

Latinx Characters in Children’s Literature: An Exploration of Language, Family and Separation

**Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth,
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Abstract

My praxis project and research is focused on multicultural literature in book-reading activities with Latinx children in an after-school mentoring program. The books were selected to include Latinx characters created by Latinx authors and illustrators. Building upon the theory of cultural wealth of Tara J. Yosso and Rudine Sims Bishop's framework of books being "mirrors, windows, or sliding doors," each of the books is intended to facilitate a conversation with the children in which they can express in their own voice the richness of their own cultural wealth, whether it be (in Yosso's six categories) aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, or resistant capital. This project shows how non Latinx teachers can, and I believe should, include books with narratives that are specific to these children's cultures, allowing room for discussion about their lives. Teachers of non Latinx backgrounds can create safe spaces for children to see themselves and be themselves more fully – by bringing their families, language, and cultures into the classroom, and sharing about their lives at home.

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Introduction and Research Questions

The idea for this project started as a reaction to George Floyd's death in the summer of 2020. I noticed that elementary school age children were joining protests and seemed to be aware of what was going on. This made me wonder what children actually understand about their identities. I decided to look at children's books and the importance of children of color seeing themselves represented. I understand the visuals are a powerful tool. That is why I focused on children's books used in K-5. My starting assumption was that having a book with a child or adult character that looked like them would help with their engagement with the books to give them a sense of empowerment, of being seen. This can help their engagement with the book. It is possible that seeing images of themselves as children will give them a sense of empowerment for the rest of their lives.

This led me to think about how I could create change within the mentoring program where I have volunteered for the past three years at St Peter's Church in Worcester, MA. The majority of children in the program are from Latinx cultures. (I am using the term Latinx because it is a gender-neutral term that includes all those of Latin American descent.) I was inspired by the eagerness of children who wanted to explore the world of books. One year, I was mentoring a 7-year-old girl. She loved to read and she showed me a book with a Latinx ballerina in it. She said "look at her," pointed at the ballerina, and expressed that she wanted to be a ballerina when she grew up. This showed me that the power of representation matters. I would hope that this project will

contribute to children finding a sense of belonging and a way to make their dreams come true.

As part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies (CYES) major, I have been carrying out a capstone praxis project. A praxis project is a cyclical process that involves identifying and theorizing a problem in a community site, taking action to address the problem, and carrying out research (documenting and reflecting on this process and its impact on the participants, community, or program). My praxis project and research is focused on multicultural literature in book-reading activities with Latinx children in an after-school mentoring program. The books were selected to include Latinx characters created by Latinx authors and illustrators. Building upon the theory of cultural wealth of Yosso (2005), and Bishop's framework (1990) of books being "mirrors, windows, or sliding doors," each of the books is intended to facilitate a conversation with the children in which they can express in their own voice the richness of their own cultural wealth, whether it be (in Yosso's six categories) aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, or resistant capital.

At the St Peter's after-school program, I was the "teacher" for a series of hour-long book reading, discussion and art activities. I sought to understand more about the challenges, opportunities, and successful strategies when using multicultural literature (with characters that look like the children in the group). Using practitioner inquiry and ethnographic methods, during naturally occurring book reading/art sessions, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the children engage with the books I read, during and after book-reading (and in follow-up art activities)?
 - What kinds of “book talk” discussions take place?
 - What kinds of art or writing do the children produce?
2. Do they show evidence that they identify or connect with a character or characters?
 - What do they do or say that shows a connection?
 - What do they draw or write?
 - Do they refer explicitly to their experiences or lives outside of the book sharing setting?
3. Are the theoretical frameworks of Bishop (1990) and Yosso (2005) useful to document children’s engagement with children’s books?
 - Does Bishop’s framework of books as mirrors, windows and sliding doors help with this?
 - Does Yosso’s framework for six types of cultural capital help with this?

My hope is that this research can help educators question and become aware of how the materials they use can guide discussions allowing the children to bring their experiences into a space that they trust.

Ethnographic Background

My project took place in person at St Peter's church in Worcester, MA. This is a mentoring space with children that are 5 to 14 years old. The majority of the children come from a Latinx background. They come right after school to the mentoring program which takes place three times a week: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday from 2:45 to 4:45. St Peter's mentoring is led by the Assumption Sisters whose mission it is to help the community. The mentoring program is a safe space where children come to connect with their mentors. The children get to do their homework and play games. During this project, I was able to work with six children. They are from families that immigrated from countries in Central America, including El Salvador and Honduras.

I chose this site because I have been a mentor at St Peter's for three years. I love interacting with the children and learning about their lives. The mentor and mentee bond is special because you are there to listen to the kid and the children love to share. Not only do I have a close connection with my mentee but I have developed a bond with the other children there. Trust and connection is an essential part of being a mentor and I wanted to bring that into my project.

Before the summer, the director at St Peter's for two years, left. She was in charge of organizing all the activities and making sure that the children would show up. I found out at the end of August that there was going to be a new director along with a new assistant. The director of the program is from Puerto Rico and speaks Spanish, which is very helpful to connect with the families because many of the families speak more Spanish than English. The assistant director, who leads the activities, just

graduated from Assumption College. She is also teaching English to adults as part of the ESL program at St Peter's. The two of them work as a team and bounce ideas off each other. They were fully supportive of my project.

