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# **Benefits of Culturally Relevant Literature on Latino Students**

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**LS 400: Liberal Studies Senior Capstone**

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**Seaside, CA**

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## **Abstract**

The Latino population is growing in the United States such that one of every five school-aged Latino children comes from a home in which a language other than English is spoken. Many Latino students are placed in English-only classrooms where their language and culture are not reflected in the curriculum. In particular, Latino students are mainly exposed to books that include middle-class white characters. Thus, Latino students do not see themselves reflected in the books they read. Given this problem, educators must incorporate culturally relevant literature into the curriculum. This capstone analyzes the benefits of culturally relevant literature for Latino students through the review of the literature, interviews with five teachers, and an anonymous survey of five students. The findings reveal various criteria which teachers use for selecting quality Latino literature, a list of quality Latino literature, and student insights about the power of Latino literature to engage students in their academic and personal lives.

## **Introduction and Background**

Latino students face educational inequalities in primary, postsecondary and higher education. The challenges are perhaps most profound within the K-12 sector. Though the Latino population in the United States continues to grow, their gains in educational attainment do not reflect it. As Huber, Malagón, Ramirez, Gonzalez, Jimenez, and Vélez (2015) note, “out of every 100 Latino/elementary students, 63 graduate from High School, 13 receive an undergraduate degree, 4 graduate with a master’s or professional degree, and fewer than one (0.3) graduate with a doctorate” (p. 1). These numbers reflect the reality that as Latino students progress through their educational experience, their enrollment numbers decrease. Huber, et al. (2015) note that there are seven critical issues that frame why Latinos do not progress through the educational pipeline at rates comparable to their white peers. These include the absence of: 1. Safe and adequate school facilities, 2. A college-going school culture, 3. Rigorous academic curriculum, 4. Qualified teachers, 5. Intensive academic and social support, 6. Opportunities to develop a multicultural college-going identity and, 7. Family-neighborhood-school partnership focused on college-going. Moreover, Huber, et al. (2015) also note that the gaps in educational attainment for Latina/o students are widening rather than narrowing. In fact, even before Latino children start school, they are seven months behind their white peers, on average, in oral language and preliteracy skills (Rich, 2012). This is, in part, due to the fact that Latino students come from homes where the only language they speak is Spanish. In classrooms where instruction is given in English, Latino students’ reading skills mainly consist of decoding words and deciphering the text. Thus, when Latino students are asked to read in English within the classroom, they often have a hard time doing so. What might seem like simple Standard English to white students is often puzzling for Spanish dominant Latino students. Most of the time

Spanish dominant students are merely “decoding” texts but are not comprehending the text at any meaningful level. As Gonzalez and Montañó (2008) argue, “students who cannot comprehend the reading material or connect with the meaning of the text, cannot learn” (p. 76). The disparity in literary competence and academic performance between students of color and whites is intensified by a range of social and economic problems that minorities face. These problems include English-only policies, teachers not allowing students to speak Spanish, and the lack of multicultural education in schools. Specifically, Gonzalez and Montañó (2008) argue that “the teaching of reading and writing is often compromised due to an ‘English only’ mandate that stems from Proposition 227 (English for the Children) passed by California voters in 1996. The consequences of Proposition 227 have resulted in a reductionist approach to literacy instruction” (p. 75). And, it results in an increasing drop-out rate. In sum, the research from Huber et al. (2015) document that there is a problem with the educational system that is limiting Latino students from being successful in school and attaining higher education. Thus, in order to reverse the increasing drop-out rate and, more important, keep students in schools, educational institutions need to adopt culturally relevant teaching.

I'm interested in the topic of incorporating culturally relevant literature in elementary schools, and how it benefits Latino students. As Mora (1998) argues, because one in five school-age children in the U.S. are dominant in a language other than English, she asks, “how is our literature for children honoring their reality” (p. 282). From my personal experience, throughout my K-12 education, I was not exposed to books that included Latino characters, even though 98% of the school population was Latino. Thus, I became interested in this topic because I do not want the students whom I teach to also be limited to reading books without Latino characters. In LS 395 (Multicultural Literature) and LS 380 (Social Justice), I was introduced to various

children's literature books where the main character was Latina/o, their culture was reflected through the story, and, most importantly, social-political issues were also reflected in the story. Being exposed to different books in which minorities are represented I now understand the argument that Mora (1998) makes, noting that "Latino children like all children, are hungry to see themselves in books, and that all families deserve to see Latino reality and folklore and imagination" (p. 238). I learned that it is important that students "see" themselves in the classroom curriculum. When Latino students read Latino literature, they identify with the text due to similar life circumstances that they see depicted in the text, such as family traditions, food, and Catholicism (Vasquez, 2005). When one's culture is reflected in the curriculum and in the different materials used in the classroom, they will, as Vasquez (2005) argues, have a sense of pride in their culture in school. For Latinos, the ability to see oneself in literature is critical for, as the U.S. Census Bureau predicts, one of four U.S. students will be Latino by 2021, (Huber et al, 2010). For these reasons, I believe that it's important for teachers, to implement culturally relevant literature in their curriculum, and especially literature in which the Latino community is represented positively.

