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REFLECTING THE DIVERSITY OF HISPANIC CULTURES IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT COLLECTIONS

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When Latinos look at each other they see Chicanos, Cubans, Guatematecos, Puerto Ricans, Venezuelans, Chileans, Mexican-Americans, and even Nuyoricans ... The need to find a manageable label with which to handle such complexity has grown as the diversity of Spanish speaking Americans has increased. The term Hispanic can blur the cultural distinctions. When it comes to personal identity, however, very few individuals would readily identify themselves as Hispanic. (Sullivan 5)

The approximately 50.5 million Americans of Hispanic heritage are far from a homogeneous group (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Nora 2). Their many significant differences stem from their country of origin, time of arrival in the United States, generation and membership in different ethnic groups (Robbin 139). Due to high birth rates and immigration, Hispanics are now the fastest growing ethnic group in United States. These changes in American demographics have implications for all aspects of society. Because the vast majority of Hispanic Americans are young, institutions that provide services to youths will be most effective. Libraries, both public and school, have a responsibility to build collections that reflect the diversity of our society. In order to do so, we must develop an understanding of the cultures of our Hispanic neighbors and apply this knowledge to collection development.

Across Kentucky, Hispanic populations increased by 121.6% from 2000 to 2010, to reach an estimated 132,836 (Kentucky Data Center). Hispanic students make up 4% of Kentucky's K-12 population, with over 31,000 enrolled across the state. While the majority of Hispanics live in urban centers like Fayette and Jefferson counties, significant numbers live in more rural areas; for example, over 6% of Christian County's residents are Hispanic

(Pew Research Center).

The term "Hispanic" is used to describe the ethnicity of people from the Iberian Peninsula of Europe, and various regions of Africa, North America, and South America. My discussion will be limited to the origins of those people who make up over 91% of the Hispanic population of the United States (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, and Nora 3). These will include people of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American and South American heritage.

Bound by a common colonial history and shared language, Hispanics share many common social situations in the United States today. The majority (70%) live in a household with a married couple. Hispanics are also more likely than non-Hispanics to live in a household with five or more members (U.S. Dept. of Commerce 8). Hispanics occupy all social classes; however, they are more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic families, with incomes far lower than the median family income (US Dept. of Commerce 9).

Both family and respect for traditions and religion are central to Hispanic cultures. The definition of family is much more extensive than in Anglo culture, and may include uncles, aunts, cousins and a variety of associated persons. Hispanics are often formal toward one another, and this formality is reflected in the Spanish language by using the formal "usted" when addressing someone, rather than the familiar "tu." "Hispanic families instill in their children the importance of honor, good manners, and respect for authority and the elderly" (Clutter).

Throughout time, stories have served to relay history and transmit cultural values. Children's literature can be either a vehicle of

acculturation or a tool of empathy and pride. When selecting and using multicultural literature, it is important to address what Karen Smith defines as the three sub-issues in children's literature. The first is **exclusivity**. No library collection can address all of the ethnic variations. It is important not to exclude materials simply because no members of that ethnic group live in the community. By including materials on cultures and people not present in your community, the library offers readers the opportunity to learn about cultures they might never encounter otherwise. The second issue is **authority**. Who is qualified to write about a culture? While an author raised in a culture may be better qualified to reflect the culture accurately, this criterion would be far too limiting to the size of multicultural collections. Instead, the selector must pay attention to the quality and accuracy of the materials. The discussion of authority leads to the third issue, **stereotyping**. A collection full of ethnic "stereotypes" is less useful than a mono-cultural collection.

For a book to be multicultural, the author must do more than strategically place persons of color in the book. Mei-Yu Lu offers the following characteristics of high quality multicultural children's literature:

1. Positive portrayals of characters with authentic and realistic behaviors
2. Authentic illustrations to enhance the quality of the text
3. Pluralistic themes to foster belief in cultural diversity as a national asset and a reflection of the changing nature of this country's population
4. Contemporary as well as historical fiction that captures changing trends in the roles played by minority groups in America
5. High literary quality, including strong plots and well-developed characterization
6. Historical accuracy when appropriate
7. Reflections of the cultural values of the characters
8. Settings in the United States. (3-4)

Avoid materials based on Hispanic stereotypes, such as stories that assume Hispanics are non-English speaking, poor, undocumented aliens and/or migrant workers. While some of these characteristics do apply to some Hispanic Americans, they do not reflect the experience of the majority. The complex problems of Hispanics have a place in children's literature and young adult literature, but Hispanic characters should be shown as con-

tributing and independent members of society. Books about real-life Hispanic Americans and cultural icons from other Hispanic countries should be part of the collection.