Positionality and Identity

St Peter's has felt like a home for me for three years. As mentioned above, it is an afterschool program, a safe space where children can feel like themselves and get extra support for homework. I started out as a mentor. I love being around my mentee, learning about her day, her home life and doing fun craft activities. I was able to go in person again after the Covid restrictions were lifted and it is great to be able to rebuild the in-person connection. Being a mentor has allowed me to really get to know the children and know about their lives. I remember as a kid those teachers or adults who listened to me and valued me. I want to be that mentor that children feel comfortable being themselves around. Being a mentor allows me to be an insider because I can make real bonds with the children and the other mentors around me. Not only am I a mentor but now I lead a book reading session as part of my project so I get to also be the teacher in the space. As a mentor I was paired with one student whereas the book reading sessions involved multiple students.

However, I am also an outsider because I am not Latinx and I am white. Being white in our society gives me more privilege. As a university student, I am also privileged. Not everyone is able to go to college. I am mindful of my own privilege and thankful for opportunities to hear the children's voices about how to become a better

educator. While carrying out my praxis project, I was an instructor, which means that even though I knew the community I would be interacting with, I was still coming in contact with different perspectives. I was mindful of the assumptions that I may have been bringing in that may have been shaped by societal norms.

I grew up bilingual, with English and French, so I can empathize with some of the difficulties of navigating different languages. I wanted to be able to connect with people from different cultures around me, which is why I have studied Spanish. I now speak Spanish fluently, which helps me connect to the children and their parents. During my mentoring in Worcester, I have seen how appreciative parents and students can be when you can share their language. I have observed how some children continue to be struggling in school, having difficulties with their homework or not communicating well with their teachers, because they do not speak enough English. I have noticed how much it matters when different cultures are valued in the educational spaces and acknowledge that different stories deserve to be heard.

Being from two different cultures has also made me an outsider sometimes, not because of race but because of culture. I understand what it is like to not be seen as fitting into societal expectations. As I grew up between French and American culture, people never knew where to place me because of my accents. I was never French enough or American enough. In the US people have often asked me: "Where are you from?" They were assuming that I wasn't from the US simply because I didn't have the American accent they were used to.

Literature Review

There is a significant body of literature arguing that there is a dire need for books that will combat negative images and create a space where children feel valued. A significant body of literature argues for this.

When it is easier to find a children's book about animals than one that features non-white characters, we still have a problem (Stechyson, 2019). Representation of Latinx characters appears particularly lacking given that Latinx children represent 26.8% of public school enrollment (Wang, 2020) but are represented in only 5% of children's books. Authentic representations of Latinx characters, in books by Latinx authors and illustrators, are rarer still. Bishop (1990) argues that this matters for children from marginalized communities because these books are a mirror in which they can find their own identities, a window into the world, and a sliding door for navigating that world. This also matters for all children because the absence of diversity gives them a false sense of the world in which they are living. In a content analysis of recent children's books, Rodriguez (2018) finds that there has been an increase in literature depicting Latinx immigrants following the 2016 Trump election. Nevertheless, immigration in particular remains a controversial topic in many classrooms. Rodriguez argues that these books representing the immigrant experience help to fight the fear that exists in US society.

For some Latinx children, issues related to immigration are very important. Mangual Figueroa (2021, p. 6) points to "growing empirical evidence that children are cognizant of the significance of their own and others' legal status." She writes that

enabling the voices of children serves a critical purpose: “We argue for the power of testimonio to communicate both extraordinary hardship and everyday experiences and that—through this storytelling—immigrant-origin children and youth also express imagined futures for themselves and their loved ones.” I agree that this representation is important for immigrant children; despite the belief of some adults that young children can’t understand the adult world, they are constantly aware of what is happening to their families.

At the most basic level, diversity in children’s books can help foster a love of reading. “When readers frequently encounter texts that feature characters with whom they can connect, they will see how others are like them and how reading can play a role in their lives. A love of reading will result” (Hefflin, 2001, p. 810). On the other hand, Hefflin argues that children are likely to feel frustrated if they look for mirrors of themselves in the texts they are reading and they do not find them: “If teachers continually present African American children with texts in which the main characters are predominantly animals and white people, it stands to reason that these children may begin to wonder whether they, their families, and their communities fit into the world of reading.” (page 5).

Jagoo (2021) also argues there isn’t enough representation of diverse characters and stories and that children can have a diminished sense of self worth and “identity erasure. (page 10).” Kids don’t feel represented and don’t feel they have a voice. She insists that representation is important within the education field because all children should feel included when learning. Voice matters as “the assertion and

acknowledgement of the importance of the personal and community experiences of people of color as sources of knowledge” (Dixson, 2005).

Yosso (2005) writes about the cultural wealth that belongs to every community and that should be taught through stories of that community. She identifies six types of cultural wealth:

“1. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. 2. Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style. 3. Familial capital refers to [the] cultural knowledge nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. 4. Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources. 5. Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind. 6. Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

This cultural wealth allows for a space where children can gain knowledge and can resist dominant narratives in society.

For Stechyson (2019) “the cracks in the mirror” (page 6) are the lack of representation and also the inaccuracy of that representation. For that reason, she says it is important to have not only diverse characters but also diverse authors. People of

color writing about their experiences will be more accurate than white authors writing about this.

Rudine Sims Bishop, known as the “mother of multicultural literature”, has come up with the theory of windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors. These windows allow the reader to walk into another world that is being imagined through the lens of the book. The mirror is what allows the reader to see their own reflection and feel human. The problem to her is that when you don't include characters that represent the children, the images of themselves can become negative or laughable: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (p. 8). On the contrary, when these narratives are included it gives the child a sense of self and makes them feel that they are valued: “When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” (Bishop, 1990, p. ix).”

