

Selecting Chicano Children's Literature in a Bilingual Classroom: Investigating Issues of Cultural Authenticity and Avoiding Stereotypes

Laura Alamillo, Ph.D.

Before the Civil Rights movement, the lack of accurate representations of people of color was evident. Children's literature did not present accurate depictions of Mexican-Americans in the text. Sarapes, sombreros and fiestas were typical symbols used to identify Mexican culture and traditions. The Civil Rights Movement sparked a change for accuracy and culturally conscious children's literature in order to provide equity in a diverse classroom. The field of children's literature has made great strides in this area making choices easier for teachers looking to integrate Chicano children's literature in their classroom. Do teachers know how to make informed decisions regarding what is an accurate or authentic depiction of Mexican-American/Chicano culture? What is informing these decisions and why must teachers make educated decisions in literature selection? In making these decisions, teachers are looking at cultural and linguistic authenticity in specifically bilingual

children's literature. These must be informed decisions based on several factors: insider-outsider perspective, overall theme of book, and overall authenticity of the themes presented. In this article, criteria and questions are presented in order to provide assistance for teachers who are making these curricular decisions in their classroom.

For schools that provide access to authentic Chicano children's books, selection criteria can be useful in identifying literature reflecting their student's lives. Readers of this article must also keep in mind that there are many experiences represented in one culture and community. In this essay, criteria does not mean that there is one experience or that the culture is homogenous, instead, it provides a context and questions for understanding certain distinct qualities allowing a critical analysis of text in order to identify stereotypes and misrepresentations of Mexican-Americans.

Chicano Children's Literature

The need to distinguish Chicano Children's Literature from Latino children's literature can be helpful for researchers, educators and parents. There is a growing move for Chicano/a writers to transition from adult poetry/novels to children's literature, often addressing similar topics but adjusting the tone, style and themes for a younger audience, appealing to

bilingual, Chicano/a young children. Many of these books tend to follow within the contemporary genre area of children's literature. Writers like Gloria Anzaldua, Sandra Cisneros and Juan Felipe Herrera, to name a few, have published literary acclaimed children's books relating to experiences of being Chicano living in the United States. Some of the children's books considered

culturally authentic have been recognized by the Tomas Rivera Book Award and the Pura Bulpre Award. These awards look at stories with authentic and accurate depictions. Because these books tend to fall under the contemporary issues genre of children's literature, they tend to be more relevant to the everyday lives of children living in the United States.

I also used Rudine Sims Bishop classifications of culturally conscious African-American literature (Sims-Bishop, 1982). Because both types of literature came out of the Civil Rights Movement, I felt that her criteria would be useful to identify and describe Chicano children's literature. I found similar themes within African-American

children's literature and Chicano children's literature. They will be discussed later.

What is considered a culturally authentic Chicano children's book? Would a cultural outsider be able to write an authentic piece of literature? This issue is debated in a recent publication on culturally authenticity and children's literature. In that book, Rosalinda Barrera and Ruth Quiroa (2003, p.249) stated, "the use of Spanish words and phrases holds considerable potential for enhancing the cultural authenticity of English-based text." In order for this to occur, the words must be strategically and skillfully placed. Language is an important indicator for an authentic text.

Criteria

When examining Chicano children's literature I looked specifically at certain elements Sims-Bishop (1982) found to be crucial when identifying culturally conscious books, those which came closest to depicting the social and cultural circumstances associated with growing up Black in the United States (Sims-Bishop).