I began my examination of the benefits of culturally relevant literature for Latino Students with the following primary and secondary research questions:

My primary research question is:

*How does culturally relevant literature benefit Latino students?*

Followed by several secondary or related research questions:

1. *What does research say about the benefits of culturally relevant literature on Latino students?*

2. *What criteria do teachers use to select quality culturally relevant literature for Latino students at the elementary school level?*
3. *Is the literature bilingual/bicultural? And why is the language of the text an important reflection of Latino culture?*
4. *How do students feel that culturally relevant Latino literature is beneficial to their education?*
5. *How can schools in Monterey County adopt and include culturally relevant literature in their curricula to benefit Latino students?*

### **Literature Review**

Now that we have noted the problems in educational institutions that are keeping our Latino students from progressing through the education system and learned about the purpose of the capstone research project, I briefly discuss the research on how culturally relevant literature benefits Latino students. The literature review documents how Latino students benefit from the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy and, in translation to that, culturally relevant literature.

#### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Educational researchers have identified a number of reasons for these educational inequalities and have also provided numerous recommendations for change. One of the most important recommendations is the introduction of culturally relevant pedagogy (Paris, 2012). Culturally relevant pedagogy is not designed to fit the school's culture to the students' culture, but to use students' culture as the basis for helping students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions and conceptualize knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1992). In other words, it is an attempt to develop a closer fit between the student's home culture and school, a

connection which leads to academic success. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions which include: 1. Students must experience academic success, 2. Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence and, 3. Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As a result, in the classroom of a culturally relevant teacher, students are expected to engage the world and others critically. For example, in the classroom where Ladson-Billings (1992) collected information for research, she notes that as students read aloud they critique the knowledge presented and the system of inequitable funding that allowed middle-class students to have a newer textbook. This approach is contrasted with the assimilationist approach to teaching, that is designed to fit students into the existing social and economic order (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Assimilationist teachers do not challenge the way society categorizes minorities into the lowest social categories, based on academic performance. Teachers with this ideology are those who see Latinos with a deficit view. They hold many negative stereotypes towards minorities, especially Latino students. They believe that Latino students are not going to be successful in school, and are eventually going to become high school dropouts, teenage parents, live in poverty, and be exposed to gangs (Naidoo, 2011). The insidious message that is given by teachers is one of the factors that keeps Latino students from being successful in K-12 schools. On the other hand, teachers that incorporate the culturally relevant approach utilize student's culture as a vehicle for learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). For example, a teacher who is teaching mainly African-American students is incorporating the student's love for rap songs into the curriculum. The teacher allowed students to play non-offensive rap music to find and discuss literal and figurative meaning as well as figurative meanings in poetry such as alliteration, rhyme scheme, and onomatopoeia. This allowed students to feel that their cultural music is accepted in



school and gain confidence that it is not referred to with a negative connotation. The activity was an example of how academic achievement and cultural competence can be merged.

If the teachers and school officials have an “asset view” of Latina/o culture and language in K-12 education, it will increase student connection and engagement in schools (Huber et al, 2015). In an English-only class, the teacher’s responsibility is to speak and provide instruction in Standard English. Yet, if “the teacher allows the students to incorporate their home language into the conversations of the classroom without reprimand and correction, it will empower the students” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 317). For instance, Ladson-Billings (1992) documents how Ann Lewis and Gertrude Winston, teachers of African-American and Latino students, incorporate the culturally relevant approach to teaching. Ladson-Billings (1992) notes, that “Lewis encouraged students to use their home language while they acquire the standard English” (p.315). Students were permitted to express themselves in the language in which they were knowledgeable and comfortable then they would translate to standard form, English” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p.315). Thus, allowing students to use their home language is empowering because students feel that their home language is valued, and gain confidence to voice out their ideas with other classmates. Ladson-Billings (1995) adds, a teacher’s use of students’ home language is an “attempt to locate the problem of discontinuity between what students experience at home and what they experience at school in the speech and language interactions of teachers and students.” (p. 159). Therefore, incorporating the home language in the classroom would mirror the student’s language interactions at home. Another way in which school institutions can have an asset view of the Latino culture is by “appreciating and celebrating students as individuals and as members of a specific culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p.317). Thus, teachers need to be aware of the different races that are in the classroom, and how to value and make each

culture feel part of the classroom environment. In both classrooms that Ladson-Billings (1992) observed, she noticed that the “teachers legitimize African-American and Latino culture by making it a frame of reference for all texts” (p. 316). Students are asked to compare their own experiences with what they read to make and to make assessments about the value of their readings. In addition, involving the families, cultural knowledge into the classroom is another way of looking at Latino culture with an asset view. In Winston’s classroom, she created an artistic or craftsperson-in-residence program so that students could both learn from each other’s parents and affirm cultural knowledge. One of the parents was known through the community for the delicious sweet potato pies, she devoted her time to teach students how to make the pies. All of Winston’s guest were parents or relatives of her students, to whom the students had firsthand experience with. She was deliberate in reinforcing that the parents were a knowledgeable and capable resource (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Through this activity, students came to understand that their parents’ have valuable funds of knowledge and where they came from was of value. Therefore, exposing the students to these cultural activities in school, it will make students value their culture and not be ashamed to share cultural knowledge with others.