Shyno Chako was inspired by Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor. In her powerful and personal TED Talk (2019), she describes the sense of belonging when she finally discovered a book that had an Indian American girl in it who didn't fit into stereotypes but really represented the two worlds she was living in: the American one at work and in school, and the Indian one at home with her family. She uses Bishop's metaphor of windows and mirrors: the window metaphor allows the children to see another culture,

world and learn to respect and appreciate different worlds; through the sliding glass door they get to become part of the journey, empathize with the characters; and, when it becomes a mirror they see themselves reflected, part of something creating a sense of place and belonging.

The theories of Yosso and Bishop suggest that there is an opportunity for educators to use books to create an experience that is more valuable for the children and for the community.

Conceptual Framework

In this section, I will discuss my framework, which is based on theories of cultural wealth and multiculturalism. In my project I aim to research how representation in children's books affects young readers and the communities around them. I am explicitly rejecting deficit theories relating to children's education because these blame the communities of color for their struggles when in reality their culture is rich and they are worthy.

Acknowledging cultural wealth and realizing their self-worth allows the children to succeed in society. There is a need for different narratives in books that challenge mainstream culture in order to create change. The literature review above suggests that communities of color have rich stories to share that allow them to grow and connect with one another and contribute to the larger community. These stories should not be

dismissed. Counter-narratives allow this rich history and culture to be expressed and to start conversations allowing for change.

Counter-narratives draw upon the experience of marginalized communities to challenge the dominant stories that preserve power structures in our society. These alternative stories, coming from lived experience, can reveal a cultural wealth that is often devalued by the dominant stories we tell our children about the world in which they live. I believe that diversity in children's literature can help not only the individual children who are not represented but can also help our communities as a whole.

In children's books, representation matters because it allows children to identify themselves with the characters and the setting, learn about their communities, and be heard. Books that include characters that represent the children who read them tell children reading the books that their lives matter and that they are being heard.

My perspective is also influenced by Tara J. Yosso's writings about the cultural wealth of marginalized communities. She argues that there is a cultural wealth that can be and should be integrated into the curriculum, defining cultural wealth as "an accumulation of cultural knowledge, skills and abilities" (Yosso, 2005).

Specifically, Yosso points to six forms of cultural capital that exist and should be revealed and nurtured:

1. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers...
2. Linguistic capital includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style...

3. Familial capital refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition...

4. Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources...

5. Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with Communities of Color in mind...

6. Resistant capital refers to those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality..." (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

Because the children with whom I was working are navigating between different cultures, I turned to James Banks for a perspective on multiculturalism. He argues that multicultural education allows for reform in schools. Multicultural education, he argues, is not only an idea but a process and a reform movement that battles inequality: "As an idea or concept, multicultural education maintains that all students should have equal opportunities to learn regardless of the racial, ethnic, social-class, or gender group to which they belong" (Banks, 1995, p. 390).

Multicultural education describes ways in which some students are denied equal educational opportunities because of their racial, ethnic, social- class, or gender characteristics. According to Banks, multicultural education seeks to empower students by giving them voice and therefore foster change (Banks 1995). It is not only an idea and a movement but also an ongoing process that centers on democratic goals like justice, freedom and equality.

The other concept James Banks describes is “equity pedagogy,” a method of education that allows the students to be at the center of gaining knowledge: “Equity pedagogy actively involves students in a process of knowledge construction and production. It challenges the idea of instruction as transmission of facts and the image of the teacher as a citadel of knowledge and students as passive recipients of knowledge.” It is essential to have a dynamic between teacher and student that allows the student to have more voice. The method centers on the idea of asking questions, leading students to take action : “Equity pedagogy alters the traditional power relationship between teachers and students. Most importantly, it assumes an integral relationship between knowledge and reflective action. Equity pedagogy creates an environment in which students can acquire, interrogate, and produce knowledge and envision new possibilities for the use of that knowledge for societal change.” (Banks, 1994b).

As discussed in the literature review, Rudine Sims Bishop, the “mother of multicultural literature,” came up with the metaphors of windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors: “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of words that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author.” She believes that these books are an opportunity to enter into someone else’s world, which makes the child feel that his/her story matters.

The mirror allows the child to feel human and is a means of self affirmation: “When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror.

Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” Bishop claims that children are negatively affected when they do not see themselves reflected in the books they read: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part.” Not only do they feel devalued but realize that they don’t have a part in society. Bishop urges her readers to understand that classrooms should be a transformative and inclusive space where the non-white children feel valued: “Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors.” (Bishop, 1990, p.1). This metaphor helped me see things during my project that I had not seen before.

Taken together, this framework helped me center my project on the effect of having non-dominant narratives at the forefront of children's literature. I hope that this will remind the children that their identity matters. This allows them to see that books can incorporate all narratives but most importantly their own rich culture. Books with characters that resemble them allow them to question the world around them, and in turn, questioning allows space for the narratives that are lacking.

Methodology

As mentioned above, my project consisted of a combination of practitioner inquiry and critical ethnography conducted during the after-school mentoring program at St Peter's Church in Worcester, MA. It started in the fall of 2021 and continued into the spring of 2022. Group sessions took place weekly and included up to 6 children in the group.

I started my project at St Peter's with book reading sessions every Wednesday. I started by reading a book to a small group of children from 5 to 10 years old. Then I led an art activity after the book reading that was related to the book. Before the book reading session, I thought about why I chose the books and what kind of books. My field notes, transcription and art activities allowed me to collect data and observe how the children reacted to the book. The questions I asked related to the book were really important because I want to make sure I gave space for the students' voices and they guided what kind of data I would be getting.