The label culturally conscious suggests that elements in the text, not just the pictures, make it clear that the book consciously seeks to depict a fictional Afro-American life experiences. At minimum this means that the major characters are Afro-Americans, the story is told from their

perspective, the setting is an Afro-American community or home, and the text includes some means of identifying the characters as Black-physical descriptions, language, cultural traditions and so forth.
(p.49)

I found commonalities between Chicano children's literature and the underlying themes in culturally conscious African-American literature. For example, Chicano children's books, as African-American literature, allow children to become in touch with history, traditions and cultural values. Even though the Chicano stories took place in the United States, characters in the book referred back to Mexico or their parents' experiences living in Mexico. The past

seemed to influence the current situation emotionally and physically. In *My Diary From Here to There* (Perez, 2002), Amanda the main character writes in her diary as she travels across the U.S.-Mexican border and longs to return home to see her friends. Amanda has a friend in Mexico whom she frequently writes expressing her frustrations and concerns traveling without her father. The theme of **family relationships** is present throughout the book.

The theme of **border crossing** runs throughout many Chicano children's books. The U.S.-Mexican border is a common setting for stories to take place. The stories take place crossing the border to the United States or living on the border. In *My Diary From Here To There*, the main character remembers friends from Mexico as her father is driving through Mexico and eventually across the border. In *Friends From the Other Side*, Prietita meets a friend from Mexico who crosses the border to the U.S. side, her backyard (Anzaldua, 1995).

Heritage and tradition are valid criteria when investigating the representation of a romanticized notion of Latino traditions, Barrera (1997). There is a common stereotype of traditional foods such as enchiladas, tacos and other stereotypical foods that are commonly associated with being "Latino." This notion become the norm and is often romanticized. I look critically for what types of foods and traditions are presented. Are they authentic? How often are these symbols used throughout the book and in what context? Were they placed for a strategically or "tokenly" included?

Sims-Bishop describes "**living in the city**" as another relevant criterion. This is useful when reviewing Chicano children's literature because Chicano experiences do not only take place in rural Mexico or in an urban city. The experiences that come with living in an urban neighborhood are important to distinguish from living in a rural town. This is a sensitive area because literature that only represents these realities may perpetuate stereotypes (Barrera, 2003). There should be an even, accurate balance between these portrayals.

I also found the **family relationships** criterion as useful in describing themes within Chicano children's literature. The family is often the central unit and/or theme to a story. I consider this as an important theme due to the frequent mention of family in Chicano children's books. Most of the books center around family units or how the characters actions affected the family unit or an individual family member. For example, in *My Diary From Here to There*, the father's decision to leave Mexico affected Amada and her family. The brothers were excited to leave but Amada was emotionally distraught. This sense of family is a strong theme running across the literature.

Language is a central issue in the literature. In *Chato's Kitchen*, Gary Soto uses code switching throughout the text. I questioned that text. Are Spanish words strategically placed? Is the book translated from English to Spanish? Is the language authentic to the time and setting of the story? I considered all of these aspects of the language factor when reviewing literature. Barrera's study, discussed in

Stories Matter (2003), focused on the frequent use of certain words in Latino children's books. Barrera's work provided a guide to look for these characteristics.

Sims-Bishop describes Black English as the most easily distinguishable feature identifying a book that attempts to reflect an African-American experience. Spanish, Chicano Spanish and Chicano English are therefore distinguishable factors when identifying Chicano literature. The language must be strategically placed, authentic and sensitive. It should not be confused with what Sims-Bishop describes as, "street talk" or "slang." Would Chicano children be able to identify with Castilian Spanish? Does the language reflect the language(s) spoken in the classroom? These are questions teachers should consider when choosing literature.

Barrera and de Cortes (2004) in their in-depth study of books considered Mexican-American children's literature also reported that the language used was the standard and/or academic form of Spanish. The implications of using the standard or more traditional form of Spanish with Chicano/a children needs to be considered in the context of children's language identities. The diversity of languages within the Mexican community includes representing Chicano/a Spanish, English and Caló but this diversity is rarely addressed in children's literature.

The linguistic diversification has been characterized as problematic by the "language police" on both sides of the border: English speaking extremist groups,

such as the advocates of U.S. English, and those self-appointed members of the Academic Real de La Lengua who are dedicated to the preservation of the "mother tongue" have very narrow views as to what constitutes high status Spanish and standard (high status) English. (Mercado, 2001)

Mercado argues that educators do not address how the history of the Mexican people is reflected in the language(s) spoken at home and school.