For these reasons, the K-12 curriculum should reflect the experiences of students of color, so it can positively influence academic engagement and achievement. It is important that students see their culture reflected in the classroom, so they feel accepted and part of the school environment. Unfortunately, most of the books students read in schools reference the attitudes, behaviors, and taste of students from privileged classes or the mainstream white culture. Thus, the education system, teachers, and curriculum collectively leave behind non-privileged students who are, then, forced to play educational and cultural catch-up (Vasquez, 2005). Therefore, Latino students are not able to comprehend many of the White middle-class stories, which

contributes to the “achievement gap” of Latino students being seven months behind their white peers. If Latino culture is not reflected in the curriculum, Latino students start thinking of their language, cultural practices, and familiar places as not belonging in school (Rich, 2012). Even if brown characters are in the books, these are often portrayed through negative stereotypes about Latinos that depict Latinos as drug dealers, dropouts and delinquents (Mora, 1998). Thus, there is a need for genuine literature that reflects the day-to-day lives of Latinos and the issues they face. So, for instance, as Naidoo (2012) argues, these books should cover topics such as being undocumented, growing up amidst poverty, substance abuse, racism, hardworking families, and hiding one’s identity to fit in with the status quo. If Latino youth see themselves represented in the literature used in the classroom, they will have greater respect for their cultural heritage and a stronger sense of self (Naidoo, 2011). Therefore, when students read stories that reflect the Latino reality and see the main character as a person of color, Latino students understand stories more fully because they are able to make a personal connection to them.

Thus, teachers and prospective teachers need to incorporate quality Latino books into the curriculum so that Latino students can “see” themselves and believe their lives “matter.” More specifically, these books must build upon the tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995): 1. Students must experience academic success, 2. Students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence and, 3. Students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. Accordingly, it is essential to identify the elements of quality books written for Latino students.

### **Culturally Relevant Literature:**

As noted, it is essential to translate culturally relevant pedagogy into a set of criteria by which teachers can identify, and teach, quality literature. First, the inclusion of culturally relevant

pedagogy into the curriculum means that the selected literature must humanize the curriculum by honoring student voice and tapping into the cultural and linguistic knowledge of students (Montaño & González, 2008). For instance, when students are allowed to use their native language in class, they gain confidence and to speak up because they are able to express themselves without hesitation. Thus, a criteria that Gonzalez and Montaño (2008) identify is “books are selected because they written in two languages and/or are written by someone teachers believe is a Latino character” (p.77). Gonzalez and Montaño (2008) address the importance of language as a critical criteria but one that should not be the sole criteria. Therefore, teachers should look for bilingual texts to support their students’ multiple languages. If the student reads a text in their primary language and then they read it in English, they will be able to have a better understanding of the text. Learning from Gonzalez and Montaño (2008), I will ask teachers if this is their primary criteria, or one of many.

In addition, the introduction of Latino literature into the classroom humanizes the curriculum by presenting stories and situations of a group of people excluded from the “traditional” or mainstream curriculum (Gonzalez & Montaño, 2008, p. 77). Thus, students are able to make a personal connection to the text. In contrast, when students are exposed to only white-middle class books, they are not able to understand the story because they can’t make the personal connection to it. In order eradicate this problem and allow Latino students to see themselves portrayed in the curriculum, Gonzalez and Montaño (2008) have documented how teachers have included multicultural books into the classroom as a noble effort to bridge misunderstandings, expose children to other cultures, and build unity.

However, Gonzalez and Montaño (2008) analyze that the rhetoric about multicultural children’s literature as affirming the “ethnic” child and “celebrating” unique cultural traditions,

can be problematic. When multicultural literature is used to affirm “other” ethnic groups by including “interesting” nuances or cultural differences, it tends to essentialize an ethnic group and promote a tourist approach to literature. Shedivy (2007) states, when students are exposed to books that take a tourist approach to multicultural children’s literature, these books may actually serve to counteract a teacher’s intent to “bridge cultural understanding.” Rather, these books instead promote oversimplifications and cultural stereotypes of brown characters. For instance, Gonzalez and Montañó (2008) argue that this happens when teachers just select a book because the main character’s skin color is “brown” or because the name of a character is “Maria” and not “Mary.” Therefore, they warn educators that they must have a deeper set of criteria and a greater critical consciousness. Another issue with the inclusion of “superficial” multicultural literature is that teachers simply add cultural stories to the curriculum with minimal or tangential academic goals in mind (Easter, Shultz, Neyhart, & Reck, 1999). In contrast, because Gonzalez and Montañó (2008) found that many teachers choose “Latino” literature that does not represent Latino social realities in an authentic and meaningful manner, then the deficit views of Latino students remains unchallenged.

