

Hispanic literacy trends: As readers, library patrons, and book characters

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Abstract

This paper explores three trends related to the Hispanic community in the US. First we are interested in identifying the achievement scores and graduation rates of Hispanic students. Second, we are interested in Hispanic populations as library patrons. And third, we are interested in how Hispanic book characters are portrayed in literature for children. We explore these three trends not as causal relationships but as three trends that hold importance and are related to the daily activities of teachers and students throughout the schoolday. We also look at these three trends as possibilities for insuring the inclusion of Hispanic students in the larger culture of books and reading.

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Reading a book can do several things for you. It can entertain, inform, expand your world, or merely make the passing of time more pleasant. Reading a book is both personal and solitary; and when this engagement is done as a free and voluntary act, it is perhaps the most personal and private of the communication arts. And even more importantly, as one teacher explained, “Books can capture and save a culture” (Jessica Olivarez Mazone, personal communication, April, 2007).

And for the Hispanic community, the potential for books to capture and save a culture can be a determining factor in the academic future of this growing population. The Hispanic community is actually comprised of different cultural and geographic groups including but not limited to those with ancestry from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Cuba as well as others with ancestry in Central and South America. The largest group in the United States as reported by the Pew Hispanic Center is Mexican-American and comprises 64% of the total Hispanic population (“Statistical portrait of Hispanics in the United States,” 2006). Closing the gap between educational potential and actual achievement for the Hispanic members that make up 15% of our nation’s population is a goal of all educational groups. And this effort can be enhanced by promoting readership, books, and library usage for all students but especially for those within the Hispanic population. In short, inviting readers to join the literacy club is an opportunity to impact the future, enhance achievement, and bring readers and writers together for a life-long journey.

Our interest in Hispanic trends

Our interest in Hispanic trends stems from our own familial and ethnic heritages as well as our geographical location in south Texas where 70% of the residents are of Hispanic origin.

We are specifically interested in three aspects of education and literacy related to trends in Hispanic literacy issues. First we are interested in identifying the achievement scores and graduation rates of Hispanic students. Second, we are interested in Hispanic populations as library patrons. And third, we are interested in how Hispanic book characters are portrayed.

Achievement scores and dropout rates for Hispanic students

The invitation to become a reader is becoming more and more critical as the continuing gap in achievement between White and Hispanic students remains unacceptably large. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Hispanic youth have consistently scored below their White counterparts across the nation since NAEP began its long-term assessment of Black and White students in 1971 and Hispanic students in 1975. For all three age groups (age 9, age 13, and age 17) there were “no significant changes in the gaps in reading scores between White and Hispanic students from 2004 to 2008” (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009, p. 16). Gaps in reading achievement between White and Hispanic students were noted in 1975; and in spite of political, financial, and pedagogical efforts for over three decades, achievement gaps remain between these two groups.

An additional measure of school success or failure is the dropout rate for high school students. And although documenting how many students are in versus out of school might appear to be a simple task, it is not. Dropout rates for Hispanic youth have been documented to be between 5% and 50% depending on how the youth are counted and by whom (Rodriguez, 2008). Rodriguez is critical of this large discrepancy and cites various reasons ranging from economic to political for this miscounting. We do know that dropping out of school results in reduced employment opportunities, less income, smaller tax bases, and limited access to professional development (Fields, 2008).

As high-stakes testing continues to be a political and pedagogical maelstrom, attention must be paid to creating a culture of reading, books, and literacy engagement for all students in spite of the overemphasis on tests, politics, and the underfunding of schools and libraries (Graves, 2002). Testing is not teaching. And neither is teaching to the test. This concept of reducing the pressures of high-stakes testing in favor of attention paid to teaching is even more critical for underserved and underachieving students. With NAEP scores and graduation rates clearly identifying discrepancies between high and low achievers in our nation's schools, it is even more critical that schools become a place where great readers meet great writers (Harwayne, 2000). And for Hispanic students, those meetings can begin in libraries.

