenge to educators to see language diversity as a resource and to help children see that this is a resource that they have. I want students to be able to speak, read and write English well. I am a former English teacher, but on the other hand, I don't want any student, whether they speak Chinese or Arabic or Spanish, to feel that that means they are less than or they are a problem.

How can educators show an appreciation for bilingual literacy and incorporate it into education?

I think creative teachers develop ways to help a student see their language as an asset. If creative teachers can think of ways to make the other language an asset like, 'Can you help me say this word? I know the word for tree in Spanish, can you help me say it correctly?' and sense when a student wants to be singled out and when a student wants to get settled into class first, then little by little, throughout the year, that other language, that other culture, will be viewed as an asset.

You have said that bookjoy is the work of educators and that it's the job of educators to get young kids excited about books. You've also said that this is the most important work that needs to be done, especially now because competition from the web is so intense. Tell us what you mean by bookjoy and why it is so important.

More than 20 years ago, I came up with this word: bookjoy. It's the way I feel about reading. My mother was a reader. I was always a reader from the time I was little. Every night before I go to sleep, I read a little bit. That's how I relax. But I think it is such a gift that we can give students when we help them discover bookjoy. Whether it's reading sometime in class or classes that have 10 minutes just to read, experiencing bookjoy — the pleasure of me and text and how that can make me laugh, how that can open doors, how it can scare me — the pleasure of reading. Bookjoy.

How can you develop bookjoy and help others, particularly young readers, develop it?

It's a wonderful thing for teachers to read to the class. I can remember the second grade teacher that would say after lunch, 'I want you to put your head down in your arm' and she would read so many pages from a book. That is such a clear memory in my own mind. By doing that, that teacher was sharing bookjoy.

Certainly, there are teachers who have a reading time or a quiet time. I think we, as educators, have a grand opportunity to connect students with text for pleasure. That is what bookjoy is. For knowledge, yes, but for pleasure. I also think encouraging parents to have reading time in the evening is a beautiful way to end a day. And that's bookjoy.

What led you to start Children's Day/Book Day?

About 24 years ago, I was on the campus at the University of Arizona in Tucson. I was on campus to do some poetry reading for the Academy of American Poets and they had arranged for me to have an interview with an on-campus radio station. This lovely bilingual radio announcer said 'When you finish with the interview, how would you feel about reading some of your bilingual books in Spanish?' At the end of the interview, while she was setting up, I asked 'Why?' and she said, 'Oh, for El Día del Niño,' which means the Day of the Child. I felt that I was just hit over the head with this. Why is it that we have Mother's Day and Father's Day and we don't have Children's Day? But then I thought, if we are going to have Children's Day, it has to be connected to books because I feel so strongly that we need a nation of readers.

This is our 24th year. And on April 30 there are hundreds of celebrations, many in the state of North Carolina. However, what I discovered, and particularly in the last five years, is that people were making the mistake that if they heard it in Spanish (El Día de los Niños/El Día de los Libros), they would say 'Oh, that's for Latinos.' And I would say, 'What? Yeah, it's for Latinos because you are saying it in Spanish.' So I have really started saying Children's Day/Book Day because it is really for everybody. It was always for everybody.

Why did you choose education?

I was an English major and my first teaching assignment was teaching Spanish to every child in a K-6 school. I taught elementary school, middle school and high school and at the junior college and at the university. So, I did a lot of teaching. I believe it's a great way to improve a society, and I have a deep and abiding respect for educators.

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