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Eastern Kentucky University

Raising Awareness:

Creating a Children's Book to Reveal the Responsibilities and Cultural Values of

Latino/a Children

Honors Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment

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By

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Raising Awareness:

Creating a Children's Book to Reveal the Responsibilities and Cultural Values of Latino/a
Children

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This research project explores the challenges Latino/a children face by highlighting those challenges in a new children's book. Existing books attempting to portray the Latino/a culture were reviewed and common themes found were sectioned into groups using the Creswell's method for coding qualitative data. Discovering which existing themes in children's books about Latino/Latina culture were the most prominent guided the process of choosing which new themes were essential to include in future pieces. This research reviewed components of published work to determine which accurate cultural representations were appropriate to include in books for children ages five to seven. Previous pieces of literature attempting to portray the Latino/a culture include concepts such as defined gender roles as well as familial and ethnic stereotypes. It was important to choose cultural characteristics that accurately represented Latino/as when creating the plot of this new book. Concepts such as language brokering,

familism, and discrimination are all introduced, which are not often found in existing children's books. Introducing these concepts is important to enhance the cultural awareness in children by providing insight into the experiences children of Latino/Latina families face. To understand the values and responsibilities Latino/a children have, it is critical to find a method of introducing such sensitive topics to children and the readers- which are most often the parents. Making this conversation accessible was the primary motive of conducting this research. Establishing a cultural awareness dialogue between parents, teachers and children can be achieved through creating a children's book that is culturally appropriate.

Keywords and phrases: Children's books, cultural awareness/competence, child brokering, familism, discrimination, Latino, Latina.

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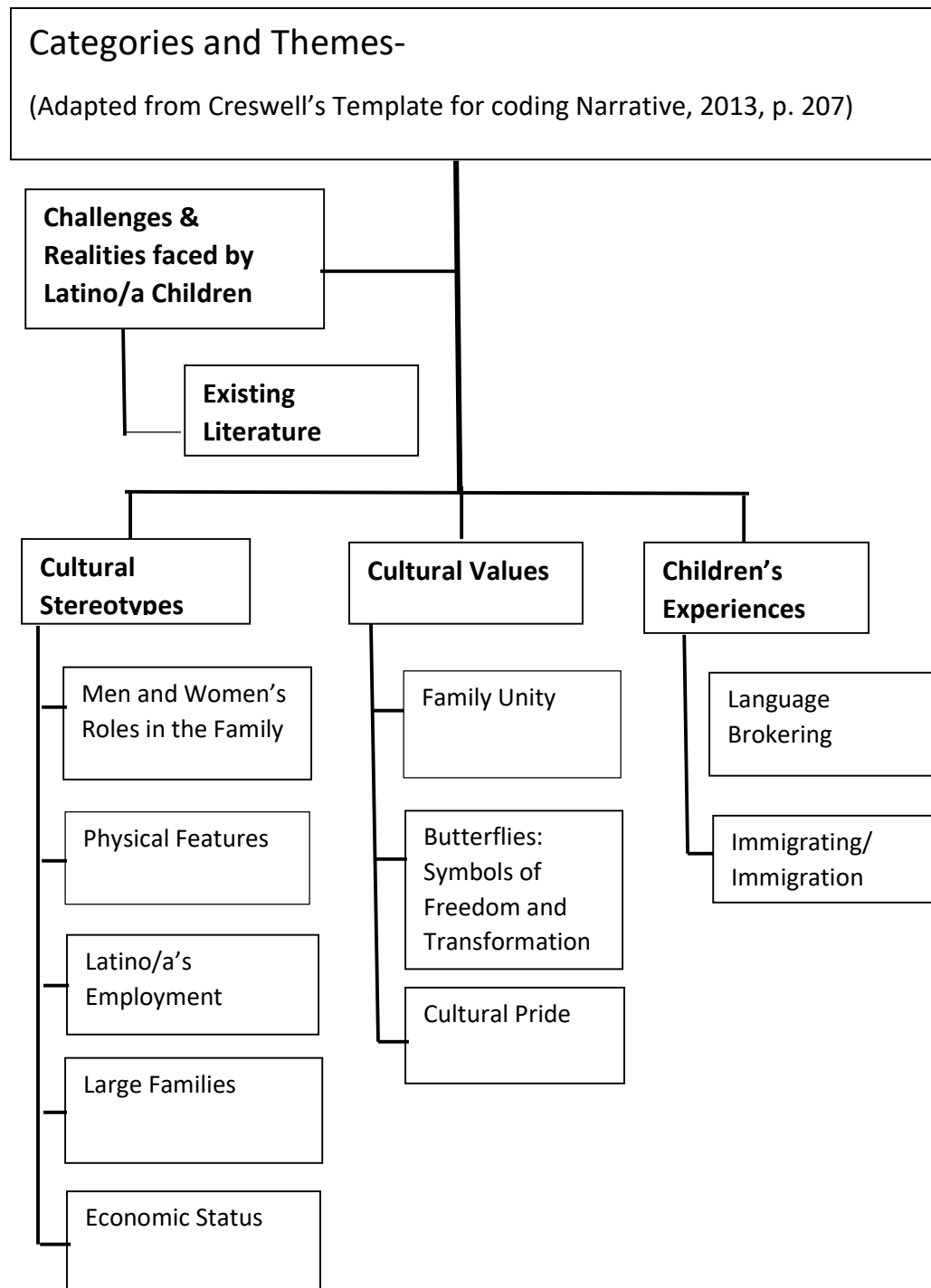
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Being part of the Latino/a population myself, I have endured many similar experiences as those mentioned throughout this research. As a child I often felt excluded and different, therefore I am aware of how important it is to enhance cultural awareness from a young age. My intent was to create something Latino/a children could relate to in their communities and classrooms to feel they are not alone in environments that may not be so welcoming.