The use of Chicano Spanish or Castilian Spanish is not relevant in teaching Spanish to children. There is little research available to show how these variations of Spanish serve as linguistic input. It can be problematic if children are only being exposed to one perspective of the language and diverse voices are not represented in the classroom. Rudolfo Anaya, a legendary Chicano adult and children's writer, poses questions to schools and publishers of children's books. He states: "What literature are we teaching in the classroom? Who writes it? What social reality does it present? Who packaged it for us? How much choice do we have as teachers to step outside the mainstream packaging and choose books?" Anaya (1992) presents critical questions educators must ask themselves when selecting children's literature.

Sims-Bishop review of African-American children's literature found that when language is poorly depicted, the literature will reduce characters to caricatures. When language is poorly

depicted in Chicano children's literature, children are not only exposed to inaccurate, unauthentic language, they are also seeing stereotypes of Mexican-American people. Barrera and Quiroa (2003) question these stereotypical or token bilingual language representations. This aspect of language should also be considered in selecting Chicano books as well as in evaluating books used in the classroom.

In addition there are other key issues, for example, the illustrations depicted in the literature. What skin colors are represented? When was the book published? Sims-Bishop argues that books written before the 1960's must be questioned. Post-civil rights, schools, libraries and publishing companies were required to make and supply culturally conscious books. In addition, looking at allows teachers to identify insider/outsider perspective. Who wrote the book? What are their cultural experiences? Do they offer an insider or outsider perspective? When evaluating literature ethnic background, cultural and language experiences of the author help determine accuracy in the literature. Authors who do not talk about their invested interest may present inaccurate portrayals.

Researchers in this field (Sims-Bishop, 1997; Barrera, 1997; Nieto, 1997 1992) have concluded that an author's ethnic background plays a role in what themes an author chooses to write on and how they portray language and culture in the text. Their cultural experiences influence the language they use, contribute to how they represent the characters in the book, and ultimately play a role in determining if the book is

authentic. These are all factors to consider when choosing literature.

The push towards English Immersion in California is affecting the literature used in the classroom. Schools push for English only limits the use of the first language in the classroom. Even though schools may not provide bilingual education, Chicano/a children's literature is a potential outlet for children who are not seeing their first language in the classroom. Chicano/a children are provided with another option to see themselves, their language, culture and bicultural identities. Chicano/a children's literature provides a space for both languages to be used together. Selecting the literature can be difficult for teachers who do not have these lived experiences.

When selecting Chicano children's literature there are many issues to consider. First and foremost, teachers should aim for accurate depictions in the literature. Stereotypes represented in culture and language should be avoided. The selection of literature should be informed by investigation and research. Also, knowing of publishers who aim for cultural authenticity is an effective way to research and select children's literature. There are publishers who aim for accuracy and authenticity. Publishing firms and non-profits such as Children's Book Press, Lee and Low Books and Piñata publications place cultural and language authenticity as a priority when publishing multicultural children's literature. Teachers can begin with these publishers. Also, looking at the Tomas Rivera Award for awarded children's literature provides a starting point as well. In order to present authentic

views of the Mexican American/Chicano community, children must be presented with authentic views in the classroom. Literature makes a long lasting impression on children and teachers

need to be aware of this impact. By using the criteria presented in this article, teachers can make informed decisions on the images they present in their bilingual classrooms.