The authors' and illustrators' portrayals of poverty, food, village scenes and social problems should be closely examined. Descriptions of where and how Hispanics live should be balanced between the modern and traditional. Both Spanish and English language titles should be part of the collection. When possible, the multilingual nature of Hispanic cultures can be illustrated by books that combine both languages.

Religious themes may also play an important role in many of the stories, and especially those about Hispanic holidays and festivals. Most Hispanics (90%) belong to the Roman Catholic religion (Clutter). Many Hispanic cultures combine aspects of indigenous and African spiritual traditions with Catholic beliefs. Persons of Hispanic heritage come from rich and long-established cultures. The ancient indigenous civilizations of the Maya, Aztec, and Inca are an important part of Hispanic culture, and their importance should not be underestimated. The Hispanic identity has been shaped by the pre-Columbian civilizations, Spanish conquest, slavery, and Manifest Destiny.

Building culturally responsive Hispanic children's and young adult collections is not a daunting task. Many resources exist to assist librarians in selecting materials and instituting services to meet community needs. Annual awards for high-quality Hispanic children's and young adult literature are key collection development tools. Winners and nominees for the following awards should be considered essential books for any collection, regardless of patron demographics:

- Consortium of Latin American Studies Programs' *Américas Book Award*
- Hispanic Heritage Foundation's *Hispanic Heritage Awards for Literature*
- Latino Literacy Now's *International Latino Book Awards*
- American Library Association's *Pura Belpré Award*
- Texas State University College of Education's *Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award*.

In addition to these awards, librarians can consult general multicultural book guides and

journals, as well as other multicultural book awards. Many public libraries post recommended reading lists for Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15-October 15), and a wide variety of blogs explore multicultural children's literature in general, and Hispanic literature specifically. REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, maintains a variety of resources on its website and in its conference proceedings. Following this article is a recommended reading list of books that address the growing need for libraries to provide services specific to the needs of America's growing Hispanic population, as well as services inclusive of a variety of ethnic groups.

The cultures of the Americas are intermixing like never before. By some estimates, Hispanics will make up a full 50% of the American population during the twenty-first century. The destinies of all the people of the

Americas – indigenous, Anglo, Hispanic or African in descent – are married together in innumerable ways. By introducing this interconnectedness through literature, we set the foundation for the next generation to address the issues facing our hemisphere. Exposure to multicultural literature will establish the value of all people and cultures. Building on a solid foundation, middle and high school students can more readily approach literature that deals with increasingly difficult issues. A growing number of young adult books explore the racism that has faced Hispanics living in the United States. The cultural competence children can obtain from this literature will assist them as adults to look critically at issues such as immigration reform, foreign aid, and foreign policy. For at its best, literature is a catalyst for children to grow up to be explorers and to change their world.

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RECOMMENDED READING

Ada, Alma F. *A Magical Encounter: Latino Children's Literature in the Classroom*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2003. Print.

Alire, Camila A, and Jacqueline Ayala. *Serving Latino Communities: A How-to-Do-It Manual for Librarians*. New York: Neal-Schuman, 2007. Print.

Avila, Salvador. *Serving Latino Teens*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2012. Print.

Baumann, Susana G. *¡Hola, amigos!: A Plan for Latino Outreach*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011. Print.

Byrd, Susannah M. *¡Bienvenidos! ¡Welcome!: A Handy Resource Guide for Marketing Your Library to Latinos*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2005. Print.

Güereña, Salvador. *Library Services to Latinos: An Anthology*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000. Print.

Immroth, Barbara F, and Kathleen P. McCook. *Library Services to Youth of Hispanic Heritage*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000. Print.

Naidoo, Jamie C. *Celebrating Cuentos: Promoting Latino Children's Literature and Literacy in Classrooms and Libraries*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011. Print.

Totten, Herman L, Carolyn Garner, and Risa W. Brown. *Culturally Diverse Library Collections for Youth*. New York: Neal Schuman, 1996. Print.

Wadham, Tim. *Libros Esenciales: Building, Marketing, and Programming a Core Collection of Spanish Language Children's Materials*. NY: Neal-Schuman, 2007. Print.

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