Introduction

Children are constantly gaining new experiences and knowledge that will shape them into the adults they will become. Children's beliefs are influenced by the people they are closest to and spend the most time with. This could include family, school, and their overall communities. These people all influence and contribute to children's attitudes towards others. Cultural awareness relates to the ability of a person to accept and be sensitive to, as well as be aware of, differences among various cultures. Not everyone has learned about, or subscribes to, cultural awareness. There has been a lot of research conducted to investigate the point where a child begins to develop a sense of cultural awareness. Several scholars have proved that instilling multicultural sensitivity is an important part of helping children develop strong social competence, especially given an increasingly diverse society (Kim, Green & Klein, 2006). In the United States, a country where the largest ethnic minority represented is the Latino/a group, finding appropriate ways of enhancing cultural awareness in children is important. It is imperative to raise cultural awareness about the responsibilities and realities that Latino/a children face. Some of these realities, including serving as language brokers, familism, and discrimination. Through literature, such topics can be depicted in ways the children can relate to and understand. Children's books provide insightful information for children to learn about the world around them by providing more than just literacy skills. When creating developmentally appropriate literature about diverse cultures, children can become culturally competent and children who have minority backgrounds feel welcome in the classroom by the representations of their cultures in the stories and dialogue being shared each day.

Finding appropriate methods of introducing diversity to young children can be challenging since teachers may have difficulty finding ways of introducing diversity, and it is often not taught in the classroom (Morgan, 2009). One reason why diversity may not be promoted in the classrooms as much as it should relates to the avoidance of discussions. Teachers and staff may choose to avoid speaking on such topics to prevent discussions that parents and teachers may find uncomfortable or disapprove of. However, finding appropriate methods to introduce diversity in ways that cultural awareness can be learned, and adults feel confident in teaching/sharing, is possible. Books are a great tool to teach and learn about other cultures. They can be used to help children develop a sense of identity, an awareness of the ways in which they are different from others, knowledge about their own and other cultures, and skills to communicate effectively with people of different cultural backgrounds (Kim, Green, & Klein, 2006). Schools and teachers should validate children's culturally different experiences. If schools fail to be inclusive, children may be unwilling to communicate regarding their sense of identity, develop two identities (one to fit the home and another to fit the school environment), or feel rejected from the school system overall (Kim, Green, & Klein, 2006). The importance of fostering an inclusive environment is demonstrated in the way children express themselves and how they speak of other cultures. Using children's books to promote diversity in the classroom is a method of creating an inclusive environment, while also enhancing cultural awareness in children.