Therefore, educators must ensure that the Latino books reflect authentic realities. In order for the cultural stories to make an impact on the students the teacher needs to provide solid background information so that as students read a cultural story they are able to thoroughly understand it. Also, to further develop the information learned, teachers should prepare multiple lessons in which students advocate for social change. In addition, the inclusion of multicultural literature can also be problematic if conversations about prejudice do not include a deeper understanding of privilege and institutional racism (Smith & Heckman, 1995). In other words, if the roots of racism and inequality, for example, are not addressed by a teacher’s goal of building

unity, the curriculum will fall short. Students will not be informed of the social issues that the particular culture encounters and the privilege group will continue to reproduce those acts of racism towards the minorities. Therefore, the mere inclusion of multicultural literature is not enough to disrupt privilege or injustice (Cai, 1998). Nor is it enough to ask teachers to deconstruct stereotypes in texts and images if teachers are unaware of the subtle biases that exist therein. Therefore, it has become especially important for teachers to critically analyze children's literature and the criteria they use when adopting literary materials for their classrooms.

In order to critically analyze a children's book, Gonzalez and Montaña (2008), argue that teachers need to move from the surface-level inclusion of other cultures or a simplistic affirmation of cultural identity. Rather, they argue that book selection must be grounded in a critical multiculturalism. For Gonzalez and Montaña (2008), this dictates that "teachers recognize the cultural, social and political factors in institutionalized racism and examine the school practices that contribute to the persistence of racism in schools and society" (p. 77). Importantly, children's literature can be a vehicle to examine social inequality. This reflects that fact that much of "Latina/o children's literature is "born of struggle... [and] the themes, values and storylines reflected in Latina/o children's literature connect to the lives of poor and working-class families and create opportunities for dialogue and social justice activism" (Gonzalez and Montaña, 2008, p. 77). Thus, it is logical to conclude that children's literature can be used to analyze past and present socio-political realities.

Again, it is important to understand the criteria that teachers use to select book. Hence, as noted above, research question 2 is: What criteria do teachers use to select quality culturally relevant literature for Latino students at the elementary school level? Montaña and Gonzalez (2008) identify what constitutes quality Latino literature and provide a list of potential criteria,

or stages of critically analyzing a book: 1. Students move from a descriptive stage to a deeper analysis of the book; 2. Personal interpretive stage: students relate info in the book to their own feelings, realities, or experiences; 3. Critical multicultural or anti-bias stage: requires reflection of the themes of equality and justice; and, 4. Creative transformative stage: individuals translate their reflections into concrete outcomes in order to create change. This criteria is about the teaching and also about the analysis of a text. My study is seeking to verify through surveys, if the teachers use that or not criteria.

Based on the information acquired through the literature review, I designed a study that examined the benefits culturally relevant teaching and literature has on Latino students' education. In addition, I sought to learn if teachers have a set of critical criteria to guide the process of selecting Latino literature. And, finally, I sought to understand if schools in Monterey County are including culturally relevant literature into the curriculum.

## **Methods and Procedures**

### **Data collection**

This study consists of gathering information from peer reviewed articles. The articles were reviewed to make sure that the information is relevant and accurate to the research questions. In addition, two surveys were conducted. The first survey was directed to teachers (see Appendix 1). Five teachers that work at different elementary schools throughout Monterey County were surveyed through email. The goal of this survey was to learn if teachers in Monterey County currently use quality Latino literature in their classroom. And, if they do, what criteria do they use to select quality Latino literature and what Latino books do they recommend for use in the curriculum. From the articles reviewed, key information was used to develop the

teacher questionnaire. To have a deep understanding of how culturally relevant literature benefits Latino Students, an anonymous survey was designed to be distributed to five Latino students who enrolled in an interviewed teacher's classroom (see Appendix 2).

## **Participants**

The teachers who were surveyed were selected because I knew them from either service learning experiences, my work as a substitute teacher, or they are friends that worked at different elementary schools throughout Monterey County and the larger tri-county area. I sent an email to each of the teachers requesting their participation in this study. I emphasized that the survey would be conducted anonymously, meaning that their identity wouldn't be revealed. They all agreed to participate in the study. The participants are:

- Teacher 1 is a Latina elementary school teacher who has taught for twelve years and has taught 5th and 6th grade.
- Teacher 2 is a Mexicana elementary school teacher who has taught for ten years and has taught 1st grade English-only and now is teaching a bilingual 3rd grade classroom.
- Teacher 3 is a Latina and elementary school teacher who has taught for eight years and previously taught 3rd grade English-only and now teaches in a bilingual 3rd grade classroom.
- Teacher 4 is a Mexican-American elementary school teacher who has taught for twelve years and who originally taught 1st grade and is now teaching in a 2nd grade English-only classroom.



- Teacher 5 is a Latina elementary school teacher who has been teaching for four years in a 1st grade bilingual classroom.

