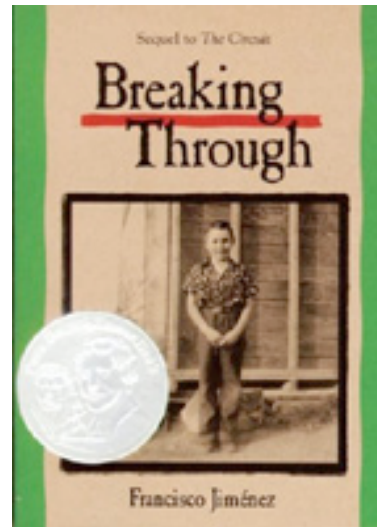


"There is at bottom only one problem in the world...
How does one break through?
How does one get into the open?
How does one burst the cocoon and become a butterfly?"

Francisco Jiménez



Breaking Through

Francisco Jiménez

Houghton Mifflin Company 2001

Grade Levels

9-12

Curriculum Areas

Language Arts • Social Studies • American History

National Language Arts Standards

NL-ENG.K-12.8

DEVELOPING RESEARCH SKILLS

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

United States History Standard 31

Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Civics Standard 25

Understands issues regarding personal, political, and economic rights.

Objectives

To provide a range of culturally diverse literature meeting students' needs to understand themselves, understand worldviews and other cultures.

To explore issues surrounding the use of itinerant child labor on farms around the nation.

Identify the associations that the words Farm, Immigrant and Migrant Worker have for them.

To provide meaningful, authentic opportunities to read vocabulary in a variety of contexts; language in a cultural context.

Overview

Like the Joad family in the Steinbeck classic, *Grapes of Wrath*, the Jimenez's came to California to escape poverty and find a better life. In a short story titled "Crossing la Frontera" (the border), told from a child's point of view, Jimenez describes his family's flight from their home in a small village north of Guadalajara across the border into the United States:

"On both sides of the fence were armed guards in green uniforms. Papa called them la migra and explained that we had to cross the fence to the other side, without being seen by these men. If we succeeded, we would enter los Estados Unidos....We continued walking along the wire wall, until Papa spotted a small hole underneath the fence. Papa got on his knees and, with his hands, made the opening larger. We all crawled through it like snakes."

"A few minutes later, we were picked up by a woman whom Papa had contacted in Mexicali. She had promised to pick us up in her car and drive us, for a fee, to a place where we would find work. As we traveled north through the night, I fell asleep for a long time on Mama's lap. I woke up at dawn and heard the woman say, we're entering the San Joaquin Valley.

"Here you'll find plenty of work. 'This is the beginning of a new life,' Mama said, taking a deep breath. 'A good life,' Papa answered."

As it turned out, many years would pass before anyone in the Jiménez family experienced that good life. Jiménez's father, Francisco, his mother Joaquina, and his older brother Roberto, found work picking crops in the fields. So began the cycle of moving from camp to camp, following the harvest.

The family, which eventually grew to nine children, lived in one-room shacks and tents. In the summer, they picked strawberries in Santa Maria. Then they traveled to Fresno to pick grapes in early September and on to Corcoran and Bakersfield to pick cotton in the winter. In February, they moved back to Santa Maria to thin lettuce and top carrots.

Working from sunup to sundown, the entire family earned just \$15 a day. Jiménez called this nomadic existence "the circuit" in a short story by that title that has been reproduced many times in textbooks and anthologies of American literature.

"It's a symbolic circuit," he says. "If you're a migrant worker, you're constantly living in poverty. It's very difficult to get out of it."

Yet Jiménez soon found relief from the hard life in the fields and a way to escape the circuit: school. "I came to realize that learning and knowledge were the only stable things in my life. Whatever I learned in school, that knowledge would stay with me no matter how many times we moved."

Because Jiménez could not start school until after the mid-November harvest and because he knew so little English, he struggled to keep up with his classmates. One teacher even labeled him mentally retarded.

"I would start school and find myself behind, especially in English," he remembers. "School for the first nine years was very sporadic."