References

- Alamillo, Laura (2004). Chicano Children's Student's Responses to Bilingual Children's Literature, Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley.
- Amada, Irma Perez (2002). *My Diary from Here to There*. Children's Book Press. San Francisco, CA.
- Anzaldua, Gloria (1995). *Prietita and the Ghost Woman*. Children's Book Press. San Francisco, CA.
- Anzaldua, Gloria (1987). *Borderlands, La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, CA.
- Baker, Colin (2001). *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 3rd Edition, Multilingual Matters.
- Banks, James (1995). Multicultural Education and Curriculum Transformation. *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 64, No. 4., Howard University.
- Baquedano-Lopez, Patricia & Hector Alvarez, Kris Gutierrez (2001). Literacy as Hybridity: Moving Beyond Bilingualism in Urban Classrooms. In *The Best for Our Children*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY.
- Barrera, Rosalinda and Robert T. Jimenez, Luis C. Moll and Flora V. Rodriguez-Brown (1999). Latina and Latino researchers interact on issues related to literacy learning. In *Reading Research Quarterly*, Vol. 34. No. 2 April/May/June, p. 217-230.
- Bishop, R.S. (1994). *Kaleidoscope: A multicultural booklist for grades K-8*. Urban, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Cummins, Jim (1989). *Empowering Minority Students*. Sacramento: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Cummins, Jim (2000). *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Day, Frances Anne (1997). *Latina and Latino Voices in Literature: For Children and Teenagers*. Heinemann and Portsmouth, NH.
- Delpit, Lisa (2002). *The Skin That We Speak: thoughts on language and culture in the classroom*. The New Press, NY.
- Dyson, Anne and Celia Genishi (1994). *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and Community*. NCTE.
- Fernandez, Ramona (2001). *Imagining Literacy: Rhizomes of Knowledge in American Culture and Literature*. University of Texas Press, Austin, TX.
- Freeman, David and Yvonne Freeman (1994). *Between Worlds: Access to Second Language Acquisition*. Heinemann, Hanover.
- Freire, Paulo and Donaldo Macedo (1987). *Literacy Reading the Word and the Word*. Bergin and Harvey, Westport CT.
- Gonzalez-Jensen, Margarita (1997) The Status of Childrens Fiction Literature Written in Spanish by U.S. Authors. In *Bilingual Research Journal*, Spring & Summer, Volume 21, No. 2 & 3.

- Halcon John J. & Maria de la Luz Reyes (Eds.) *The Best for Our Children*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY.
- Harris, Violet (Ed.) (1996). *Using Multiethnic Literature in the K-8 Classroom*. Christopher Gordon Publishers Inc., Norwood, Massachusetts.
- Herrera, Juan Felipe (2002). *Grandma and Me at the Flea*. Children's Book Press. San Francisco, CA.
- Martinez, Elizabeth (1991). *500 Years of Chicano History in pictures*. Southwest Organizing Project, Albuquerque, New Mexico.
- Mercado, Carmen (2001). *Reflections on the Power of Spanish*, In *The Best for Our Children: Critical Perspectives on Literacy for Latino Students*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY.
- Nieto, Sonia (1992). *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Bilingual Education*. Longman Publishing Group, White Plains, NY.
- Nieto, Sonia (2001). *Foreword*. In *The Best for Our Children*. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, NY.
- Pogrow, Stanley (2000). *The Unsubstantiated Success, of Success For All*. In *Phi Delta Kappan*, April, p.596-600.
- Sims-Bishop Rudine and Mingshui Cai (1994). *Multicultural Literature for Children: Towards a Clarification of the Concept*. In Dyson, Anne and Celia Genishi (Eds.) (1994). *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and Community*. NCTE.
- Soto, Gary (1995). *Chato's Kitchen*. The Putnam and Grosset Group Inc., Berkeley, CA.
- Suarez-Orozco, Marcelo and Carola (2001). *Children of Immigration*. The Developing Child Series, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Wong-Fillmore, (1991). *When losing a second language means losing the first*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 6, 323-346.
- Wong Fillmore, Lily & Catherine Snow (2000). *What Teachers Need to Know About Language*. Center for Applied Linguistics.

**Dr. Alamillo is an Assistant professor at California State University, Fresno.
Department of Literacy and Early Education.
Email: lalamillo@csufresno.edu.**