The surveys were formulated as a Google document and sent out individually to each teacher (see Appendix 1). The teachers were able to voluntarily and on their own time complete the survey. Ample time was given to the busy teachers to complete the survey. In order to complete the Student surveys, I asked all teachers if they can give the anonymous surveys to only their Latino students (see Appendix 2). Since, it is an anonymous survey for students, their identity would not be revealed. All of the students are elementary school students in the tri-county area. The anonymous student surveys were formulated as a Google document and the teachers were asked to print it out, and have the Latino students write their responses to the survey questions. Once the surveys were completed, the teachers scanned each document, so I could record the Latinos students' answers. After waiting three weeks to hear if the teachers were able to distribute the surveys, I learned that none of the teachers were able to distribute the survey because spring break and because they are preparing for the end of the year state test. So, I canceled the anonymous students' surveys as a data source.

In addition, as part of the teacher survey, I requested that the teachers provide a list of criteria that they use to choose quality culturally relevant literature for Latino students. The teachers' cumulative responses of criteria for selecting quality Latino literature is collated together in a table (see Appendix 3). Finally, I also requested from the teacher recommends of quality Latino literature that they use in their classroom. A list of recommended titles that that the five participating teachers offered is provided in Appendix 4.

## **Results and Discussions**

Besides the literature review and through the application of my methods and procedures, I have acquired enough data from the five elementary school teachers. In this section I summarize the findings structured and organized around the secondary research questions posed in the Introduction and Background section. As noted above, this capstone research project examines how culturally relevant literature benefits Latino students.

*1. What criteria do teachers use to select quality culturally relevant literature for Latino students at the elementary school level?*

In the teacher survey (see Appendix 1), teachers were asked what criteria they use to select quality Latino literature. Teacher 3 stated, “I look for books that could be age related to my students. Also books that have good illustrations and stories to which my students can relate to” (Teacher 3, personal communication, 22 March 2019). In addition, Teacher 5, stated, “I choose books that are in both English and Spanish, in particular, a bilingual book that my students like to read is *Dora La Exploradora*. Also, I have books about special events in Mexico such as el ‘Día de Los Muertos’ and ‘16 de Septiembre’ (Teacher 5, personal communication, 22 March 2019). As stated above, Gonzalez and Montaña (2008) argue, that teachers often use simplistic criteria such as only choosing Latino books because they are bilingual and include a brown character. It is evident that Teacher 3 and Teacher 5 do not use critical criteria when selecting quality Latino literature. In contrast, Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and Teacher 4 did use what Gonzalez and Montaña mention as critical criteria to choose Latino literature. Teacher 1 mentioned, “the Latino books I choose reveal Latino reality, and include themes such as immigration, undocumented, poverty, sacrifice, Mexican traditions, and the importance of Family and cultural values” (Teacher 1, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Teacher 1, referenced various books which include *América Is Her Name/La Llamam América* by Luis

Rodriguez, *The Christmas Gift/ El regalo de Navidad* by Francisco Jimenez, *Super Cilantro Girl/ La Superniña del Cilantro* by Juan Felipe Herrera, and *Friends from the Other Side/ Amigos del Otro Lado* by Gloria Anzaldúa because these books reflect the reality of Latino in the United States. Teacher 1 specifically referenced the book *América Is Her Name* by Luis Rodriguez stating, “I like this book because it includes the various sub themes such as undocumented, urban violence, gaining voice through poetry, family, and machismo.” Teacher 1 added, “I decided to read this book because of the growing community of Mixteco in south Monterey County and many of my Mixteco students identify themselves with América” (Teacher 1, personal communication, 22 March 2019). In addition, Teacher 2 mentioned, I choose books in which the character is an ‘authentic’ Latino/a” (Teacher 2, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Teacher 2 referenced some of the books Teacher 1 mentioned but added, *In My Family* by Carmen Lomas Garza and *Rainbow Tulip* by Pat Mora. Specifically, she referenced, *Rainbow Tulip* as a book in which the character is an authentic Latino/a. Teacher 2 stated that “Estelita knows that her Mexican heritage sets her apart from the rest of the children at school, she wants her mother to become like the rest of the American ladies” (Teacher 2, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Teacher 2 added, “I believe that this book is authentic because many of the Latino students in public schools can relate to Estelita’s story, they leave their Mexican heritage at home and do not embrace it at school because they want to fit into the U.S. status quo.” Teacher 4 states, “I choose books in which the Mexican/Latino culture is represented because I want my students to connect with the text” (Teacher 4, personal communication, 22 March 2019). She states, “I really like the book *In my family/En mi Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza, because in all the pages my students can connect to the different Mexican family traditions, that vary from the introduction of Mexican legends, to family time, and the value of religion”

(Teacher 4, Personal communications, 22 March 2019). In sum, as a collective, the critical criteria the teachers use to choose quality Latino literature includes: a bilingual text, themes that reveal Latino reality, the main character is an “authentic Latino/a,” and stories in which Latino culture is positively represented (See Appendix 3).

