

Critical Race Content Analysis of Contemporary Latinx Representation in Children's Literature
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REPORT

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This purpose of this report is to summarize the scholarly activities undertaken during the 2023 spring semester under the Probational Faculty Development Grant (PFDG). In the following subsections I detail information about the larger project, and the next steps in the research project.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In 2021, only 7% of the books published in the U.S. centered, or detailed stories about Latinx characters in picture books (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2022). Scholars engaged in the analysis of children's books have argued the low number of books published about People of Color leads to underrepresentation and lack of mirrors for Children of Color (Bishop, 1990). Sims Bishop's canonical metaphor of books as mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors, suggests that young readers should be able to see their identities represented in books, that books can serve as windows into other lived experiences and books can be portals for children into new experiences (Bishop, 1990). However, as data from the Cooperative Children's Book Center shows, there is a lack of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for young Latinx readers. This project is concerned with examining contemporary representations of Latinx characters in books that were published in 2021, to better understand whether the stories culturally affirm or perpetuate stereotypes of Latinx communities. The project undertaken during the spring semester was guided by the following research questions: 1) How are Latinx characters portrayed in children's picture books? And 2) How are race, gender, class, language, and immigration status portrayed in Latinx children's picture books?

DATA COLLECTION

With support from the PFDG, I was able to obtain a total of 51 children's picture books about Latinx characters published in 2021 for analysis. Using the Cooperative Children's Book Center's, Diversity Statistics Book Search, I used filters to select "Latine" primary characters and "picture books" to identify book titles published in 2021 in the U.S. This search generated a list of 51 titles, from which I used to obtain the books for analysis. The 51 books are on a diverse range of topics from friendships, family relationships, immigration, and celebration of Latinx cultural events, to name a few. The year 2021 was selected because at the time of the grant proposal, this book list was the most complete.

SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES

Given the award period is brief, I worked with my undergraduate research assistant to focus on organizing the data and conducting the data collection of the 51 books. We used a Critical Race Content Analysis Guide, developed by colleagues and I, to engage an anti-racist perspective within the analysis of children's books (Perez Huber, Camargo Gonzalez, & Solórzano, 2020). To organize the books, we read the synopsis of each book and created preliminary themes to sort the books. This initial organizing of data reveals the topics of the books published and we start to see patterns of publishers, authors, and illustrators. Since the 2021 books were recently published, we will need to go back and examine whether any titles won awards.

Next, using the Critical Race Content Analysis guide we documented the descriptive information for each book, including biographical information, publisher, author, illustrator, and information about the main characters. When the information was available, we also document race and ethnicity for authors and illustrators. The next step we took was to read each book twice and fill out the five Critical Race Content Analysis principles: 1) Centralizing racism and intersecting forms of oppression, 2) Uncovering ideologies of white supremacy, 3) Centralizing culturally authentic experiences, 4) Using interdisciplinary knowledge to consider the socio-historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts, and 5) Challenging, critiquing, and transforming systemic inequity in stories as a move toward social justice. Each of these principles has guiding questions we answer as we read each book. For example, in the first principle, the guiding questions prompt us to examine: 1) What identities or characteristics are assigned by race, class, gender, immigrations status, language, etc. to Latinx characters? 2) What roles do Latinx characters play (i.e. central, tangential, hierarchical)? In what ways do we understand race/ethnicity, or not in the story? Each of the five principles has a set of guiding questions we answer by noting text and images from each book. During this award period we were able to finish noting the book information and filling out information for each principle for each of the 51 books.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS & SIGNIFICANCE

In the next phase of this larger research project, I will be conducting a thematic analysis of the information gathered. The data will be coded using open coding to generate themes across the book titles. I plan to use findings from this research to inform a larger multi-year project that will examine books about diverse identities published in the last five years. During this time, I will also be focused on better understanding how to use the Critical Race Content Analysis guide, in order to share it as a tool for use by general audiences through the publication of a research brief. This tool will contribute to the theoretical developments of both Critical Race Theory and early literacy studies to inform us weather children’s picture books socialize children to consume messages regarding traditionally underrepresented race/ethnic groups. It is my hope that this project will further inform the development of social justice education curriculum for K-3 students, which is the target age for children’s picture books.

REFERENCES

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