Creating an Appropriate Children's book

To create a piece of literature that will help raise cultural awareness, it is vital to understand the elements of a successful children's book. When introducing literature to raise cultural awareness in a classroom, teachers must ensure they are utilizing books that are unbiased to appropriately portray cultural minority groups. The language should be equitable, and the speech used must accurately represent the dialogue of the group (Morgan, 2009). The word choice of the author must respectfully describe the population characterized in the book to ensure cultural awareness is fostered. Since many ideas and beliefs circulate in children's environments, unbiased phrases and depictions of other cultures should also be present in their classrooms. Aside from carefully analyzing the language used, the arrangement and display of the wording is also important. For example, the manipulation of text size is one method of expressing emotional intensity (Villarreal et al., 2015). Emotions like anger and excitement can be portrayed using capital letters since they emphasize an important part of the text. Ideally, authors should not overwhelm the reader with an excessive amount of words. An important characteristic to consider about a children's book is the balance between text and illustrations (Villarreal et al., 2015). Children can interpret the meaning of books without using unnecessary text that will distract them from the overall message. Children's book author and illustrator, David Galef, pointed out some key elements when it comes to wording. A children's book should not be wordy since children's attention span is shorter than adults, and at the same time they also need to be engaging and appealing. Some children like patterns and symmetry so careful selection of

words is crucial when constructing the story (Galef, 2009). The ability to effectively use and arrange language or words is a must-have skill when creating a children's book.

Some of the most important elements of children's books are the illustrations. In addition to the use of illustrations, there are several components that aid in creating meaningful stories. Researchers Villarreal, Minton, and Miriam Martinez (2015) conducted a study to determine the effects of using picture books in the classroom while defining the characteristics of meaningful illustrations. One important characteristic to keep in mind is the positioning of characters since it conveys information about their status and power. When the character's status or position in their communities is clearly illustrated, it can teach children of similar people in their environments (Villarreal et al., 2015). Another key element when creating illustrations is the use of perspective. Shifts in perspective have the power to create dynamic storytelling effects. It must be clear for a child to understand from whose perspective they are reading and should be easy for them to understand if it changes. Line is an important visual element that is used to organize an image and guide the eye of the viewer. Illustrators use lines to create emphasis, define an area, convey movement, or heighten tension (Villarreal et al., 2015). The use of line has the power to control an entire image since it directs the way the viewer makes sense of the illustration. Color also has a great impact on illustrations since it can convey a character's traits and emotions, establish moods, provide setting information, and draw attention to objects or characters (Villarreal et al., 2015). These elements come together to create images that will generate the originality of a children book. When creating a piece of literature to enhance cultural awareness, these characteristics need to be critically implemented into the story to respectfully compose

illustrations that will represent specific cultures. The illustrations of a culturally appropriate book should accurately portray physical differences and gender roles (Morgan, 2009). The Latino/a population is often stereotyped, and its members are described as being all like, sharing physical features, financial situations and more. Therefore, when illustrating the culture, many books incorrectly depict Latino's skin colors, and amongst them a prevalence for the disregard for bicultural backgrounds (Naidoo, 2008). For some children, the images in a book are more meaningful than the text itself, so the authors must appropriately characterize the culture they are illustrating.

Existing Literature

In order to create a meaningful children's book that will raise and teach cultural awareness, it is important to explore published work to find common themes in what children are currently reading about the Latino/a culture. The popular themes found in existing literature will be coded using the Creswell method. In the Creswell method for coding qualitative data, common themes and ideas will be placed in groups to find patterns within literature. These patterns will then be used to guide the process of choosing which new and existing appropriate themes will be incorporated in this children's book as well as to explore the gaps in the research already conducted.

The Américas Award is given in recognition of U.S. books published in the previous years in English or Spanish that authentically and engagingly portray Latin America, the Caribbean, or Latinos in the United States. A study conducted by Jaime Naidoo reviews children's books that have won or been nominated for this award. It has been noted that many of these books portray the Latino/a culture in a biased or stereotypical manner (Naidoo, 2008). Many picture books nominated for the Americas award portrayed gender stereotyping for females. For instance, Rudolfo Anaya and Amy Córdova's *The Santero's Miracle: A Bilingual Story* portrays Mexican-American Latinas in traditional roles such as cooks and caregivers, while the male characters undertake more active roles. In *No Dogs allowed* written by Sonia Manzano, the main character's mother has the role of cooking large quantities of meals for her family as being her main role. (Yoo-Lee, Fowler, Adkins, Kim, & Davis, 2014). Many books still perpetuate the idea