Each of the sessions was broken down roughly as follows:

| Time | What students will be doing | What teacher(s) will be doing | Rationale (how this supports learning goals) |
|-------------|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 5 min | Before reading: Listening and answering questions | Introducing the book and its authors | Understand context, theme of the book, its main characters and its authors |

| | | | |
|--------|---|---|---|
| 15 min | During reading: Reading out loud, listening & answering questions during the reading of the book | Reading the book out loud and asking questions | Being able to follow key elements of the story and connect these to personal experience |
| 10 min | After reading: Answering questions and discussing with others in the group | Asking questions related to the book and leading the discussion | Think critically about the world around them |
| 20 min | Activities: Engaging in creative activities like writing, drawing | Explaining and engaging the children | Express through artwork; become aware of possibilities for change |

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data from six sessions I did Wednesdays at St Peter’s church between October 2021 - February 2022. Every week I did book reading sessions where I read to the children. The children loved stories and it gave them a chance to interact more with the pictures and the characters. While reading I recorded their responses through audio recordings with voice memos. Then I transcribed the audio recordings which allowed me to find emerging themes within it. After reading, I asked them questions related to the book. The discussion is a time when I wanted their voices to be heard and for them to feel like they had agency. After the discussion part, I did a drawing activity and tried to see how they responded to the book.

I read six books to the children at St Peter's: *Pete the Cat Saves Christmas*, *Pete the Cat Thanksgiving*, *Sing Don't Cry*, *Carmela Full of Wishes*, *Dear Primo and Mango*, *Abuela and Me*. I started with books that had characters that were Latinx immigrants like the children in my group. I wanted to see how they would interact with these books because my project is about the lack of representation. Then I asked the children to tell me what kinds of books were their favorite to read. They told me that they loved books with characters like Pete the Cat and Piggy and Gerald. I found this interesting because children's books that are most commonly found in bookstores, schools, in children's homes are ones that include animals. I then wanted to see how they would react to these books. I wanted to include both books that had Latinx characters and also books that had non Latinx characters, animal ones. The idea was just to see how the children would react to the different books. These books reflect the Latinx immigrant experience whether it be the separation of family members, the foods that come from Latinx countries, the traditions that are passed down. These children and their families are living the immigrant experience. Their Latinx identity matters to them and loved sharing about it.

My data analysis was based on the written transcripts and photographs of the children's artwork. I looked for the most frequent themes that emerged from our discussions and I coded the data to tie it to Rudine Sims Bishop's framework of mirrors, windows and sliding doors (Bishop, 1990) and Tara J. Yosso's framework of aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, or resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). I explored how these frameworks could help me observe and document the children's engagement with the books.

Findings

In this section, I am presenting my findings based on what happened during the discussions of three books and the key elements that emerged from the children's words and their artwork. I chose to focus on these three books because I was struck by the children's ability and willingness to share their own life experiences in reaction to these books. The children loved the animal characters but the books with Latinx characters allowed them to connect with the cultural wealth of their community and tell stories that otherwise wouldn't have been expressed.

There were three recurring themes that characterized what the children chose to share: separation, family and language. *Separation* is relevant to Latinx immigrant experiences because often family members are in two different places. Although they are physically distant, they are not emotionally distant being tied together by memories that they have shared. The children hold on to these memories and have shared them to express their connection to the books. *Family* resonates strongly with the children of St Peter's. It reminds them that their culture matters and gives them an identity and a sense of community. When looking at the books, they connect to them through the lens of their family. At times there are language barriers but despite this language allows them to feel a strong tie to their family and community. *Language* is what connects them to their Latinx identity and makes them proud to be who they are. These themes show up in more than one book with narratives of the Latinx immigrant life.

For each of these three books, I include a brief summary of the book, sample questions and activities that I used during discussion sessions, excerpts from the transcripts, and my analysis of the themes that emerged.

Mango Abuela and Me - session on October 20 2021

Book Summary: It's a story about a girl and her grandmother who comes to live with her. The girl realizes that her grandmother has trouble speaking English. It's hard for her to fully tell her stories to her granddaughter. And the girl only knows a few words of Spanish. They decide to get a parrot to help with the communication.

Questions before starting to read the book (5 min):

- What do you see on the cover of the book?
- Who wrote this book? Who drew the pictures for this book?

Questions while reading the book (15 min):

- Why are the girl and the grandmother having trouble speaking to each other?
- What do they do to get over it?

Questions after reading the book (10 min):

- Do you know your grandmother? What's your grandmother like?
- Does she speak English?
- Are you able to visit your grandmother? Does she visit you?
- How many languages do you speak?
- What language do you speak at home?
- How do you communicate with someone who doesn't speak your language?
- Is there a family member that you would like to see? If so, what item would you want to share with them?

Activities (20 minutes):

- Draw a family member you miss and would like to see

Transcript excerpt of Mango Abuela and Me: Separation, Family, Language:

When discussing Mango, Abuela and Me, the themes of language, separation and family came up through the stories that the children shared.

Claire: Can someone tell me what you see on the cover?

Maria: I see a grandma, a bird and a child.

Observation: I asked the children to raise their hands if they liked it and everyone raised their hands.

Claire: Does your grandmother speak English?

Maria: She doesn't speak english. My grandma lives in El Salvador

Victoria: We live in America.

Claire: Does your grandmother ever visit you?

Selina: My grandmother also lives in El Salvador but sometimes she comes in the summer to visit.

Claire: So she comes to visit you here. And does she speak Spanish?

Selina: Yes she does.

Claire: Is it hard sometimes to communicate with your family members who don't speak english?

Maria: It's hard because she says words I don't understand.

Claire: What languages do you speak?

