

## How does Hispanic portrayal in children's books measure up after 40 years? The answer is "It depends."

*Findings in this U.S. study suggest that there are more books with Hispanic characters and themes now than in the past. However, there is still room for improvement.*

Ever since Larrick's (1965) landmark study revealed a dearth of characters of color in children's books in the United States almost 40 years ago, accurate and fair portrayal of diverse cultural groups in children's literature has become an increasing concern. New incentives to improve the quality of the literature have emerged. For example, the Council for Interracial Books for Children (CIBC) offered to negotiate with editors for manuscript publication (Larrick). In addition, annual and biennial awards have sprung up to encourage authors and illustrators to accurately portray the experiences of diverse cultural groups (Archibeque & Greenblatt, 2002). More and more, character portrayal in children's books has become a topic for organized study. But has the portrayal of African American, Native American, Asian/Pacific Islanders, or Hispanic characters actually improved?

As we try to make sense of the work that has been done, we face a dilemma similar to that of the seven blind men in the ancient Indian fable "The Blind Men and the Elephant." In that tale, each man discovers a different part of an elephant and argues about its appearance. Only when all of the clues are considered collectively can the elephant be fully conceptualized. Due to differing book samples and various types of comparisons made, drawing conclusions across content analysis studies can prove challenging. For example, investigators

Rocha and Dowd (1993) and Ramirez and Dowd (1997) compared character portrayal in books published across different time periods. Others, such as Gillespie, Powell, Clements, and Swearingen (1994), examined different bodies of children's literature published concurrently. Taking yet another approach, Mosley (1997) limited her content analysis to titles in one particular school library collection. In some cases, investigators compared the degree of representation and role of characters of one ethnic group (e.g., Hispanics) to a different one (e.g., Native Americans) or to the corresponding segment of the population at large. What makes interpretation of the research so difficult is that differing comparisons can yield seemingly disparate results.

It is also important to note that in the nearly four decades since Larrick's (1965) study, there have been important societal and educational changes in the United States, which create a pressing need to bring together and reassess the body of children's literature at this time. Hispanics have been officially recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau (2003) as the largest minority group in the United States. In addition, the practice of inclusive education for individuals with disabilities has become more widespread, bringing greater numbers of children with exceptionalities (differences in terms of mental characteristics and sensory abilities, among others) into U.S. classrooms (Gillet, Temple, & Crawford, 2004). As a result of these two changes, greater numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse children with and without disabilities have become participating members of classroom communities.

Another important change involves the ever-evolving role of children's literature in educational practice. It is becoming more common for teachers to replace basal readers with authentic children's literature as the core of their reading programs (Tompkins, 2001). In addition, some propose new uses for multicultural children's literature. For example, factual and fictional works written by cultural "insiders" may help teachers, counselors, administrators, and policymakers gain greater understandings of the challenges children of diverse backgrounds experience (Freitag, Ottens, & Gross, 1999; Nieto, 1998). Already, Latino children's literature has been used with pre-service teachers to help those enrolled in teacher education programs gain background knowledge of the Latino elementary school children they will serve (Nathenson-Mejía & Escamilla, 2003). Also, as linguistics has gained greater acceptance as a discipline, researchers across a number of fields, including education, language arts, and English as a second language, have incorporated some of its principles into their work (Center for Applied Linguistics, n.d.), which has led to research findings with important implications for reading instruction and materials (Christianson, 2002).

But has the children's literature base kept pace with these changes? Are the images portrayed accurate and multidimensional? Now is a good time to reexamine Hispanics' place in the world of children's literature. The purpose of this study was to synthesize the research, draw tentative conclusions about how the literature published in the United States has evolved, and recommend possible new directions. Knowing about the evolution of Hispanic literature can help classroom teachers become more effective evaluators of the quality of the books in their own classroom and school library collections. By becoming aware of the special features that increasingly characterize quality children's literature with Hispanic characters and themes, teachers can also discover new ways to use those books as instructional resources.

