

Beyond Tamales, Tacos,
and Our Southern
Neighbors :
**Exploring Latino Culture
in Child and Young Adult
Literature**

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As a professor of education, I am in constant pursuit of new ideas that assist teachers to understand current societal trends, appreciate richness in diversity, and know sociological history of ethnic groups, all while impacting student achievement. The world of child and young adult literature allows students and teachers to experience life in atypical ways, for readers can share experiences with characters in settings far different than their own. Through literature, teachers can develop a curiosity for differences, assist in breaking down walls of prejudice, and ensure acceptance of cultural heritage found in ethnic groups throughout the United States. The purpose of this paper is to highlight a graduate level course about Latino culture revealed in child and young adult literature available in K-12 schools.

The course was entitled: "Seminar: Latinos in Literature". Since the majority of students taking the course were K-12 classroom teachers, I needed to choose literature that supported existing reading and social studies curriculum, would be readily available for classroom use, and reflected Hispanic groups represented in the United States, specifically, southeastern Wisconsin. I chose to use award winning literature because it met established criteria, and some of it was reviewed by James A. Banks in *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies*. In

further support of the literature chosen, I studied K-12 scope and sequence in reading, language arts, and social studies to see which books might already be accepted for use. While the majority of books chosen for the course were available in school libraries, only *My Name Is Maria Isabel*, by Alma Flor Ada, and *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros were widely taught, with the first appearing in a third grade reading anthology. Students were required to read two or three books each night of class to develop course topics and objectives.

I turned to Banks's *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies* to establish a foundation for studying ethnic groups. His work is required reading in other education classes, and I knew students would be familiar with it. Further, his extensive bibliographies for teachers and students served as a springboard to determine which literature would meet course objectives. Banks provided a framework of history, culture, and heritage of Hispanic ethnic groups in the United States being studied in courses concerned with Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Rican Americans. This text was listed on the syllabus as optional reading; however, all students enrolled did read the material which was factual and helped them become effective readers of assigned primary texts.

I had taught a series of graduate level seminars to teachers with child and young adult literature as a knowledge base, and I realized this course design needed an instructional strategy to fully integrate the ethnic groups who would be studied without distracting from traditional seminar format. After critical research, I constantly revisited the percentage distribution of Hispanics in the U. S. as defined by the population census. Using this information, I chose readings based on census percentages, meaning roughly 64% of the readings were related to Mexicans, 9% to Puerto Ricans, 7.4% to Central Americans, 3.5% to Cubans, 2.7% to Dominicans, and 7.3% to all other Hispanics

(Banks 298). To demonstrate how all groups were represented in American society, I assigned multiple readings for each of nine class periods. In other words, the course was not designed as "the minority of the week," but rather as a synthesis of Hispanic ethnic groups. The seminar format enabled students to make immediate connections to readings based upon varied and integrated literature.

I developed an instructional strategy called Reading with the Professor several years ago whereby I choose a book I had never read. Then I read it along with my students. It permits me to be a true learner because no research has been conducted prior to teaching. I would read along with the students, maintain a journal, and discuss the book with them. There were times when I did research after completing an assigned reading, but it was based on an interest or question formed during reading. The practice also models effective reading strategies for teachers.

For this course I chose *Zorro*, by Isabel Allende. One student had read the book, and was sworn to secrecy. However, so as not to miss out on the experience, she asked if she could read the book in Spanish. As a bi-lingual kindergarten teacher, she wanted to spend her summer practicing reading in Spanish. Her request was a true jewel in the course design, for it took learning to another level that I had not foreseen while developing the course. At the beginning of each class period a discussion of the reading was held about the few chapters of *Zorro* we had all read, and the student reading it in Spanish developed wonderful thought provoking questions to assist us in the plot's many twists and turns.