Library patrons

Most readers, in general, choose books they want to read based on the book's cover, the size of the font, the title, the illustrations, the author's reputation, a friend's recommendation, the first page, the last page, the book's heft, the book's cost, the book's critical acclaim, or even the ease of physically getting to the book. And with the new world of instant downloads, online readers, Kindle, Amazon, public libraries, Barnes and Noble, and our favorite independent book store, books seem to be everywhere and more accessible than ever.

There were 3.13 billion books sold in 2007 compared to 3.1 billion in 2006, an increase of 0.9 percent, according to Book Industry Trends 2008 as reported in *The New York Times* (Rich, 2008). With this massive amount of reading material each year, it is difficult for librarians to keep up. Public libraries report an increase in the number of library cards issued and in the number of books checked out. The American Library Association used a Harris Poll from Harris Interactive, released September 22, 2008, to reveal that 68 percent of Americans have a library card and use the library regularly (up 5 percent since 2006) ("New national poll shows

library card registration reaches historic high," 2008). And two-thirds of those card holders were either extremely or very satisfied with their public library.

Flores & Pachon (2008) report that the number of Hispanics using libraries is at an all time high at 54% although this is still lower than the general population usage of 68% ("New national poll shows library card registration reaches historic high," 2008). Their survey revealed that Hispanic usage of libraries is impacted by three aspects: 1) how friendly the library appears to be, 2) whether Spanish-language materials are available, and 3) the perception of whether or not the library maintains privacy of patrons' records (Flores and Pachon explain that if Hispanic patrons are in the US as new immigrants, they may be unfamiliar with US privacy laws and may therefore be cautious about using official government services even when it's the relatively easy-to-get library card).

For the Hispanic community and for those who are working toward increasing Hispanic readership and the use of libraries, these three factors should be taken into account when public libraries make decisions about how to serve their public. Being friendly, providing Spanish-language services, and assuring patrons of privacy are the three aspects that seem to make a difference in library usage for Hispanic patrons.

Other considerations for increasing the readership and library usage of young Hispanic readers involve showcasing literature that will appeal to young readers using what is known about how young readers choose their books: covers and titles. A recent survey of why children choose their books (Jones, 2007) revealed that 76% of middle schoolers usually choose their library books based on the cover of the book while 70% of that same population usually are influenced by the title of the book. So, covers and titles count. But we know that featuring covers and titles is not the most we can do. In addition to actively promoting books through

booktalks, recommendations, read-alouds, discussion groups, and literature circles, librarians and book sellers can and do use what is known as “passive recommendations” of books. This practice involves the strategic placement of books in noticeable places in an attractive and inviting environment. This passive yet effective message invites readers in, offers an invitation, and gives readers the opportunity to see books that might otherwise be overlooked.

For libraries serving Hispanic populations and with this passive-recommendation practice comes the additional responsibility to select books and authors who connect with Hispanic readers and invite them into the world of books and reading. One source for finding great books of this nature is the Florida Department of Education, which has compiled a list of notable books for Hispanic Heritage Month in the categories of Pre K-2, Elementary, Middle School, High School, and Adult Reading ("Just read, families!," 2009).

Another list of critically-acclaimed authors recommended (McNair, 2008) includes twenty-one Hispanic writers including: Alma Flor Ada, Francisco Alarcón, George Ancona, Paula Barragán, Joe Cepeda, Raúl Colón, Lulu Delacre, David Diaz, Mayra Dole, Arthur Dorros, Carmen Garza, Elizabeth Gomez, May Gonzalez, Susan Guevara, Juan Herrera, Pat Mora, Yuyi Morales, Amada Irma Perez, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Benjamin Saenz, and Gary Soto.

For libraries to do their part in helping reduce the achievement gap and the library usage gap, the attributes of friendliness and familiarity with culture and language can make a difference for all patrons but particularly for Hispanic library patrons who are not only looking for great books but who are also looking for themselves inside those books.

Book Characters

The final trend discussed in this paper in addition to trends in achievement scores and library usage for Hispanic students includes how Hispanics are portrayed as characters in

literature for children and adolescents. One of the most thorough reports on this issue was completed by Nilsson (2005) who reviewed 21 primary studies of the portrayal of Hispanics in children's books. She discovered a variety of ways that other researchers had categorized the Hispanic label as well as the criteria those researchers used to study selected books.

