
Cultural Values as Depicted in Hispanic Contemporary Fiction Books Written for Children

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A growing emphasis on finding appropriate ways to define ourselves as a nation of many peoples has led to discussion and debate on the issue of how to include, in literary works, experiences and histories of different cultural and ethnic groups. The public demand for multicultural books may well be the result of a struggle to include the viewpoint of those groups considered outside the sociopolitical mainstream of the United States. Certainly any consideration of literacy for Hispanic children should include an examination of the depiction of Hispanic peoples and culture in contemporary fiction books written for children.

If the African-American experience with children's books may be used as a point of departure for this discussion, one can clearly see a well-defined change leading to the emergence of the culturally conscious literature that constitutes the body of African-American children's literature available today. Throughout early American history, African-Americans were depicted in children's literature in negative and disparaging ways and existed only in their relationship to Whites. Broderick (1973) made a careful study of African-American images in children's fiction from 1827 through 1967. She found that most of the characters fit one of seven stereotypes: the contented slave, the wretched freedman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive. Other researchers since Broderick found similar portrayals of Blacks and Black culture in children's fiction (Harris, 1986).

In the period of the early 1990s middle class and college educated African-Americans such as A. Phillips Randolph, Alain Locke, Ida B. Wells, and W. E. B. DuBois argued for the creation in literature, including children's literature, of a new image for African-Americans (Huggins, 1976). Among the most influential voices calling for change in the depiction of African-Americans in materials written for children was that of W. E. B. DuBois.

DuBois (1919) issued a call for the development of a children's literature that would give African-American children an appropriate image of themselves. One of the most immediate results of DuBois' work was the development of *The Brownies' Book*, the first children's periodical written by African-Americans for African-American children. DuBois' thinking guided the development of the periodical and has influenced literature for African-Americans to the present day:

Certainly *The Brownies' Book* was a forceful instrument for developing racial and political consciousness among Black children. The magazine gave Black children a code of behavior for their personal and public lives . . . It commanded and coaxed its readers to believe in themselves and their race through written materials. *The Brownies' Book* was one song of affirmation in the creation of a national culture that would burst forth periodically and reach a tumultuous crescendo in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. (Harris, 1986, p. 250)

Eloise Greenfield, Virginia Hamilton, Walter Dean Myers, and Mildred Taylor are but some of the accomplished authors who, starting in the mid-to-late- 60s and 70s and continuing in the 80s and 90s, have written excellent literature from the perspective of African-Americans.

The Issue of Cultural Authenticity

The diverse nature of the Hispanic population makes the writing of appropriate books a complex proposition. The 1990 United States census of population (Bureau of Census 1993a, 1993b) reported that Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other Central and Latin Americans are part of the patchwork of Hispanic cultures in the United States. This population, however, is not a uniform group. Represented are different socioeconomic situations, different levels of competence in English and Spanish, and many political voices that reflect the personal interests of special groups.

It is estimated that at the beginning of the next century, due to continued immigration to the United States and high birthrates among

some of these groups, Hispanics will constitute 15% of the total population; they will thus become the largest minority group (Bouvier & Davis, 1982). Adding to the issue of population growth, there is a yearning to preserve the language and cultural roots (Mendoza, 1994) and a demand for education that meets the needs and cultures of the different groups that make up the Hispanic family (Collins & Coltrane, 1991).

Despite contradictory findings from research as cited by Cummins (1979), bilingual programs were legislated in the 60s and 70s in an attempt to improve the educational achievement of children and maintain the culture and language of immigrant groups. Opponents of this legislation have, for years, questioned the effectiveness of the programs on grounds that they (a) defeat the purpose of language learning, the language being English; (b) diminish the economic potential of the immigrant groups; and (c) delay assimilation or integration to a common culture (Glazer, 1983, 1992). Proponents, on the other hand, have questioned the merit of dismissing the language and culture of the home for the sake of the language and culture of the dominant society. They have argued that the transition to reading in English would be easy to achieve for Spanish-speaking children if they have adequately developed first language skills (Cummins, 1979; Schon, Hopkins & Davis as cited in Schon, Hopkins & Vojir, 1984).

Whether children read about the Hispanic experience in Spanish and/or English, or they read as part of the curriculum in bilingual programs or in classrooms where teachers provide extensive collections of culturally diverse literature, the issue of what constitutes excellent literary form and presents true cultural images is at stake. As part of a discussion of multicultural literature and cultural authenticity, Bishop (1992) explains that in portraying what is unique to an individual culture and universal to all cultures, books of literary quality present without distortions or misrepresentations the nuances of day-to-day living in the culture they represent.