that Latino men are full of machismo while Latinas are submissive females constrained to domestic duties. Machismo is a term to emphasize the strong sense of sexism still present in many Spanish-speaking countries. Females should not be portrayed as weak and submissive but should have important positions and roles as well as represented as often as men in both illustration and text. There are also certain jobs or tasks assigned to Latino/a people. For example, *A Day's Work* written by Eve Bunting perpetuated stereotypes of Mexican American Men as manual laborers. The depiction of Latinos as having brown eyes accompanied by dark hair and skin, commonly referred to as the "Latin look," is a perpetuation of the misconception that all Latinos have the same physical appearance (Naidoo, 2008). Naidoo found that half of the titles running for the Americas award illustrated Latino characters as such. This misconception that many, if not all, Latinos have a certain look is one of the reasons why individuals are discriminated against. People may be categorized as Latinos based on this "Latin look" without being Latinos or may be automatically defined as Latinos by their skin color. Placing cultural stereotypes in children's books is also common. Many children's books illustrate cultural stereotypes by showing piñatas, sombreros, and other degrading references. The idea that Latino/a families consist of many children is often portrayed. For example, in the story, *If the Shoe Fits*, the main character Rigo is portrayed as having several brothers and sisters. In both *If the Shoe Fits* and *No Dogs Allowed*, beans are shown as being the primary meal of the families. There are illustrations within several children's books that often provide a stereotypical way of describing the culture.

Many children's books about Latino/as may also only focus on one specific country. For example, the butterfly which symbolizes metamorphosis, flight, and fragility is found in many children's books about the Latino/a population (Naidoo, 2008). Since many butterflies are native only to Mexico, the butterfly is significant to the Mexican culture and a source of cultural pride. Therefore, numerous children's books about Latinos have included butterflies as significant cultural symbols which classifies Latino/as to one specific country. Examples of books that illustrate butterflies include: Francisco Jiménez and Simón Silva's *La Mariposa*, Tony Johnston and Susan Guevara's *Isabel's House of Butterflies*, and Virginia Kroll and Gerardo Suzán's *Butterfly Boy*. Particularly symbolic in many of these books and in *My Diary from Here to There*, the monarch butterfly represents the immigration of souls from their native home in Mexico across the U.S. border to places unknown (Naidoo, 2008). Even though this symbol represents positive characteristics, it often characterizes Latinos as originating from one country. Many children's books such as the pieces previously mentioned, fail to portray the Latino/a culture

Literature That Accurately Depicts the Latino/a Culture

Even though there are many pieces that provide a stereotypical description of the Latino/a culture, there are appropriate pieces that can be used to promote cultural awareness. These books can also be used as examples for future writers of Latino/a literature to incorporate accurate themes into their own writing. Written by Tony Johnston, *Uncle Rain Cloud* raises the reader's awareness of the multiple roles that children play when their families have immigrated. In this story, Carlos is both a translator and an English teacher for his Uncle Tomas which defines Carlos as a language broker. Literacy code switching is the use of alternating Spanish and English in the text. It is strategic and intentional in which children who are part of the culture being described, can identify words that are used in their homes. For example, in *Grandma and Me at the Flea* by Juan Felipe Herrera the narrator states:

I smell toasty hot chocolate and my favorite—scrambled eggs with *nopalitos*, juicy cactus. After breakfast, I help Grandma get ready for the flea market. I wrap Western pants and shirts into tight burritos. Grandma loads the clothes into her van with the sign on the side. (p. 5)

The author uses Spanish terms throughout the English text that are easy to define by the reader, who may not be fluent in Spanish. This strategy provides insight into the language, while also offering children who do speak Spanish the opportunity to read words they already identify.

Another example of literacy code switching is found in *In My Diary From Here to There/Mi Diario de Allá Hasta Aquí* written by Amada Pérez. The author writes:

Amada m'ija, I can see how worried you've been. Don't be scared. Everything will be all right. But how do you know? What will happen to us? I said. He smiled, M'ija, I was born in Arizona, in the States. When I was a big kid like you—my Papá and Mamá moved our family back to Mexico. (p. 11)

The use of the word m'ija suggests intense love and affection coming from the parents. Children in the Latino/a culture can relate to the use of the word m'ija by their loved ones who use this term of endearment to identify them (Alamillo & Arenas, 2012). The books mentioned above each have characteristics that make them meaningful books to introduce in the classroom. They cover concepts such as language brokering, difficulties with finding an identity in diverse environments and code switching between languages. When children are exposed to such concepts, awareness of that culture develops, while children who identify as being part of that culture have things they can relate to in the classroom.