*2. Is the literature bilingual/bicultural? And why is the language of the text an important reflection of Latino culture?*

Overall, all five teachers responded in the survey to the importance of language. In particular, the five teachers articulated the importance of books being in Spanish. As Teacher 5 stated, “especially for my new children that just arrived from Mexico and El Salvador because they do not speak English it is important to have those books in Spanish” (Teacher 5, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Similarly, three out of the five teachers responded about the importance of having that same book available in English, so that they can use it with their English Language Learners. As Teacher 3 stated, “for those students that are transitioning to being fluent English proficient or for my students that grow up with a little bit of Spanish, they love reading in English and practicing both languages” (Teacher 3, personal communication, 22 March 2019). For instance, Teacher 2 stated, “it’s a little bit of work having both volumes of *América Is Her Name* and *La llaman América* by Luis Rodriguez because I have to had to purchase both sets, since on Mondays we work on the Spanish version and on Wednesdays on the English version” (Teacher 3, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Teacher 1, in contrast, talked about the power of *Super Cilantro Girl*, in which the text exists in a bilingual version, include both English and Spanish, in one volume. And thus, how beneficial it was for her students to check their comprehension by first reading in Spanish and then in English. Once again, all teachers unanimously believe it is important to have both languages present in

literature. This reflects their collective ideology as voiced by Teacher 5, “I think it is important that as Latinas/Mexicans we support our students’ two languages, not only do I want them to learn English, but I want them to maintain and develop their native language, Spanish, so I always look for bilingual books” (Teacher 5, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Teacher 2 was unique as the only teacher out of the five to highly recommend a book that only exists in English, *Rainbow Tulip*. But, as she wrote on her survey, “I sure wish this book existed in Spanish and even though I want my students to read it in Spanish, I think the themes of mother-daughter relationships and cultural pride are still strong positive messages that I want to give my students, that I still read it in English. But because I also know Spanish, even though it is only printed in English I will translate it to Spanish for them to fully comprehend” (Teacher 2, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Thus, teachers can, and do, make an accommodation in reading stories that have a strong message and presence of Latino/a culture and are only printed in English.

### *3. How can schools in Monterey County adopt and include culturally relevant literature in their curricula to benefit Latino students?*

From the teachers’ responses I noted, that many schools in Monterey county are not adopting nor including culturally relevant literature in their curricula to benefit Latino students. All five teachers agree on the importance of including quality culturally relevant literature because of the large numbers of Latino students in all of Monterey county. For instance, Teacher 3 responded, “we are not trained to properly choose quality Latino literature in which the Latino students’ culture is present. Many of the books we have in our school and classroom library reference white-middle class people.” (Teacher 3, personal communication, 22 March 2019). In addition, three of the five teachers mentioned that they do not believe that their principal is aware

of the quality Latino literature books that truly represent Latino reality and reveal issues such as racism and poverty. Teacher 1 added, “after attending the social justice conference in San Francisco, I became aware of the importance of choosing quality Latino literature that reflect Latino reality and enable students to challenge the status quo. She also added, “the books I mentioned above, I have to buy them out of pocket because they were not found in the school library” (Teacher 1, personal communication, 22 March 2019). In order to eradicate this problem, all teachers agreed that school administrators and teachers need to receive valuable training on the inclusion of culturally relevant literature for Latino students, so that our Latino students would not feel rejected in school grounds and so they can value their culture.

#### *4. How do students feel that culturally relevant Latino literature is beneficial to their education?*

Since I did not receive any responses from the students, I’m going to go based off of how teachers believe culturally relevant literature is beneficial to the students’ education. All teachers believe that culturally relevant literature that is also bilingual benefits the students because they are able to first read it in their first language and then in English. Thus, they can fully comprehend the story. For many of the English Language Learners, if they only read a text in English, there can be some words they don’t understand that totally change, which does not allow the students to fully understand the story. In addition, all teachers mentioned that it is important for students to see “brown characters” as main characters because they will feel that their culture is being valued in school. The teachers believe their students will value their brownness and not see themselves as the “other” as society perceives Latinos. In addition, as Gonzalez and Montaña (2008) argue, there has to be a social and political turn where teachers move from just a simplistic and superficial inclusion of culture based upon the 5-Fs themes and embrace a critical vision of multiculturalism that includes themes such as being undocumented

and the separation of families, the importance of parents, having caring teachers, poverty and family traditions. Also, when students can make a personal connection to the storyline and/ or main characters they tend to thoroughly comprehend the story. As Teacher 4 mentions, “when I read quality Latino children’s book such as, *In My Family* by Carmen Lomas Garza, my students can make a personal connection to each of portraits in the story. For example, one of my students mentioned that her birthday parties look similar to that of Mary Jane’s birthday party, because all her family gathers together, her father makes ‘carne asada’ barbecue, and all her relatives break the ‘piñata’ (Teacher 4, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Thus, students create a sense of belonging in school, and pride in their cultural traditions. Instead of leaving their “Latino identity” at home, they value it and would not reject it to fit into the status quo.