Nieto (1987) reports that, unfortunately, it is not unusual to find works that include stereotypes, distortions, misconceptions, misspellings, inappropriate use of language and/or the illusion of a generic Hispanic experience in children's books. In a recent review of Hispanic children's literature in the United States, Nieto (1992) expressed concern about the exclusion of the family and family traditions in books about Puerto Ricans written by non-Hispanics. Family and extended family relationships, she explained, were crucial to an understanding of the Puerto Rican experience. Nieto indicated, furthermore, that the family played a central role in other Hispanic groups and criticized the lack of authenticity in the representation of Hispanic life and culture.

The growing number of Hispanic literary works for adults is indicative of attempts to acknowledge and value the Hispanic experience and legacy in the United States. Books such as *Dreaming in Cuban* by Cristina Garcia (1992) promote understanding of cultural heritage and provide authentic interpretations of the Hispanic-American experience. These insiders' perspectives may be responsible for an increasing acceptance of Hispanic literature as a body of work (Tatum, 1982).

A number of writers and researchers (Mohr, 1987; Norton, 1993; Schon, 1990, 1992, 1995) have worked tirelessly to raise the level of cultural awareness of people who write, publish, and select books for children. Hispanic literature for children, however, remains underrepresented both in quantity and quality. Of approximately 5,000 children's books published each year in the United States, only 2% represent the Hispanic culture (Barrera, Liguori & Salas, 1992; Nieto, 1992). The small number of children's books that focus on Hispanic themes and characters in view of the growing numbers of Hispanics in the United States is disappointing.

Norton (1995) suggests that readers shape their view of the world and of themselves partially through the books they read. Through books they experience others; with books they see themselves. The voices of those who have carefully read and analyzed books that reflect Hispanic culture are alarming. They express concern about the quantity and quality of the books available; they point to a number of authenticity-related questions that educators need to continue to consider:

1. How is cultural thinking promoted in literature written for children?
2. In what way are Hispanic cultural values shown in the literature?
3. How is Hispanic life represented in contemporary children's books?
4. How are family and extended family relationships, crucial in the understanding of the Hispanic experience, described or implied?
5. Who has written excellent literature for children from the perspective of Hispanic-Americans?
6. Which are the books that include inaccuracies and distortions?

In order to respond to the issue of cultural authenticity, one needs to examine the culture, the value system, and the language of people who share experiences and wish to retain certain cultural traditions. The importance of family, for example, and the relationships and connec-

tions among family members and other individuals including extended family and close friends referred to as "como familia" (like family) is discussed extensively by authors who write about the cultural values shared by Hispanic groups (Nieto, 1992).

Ramirez and Castañeda (1974) identified four major value clusters associated with the Mexican-American experience: (a) strong family, community, and ethnic ties, meaning that the needs of the individual are secondary to those of family and ethnic group; (b) warm and open interpersonal relationships, resulting in cooperation rather than competition; (c) respect shown to older people with parents and other adults serving as children's models; and (d) emphasis on family ties which are reinforced through religious commitment, respect for adults, and social conventions.

Culturally Authentic Literature

Are the cultural values and traditions historically shared by Hispanics depicted responsibly and accurately in contemporary children's books? Sometimes.

Nicholasa Mohr is perhaps the most prolific and respected author of Puerto Rican books for children. She writes from personal experience about young people who feel overprotected by parents, lose a beloved grandparent, cannot understand the different rules that govern the behavior of boys and girls, and have meaningful relationships with the extended family. She addresses problems of poverty; she speaks with pride about cultural heritage. Her books include *El Bronx Remembered: A Novella and Stories* (1975) originally written with an adult audience in mind and *Felita* (1979), the story of an eight-year old who loves her family and friends in her Puerto Rican New York neighborhood but suffers discrimination and is attacked in another neighborhood. In *Felita's* sequel, *Going Home* (1986), Felita is twelve years old. She visits relatives in Puerto Rico and faces discrimination. It is with the help of her great uncle and the community that she learns about people and life in Puerto Rico.

Cruz (1976), author of *Yagua Days*, writes about a Puerto Rican child born in New York. Adan thinks that rainy days are boring, but during a visit to Puerto Rico he discovers what children do there on rainy days. In the process, he learns to use a *yagua* to slide down the hill.

A number of books written for children are offensive to Hispanics and especially demeaning to Puerto Rican-Americans. In *Secret city*,

USA, Holman (1990) shows young people living in an uncaring world. Although the characters' country of origin is not mentioned, there is text to indicate their Puerto Rican heritage, they come from the islands, live in New York, have Spanish names. The older boys play cards, smoke, deal in drugs; there is no Hispanic adult available to serve as a role model. The social worker, a white woman, "is nice."