Selina: Spanish and English.

Maria: Spanish and English.

Victoria: Spanish.

Maria: But she also speaks English.

ME: When she comes to visit you what do you speak?

Maria: Spanish with my grandma but to my sisters English.

Claire: So does she speak English, your grandmother?

Maria: No, I only speak English with my sisters.

Claire: The thing about this book, in this case the grandmother speaks Spanish but the little girl doesn't speak Spanish, she only speaks English so it's hard for her to communicate with her grandmother and so what really helps them is that they get this parrot who is able to help them practice the words.

Selina: The only word my grandma knows how to say in English is "cow"

Claire: Have you taught your grandma any English words.

Selina: I only taught her how to say cow and when she came back to visit she forgot.

Claire: Does she want to learn English?

Selina: Yes.

Claire: And you already know Spanish so you can speak with her?

Selina: Yes.

Commentary and Analysis

When reading *Mango Abuela and Me*, we discussed languages being spoken. The children use different languages in different settings: home, school and at mentoring. Spanish appears to be particularly important because it allows them to communicate with their families and stay in touch with their roots. For example, Selina, a lively 8 year old, expressed that her grandmother speaks Spanish and that she speaks Spanish with her when she comes to visit from El Salvador. Selina speaks Spanish at home but English in school and at St Peter's.

The little girl who struggles to communicate with her grandmother resonated with Maria who speaks Spanish with her family but despite that still struggles to understand her grandmother. When asked whether it is hard to communicate with members of her family who don't speak English, Maria says: "It's hard because she says words I don't understand." Although she loves her grandmother and speaks Spanish at home, there is still a language barrier that makes it hard to communicate and understand each other.

Maria goes on to say that she speaks "Spanish with my grandma but to my sister English." This shows that she is aware of with whom she speaks what language within what context. Spanish is the language of her ancestors, tying her back to her roots in El Salvador even though she was born in the US.

Selina, too, is aware that the Spanish language ties her to her grandmother. When I asked her if she knows Spanish so she can communicate with her grandmother, she confirmed that she did. She also expressed that her grandmother didn't know any English.

Maria also expressed that she spoke Spanish with her grandmother but that it was hard to understand sometimes because she didn't know all the words that her grandmother was using. Maria, like Selina, is bilingual. She speaks Spanish with her family and English at school and in mentoring. I wanted to address this because sometimes with immigrant families there can be a language barrier between different generations. Both Maria and Selina were born in Worcester and grew up speaking English at school and Spanish at home with their families.

Language is a huge part of a child's identity and culture. I wanted to give them a space to speak about the importance of Spanish in their lives. For Maria and Selina, Spanish is the way that they communicate with their family members and allows them to stay connected to a country, El Salvador, which isn't theirs but is a huge part of their culture. This is important because books often don't acknowledge the other half of their background, El Salvadorian. In this case, the children really connected to this story because their relatives also come to visit them from El Salvador. As an observer, it was amazing to see them unexpectedly connect to their Spanish side when Worcester public schools encourage speaking English in school.

Selina and Maria share the experience of growing up in the US and being disconnected from El Salvador. Growing up in English-dominant environments like their schools and mentoring at St Peter's, the Spanish language became their cultural wealth as Yosso describes it because it allows them to have a tie to their community and because it is most important to their families.

The transcript not only showed the importance of the Spanish language to the children in the mentoring but also showed that they see not only themselves but also their families represented through the mirror of these books. The children at St Peter's immediately saw their own grandparents in the grandmother character in the book.

Language reminds them of their strong connection to their family and culture despite physical separation. When reading *Mango, Abuela and Me*, Selina states, "My grandmother also lives in El Salvador but sometimes she comes in the summer to visit."

She recalls her grandmother coming to see her from El Salvador when she was younger. There may be the distance between Worcester and El Salvador but she has not forgotten the time she spent with her grandma who she has barely seen.

The book *Mango Abuela and Me* is a mirror for Selina and Maria since like the main character it is their grandmothers who came to visit. They see not only themselves but also others around them. Selina is aware that there is distance between her grandmother and her but the Spanish language is a bond that keeps them together. The book becomes a mirror in which they can see their own family and how the cultural richness of their language and traditions is something to be cherished.

Dear Primo - session on November 3, 2021

Book Summary:

The book is about two cousins, one who lives in the US and one in Mexico. They are writing each other letters, sharing about their daily lives. Charlie, the cousin living in Mexico, lives on a farm and shares his experiences with animals. Carlito, the cousin living in the US, talks about his experience living in the city with all the people and the tall buildings. The story shows how the cousins care for one another and they want to communicate.

Questions before starting to read the book (5 min):

- What do you see on the cover of the book?
- Who wrote this book?

Questions while reading the book (15 min):

- Where does Charlie live?
- Where does Carlito live?

Questions after reading the book (10 min):

- Do you have anybody in your family who lives outside the US?
- When was the last time you saw them?
- If they were here now, what would you like to show them about your life?
- What do you miss about that person?

Activities (20 minutes):

- Draw a picture that represents your life and your family

Transcript excerpt from Dear Primo

Language, family and separation are, as with *Abuelo and Me*, dominant themes in the book and allowed the children to share more about their lives.

Claire: Yeah they [Charlie and his cousin] seem to be together.

Selina: So they are writing each other letters.

Claire: Yeah it looks like they are writing each other letters.

Claire: We are going to see what it's about, good predictions, though.

Claire: My family grows things such as mais. Does anybody know the word mais. in English?

Selina: Corn.

Maria: Mouse.

Claire: Good, mais means corn in Spanish

Victoria: We live in America too.