### **Discussion**

From the teacher surveys I received, there was a variety of perspective of what critical criteria is used for choosing quality Latino Literature and its benefits on Latino students. Just like in Gonzalez and Montañó’s research they noticed that preservice teachers didn’t know how to choose quality Latino Literature for Latino students. They mentioned how many of the non-Latino and Latino teachers that took part in their research considered a book “Latino” just because it was in two languages and it included a brown character. Even though, this criteria is important, it shouldn’t be the only criteria when choosing quality Latino literature. On the other hand, from the teachers that took part in the research, most did use critical criteria to choose quality Latino literature. The cumulative response from all of the five teachers consisted of the following critical criteria: bilingual text, themes that reveal Latino reality, include an authentic Latino character, and Mexican/Latino culture is represented. These detail insights from teachers to question three were very important to me because they showed me the importance of the

content of the story. For instance, Teacher 3 said, “I have a student that liked *Friends from the Other Side* because it reflected her experience of being undocumented, and how other kids would make fun of her legal status and tell her to go back to Mexico” (Teacher 3, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Exposing non-Latino and Latino students about the hardships the undocumented students encounter will make them socially aware of the social issues. In addition, Teacher 1 believed that through the inclusion of quality Latino text in the classroom the Latino students felt socially valuable, personally justified, and were therefore inclined to claim space and speech in the classroom (Teacher1, personal communication, 22 March 2019). Overall this capstone documents how teachers believe Latino students can benefit from culturally relevant literature by allowing students to feel valuable, make personal connections and feel accepted into the Americanized schooling system through quality Latino literature.

### **Problems and Limitations**

Through the process of acquiring information about how culturally relevant literature benefits Latino students I encountered some difficulties. I read many articles to find the ones that would help me answer my research question. Some of the articles were about the inclusion of multicultural education. These articles were interesting but did not provide evidence of how it will benefit Latino students. In addition, my focus was not on incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum and how it benefits students. Also, many of the sources used in this research are about the benefits of culturally relevant pedagogy, I had a difficult time finding sources that were specifically about the benefits of culturally relevant literature and its benefits for Latino students.

Also, I feel that the time was limited to have a deep/thorough search on the topic of culturally relevant literature and its benefits on Latino students. Also, for question 3, I did not get



the answers I was expecting from most teachers. Most of the teachers mentioned that schools could implement culturally relevant literature by schools buying books for them and for teachers to properly teach them to their students. I believe that this question was not written well. If I was to do this research again I will rephrase the question, so I can have multiple and thoughtful answers from teachers. In addition, I believe that the research would be more interesting if I was to compare the criteria non-Latino/a teachers vs. Latino/a teachers use to choose culturally relevant literature for Latino students. Since there are more white teachers than Latino teachers in public elementary schools, I would like to know how they would implemented culturally relevant literature into the curriculum. Finally, another limitation I encountered as I collected data was that I didn't receive any surveys from the students. When I sent out the surveys for the teachers I also included the student's surveys. I only received the I asked the five teachers to give the surveys to their Latino students, but only one teacher got back to me. She mentioned that she will send them to me once the students come back from Spring break, but I still did not receive any, so I decided to drop the student surveys.

### **Recommendations**

After analyzing the benefits of culturally relevant literature on Latino students, I have noted the vast amount of benefits it creates for students. Therefore, I recommend that teachers incorporate quality Latino literature in their classroom because it has tremendous benefits for Latino students. But, as the research shows, teacher must have critical criteria when they choose quality Latino books. They should not choose a book not just because it includes a brown character, are bilingual, and are about the 5- F: Fashion, Festival, Flags, Folklore, and Food. The teachers that participated in this survey provided the critical criteria they use to choose books which include, bilingual text, reveals Latino reality (undocumented, poverty, importance of

family, family traditions etc..), the character is an authentic Latino, and represent Latino culture. If teachers or preservice teachers do not have criteria to choose quality Latino literature, they can use the criteria provided by the teachers that participated in the survey. In addition, educators can use the list of quality Latino literature that reveals Latino reality and challenges the status quo (see Appendix 4).

For future researchers, I recommend they further analyze the effects Latino literature has on college level Latino students. It will be interesting to know how the inclusion of culturally relevant literature benefited Latino students. Also, if the college students were not exposed to culturally relevant literature in their “K-12 schooling” it will be interesting to examine the effects of the absence of culture in school.

### **Conclusion**

The Latino population is an increasing population in the United States. Nearly half of our public-school system consists of Latino students. Yet, our public-school system is not honoring the reality of including Latino culture into the classroom. The curriculum is Eurocentric, which only allows white middle-class students to see themselves in curriculum and their culture is validated in school. In addition, the literature that Latino students are exposed to only includes white middle-class characters. Accordingly, Latino students are not exposed to many books in which they can “see” themselves.

In contrast, by incorporating Latino literature into the curriculum, Latino students can feel validated and valuable, which gives them confidence to actively participate in class discussions. Teachers need to be culturally conscious of the hardships the Latino community encounters. Thus, through the inclusion of the quality Latino literature students feel validated

and included in the classroom, and they can believe that they can challenge the status quo and to make a change in a society that often negatively depicts them.