In *Somewhere Green* by Mango (1987), a Puerto Rican character, Angel Rivera, is the protagonist's friend. In the text, the writer uses expressions that are not in keeping with the everyday language of New York Puerto Rican youth. In addition, Angel's mother screams his name, her voice is described as "a shrill", and females can only be relegated to traditional jobs, never could become, for example, architects.

In contrast, in *Scorpions*, a story that takes place in Harlem and is not about the Puerto Rican experience, Myers (1988) shows understanding of Puerto Rican family relationships as Tito clarifies for his friend Jamal the role of the grandmother in the family. Tito explains that "your grandmother is supposed to take care of you . . . in Puerto Rico everybody treats their grandparents like they were the real mother in the house" (p. 33). Other non-Puerto Rican authors such as Johanna Hurwitz and Milton Meltzer have also written convincingly about the Puerto Rican experience.

Well known writer of adult books and poet Gary Soto has written extensively for children. His stories about growing up Chicano in California present conflicts and concerns that have universal appeal. His characters relate to siblings, parents, grandparents and other respected adults such as coaches and neighbors who provide guidance and company. His books include *Baseball in April and Other Stories* (1990), a collection of short stories; *Pacific Crossing* (1992), a story in which two friends from the barrio participate in an exchange program in Japan; *The Skirt* (1992b) in which a young girl leaves her "folklorico" skirt in the school bus and is afraid to tell her mother; and *Taking Sides* (1991), a novel about a Chicano student who has to deal with a racist basketball coach and has conflicting loyalties when his new school team plays against the team from the old barrio school.

Several Mexican-American books show parent-child relationships that are tender and warm and situations in which the family provides support and is interested in the children's progress. Such is the case of *Hello, Amigos!* (Brown, 1986), *Hector Lives in the United States Now: The Story of a Mexican-American Child* (Hewett, 1990), and *I Speak English for my Mom* (Stanek, 1989). One of the realities of the Mexican-American experience, the struggle to enter the United States, is seen in *The*

Maldonado Miracle (Taylor, 1973), a story of danger and sometimes humorous adventure in which 12 year-old Julio who lives in Mexico is smuggled into the United States.

Lack of cultural insight is cited most often as the reason for errors, biases, and, in general, the portrayal of stereotypes and negative images of Hispanic-Americans in books written for children. The task of making informed selections of culturally authentic literature is not easy if educators lack understanding of the value systems and traditions that are important in Hispanic communities (Ramirez & Castañeda, 1974). The small number of books available in the market and the fact that they tend to go out of print soon after publication (Norton, 1995), further complicate the issue.

Conclusions

The lesson learned from the African-American experience with children's literature is that negative stereotypes can be identified and changed but it takes a sustained, determined, and long term effort to do so. The public demand for authentic African-American literature resulted in the sharing of a body of work that now includes many outstanding stories. As teachers read these stories and learn about the African-American experience, they also learn to choose appropriate literature for their classrooms.

Likewise, stereotypes and negative images in Hispanic children's literature need to be identified more clearly. Hispanic-American novelists need to be encouraged to share their authentic cultural values and traditions, and teachers need to read extensively in order to learn from these insiders' perspectives. As teachers become sensitive to issues associated with the Hispanic experience, they will be able to select literature that is rich in content and language, literature that defines the culture and the individuals realistically and with accuracy.

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Second, children's literature provides an avenue for students to learn about their own cultural heritage and the cultures of other people. It is crucial for children to learn these values because, "developing positive attitudes toward our own culture and the cultures of others is necessary for both social and personal development" (Norton, 2010, p. 3). In saying this, however, when teaching students about the cultural heritage of others, one should be very careful in selecting which books to recommend to young readers. Many books are available that depict culture as an important piece of society that is to be treasured and valued, and those books can have great value for students. Third, children's literature helps students develop emotional intelligence. Best-selling books for children tend to conform to a capitalist, consumerist, liberal, democratic, humanist ideology, seen as benign and benevolent, but at the same time, is not transgressive. Julia Donaldson has no political message, and conforms to dominant ideas about parenting and teaching etc. Her books can therefore become best sellers. RELATED. The Trouble With Normal: Trans youth and the desire for normalcy as reflected in young adult literature, a paper by Robert Bittner. "All writing is political. To assert that it is not is political. Children's literature or juvenile literature includes stories, books, magazines, and poems that are enjoyed by children. Modern children's literature is classified in two different ways: genre or the intended age of the reader. Children's literature can be traced to stories and songs, part of a wider oral tradition, that adults shared with children before publishing existed. The development of early children's literature, before printing was invented, is difficult to trace. Even after printing became