Nilsson (2005) created a coding sheet with 14 categories of information based on the 21 studies. She identified the various ways the Hispanic label was used, research questions, and analysis procedures as well as results and conclusions from those studies. She found what she described as "glaring deficiencies" in books published in the 70s and 80s which simply omitted Hispanic characters from within the covers of books or used misrepresentations, stereotypes, or negative images in their portrayal (p. 543). Nilsson goes on to quote from one study of that era when Puerto Rican book characters were "seen as the cause of their own oppression, and whites were often depicted as "curing" Puerto Ricans' problems" (p. 544).

But that was then and this is now. Unfortunately, even though many more positive and accurate picture books and chapter books have been more recently published and added to library collections, the older books are still on library shelves. Under-funded libraries that are committed to increasing the numbers of books on various Hispanic cultures are reluctant to discard books; and so the earlier, less thoughtful and less accurate of the Hispanic titles, remain.

Nilsson (2005) does conclude her 21-study analysis with the positive news that Hispanic characters in newer books appear to be more positive and with a more accurate representation of Hispanics in society. She also says there have been more books by and about Hispanics written and published in the last 40 years. But even with this increase in numbers, the number of books with Hispanic characters and themes is still not in proportion to the number of Hispanics who reside in the US. She also cautions that one single book can never fully reflect the complexities

of cultures and society, which makes it essential to provide young readers with a variety of books, subject matter, characters, and genres.

A second study by McNair (2008) looked specifically at the Scholastic Book Club (SBC) for representations of authors and illustrators of color. On the SBC order forms, she found selections of books in the two to three dollar range of cost, which of course makes them financially accessible to many. But built into the system of acquiring these rather low-cost book-club books is Scholastic's marketing strategy to make available well-known titles. And unfortunately, that particular marketing-strategy results in order-forms that feature "the names of authors and illustrators of color for a total of 34 times, while the names of white authors and illustrators appeared more than 600 times." (McNair, 2008, p. 196) In an effort to make available and accessible, low-cost books for children and teachers, a built-in bias against certain types of books has been established. And although that built-in bias against authors and illustrators of color was not intentional on the part of SBC, it does appear to be part of the book-selling system.

To compensate for the lack of multi-cultural representation in SBC's book-club titles, McNair (2008) provides several websites that will allow teachers and librarians to find critically acclaimed literature that features authors and illustrators of color. Specifically for Hispanic literature, recommended websites include:

<http://www4.uwm.edu/clacs/aa/index.cfm> for the Américas Award;

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/belpremedal/index.cfm> for the

Pura Belpré Award; and

<http://www.education.txstate.edu/departments/Tomas-Rivera-Book-Award-Project-Link.html> for

the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award.

Final thoughts

As we sought to take a look at information available on the achievement levels of Hispanic students in the US, on how Hispanics use public libraries, and the degree to which Hispanics are represented in literature for children, we are both heartened and hopeful. We know that the achievement gap is closable. We are not convinced that high-stakes testing will fix the problem; and in fact, there is evidence that constantly testing children and teaching to the test make high achievement less likely for all students and for Hispanic students in particular (Fairtest, 2007).

We are heartened to see that Hispanics use the public library system particularly when the library is viewed as friendly and respectful of language and privacy issues.

We are also hopeful that publishers will view books with Hispanic themes and Hispanic writers as beneficial to all readers but particularly to those with a special interest in and connection with Hispanic culture.

To invite readers into the world and culture of books, invitations must be extended. To invite Hispanic readers, in particular into that world, libraries must be friendly, accessible to the Spanish language, and sensitive to patrons' needs for privacy. Books must be made accessible and visible. Readers need to be able to see themselves in the characters and themes of books. And with these invitations, guidelines, and resources, achievement levels for all students will be enhanced so that in years and decades to come, researchers and writers will be addressing new trends in educational achievement while leaving gaps and tests far behind.

In closing, we do maintain a commitment to inviting all students to be a member of the literacy club (Smith, 2004) and to providing a welcoming invitation and environment for readers of all kinds, at all levels, and for all time.

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