Coding the Existing Literature

Ten published children's books were coded by placing common themes found throughout the stories into bigger categories to highlight which matters are being discussed and which ones are not. The ten books that were coded include: *The Santero's Miracle: A Bilingual Story*, *No Dogs allowed*, *A Day's Work*, *If the Shoe Fits*, *La Mariposa*, *Isabel's House of Butterflies*, *Butterfly Boy*, *My Diary from Here to There*, *Uncle Rain Cloud*, and *Grandma and Me at the Flea*. Using the critiques from professionals and authors as well the information gathered by reading each book, it was possible to use the Creswell's coding tool to group the common themes found in those pieces. The popular themes found were placed in three categories: cultural stereotypes, cultural values, and children's experiences. Within those categories several common themes were listed. For example, men's and women's roles in the family, physical features, Latino/as employment, the portrayal of large families and the low economic status of the Latino/a population were all topics that could be classified as cultural stereotypes. In most of these books, the Latino/a characters were portrayed as being dark skinned or having dark hair. The idea that Latino families are made of up many members is also a stereotype along with portraying most characters as having manual labor jobs. Other common themes found were family unity, using butterflies as cultural symbols and cultural pride, which were all categorized under cultural values. Several books such as *If the Shoe fits*, *My Diary from Here to There* and more focus on the importance that the family plays in the Latino/a culture by exemplifying the unity of its members. Children's experiences include topics such as the role that children have serving as language brokers and the immigration of families from their home countries to the

United States for better economic opportunities. Language brokering which is the process where children interpret and mediate for their non-English speaking family members. This issue was present in the books- *Uncle Rain Cloud* and *A Days Work* where the main characters were shown translating for their grandfathers and uncles in important settings. The coding process was used to categorize the common themes found in existing literature that attempt to portray the Latino/a culture. It was necessary to note which topics in existing books was respectful to conclude which new concepts were crucial to implement in an authentic book about Latino/as to raise cultural awareness in children.

Cultural Characteristics that should be Implemented in a Children's Book

Ensuring a children's book is culturally appropriate may be challenging but knowing the components of pieces that represent other cultures respectfully is needed to be able to introduce them in the classroom. Culturally appropriate pieces of literature include certain key components while also avoiding those that may inaccurately or even disrespectfully portray that culture. Hani Morgan, a professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, conducted a study in which he argued that using picture books in classrooms is an effective way to teach multiple perspectives to children as well as describing the characteristics that are found in appropriate pieces. A children's book should not reflect just the perspective of the majority group but express perspectives of other groups. Speech needs to represent the dialogue of the group and be portrayed accurately. The writing used to express the language of a culture should not make the group seem "exotic," but should use and teach the actual language of the group. Characteristics of culturally appropriate books include illustrations that show physical differences between people of color because characters should not appear identical to each other. Illustrations should not be stereotypical in any way to avoid placing a certain label on how people should speak, feel, or look. Also, authors who write about their own group are more likely to publish an authentic book since they have more insight of that specific group (Morgan, 2009). Ensuring that a group is respectfully portrayed is crucial when introducing a book to the classroom since it can influence the way children perceive those who have different backgrounds and cultural values than they do.

When choosing which elements to include in a culturally appropriate story, values of the Latino/a culture must be explored. The importance of family varies between cultures depending on their involvement and how much value is placed on individualism. In many developed countries, a sense of autonomy is praised in which children are encouraged to achieve their goals to have the most opportunities. In the Latino/a culture, familism is valued over individualism. Familism is defined as a cultural value that involves individuals' strong identification with and attachment to their families (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Individuals with a deep sense of familism show strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity with members of their family which influence their decision-making skills. The concept of familism incorporates both behavioral and attitudinal dimensions since children of Latino parents feel obligated to provide material and emotional support as they grow up (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Children are frequently reminded to rely on relatives for support as well as always being available to offer the same assistance. When children are constantly reminded of the importance of family, they develop a sense of dependence, which can affect their academic and personal lives. Latino/a parents do, however, have high hopes for their children's future and education. Since family is an important part of children's lives, they are driven by their parent's sacrifices and use them as motivators to become educated individuals (Holloway et al., 2014). Familism can positively influence Latino children since it inspires them to achieve their goals to make their parents proud. However, some view this concept as negative since it influences individuals to stay close to home which limits their college and work opportunities. The sense of familism is a prominent quality in Latino/a children that influences the way they view life in general.

