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# LET'S DISCUSS CHICANO ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

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## Introduction

Ethnic literature has had an increasingly important role in our public schools as the number of minority children enrolled has grown dramatically. Teachers are realizing the importance of helping children to appreciate the richness of cultural difference and to develop some feelings of empathy for all people (Washburn, 1978, p 3). Tanizer very aptly sums up the matter: "What does children's literature have to offer?... At its best it can hold up a mirror to minority life and provide memorable characters with whom minority children can identify. At its best it can enable children to gain insight into the lives and essential humanity of people who seem superficially quite different" (Tanizer, 1972). Children's literature appears to have the potential of dispelling harmful stereotypes about groups.

## Improved Representation

Various studies have documented an increase in the ethnic diversity within the pages of literature intended for youthful readers (McKay, 1970; Garcia, 1977; Chall, Radwin, French and Hall, 1978). However, many of these same researchers found that these improvements in the number and quality of ethnic characterizations were minimal compared to the actual need. Jean Chall and other replicated Nancy Larrick's study and found that the world of children's literature had changed very little in over ten years, and in fact had remained the "all-white world" that Larrick had earlier documented. Many researchers also found problems with the characterizations of these ethnic protagonists. For example, Taylor felt that there were some very serious problems of stereotypes in the extant Chicano children's literature (Taylor, 1975). Monson and Peltola put together a very fine collection of research studies of ethnic children's literature (Monson & Peltola, 1976).

## The Evaluation Process

Another issue developed around the task of evaluating and selecting this ethnic literature for inclusion in public school and library collections. A review of the literature revealed many different instruments for evaluating and selecting ethnic children's literature. However, to a great extent, it remains primarily a function and process involving individual selections, views, and perceptions.

There has been real concern in the scholarly literature regarding the background of those who write, evaluate, or select this literature for young readers. The concerns take varied and often

controversial forms. The IRA sponsored a forum on ethnic children's literature for the purpose of exploring issues facing a pluralistic society (Tanizer & Karl, 1972). One of the issues discussed was the question of who speaks for a culture both in the writing and in the evaluation of literature. Among the minority literature opinions stated that it is very unlikely that a white person is able to write about the minority experience. Other researchers have expressed these positions regarding the selection and evaluation of ethnic children's literature. Articles expressing similar opinions and positions often appear in the Bulletin for the Council on Interracial Books for Children (1975).

The issues that surfaced in the 1972 roundtable discussion sponsored by the IRA are still developing in the current literature as witnessed by Taylor and others who question the current ethnic children's literature that is being made available to young readers. They are not questioning whether it should be shared with children. Indeed, the literature clearly stated the need for more and better ethnic children's literature. The questions revolve around the issues of negative characterizations and the differences of opinion that develop in determining what is good ethnic literature. The following investigation attempted to address these issues.

#### Summary of the Study

The primary concern of this study was to determine whether there were significant differences in the perceptions of Chicano adolescents and librarians who read three selected samples of Chicano adolescent literature. The sources of data consisted of three Chicano adolescent books that were selected through a questionnaire administered to librarians. The investigation was carried out using Osgood's Semantic Differential Scale (SDS) and a Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) instrument for evaluating Chicano adolescent literature.

The sample consisted of 54 Chicano adolescent students who were participants of the High School Equivalency Program at California State University in Fresno. The panel of librarians consisted of ten employees of the Fresno County Public Libraries System.

The primary hypothesis was that there would be no significant differences in the perceptions of the Chicano adolescents and the librarians. This hypothesis was tested three different times for each of the three samples of literature. There were also composite evaluations of each book and an overall comparison of the three books. The t-test was used to identify significantly different evaluation scores between the Chicano adolescents and the librarians.

The results of this study seem to support the idea that there are strong similarities in the way that Chicano adolescents and librarians from Anglo and middle-class backgrounds perceive the same literature. The statistical findings of the study seem to indicate that there is not a significant difference in the way that Chicano adolescents and librarians perceive literature, as measured by the semantic differential scale. This would seem to

support the argument that librarians, in fact, have been accurately identifying and selecting literature that Chicano adolescents would enjoy. If this is the case, a number of related questions remain to be answered. The first has to do with the applications of this research finding to the reality of the library systems.

In a Bulletin double issue devoted to the status of children's books for Chicanos, five articles explored the problems of establishing library collections that are free of racism and stereotypes. The general mood of the articles was that current library systems and staffs were not sufficiently informed about the Chicano experience to make accurate decisions regarding literature selections. How are the findings of this study reconciled with the expressed opinion in the extant literature? A reasonable response is that this study has uncovered some important commonalities and has affirmed that there is a basic understanding between librarians and Chicano adolescents.

#### Implications for Further Research

This researcher was struck by the difficulty that librarians had in identifying the five best examples of Chicano adolescent literature. Many of the librarians were only able to identify three examples, and many of their selections were not Chicano adolescent literature but Black or Puerto Rican literature. Two research recommendations arise from this experience.

The review of research and scholarly opinion did not reveal any studies or annotated bibliographies devoted exclusively to Chicano adolescent literature. Such a study would describe the quantity and quality of this literature and would be a welcome resource for teachers and librarians alike.

A similar recommendation is directed at writers and developers of literature and instructional materials. The review of the literature and the experience of the librarians involved in the study verify that the body of existing Chicano adolescent literature is actually very limited. Writers from Chicano backgrounds or who are knowledgeable about the Chicano experience should consider contributing to this limited body of literature. The growing number of Chicano children in the public schools gives this recommendation a sense of urgency.

Adolescence is a difficult and demanding stage of development. This is especially true for minority background youths who often suffer from unemployment, poverty, racism, and a frequently bruised self-image. Librarians and teachers can make a significant contribution in the lives of Chicano youths by making available to them a literature that calls out to them personally and provides them with an opportunity for self-assessment and reassurance in their identity.

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