To facilitate integration of ethnic groups through literature, in addition to weekly assignments of *Zorro*, students were to read sections from *Baseball in April* by Gary Soto, *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan, and *Operation Pedro Pan* by Yvonne M. Conde. These reading assignments lasted throughout the course's duration. These readings allowed

for research of student interest, and provided comparing and contrasting of Hispanic groups. *Operation Pedro Pan* found everyone searching for someone who was involved in the project. *Becoming Naomi Leon* provided insight into second and third generation families. *Baseball in April* was a collection of short stories, which proved to be a nice break from the required full-length books. During each class, students made connections between the topics and these readings. This practice of diversified readings proved to be highly effective, because students analyzed cultural differences, related what they had learned to a variety of texts, and completed research based on their interest to improve their personal knowledge base. In the spirit of a true seminar, the professor never knew where the knowledge gained would take a student on a path to learning.

The targeted student population for the course was K-12 classroom teachers. While they were required to read 18 different books, they were also required to research themes, people, places, and events. Teachers were from a variety of educational, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds; which meant that they were exposed to a variety of topics presented. To assist students in directing their individual learning to meet the course objectives, I created a section on the syllabus called, Research and Respond. This section contained a list of general topics for students to locate information and expand their knowledge on a given daily topic. Students were required to make reference to their research throughout each night's seminar discussion.

As a final project, students were required to complete a documentary photo essay integrating Hispanic groups studied. They were required to develop themes used in the course to allow for comparing and contrasting; synthesizing; and creating new ideas about content studied. The essays were required to be 2,000 to 4,500 words in length with a minimum of 20 pictures. They were assessed on integration of theory and scholarly analysis of images while

drawing appropriate conclusions. During each night of class, student topic ideas evolved through discussion. Topics were primarily based on knowledge gained in the Research and Respond section.

A memorable event on the first night of class occurred during the first break. Our tiny windowless classroom was located in the basement of the college library. Its austere physical nature can feel a bit claustrophobic on summer nights. We were all standing to leave the room for a few minutes when a student said, "Look at how beautiful this table is!" Everyone paused to observe her remark. Our seminar table was laden with beautiful artwork representing Hispanic culture captured in the artistic ability of book illustrators and cover artists. Vivid colors, brown wrappers, religious icons, and photographs created an image for our summer of reading. It truly was a beautiful sight. It energized everyone and proclaimed the start of the course, Seminar: Latinos in Literature.

Integrated Course Content

Nightly news contained stories about agricultural workers crossing the Mexican-U.S. border. Video coverage allowed us to view the reality of the events, while the literature allowed us to retain the dreams of those who toiled while living in tents. At one point, a student considered writing her documentary photo essay on people killed at the border, but the topic was discarded due to its depressing intensity. After reading the life of Francisco Jimenez in *The Circuit*, students knew the value placed on education by families who labored in fields trying to create a better existence for their children. Jimenez's words coupled with research about the United Farm Workers of America established a basis for demonstrating effects of institutional oppression on minority groups. Students drew immediate connections with Jimenez, because educational success was a core family value expressed throughout the readings. Collective research demonstrated the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) had been organizing

migrant workers in California for over 20 years, yet still many workers remained undocumented, unorganized, with unpaid fair wages.

In one photo essay, a student focused on Cesar Chavez and the National Farm Workers Association. The essay was a biography of Chavez steeped with images of migrant workers. It was breathtakingly beautiful in depicting the rising sun, yet hauntingly memorable in its sadness when details of the faces were studied. Children stood with baskets larger than themselves awaiting crop weigh-in and pay by standing in line next to women clad in cotton shirtwaist dresses with deep pockets and hands worn with toil. Men in large brimmed hats stooped using knives with curved blades to harvest heads of lettuce. In her introduction, the student wrote: "Chavez once said that he could never pick up a head of lettuce without thinking about the person who had picked it (Burns 8). As I read about his life and the life of migrant workers, I can honestly say that I have begun doing the same." Her research, along with knowledge gained from course material, proved to alter her understanding of literally bringing food to market.

Rather than focusing on embargos against Cuba, I chose to concentrate on Operation Pedro Pan, which was an airlift to relocate children to the U.S. when Castro first came into power. On the first night of class everyone admitted to having never heard of the process. Since this was one of the books with reading assignments throughout the entire course, awareness of Cuba's geographical closeness was required. Students were interested in making connections to Kindertransports conducted during the Holocaust; however, in Pedro Pan most of the children were reunited with their parents. Parallels were made with the Cuban Rafters of 1994, and the Elian Gonzalez case of 2000. Cuba's national pastime of baseball was discussed at great length, because Cuban players now play on U.S. professional teams. As a result of this discussion, one student elected to complete his photo essay on Hispanic players

who had joined the major leagues by any means possible.