### **Appendix 1: Teacher survey**

1. Please identify quality picture books that you believe affirm your Latino students' cultural identity.
2. What are some of the titles of quality culturally relevant literature that you use in your classroom?
3. What criteria do you use to select books for Latino youth?
4. Do your students more fully appreciate books that are written in Spanish? If so, how/why?
5. Do your students more fully appreciate books that include Latino culture? If so, how/why?
6. Are your students able to make connections with the Latino characters in the stories? If so, how?
7. How do your students respond to the storylines and issues in the Latino books?
8. How can schools in Monterey county adopt and include culturally relevant literature into the curriculum?
9. How do Latino students benefit from incorporating Latino literature in to the curriculum?

## **Appendix 2: Student Anonymous Survey**

1. Throughout your education, have you been exposed to books that include Latino/a protagonists? And, can you give examples of these books?
2. Throughout your education, have you been exposed to books that include Latino culture? And, can you give example of these books?
3. Do you “see” yourself in Latino literature, if so, in what ways?
4. Do you “see” your culture in Latino literature, if so, in what ways?
5. When you read a book about the Latino culture, are you able to make a personal connection that enables you to have a deeper understanding of the story?
6. When you read a book about mainstream culture and characters (e.g. a white protagonist) are you able to make a personal connection that enables you to have a deeper understanding of the story?
7. Do you prefer to read books that are written in Spanish or are bilingual? If so, why?

**Appendix 3: Critical criteria and analysis on quality Latino Literature**

<b>Book title<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Bilingual</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>How is the character “authentic” Latino/a</b>	<b>What are the ways in which the Mexican/Latino culture is represented?</b>
America is her Name/ La Lllaman America by Luis Rodriguez	No: English  Two Volumes: One book in Spanish and the other in English	Machismo Violence Undocumented Silence Poetry(voice) Familia Poets Urban violence	Rich culture of Mixteco  Standing up for the marginalized:  We can see this through the uncle. America experiences Machismo,  In school teacher is not allowing her to speak up in Spanish  Does not believe in her poetic abilities	Machismo from Papa: women stay home and clean the house  Undocumented Jobless/ poverty  Mother believing in daughters dreams  Immigration story  History of the Mixteco  Importance of mothers in Education
Friends from the other side/ Amigos del Otro Lado by Gloria Anzaldua	Yes: English and Spanish in the same book	Curandera (healer): prietita protects Joaquin from la migra and the racist acts from the other children.  Protection  Undocumented/	Curandera (Healer)	Curandera protects  Hospitable  Humility  Good Samaritan  Faith

<sup>1</sup> These titles were recommended by a panel of teachers whom I surveyed, they also provided a thorough analysis on the books they recommended.

		crossing the border  racism: 1st generation vs 2nd generation		Sacrifice
Super Cilantro Girl/ La Niña Super Cilantro by Juan Felipe Herrera	Yes: English and Spanish in the same book	Racism & Stereotypes: mother was detained by immigration because she was brown and thought she was undocumented  Illegal detention  Dreaming  Superheroes  Women  Familia  Separation	Mexican culture: Mexican superheroes and movies  Powerful females  Dreamers- American dream	Importance of mothers  Fears separation  Comforting grandmother  Importance of mothers  Value of Lucha Libre  Value of Spanish Language-border patrol speaking Spanish
The Rainbow Tulip by Pat Mora	No: only English book	Protecting: Estelita's mother is always protecting, caring, and nurturing her  Familia  Importance of culture and using Spanish language at home	Pride in cultural identity  Like many Mexican families in the US, they want to hide their identity (Mexican) and fit in to the status quo of the US. One needs to accept who they are.	Validating Spanish Accepting herself as different from others.  Cultural value  Humble  Importance of mothers
In my Family/	Yes: English and	Family unity &	Mexican Family	Mexican

<p>En mi Familia by Carmen Lomas Garza</p>	<p>Spanish</p>	<p>traditions</p>	<p>traditions are exposed throughout the book</p>	<p>traditions Religion/ Faith  Mexican Legends</p>
<p>The Christmas Gift/ El Regalo de Navidad by Francisco Jimenez</p>	<p>Yes: English and Spanish</p>	<p>Poverty Migration Honesty Sacrifice Faith/religion Family Christmas</p>	<p>Catholics: faith that God will provide  Value of a gift</p>	<p>Humble Migration Sacrifice Catholic Family  Appreciating the gift and the giver, not its economic value</p>



#### Appendix 4: “Quality” Latino Literature

- *America is her name/ La llaman America* by Luis Rodriguez
- *Rainbow Tulip* by Pat Mora
- *In my Family/En mi Familia* by Carmen Lomas Garza
- *Friends from the Other Side/ Amigos del Otro Lado* by Gloria Anzaldua
- *Super Cilantro Girl/ La Superniña del Cilantro* by Juan Felipe Herrera
- *The Christmas gift/ El regalo de Navidad* by Francisco Jimenez
- *Yes We Are Latinos* by Alma Flor Ada
- *El pañuelo de Oro* by Alma Flor Ada.
- *Gary el soñador* by Gary Soto
- *My name is Maria Isabel* by Alma Flor Ada
- *The Beautiful Lady, Our Lady of Guadalupe* by Pat Mora
- *Listen to the Desert* by Pat Mora

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