Still, Jiménez was luckier than his brother Roberto, who was old enough to pick cotton and therefore could not start school until February. In "The Circuit," Jiménez describes the pain of leaving his brother behind on his first day back at school:

"I woke up early that morning and lay in bed, looking at the stars and savoring the thought

of not going to work and starting sixth grade for the first time that year. Since I could not sleep, I decided to get up and join Papa and Roberto at breakfast. I sat at the table across from Roberto, but I kept my head down. I did not want to look up and face him. I knew he was sad. He was not going to school today. He was not going tomorrow, or next week, or next month."

Unlike many of his classmates, Jiménez looked forward to the days he spent in school. "I had many embarrassing moments; but in spite of those, I enjoyed the environment," he says. "School was a lot nicer than home. Many times, we lived in tents with dirt floors, no electricity or plumbing. In school we had electricity, plumbing, lighting. We even had toys."

Although the physical environment was pleasant, interactions with classmates often were not. "Kids would call me spic, or greaser, tamale wrapper. They made fun of my thick accent and whenever I made grammatical mistakes. That really hurt. I withdrew and became quiet," Jiménez says.

Fortunately, Jiménez sometimes encountered a friendly teacher who recognized his desire to learn. His sixth-grade teacher, Mr. Lema, helped him with his English during lunch. Discovering that Jiménez enjoyed music, the universal language, Lema offered to teach him to play the trumpet.

But Jiménez never got his first lesson. When he went home to tell his mother and father the good news about his music lessons, he found the family's possessions neatly packed into cardboard boxes. They were moving again.

To compensate for his sporadic education, Jiménez began teaching himself. He would jot down words he was trying to memorize on a small note pad and carry it with him into the fields so he could study during his breaks.

Whenever his family visited the local public dump to collect discarded clothes, wood for a floor, and other necessities, Jiménez would pick up books. Once he found a single volume of an encyclopedia. Not realizing it was part of a 20-volume set, he leafed through its pages, figuring that if he could learn to read the whole thing, he'd know just about everything there was to know.

Wherever he was, Jiménez always knew to run and hide from la migra (Immigration and

Naturalization Service agents), especially when they made their sweeps through the fields and camps.

Jiménez and his family lived in fear of being deported. His father had a visa, but the others did not; visas were too expensive. Jiménez remembers the INS officers interrogating people and sometimes beating them. When someone asked where he was born, he lied.

When he was in junior high school, INS agents entered Jiménez's classroom and arrested him as an illegal immigrant. The family was deported to Mexico but returned after several weeks with visas obtained with the help of a Japanese sharecropper who sponsored them. Jiménez's life changed forever when he was about to enter high school. Because his father suffered from permanent back pain--probably from too many hours bent over the crops--he could no longer work in the fields. It was up to Roberto to support the family.

Roberto found a job as a janitor at a school in Santa Maria; Jiménez also worked for a janitorial company. Now the family did not have to follow the harvest. Now Jiménez could start school with the rest of the class and keep up with his studies. "The work was indoors; and after I was done cleaning, I could study in an office," he says. "This was my chance." With his newfound stability, Jiménez thrived. He became student-body president of his high school and earned a 3.7 GPA. A guidance counselor, disturbed that a gifted student was not going to college because the family could not afford to send him, managed to arrange for Jiménez to obtain scholarships and student loans so that he could enroll at Santa Clara University.

[Breaking Through Study Guide

<http://www.scu.edu/ethnicstudies/fjimenez/study/breakingthrough.cfm>]

Activity

Sometimes life takes an unexpected turn. With a partner, think about a dream you have for the future. Then, discuss this scenario: Imagine that your family has to relocate to another country. How would you cope with losing something – a person, a way of life, an experience? Make notes about how you would react to such a difficult situation. What plans would you make to fulfill your dreams? Discuss your revised vision of the future with your partner. As you read *Breaking Through*, pay attention to how Francisco deals with his own obstacles of moving to the United States and how he achieved his dreams.

Create a positive profile of a particular character by gathering information about the character, evaluating and synthesizing the information, and creating a positive written impression of him/her.

Activity

Make a Connection

Have students remember a time when they have had to say goodbye to someone. What positive or negative emotions did they experience? Have students recall a time when they conquered a fear or mastered a task that was difficult for them. Discuss how they felt when they succeeded. Have students remember a time when they made a new friend. Discuss how valuable a friend can be in a difficult situation.