Claire: You live in Worcester.

Victoria: That's in America.

Claire: We have a burro, pollo and a gallo. This is the burro, what is it?

Selina: A donkey.

Claire: Yes. What about gallo?

Selina: Gallo is a hen.

Claire: What about pollos?

Maria: Chickens.

Claire: You can see a city in this picture. Can you tell me where you live?

Commentary and Analysis

Dear Primo is about a boy who lives in the US and writes letters to his cousin who is living in Mexico. Through letter writing they get to stay in touch and learn about each other's lives. This reflects the immigrant experience because often immigrants who come to the US have family members that stay behind in their country.

Language, family and separation are, as with *Abuelo and Me*, dominant themes in the book and allowed the children to share more about their lives. When reading *Dear Primo*, both Maria and Selina are conscious that the characters are not in the same country.

Maria said "It looks like they live in another place but you can see that they are right there together." She stressed the importance of how family sticks together no matter what even if they are separated due to circumstances. Selina stated "so they are writing each other letters." She is aware that letter writing means that they are in two separate places and can see that there are ways to communicate even at a distance. Immigration creates that distance but the emotional ties and memories that connect them to their

distant relatives is cultural wealth. It reminds them of who they are and that they can never lose touch with that.

The discussion about this book shows how the book acts as a mirror into their own lives. They see themselves and their own families reflected in the life experiences of the characters in the book.

The theme of language came up in the discussion of *Dear Primo*. The children were excited to hear Spanish words in a book. They recognized some of them while reading. Selina knew *mais* was corn, *burro* was donkey and *gallo* is a hen. Maria knew that *pollos* meant chicken. However, they did not recognize *rio*, the Spanish word for river. Maria expressed that it meant lake and Selina guessed ocean and then she said: "That's like a lake. Lake is *lago* is Spanish." Hearing Spanish words resonated with them because their language is a part of their culture and ties them back to their family. However, not knowing the word river shows that they are not fully bilingual since they grew up in the US and only speak Spanish at home.

I observed during this reading that the children were really excited to translate the Spanish words in the book into English. They were really proud that they knew Spanish and that they could explain the words. These opportunities may not take place in regular classrooms or in spaces outside of school.

Sing Don't Cry - session on November 10, 2021

Book Summary:

A grandfather comes to visit his grandchildren from Mexico. He has a guitar and decides to share songs from his culture with them. The children love hearing his songs. These songs allow them to bond across generations. The grandfather gets a lot of joy seeing his grandchildren happy and getting to share these songs that were a part of his childhood.

Questions before starting to read the book (5 min):

- What do you see on the cover of the book?
- Who wrote this book? Who drew the pictures for this book?

Questions while reading the book (15 min):

- Who is in this family?
- Where does the grandfather live?
- Why do you think the grandfather looks happy?

Questions after reading the book (10 min):

- Do you remember songs or stories from when you are growing up?
- Who sang or told those stories to you?
- What did you like about them?
- What songs do you like now?

Activities (20 minutes):

- Draw a family member that doesn't live with you

Transcript excerpt from *Sing Don't Cry*

The children's reactions to *Sing Don't Cry* connected to the themes of family and separation.

Claire: Can you tell me about the last time you had a relative that visited that doesn't live with you?

Selina: So like my grandma she came from El Salvador and like she knew Lola too but she like left and she stayed for 4 weeks, like for a month and she saw me and Lola play in the porch.

Maria: The last time was when I was 4 because then my grandpa and grandma was there and then my grandma leaves and only my grandpa was there.

Claire: So then your grandparents came to visit you?

Maria: But then they go away.

Claire: So they came when you were 4?

Maria: Yeah they don't come anymore when I was 5 or 6 or 7.

Claire: Why is that?

Maria: I don't know.

Claire: They can't come I guess.

Claire: Yeah Victoria, can you tell me about a time you had a family member visit you that doesn't live with you.

Victoria: So grandma leaved and then my grandpa was there and then he had food and then I had a little toy but now it got lost.

Claire: Yeah, Lola.

Lola: My mom she was here before but instead they grounded her for 5 years in El Salvador and I miss her.

Claire: Oh so she's in El Salvador now, I hope that you get to see her soon.

Selina: Sometimes I play with Lola like she calls her mom.

Claire: Oh like she calls her mom in El Salvador.

Maria: Same with Victoria because we have the same grandpa because we are sisters.

Claire: And you both haven't seen him in a while, right?

Maria: Yeah.

Commentary and Analysis

When reading *Sing Don't Cry*, I asked the children to do a drawing activity where they would either draw their favorite musical instrument or do a picture of a relative visiting them whom they hadn't seen in a long time. Maria, a talkative seven-year-old Latinx girl with family from El Salvador, drew a picture of herself with her grandparents who came to visit her. Her grandparents live in El Salvador. Maria told me that the last time her grandparents came to visit her was when she was four. I wasn't expecting Maria to connect to the book like that.

Also in response to *Sing Don't Cry*, Lola, a shy 8 year old with family from El Salvador did a drawing. In this drawing, she is waving goodbye to another female. Lola explained to me that this was her waving goodbye to her mother. She has been living with her aunt since her mother was deported back to El Salvador. When she told me this, I thought it was heartbreaking that she hadn't seen her mom in a year. I realized the power of reading a book that had characters that looked similar to the children reading it because Lola was connecting it to her own experiences and was able to talk about an experience that she hadn't spoken about before and otherwise there wouldn't be the space for. As for the drawing with Maria, I find this really powerful because it was unexpected that Lola would connect her personal life in this way to the book.

