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A Latino Anti-Racist Approach to Children’s Librarianship

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“*Mi pelo es más lindo porque mami me pasó la plancha.*”

[My hair is prettier because mom straightened it with a flat iron.]

“*Ay, vámonos. No vamos a jugar con este nene gordo y negro.*”

[Let’s go. We are not going to play with this fat and black boy].

I heard these statements at the elementary school where I worked in Puerto Rico. One is an example of the anti-blackness present in Latino communities and how hair texture becomes the signifier of blackness, while the other showcases how the intersection of body type and skin color becomes an avenue for exclusion.

The statements show us that childhood is racialized. Children learn to walk and talk, but they also go through stages on understanding race. From birth, children are exposed to institutionalized racism, but they are also exposed to it through interactions with their parents and caregivers, who “bring a vast array of their own experiences to bear in creating social life for their young children” (Van Ausdale & Feagin, 2002, p. 178).

By 2023, the Latino children population is projected to increase to 39%, representing the majority of all children in the United States (Fry & Passel, 2009). This is a community of which I am part, and one with and for whom I’ve been working. This article focuses on Latinos/as and an anti-racist approach to children’s librarianship.

LATINO IS A RACIAL IDENTITY

Latino is a social and political label that includes indigenous, Black, Spanish, Asian, and other races. Latino is not identified as a race, but a racial identity that can shift according to where individuals are living in different moments in their lives. It’s a community that historically has carried anti-blackness, anti-indigenous, and anti-Mexican sentiments, tied to racial hierarchies established by centuries of colonialism and oppression. Latino children are not exempt from these injustices.

Accurate and authentic Latino children’s books can provide realistic depictions of communities that are often misrepresented, erased, and dehumanized in U.S. American literature. They serve as counternarratives, vehicles to expose forms of oppression, and mirrors to build a positive self-image. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (1980) presents guidelines for evaluating Latino children’s books, including careful examination of text, story line, and illustrations—from stereotypes and plots with negative characterization of Latinos/as to Span-



YA NONFICTION

MEN OF INFLUENCE

Bailey, Budd. **Jackie Robinson: Breaking Baseball's Color Barrier** (Game-changing Athletes). Cavendish Square, 2016. 112p. LB \$29.95. ISBN: 9781502610560. Grades 9-12. With a narrative style, Bailey describes Jackie Robinson's challenging life of poverty as a young boy to his success as a baseball player. The book concludes with a list of other sports' pioneers, Robinson's chronology, full glossary, bibliography, additional information, organizations, and an index.

Huddle, Lorena. **Franklin D. Roosevelt** (Pivotal Presidents: Profiles in Leadership). Rosen: Britannica, 2017. 99p. LB \$28.80. ISBN: 9781680485257. Grades 7-12. As the only president to serve four terms, Roosevelt generated both applause and criticism as he addressed many events and issues. This high/low title includes a glossary, locations for additional information, and an index.

Rauf, Don. **Emeril Lagasse** (Celebrity Chefs). Enslow Publishing, 2016. 128p. LB \$27.95. ISBN: 9780766071971. Grades 6-12. Beginning with an overview of Emeril's early life, readers learn of his passion for cooking, credited to his father and his Portuguese mother. His career began at an early age with an established work ethic when he was allowed to work as a dishwasher at a neighborhood bakery. Included are six detailed recipes.

Rowell, Rebecca. **John F. Kennedy's Presidency** (Presidential Powerhouses). Lerner, 2016. 104p. LB \$35.99. ISBN: 9781467779272. Grades 6-12. In an election year, this series gives readers timely insights into eight presidents. This title provides a synopsis of Kennedy's life, his assassination, and his ongoing legacy. The back matter includes a timeline, detailed source notes, glossary, selected bibliography, additional information, and an index.

ish-language use and depiction of the racial diversity of Latinos/as.

THEORY TO PRACTICE

Educator Bree Picower (2012) developed the Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design to complement existing theories of social justice education and help the theory-to-practice transition. The first two elements are relatively easy to implement, but Picower emphasizes that they must "build upon each other sequentially" (Picower, 2012, p. 3), allowing teachers to move into uncomfortable spaces as they teach social justice concepts.

I adapted the following six elements, focusing on Latino identities, and incorporated an anti-racist approach with emphasis on library collections and activities for children in grades K-3.

SIX ELEMENTS

Self-Love and Knowledge

Help children gain a sense of pride in their heritage, color, and racial/ethnic identity by providing them with Latino children's books to help them learn who they are and where they come from. Include books that present stories about different Latino identities, children learning and loving their racial/ethnic identities, and the histories associated with them.

In *Grandma's Gift* by Eric Velazquez, a black Puerto Rican boy spends his winter breaks with his grandmother in New York City. He visits a museum and sees a painting of Juan de Pareja, an enslaved Spanish painter and assistant to painter Diego Velázquez. The boy studies de Pareja's self-portrait, observing, "He seemed so real, much

like someone we might see walking around El Barrio. I couldn't believe that this was a painting in a museum" (Velazquez, 2010, p. 25). Seeing that someone like him, with black skin, could be an artist, sparks his interest in painting. He then receives a sketchbook and colored pencils as a gift and decides to draw his first self-portrait. The boy learns about his racial identity, embraces it, and feels empowered by representation. Similar themes are found in *My Feet Are Laughing* by Lisette Norman and *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match* by Monica Brown.