Have students think of a time when they traveled to a new place. Were they excited or anxious? Discuss the emotions associated with experiencing an unfamiliar location or landscape. As they read, have students keep notes about the external and internal conflicts that Francisco experiences and how he deals with each one.

Reflection and Discussion Questions

What did you learn about the experience of Mexican-American migrant farm workers? What did you learn about the European-American landowners? How different would this book be if it were about migrant farm workers of Mexican descent today?

How would these stories be different if they were told from the eyes of the father in the story? From one of Francisco's teachers? From one of the landowners? What stereotypes are there about Mexican-Americans? Mexico? Migrant farm workers? What are some examples of racial prejudice in this story? What are some examples of power in this story? How is it used? There is great controversy in many communities about "English - only" education. What are the arguments about it? Who is making the arguments? Who has power in these arguments and how are they using this power? What do you think about the "English - only" debate? What do you know of migrant farm workers in your community? Of Mexican-Americans? How could you find out more? What do the Mexican-Americans in your community express as their needs (if they are heard in your community)? This book is for adults and children. If you were giving this book as a gift to a child what would you want the child to know about the book and how

young a child would you give this book to? Jimenez talks about being given *The Grapes of Wrath* as a teenager and realizing it was the first book he had read to which he could relate. What are the stories of your cultural heritage and when did you read them? What stories are the children in your community being asked to read and does it relate to their cultural heritage? What values does this book share in its telling? How would you and folks from your congregation greet migrant farm workers such as Francisco's family if they showed up in church? How is this book helpful in unlearning racism? What questions do you still have that you would like the group to discuss? What do you still wish to know more about and will explore on your own? What did you like most and least about the book? What did you feel and learn about yourself?

Symbolism

Authors often use symbols – people, places, or things that have their own meaning and also stand for something else to deepen a story's message. Francisco Jiménez quotes Thomas Mann, Dr. Faustus in the beginning of the book what is the symbolism Jiménez is trying to get across?

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How does one get into the open?
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Themes

Students will see the following themes, or main ideas, developed in detail in *Breaking Through*.

- Breaking down barriers
- Striving for a better way of life
- Helping to support your family
- Having a strong work ethic
- The value of education
- Being respectful to others
- Encountering racism
- Being proud of your heritage
- Making friends and becoming a leader at school
- Having your parents rely on you for many things
- Trying to balance the traditions of your family with a new set of values and a different way of life
- Working hard to fulfill your dreams
- Writing a story about your life

[Francisco Jiménez. 1997]

Activity

Work Forced: Exploring Issues Facing Young Farm Workers

Explore issues surrounding the use of itinerant child labor on farms around the nation. The PBS website, *The New Americans*, features a Mexican laborer whose family lives in Mexico while he works as a meatpacker in Kansas. The worker is trying to save money so that his family can legally immigrate to the United States.

'America's Story' web site, briefly describes the life and achievements of Cesar Chavez, labor activist and leader of the United Farm Workers. Learn more about his fight for better working conditions for migrant farmers.

Further Questions for Discussion

Why do you think child farm workers have so little visibility to other Americans?

What do you think the future will hold for a child farm worker who quits school to help his or her family make ends meet?

Why do you think farm workers are exempt from laws that require time-and-a-half pay after 40 hours of work?

Why do you think that some immigrant children are willing to leave their families behind to journey to the United States alone? Support your answer with evidence.

What are some alternatives to using child farm workers to pick fruits and vegetables, considering the labor shortage and the need for farmers to turn a profit?

[The New York Times Learning Network
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/20000807monday.html>]

Internet Websites

Americas Story-Cesar Chavez
<http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/aa/chavez>

Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs
<http://www.afop.org>

Breaking Through Study Guide
<http://www.scu.edu/ethnicstudies/fjimenez/study/breakingthrough.cfm>

The Child Labor Coalition

<http://www.natlconsumersleague.org/clc.htm>

The New Americans-Mexican Story

http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/newamericans/newamericans/mexican_intro.html

The United States Department of Labor

<http://www.dol.gov/>

Work Forced: Exploring Issues Facing Young
Farm Workers-The New York Times Learning
Network

<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/20000807monday.html>