## Why use multicultural literature?

Those who support the use of multicultural literature believe that exposure to it offers a number of possible benefits, including validation of minority

students' heritage, greater self-esteem, and increased respect and appreciation for diverse cultures (Gollnick & Chinn, 1994; Nieto, 1997). Empirical research, such as Rosberg's (1995) study of native-English-speaking and bilingual children who were exposed to multicultural books written in different languages, has suggested such books can help children develop greater awareness and appreciation of the features of diverse languages. Some propose that the literature may even stimulate greater interest in a student's native language (Christianson, 2002; Rosberg). In these ways, among others, multicultural literature may hold the potential to benefit everyone; mainstream and minority children alike may learn to function more effectively in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Gollnick and Chinn (1994) suggested that a truly multicultural curriculum reflects diversity in a number of microcultures, and they proposed that ethnicity, socioeconomic level, religion, language, gender, disabilities or exceptionalities, and age are the most critical to an understanding of pluralism. A multicultural curriculum helps children deal not only with racism but also with ageism and sexism. Consistent with this conceptualization of *multicultural*, for the purpose of this study *multicultural literature* refers to texts that include members of these microcultures.

## Focus of the study

By comparing primary content analysis studies conducted between 1966 and 2003, this research undertaking was designed to synthesize the research on Hispanic portrayal in children's literature over the past few decades. Specifically, it examines some of the ways in which children's books with Hispanic characters or written about Hispanic themes have evolved in terms of degree of representation, role of characters, and sexual or racial stereotyping.

## Search strategies for locating research

Computer searches in the ERIC system ([www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)) were conducted for primary content analysis studies reported in ERIC documents or published in journals between 1966 and 2003 using the following descriptors in various combinations: research, content analysis, children's

literature, children's books, reading material selection, multicultural, ethnic, cultural differences, cultural awareness, minority groups, ethnic stereotypes, Puerto Rican, Mexican, Mexican American, Hispanic, and Latino. In addition, reference sections of the primary study articles yielded a second generation of studies to research.

In all, 21 primary studies were retrieved. Fourteen studies were published in journal articles or bulletins (Agosto, Hughes-Hassell, & Gilmore-Clough, 2003; Ayala, 1999; CIBC, 1972, 1975; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Gillespie et al., 1994; Higgins, 2002; Madsen & Wickersham, 1980; McVaigh & Johnson, 1979; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Reimer, 1992; Rocha & Dowd, 1993), and 7 studies were retrieved from ERIC documents (Adams, 1981; Christianson, 2002; Cobb, 1995; Freundlich, 1980; Klein, 1998; Mosley, 1997; L.S. Taylor & Napier, 1992).

### **Analyzing the studies**

A coding sheet was used for collecting 14 categories of information about each of the primary studies. The categories included basic variables of interest, such as the researchers' contrasting definitions of *Hispanic*; characteristics of the book samples, such as the number of books and genres examined; research questions; data collection and analysis procedures; reliability and validity measures taken; results; and conclusions. As a check on the coding process, in addition to the researcher as primary coder, a colleague independently coded four of the studies. Percentages of agreement averaged 89%, with differences noted and resolved by discussion. Following this process, all information and codes from the individual coding sheets were transferred onto a single master chart, which facilitated comparisons across studies (see Table 1).

Because a goal of this research was to note patterns across studies, the master chart was duplicated and cut apart so that the data could be arranged and rearranged in various ways. For example, findings were cut apart for each study and arranged by cultural subgroup, book genre, and decade, among other ways. Through this process, patterns in the results of studies conducted for each decade became apparent.

### **Variations across studies**

There were vast differences across studies in researchers' definitions of *Hispanic*, book samples selected, research questions asked, and findings. A discussion of each of these areas follows.

**Definitions of Hispanic.** While Hispanic literature was not always explicitly defined or identified by relevant subgroup, researchers across studies used the term differentially to refer to the literature of Puerto Rican, Mexican, Mexican American, Spanish American, Cuban, and Central or South American origin, individually or in combination.

**Book samples.** With interest levels spanning preschool to high school age, books across the 21 samples varied in language type (i.e., Spanish, English, bilingual, or interlingual text); genre; and size; and samples ranged from as few as 4 books (Christianson, 2002) to as many as 4,255 books (Agosto et al., 2003). Perhaps reflecting the greater availability of fiction books with Hispanic characters and themes, 9 of the studies focused exclusively on fiction selections (Agosto et al.; Cobb, 1995; Freundlich, 1980; Gillespie et al., 1994; Madsen & Wickersham, 1980; Nieto, 1982a; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993; L.S. Taylor & Napier, 1992), just 2 limited titles to nonfiction books, and 5 did not specify the literary genre of the books sampled (Adams, 1981; Ayala, 1999; McVaigh & Johnson, 1979; Mosley, 1997; Reimer, 1992). Most included a combination of text types.