Concepts students obtained in the study of Cuba evoked an understanding of religion's role, specifically the Catholic religion, in all aspects of Hispanic heritage. A principle player in Operation Pedro Pan was the Catholic Church, which had created group homes throughout the country as far away as Marquette, Michigan to protect the children whose families sent them away from Castro. Images of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Infant Jesus were shared in almost all of the readings, but specifically in *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*, by Jimenez. In a photo essay, one student compared images on holy medals with those shared by Jimenez during his childhood. For example, St. Christopher's medal features him carrying the Christ child across a river, while Jimenez along with other Mexican families are ferried across the river to work U.S. farms.

As long as immigrants have arrived in the U.S. their names have been changed to ring familiar to the general populace. Changes might have happened in immigration offices, in workplaces, in neighborhoods, and in schools. In *My Name is Maria Isabel*, a teacher explains to the title character that there is already one Maria in class; therefore, as a late arrival, she will be called Mary. Names are of significance within different Hispanic groups. They carry on family heritage and traditions. To alter them would lead to feelings of confusion, disrespect, and despair. Naomi Soledad Leon Outlaw is the title character in Ryan's book, *Becoming Naomi Leon*. Naomi is a mixed race girl whose journey of self-discovery helps her to know her heritage when she understands the meaning of her name. At life's end, all that is truly left is a name on a stone marking a grave; therefore, giving respect to others by using their names is an acceptance of individual differences.

Another point to be considered when studying names is the heritage the name represents. For example, Naomi Leon has the artistic ability to carve animals from bars of soap. Her

story is in part a search to locate her father who lives somewhere in Mexico. She learns the Leon's are known for the artistic ability to carve radishes, and they have won contests at the La Noche de los Rabanos, Night of Radishes, for over 100 years. One student decided to complete her photo essay on radish carving. The pictures she found of the annual event in Oaxaca City, Mexico were colorfully beautiful. Radishes and other vegetation were carved and sculpted into animals, dancers, and a host of other works of art. To enhance presentation of her work, she created a series of small photographs to serve as a border on each page with a larger picture within the body of the text. The border changed continuously along each new page to create a movie film. It was an excellent example of a picture book for children because children often think about questions from previous pictures as books are read to them. The running border allowed the reader to see the picture from the previous page. Naomi learned that looking back on her family heritage helped her accept who she was in the present, and her name was important in life's grand scheme.

Name-calling and pejorative language are ways by which stereotyping can be perpetuated. Advertising images of slow, sleepy Mexicans is not representative of hardworking families found in literature. One student's photo essay examined stereotypes about Mexicans. Images of sombrero laden, serape clad men dozing while being supported by a cactus was not evidenced in any of the required course readings; however, the images are forever present in commercial advertising. Of course the Frito Bandito of the 1970s and 80s is no longer used in product promotion, but the image of a bandit peppering bullets into objects in order to protect his Fritos may have perpetuated the image of Mexican bandits at the turn of the last century in the U.S. Southwest.

Barrios are places where ethnic groups live together geographically to form a community. They allow inhabitants to practice traditions, speak languages, and raise families in ways that

will ensure sustentation of common heritage. Viola Canales' *Tequila Worm* tells the story of Sofia who wins a scholarship to attend an elite private school for privileged white children far away from her family and heritage. The scholarship is specifically for Hispanics. Her family works to make her wardrobe befitting of school traditions. She works many jobs to raise money for general expenses. Through it all, her family works as one to make certain Sofia achieves her goals and potential. Family is the most important thing in life; it gives us our names, our heritage, our beliefs, and our dreams. Sofia graduates from the school, attends Harvard Law School, and works as an attorney in California. In the course of her lifetime she habitually returns to the barrio to be with her family. When crime overtakes the area she fences in a small area with a locked gate creating a park for the elders. After a few years her mother asks her to take down the fence because fences do not make good neighbors if traditions are to be respected.