Respect for Others

Focus on Latino children's books where children share knowledge and experiences about their own racial/ethnic and cultural background, thereby supporting a climate of respect. Include stories that tackle intersectionality and differences within and among Latino communities, as well as language, class, and origin.

In the book *René Has Two Last Names* by René Colato Laínez, a Salvadoran boy plays an active role in talking about his identity. In school, René is bullied by other children, who shout, "Your name is longer than an anaconda" (Colato Laínez, 2009, p. 7). When assigned to create a family tree, René tells classmates how names are important and builds his identity. Other examples are *Yes! We Are Latinos* by Alma Flor Ada and F. Isabel Campoy and *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin* by Duncan Tonatiuh.

Issues of Social Injustice

Move from "celebrating diversity" to an exploration of how race and ethnicity are experienced. Children learn about the history of racism, classism,

Focus on activities that provide children with opportunities to teach others about Latino identities, social movements, and social injustices.

and other forms of oppression and connect the historical roots of racism with lived experiences and Latino communities today.

The 1940s case of Mexican Puerto Rican Sylvia Mendez is the center of the book *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* by Duncan Tonatiuh. Sylvia and other Mexican American children are sent to the dilapidated “Mexican school,” where teachers neglect students. Sylvia tries to understand why she was sent to a different school from her Mexican cousins. She looks at her brothers and herself and wonders, “Is it because we have brown skin and thick black hair . . . ?” (Tonatiuh, 2014, p.10). When she’s at the “White school,” a white boy yells, “Go back to the Mexican school! You don’t belong here!” (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 2). These two passages offer examples whereby children can become aware of unfair treatment and experiences with prejudice. Other examples are *Talking With Mother Earth* by Jorge Argueta and *Antonio’s Card* by Rigoberto González.

Social Movements and Social Change

Use children’s books about movements where people stand together to address issues of social injustice and racism. Children will learn that working together can lead to change.

In *¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, We Can! Janitor Strike in L.A.* by Diana Cohn, a Mexican American boy learns how his mother works all the time and gets

paid so little. His mother tells him that “all the janitors met outside the union hall and voted to stop working . . . to strike!” (Cohn, 2002, p. 11). In school, he realizes that fellow Latino classmates also have a parent on strike, bringing them together. Children play an active role in the story as they think of ways to help their parents and strikers, which drives them to create signs of support for the strike. Similar topics can be found in *Joelito’s Big Decision* by Ann Berlak and *That’s Not Fair! Emma Tenayuca’s Struggle for Justice* by Carmen Tafolla and Sharyll Teneyuca.

Awareness Raising

Focus on activities that provide children with opportunities to teach others about Latino identities, social movements, and social injustices. They can write poems and present plays based on their identities, their experiences, and injustices encountered by their communities. Activities such as writing newsletters, letters, and blog posts provide platforms for children to express issues rooted in injustices directly impacting Latino communities.

Social Action

Children participate in activities to create change, identify social issues, and explore skills needed to bring words to action. They engage the community and invite them to participate. From signing petitions to collaborating with grassroots organizations, children learn that their voices are important. Speak-

ing at public meetings and attending and organizing protests empower children and help them develop leadership skills while fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. Social action activities are powerful tools to let children advocate for social justice and also help them move across and within racial/ethnic boundaries to learn about other groups’ injustices.

Book Selection

In selecting books for elements 1–4, I was attentive to who the stories were written and illustrated by, as well as the point of view presented through each book. Although major emphasis was given to Latino communities, this anti-racist approach can be adapted to other racial/ethnic identities and groups. All children need to know the world they live in, and while some have privileges that give them the option to not discuss race or experience racism, for others this is their everyday life.

IMPLEMENTATION OF AN ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

Educators can incorporate an anti-racist approach to their work and play an active role in challenging racism. They must recognize and understand their racial/ethnic identities before incorporating this approach into their work. Tatum (1992) elaborates:

“Early childhood educators must spend substantive time reflecting on 1) how race and racism operate in their own lives, 2) how race and racism operate in the lives of their students, 3) how race and racism operate within the broader institutional context where they teach. (p. 370)”

Effective implementation of an anti-racist approach in education

or children's librarianship requires knowledge and understanding of the complex backgrounds of different racial/ethnic groups.

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MASTER BOOK LIST: SIX ELEMENTS OF A LATINO ANTI-RACIST APPROACH

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Argueta, Jorge. *Talking with Mother Earth/Hablando con Madre Tierra.* Groundwood, 2006. 32 pages, \$15.95, ISBN 978-0-88899-626-8.

Berlak, Ann. *Joelito's Big Decision/La Gran Decisión de Joelito.* Hard Ball, 2015. 40 pages, \$10.00, ISBN 978-0986240096.

Brown, Monica. *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match/Marisol McDonald No Combina.* Children's Book Press, 2011. 32 pages, \$17.95, ISBN 978-0-89239-235-3.

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