Both Maria and Selina talked about their family being from El Salvador, when reading *Dear Primo* and *Sing Don't Cry*. Selina brought her father into the conversation: "Those troncos, they use it in El Salvador, that's where my dad got his." Maria also

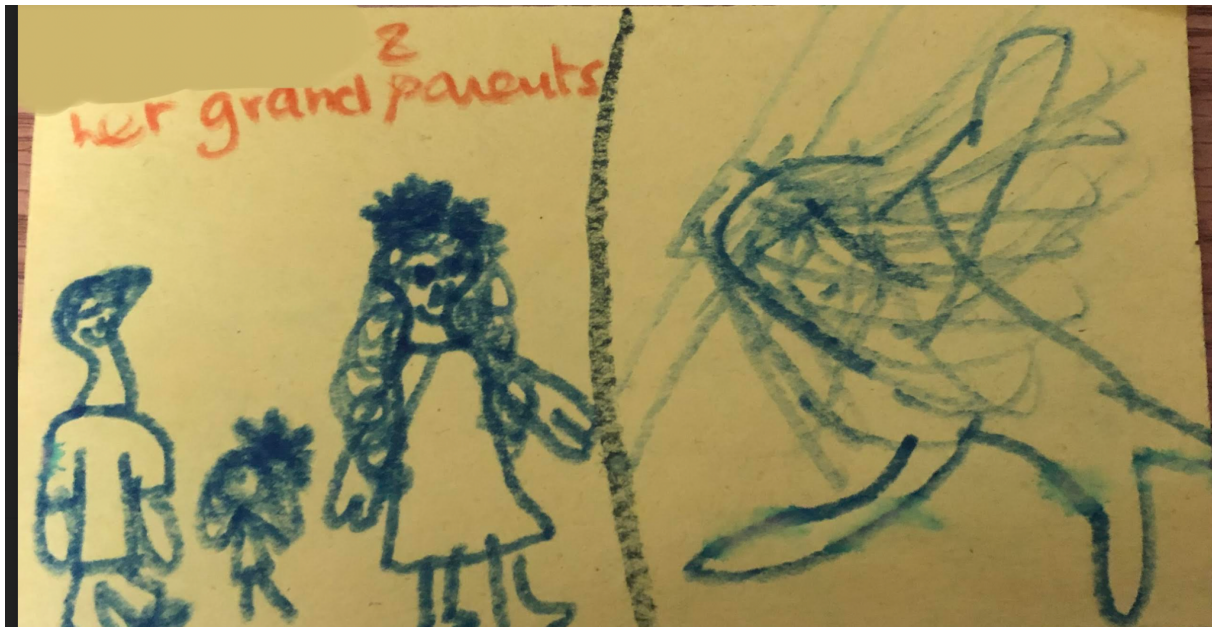
mentions her family as well: “She doesn’t speak English. My grandma lives in El Salvador.” Lola also has family in El Salvador: “My mom, she was here before but instead they grounded her for 5 years in El Salvador and I miss her.” When reading these books, the children at St Peter’s bring up memories with their distant relatives, allowing them to reflect on their own worlds through the connection to their families.



Lola is waving goodbye to her mom

When reading *Sing Don't Cry*, the children at the mentoring program brought up times when their family members came to visit them. They were aware of the separation

between them. Selina recounts a specific moment with her grandmother: “So like my grandma she came from El Salvador and like she knew Lola too but she like left and she stayed for 4 weeks, like for a month and she saw me and Lola play in the porch.” Selina and Lola lived in the same building. She remembers a very specific moment when her grandmother saw her playing with her friend on the porch. Maria stated: “The last time was when I was 4 because then my grandpa and grandma was there and then my grandma leaves and only my grandpa was there but then they go away.” She explained to me that her grandparents don’t live in the same country as her. Maria is now eight years old. It has been four years since she saw her grandparents but her emotional connection to them is so strong that their visit is the first thing that comes to her mind. This is also the subject of the drawing that she made (see below).



Maria's grandparents visiting Maria when she was 4

Victoria, Maria's little sister is also aware of the distance and the fact that her grandparents do not live with them: "So grandma leaved and then my grandpa was there and then he had food and then I had a little toy but now it got lost." Like Maria, she remembers her grandparents' present. Her memory is also specific and she mentions a toy that was given to her but then got lost. Lola also stated: "My mom was here before but instead they grounded her for 5 years in El Salvador and I miss her." She is aware that her mom is in El Salvador and that she is in Worcester. She has been separated from her mom for 5 years. The children from the mentoring program know that separation is a part of immigration and they are able to use the book as a mirror of their own lives and their families' lives when talking about their grandparents who live in El Salvador and only come to visit.

Conclusions

Yosso's framework about "cultural wealth" and Bishop's metaphors of "windows, mirrors and sliding glass doors," suggest there is an opportunity for the child to bring their family life and culture into the discussion. The children were able to see their identities reflected in the narratives of these books. The themes of family, separation and language were brought up in the discussions and allowed the children to share and value their experiences, their language and their culture.

As a future educator, I was excited to find a space that allowed the children to explore their own identities. I am aware of the importance of self-expression, especially

when it comes to the children's own families and communities. Educators can use these books as tools to allow children to feel and be seen.

I wanted to address the lack of representation in children's books because there is a lot of power in children giving voice to a part of their identity that might not be recognized in schools and in other English-dominant spaces. I wanted to learn what they would value in the books and if it mattered to have characters that looked like them. Having the chance to discuss these books gave children the agency to talk about their languages, their family, and places they connect to outside the US. These books, serving as mirrors, allowed them to not only see themselves but also a larger human experience. The literature review indicates there is a lack of representation in children's literature. Although there are some books with Latinx characters, the narratives that represent immigrant culture are still missing. These narratives are at the center of the lives of children whose parents came from countries like El Salvador and who grew up in the US having to navigate between their two cultures.