Another example of life in a barrio can be found in Gary Soto's *Chato and the Party Animals*, illustrated by Susan Guevara. By all rights, Chato is a cool cat, living in a barrio. Novio Boy is a pound cat, and as such, does not know his birthday. When Chato listens to Novio tell about how he has never had a party, Chato decides to plan a surprise party for him. Soto's tale shares the animal antics of ordering a cake, purchasing a piñata, and preparing traditional Mexican foods for a true fiesta. When all of the party animal guests arrive, their wonderment surrounding the absence of Novio Boy is expressed to Chato, who realizes he failed to invite him to his own surprise party. A list of Spanish words and definitions placed at the beginning of the story allows integration of Spanish and English word usage for children. Animals in the story represent human personalities and demonstrate acceptance that is found in extended families.

Life in barrios involves a commitment to fitting in with others who share an ethnic her-

itage. Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* describes Latino life in Chicago. The series of vignettes demonstrates the philosophy of place. They tell how place molds character and character is remembered by others making us who we become. My decision to include this text was tenuous. I knew the book was taught in area schools, which meant teachers would have read it. Since the class was designed to assist teachers to develop new curriculum and instructional strategies, I wanted required readings to be fresh. Yet Cisneros' words were like a researcher's primary source and needed to be a part of the class. Every student had read *The House on Mango Street*, but none balked at having to reread it. Further, during discussion each person agreed that they were awakened to the philosophy of place and its influence on personal development.

The American Dream is a concept that permeates U.S. history, for immigrants come from near and far to discover it. Most of the books chosen for the course explored the American Dream; however, it seemed more relevant when examining how Hispanics embraced it because they are contemporaries. People fleeing the Dominican Republic as told in *Before We Were Free*, live a secret life within the confines of a family compound awaiting papers to immigrate to the U.S. in 1960. The family maintained a code of silence so members could work the underground to overthrow the dictatorship. Some family members were already in the U.S., while others stayed behind. It is important to remember that no matter how difficult it is to live within the walls of the compound, it is home. Fulfillment of the American Dream becomes a reality for people every day; however, the heart nestles home deep in its memory.

Reading with the Professor proved to be a successful strategy for this course. I never know whether a book is going to fully meet the prescribed objectives, but Isabel Allende's *Zorro* did. In addition to stimulating discussion and story predictions, the story's twists and turns

encompassed themes students studied. Allende was commissioned to write the story of Diego de la Vega's life before he became known as Zorro. One student chose to complete her photo essay on all of the different Zorros depicted in books and film. Her work featured movie posters, book jackets, and research about the legend. Upon reflection, I can say this book will probably not be required reading in a school curriculum; however, it was a strong choice for its instructional strategy. Allende's work of historical fiction provided insight into life in California during the late 18th and early 19th centuries when Spaniards interacted with Native American Indians in the California territory stripping them of land, customs, and heritage.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2008, graduate students met to examine read, discuss, study, and research Latinos in child and young adult literature that could be effectively used for instruction in K-12 classroom environments. The work was outstanding and everyone benefitted from the experience. A reoccurring topic in nightly discussions was related to storytelling. It is integral to any cultural life experience. From understanding the ancients of Western Civilization to Mexican folklore, storytelling is the essence of shared traditions.

We read books containing folklore, strong women, solid families, traditional values, religious ethics, and immigration. Through it all the learning was like a fiesta because the lessons learned would be shared with others. Each night as I watched everyone unpack backpacks and book bags to claim their places at the table, it was like watching the piñata spill candies onto the grass for children to excitedly claim. The photo essays were exchanged, so everyone left with a full copy of the vivid pictures that sparked individual research interest.

As a group, we made the promise to gather in November of 2009 to discuss John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It has been referenced in many readings and research sites,

so we made a pact to read and examine themes presented in the course with those of Steinbeck's. Several students have called to ask about the discussion, and I shall set up the date soon. The class has lingered for each of us. Its intent was to examine a growing minority group

represented in K-12 schools, so teachers would be effective in their teaching. The call to continue reading is a sign of commitment to understanding diversity, and sharing the power of reading with others.

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