Children as language brokers is a topic that is beginning to surface even though it has been occurring for generations. Language brokering is defined as the process where children of immigrants are called upon to interpret and mediate information for adults. (Villanueva & Buriel, 2010). Most Latino immigrant parents arrive to the United States speaking little to no English. Since the young children of these immigrants are usually the first members of their families to learn the language, parents often rely on them to interpret and translate important information. These children are referred to as “language brokers” because they use their knowledge of the language on behalf of their parents and other non-English speaking members of their communities (Villanueva & Buriel, 2010). Language brokers may need to translate for their parents in medical facilities, businesses, schools, and in the overall community. These children obtain a sense of responsibility from a young age since they must represent their parents in settings of great importance. Research has found anxiety amongst Latino/a brokers since the pressure of correctly translating the message is placed on them (Villanueva & Buriel, 2010). Language brokering can occur among individuals who are in elementary school, so stress is inflicted on them from the expectation of knowing terms above their understanding. This stress is something only language brokers experience which differentiates them from their peers who do not have this responsibility. Many Latino/a children are brokers for their immigrant families and must play this role for a long time, in some occasions even after they have left home. Therefore, this role is often present and is a characteristic that often defines them.

Differences are what make people unique. At times, those differences are admired, but on other occasions they are used as reasons to exclude others. As children begin to discover

differences in a classroom, they also create their own identities and recognize cultures as diverse. Since Latino/a children are members of a minority group, they are subject to facing discrimination from their teachers and peers. Since this may happen from a young age, parental lectures are common among Latino/a families to prepare children to face discrimination (Holloway et al., 2014). The strong sense of familism comes into effect when children receive the guidance of how to overcome the challenges that come with being Latino/a. The color of their skin, the thick accent others hear or the way their food looks are factors that may lead to discrimination (Case & Hernandez, 2013). Having to prepare children to face discrimination and cultural prejudice for being Latino/a is not something easy for parents to do and even harder for young children to understand. If children become culturally aware early on, then the discrimination others face diminishes because they learn to accept differences as normal in their environments.

Implications

Latino authors and illustrators generally create more authentic depictions of the subcultures, without limiting these depictions to cultural stereotypes since they have more first-hand experiences with the culture they are writing and illustrating about than non-Latino authors and illustrators (Naidoo, 2008). Using the information that was gathered about existing literature guided the process of incorporating new uncommon topics in this new children's book. Being able to transmit a sense of belonging and sympathy was one of the main reasons for creating new literature for children. Raising cultural awareness in schools and at home may not be the easiest to do, but when there are appropriate tools, it becomes less of a challenge. Language brokering, discrimination, and familism are all key elements that when conveyed respectfully and developmentally appropriate will be used to provide more insight on what children of Latino/a parents face. Ensuring illustrations are culturally appropriate is also important to enhance accurate awareness of other cultures. Illustrating the members, values, and customs of such a diverse culture accurately and in an unbiased manner, is also a goal when creating this type of literature. When a group of individuals who are different even when sharing similar values are classified as having a certain look, stereotypes are created. Accurate and authentic picture book stories sharing the differences amongst us can help children who are dealing with the emotional toll exacted by xenophobic beliefs by accurately representing the realities of their experiences (Rodriguez & Braden, 2018). Therefore, both the language and the illustrations of a successful culturally appropriate book should be as authentic as possible.

Conclusion

Literature can introduce new concepts to children, which may have never been shared outside of their school environments. Cultural awareness is not always acknowledged in children's homes, so finding other ways to do so is important. Through books children can gain insight of the experiences, and challenges, that others face. Sensitive topics like discrimination and language brokering are difficult for parents and teachers to convey but can be slowly introduced through techniques and concepts that children can understand. By creating children's books that accurately exemplify the responsibilities and realities Latino/a children face, a better awareness of these subject can be brought to the forefront. If cultural awareness is explicitly presented to children, they will have a better opportunity to become culturally competent and welcome individuals from diverse populations into their own lives.

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