When I started this research I didn't know whether the children would connect more to popular animal books or to books with Latinx characters. I know it can be assumed that they would connect more to the books with Latinx themes and experiences and this is why I included books with animal characters. The children loved the Pete the Cat character and saw it like a friend. They did make some connections to that character but none of those connections tied them back to their rich Latinx culture and made them feel proud to speak Spanish. The children were really excited when I read *Dear Primo* because it included Spanish words and they were eager to show that

they knew them. Their excitement shows the relevance of Spanish in their lives as a language spoken in their communities and at home with their families unlike English which they speak in school and also in the mentoring space. They saw much more than themselves in the mirror of these books: they saw their families and their cultures as well.

I found it moving that these books allowed the children to trust me enough to open up about their personal stories in a way that I had not expected.

The children were able to find their voices by using the books as mirrors for their own experiences. They shared stories about their families and immigration that weren't otherwise heard in the mentoring space. For example, Lola had never spoken about her mom being deported and her not being able to see her mother. Through the *Sing Don't Cry* book and the idea of a family member visiting, she connected the dots and made a heartbreaking drawing of her waving goodbye to her mom. These are realities for Latinx children of immigrants who might have their family members taken away from them and not know when they can see them next. Maria and her sister Victoria also remembered their grandparents visiting them when they were younger. Maria and Victoria live with their parents so do not experience the same separation as Lola but still they don't get to see their grandparents often. Selina also talked about her grandmother visiting when she was younger. Selina also knows the experience of not seeing her grandparents often due to them living in another country.

My research and the wonderful interactions with the children reinforced my perception of the rich heritage and cultural wealth of the Latinx community. The families

share the experience of coming to a new country yet also wanting to stay true to their roots. Their children speak Spanish at home but English still remains the dominant language. The strong sense of community and family is what ties them together. These books were mirrors for the children at the mentoring program because they are currently experiencing and navigating between two worlds: the one with their family and the one at school where English is dominant. Being able to share their stories related to immigration affirmed them and allowed them to be proud of their roots. It allowed them to bring along with them the wealth of experiences of their families and communities. Before starting this project, I knew the importance for children to have book characters who look like them and share similar life experiences. I had not expected them to be so vulnerable and share about their families. The concept of mirrors allowed me to see that family is at the center of their world and of their understanding of themselves. They see themselves as possessors of two languages, Americans with multiple cultural perspectives, resilient links between ancestors and their current American experience.

This project may show how non Latinx teachers can, and I believe should, include books with narratives that are specific to these kids' cultures, allowing room for discussion about the student's lives. These teachers of non Latinx backgrounds can create safe spaces for kids to see themselves and be themselves more fully – by bringing their families, language, and cultures into the classroom, and sharing about their lives at home.

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Appendix

Purpose statement: What gaps in knowledge/programming are you filling? How do you think you (or others) will benefit from your praxis project (and your thesis)? What change in the world are you hoping will result? (This can be very modest -- a change in yourself....)

The purpose of this project is to examine how representation matters and how books from various cultures of marginalized communities can be included in educational spaces.

| Current Questions guiding your research | Key constructs (lenses) or framework | Data Sources | Data Analysis (How are you approaching, or how will you approach your data) | What are you finding? (What are you anticipating you'll find? What might surprise you?) |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| RQ1: How do the children engage with the books I read, during and after book-reading (and in follow-up art activities)? | a) cultural wealth, b) multiculturalism, c) critical race theory, d) counter narratives, e) dominant stories, f) windows mirrors and sliding glass doors, g) equity pedagogy | Transcripts, voice memos, photographs of artworks | Based on the data, I am looking to see if children can understand context, theme of the book, its main characters and its authors; are able to follow key elements of the story and connect these to personal experience; think critically about the world around them; express through artwork; become aware of possibilities for change | The visuals matter because they see themselves in these stories through them. The artwork is essential because it allows the children to show what they have seen. The discussion is important because they get to share their voices and perspectives on the characters. |
| RQ2: Do they show evidence that they identify or connect with a | a) cultural wealth, b) multiculturalism, c) critical | Transcripts, voice memos, photograph | Based on the data, I am looking to see if children can understand context, theme of the book, its main characters | So far the children connect to characters that have similar life experiences to them in |

| | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| character or characters? | race theory, d) counter narratives, e) dominant stories, f) windows mirrors and sliding glass doors, g) equity pedagogy | s of artworks | and its authors; are able to follow key elements of the story and connect these to personal experience; think critically about the world around them; express through artwork; become aware of possibilities for change | their responses in the discussions and in the artwork they have been doing. The children are able to see connections between the stories and their own lives. |
| RQ3: Are the theoretical frameworks of Bishop (1990) and Yosso (2005) useful to document children's engagement with children's books? | a) cultural wealth, b) multiculturalism, c) critical race theory, d) counter narratives, e) dominant stories, f) windows mirrors and sliding glass doors, g) equity pedagogy | Transcripts, voice memos, photographs of artworks | Based on the data, I am looking to see if children can understand context, theme of the book, its main characters and its authors; are able to follow key elements of the story and connect these to personal experience; think critically about the world around them; express through artwork; become aware of possibilities for change | So far the children connect to characters that have similar life experiences to them in their responses in the discussions and in the artwork they have been doing. The children are able to see connections between the stories and their own lives. |
| ... | | | | |