

A Look into Latino/a Children's Literature: Seeking Cultural Authenticity in Latino/a Children's Literature

Books expose us to ways of thinking about other human beings.

Children's literature has the potential to be a mirror or a window- Sims Bishop's (1997) asserts children's literature has the potential to serve as a mirror, seeing a similar reflection, or that children's literature has the potential as a window into someone else's life, as a way of seeing into the lives of others.

Cultural Authenticity in Multicultural Children's Literature

Adapted from Mendoza, J. & Reese, D. (2001) [on-line article]

"Good multicultural literature can benefit all children...Teachers enhance children's budding understanding and empathy when they make a point of sharing books that accurately and positively portray the backgrounds of the families in the classroom and that extend children's awareness to the significant groups in their community and the wider world." (Derman-Sparks et al., 1989, pg.12)

TEACHER'S ASSUMPTIONS & STRUGGLES IN SELECTING MULTICULTURAL BOOKS FOR CHILDREN:

- The unexamined assumption: Non-European characters or themes = worthwhile multicultural literature; not having critical lens for interpreting the literature.
- The assumption that a single book about a group, topic, or theme is enough
- The mistaken belief that there is a wide range of good-quality multicultural literature in libraries and book stores.
- Time- it takes time to learn about your students cultures and communities as well as seeking out quality literature where your students can begin (sometimes for the first time in their and their families lives) to see true reflections of themselves in children's literature. Give yourself this time; it is a process of learning!

"The meanings we hold about race, class, and gender (many of which may be stereotypes) mediate how we interpret text." (Hade, 1997, p. 235). We should then make sure we are cognizant of our own cultural awareness and that these understandings, "are prerequisites for the development and use of multicultural literature." (Barrera, Liguori, & Salas, 1993, p. 205).

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We can use the following questions to interrogate and analyze Latino/a children's literature-

- ❑ Are characters "outside the mainstream culture" depicted as individuals or as caricatures?
- ❑ Does their representation include significant cultural information? Or does it follow stereotypes?
- ❑ Who has the power in the story? What is the nature of their power, and how do they use it?
- ❑ Who has wisdom? What is the nature of their wisdom, and how do they use it?
- ❑ What are the consequences of certain behaviors? What behaviors or traits are rewarded, and how? What behaviors are punished, and how?
- ❑ How is language used to create images of people of particular groups? How are artistic elements used to create those images?
- ❑ Who has written the story? Who has illustrated it? Are they inside or outside the groups they are presenting? What are they in a position to know? What do they claim to know?
- ❑ Whose voices are heard? Whose are missing?
- ❑ What do this narrative and these pictures say about race? Class? Culture? Gender? Age? Resistance to the status quo?

As teachers we need to raise these issues of accuracy and authenticity, to begin noticing the places in books where bias, stereotypes, and misinformation may be found.

Reading against the grain is, "a way to examine the unexamined, question the unquestioned, and hold up to scrutiny the unspoken assertions the text is making about the way lives are lived in society." (Temple, Martinez, Yokota & Naylor, 1998, p. 43).

A Few Authors, Poets, and Illustrators of Latino/a Children's Literature that Work Hard on Issues of Cultural Authenticity:

Juan Felipe Herrera
Carmen Lomas Garza
Pat Mora
Alma Flor Ada
Francisco Jimenez
Amada Irma Perez
Benjamin Aline Saenz
Bobbi Salinas

Pam Munoz Ryan
Julia Alvarez
Viola Canales
Nancy Osa
Gary Soto ...and don't forget to add Monica Brown!

Poets

Jorge Argueta
Francisco X. Alarcon
Jane Medina

Illustrators

Simon Silva
David Diaz
Maya Christina Gonzales
Yuyi Morales
Carmen Lomas Garza
Luis Garay

Folk Music

Jose-Luis Orozco

And a few publishing houses that ARE trying to make a multicultural, multiethnic authentic difference in children's literature:

- Children's Book Press
- Black Butterfly Press
- Just Us books
- Arte Publishers
- Greenfield Review Press
- Polychrome Publishing Corporation
- Lee & Low
- Hyperion's Jump at the sun
- HarperCollins' Amistad

A Few Recommendations for Extending Your Learning-

- Ada, A.F. (2003). *A magical encounter: Latino children's literature in the classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Day, Frances Ann. (2003). *Latina and Latino Voices in Literature*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Fox, D.L. & Short, K.G. (Eds.) *Stories Matter: the complexity of cultural authenticity in children's literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- *Language Arts, Primary Voices, & SchoolTalk* – all NCTE publications that can be found at <http://www.ncte.org/>
- Marzan, J. (1997). *Luna, luna: Creative writing ideas from Spanish and Latino literature*. Teachers and Writers Collaborative.
- Temple, C., Martinez, M., & Yokota, J. (1998). *Children's books in children's hands*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- The Pura Belpre Award- checkout the new winners and the past winners <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=bookmediaawards&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=147610>
- Wolf, S.A. (2004). *Interpreting literature with children*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

If you would like more information on culturally authentic Latino/a's Children's Literature, you may email me at jade.cashman@ttu.edu.