Several researchers included in their samples bilingual books (i.e., text containing equivalent English and Spanish versions), interlingual texts (i.e., text written mostly in English with some Spanish words embedded within), or text written entirely in Spanish. Several researchers who did so were bilingual themselves, had background experience working in multilingual contexts, or appeared to be insiders of the culture featured in the books—as inferred from author notes, study descriptions, and biographical information available online (Ayala, 1999, n.d.; Christianson, 2002, n.d.; CIBC, 1972, 1975; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993). Others specified text written in English as a criterion for the book sample (Agosto et al., 2003), but more

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Council on Interracial Books for Children (1972)	Puerto Rican	80 fiction and 20 nonfiction, 1932-1972	How are Puerto Rican males and females represented in the literature? How accurate are the facts of Puerto Rican history?	Stereotyping of women in subordinate roles. Race and class bias. Distorted facts of Puerto Rican history. Colonialist viewpoint promoted. Events unfavorable to the United States omitted or distorted. Nationalist leaders portrayed unfavorably.
Council on Interracial Books for Children (1975)	Chicano	140 fiction and 60 nonfiction, 1940-1973	How accurately do the books depict Chicano culture and tradition? How relevant are the books to Chicano experience and interest?	Nonfiction is not as racist or full of stereotypes as fiction. Presents an image of Chicano people as rural, migrant laborers. Discrepant facts. Newer books tend to acknowledge Chicano contributions in the Southwest. Sexism is evident.
McVaigh & Johnson (1979)	Mexican	64 picture books with play themes 1945-1974	Who is playing and why? What patterns are noted in the portrayal of boys and girls, ethnic groups, and adults?	Ethnic groups and girls are underrepresented. Mexicans are portrayed in one 1963 book.
Madsen & Wickersham (1980)	Spanish American	72 realistic fiction books for preschool through age 8, 1976-1978	Does current children's realistic fiction treat all ethnic groups positively? Does it recognize the expanding role of the sexes?	No protagonists are Spanish American. Only 4 out of 83 supporting characters are Spanish American. Males and females are not treated equally in number or role.
Freundlich (1980)	Puerto Rican	22 fiction books for young adults 1950-1980	What images of Puerto Ricans are portrayed?	Characters portrayed as uneducated slum dwellers who strive to be like Anglos. Important causes bearing on Puerto Rican "adjustment" omitted. Changes in demographics and in educational status not reflected. Rigid male and female characters.

(continued)

**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003 (continued)**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Adams (1981)	Not defined	32 Newbery Medal books for grades K-7, 1950-1982, and 25 "classic" children's books	To what degree are multicultural figures portrayed in children's books of literary worth? What roles do they occupy?	Thirty-nine percent of the books are multiculturally acceptable (12% of the "classics" and 59% of Newbery Medal books). This statistic increases with time. Categories of highest acceptability were socioeconomic status, females, age, and regional culture.
Nieto (1982a)	Puerto Rican	56 fiction books about Puerto Ricans, 1972-1982	Are books published from 1972 to 1982 about Puerto Rican themes less biased and more accurate than earlier titles?	Only 8 out of 56 titles are recommended. Most exhibit the same flaws as those reviewed for CIBC (1972). Assimilation is a major goal. Most settings are urban ghettos. Racial and physical diversity are missing. Puerto Ricans are viewed as causing their own oppression. Whites often "cured" Puerto Ricans' problems. Males and females are stereotyped.
Nieto (1982b)	Puerto Rican	29 nonfiction books on Puerto Rican themes	What is the quality of Puerto Rican nonfiction published from 1972 to 1982 compared to earlier titles?	Only one third are recommended. Most biographies are about sports stars or professionals. The largest number are history books. Ethnocentrism, colonialism, and racism abound. Most focus on males. Migrants are blamed for their problems.
L.S. Taylor & Napier (1992)	Not defined	30 realistic fiction books by authors of Caldecott or Newbery Award and Honor books	How are race and gender portrayed in books depicting economic deprivation?	Hispanics or Asians portrayed in 37.5% of Caldecott and 6.3% of Newbery Award and Honor books. Newbery books depict more equal gender representation.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003 (continued)**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Reimer (1992)	A conglomerate of Central and South American cultures (e.g., Puerto Rican, Mexican, Salvadoran)	80 stories from third-grade basal series; half the stories were based on trade books and half were based on a skills approach to reading instruction	What is the status of multiethnic literature children are reading in the early 1990s?	Little cultural diversity in trade books. Mostly Euro-American authors write books about people of color. Some illustrations display a mix of races rather than the distinctive features of any one racial group. Many culturally diverse books go out of print rapidly.
Garcia & Pugh (1992)	Not defined	35 nonfiction books published in 1986 and 1987, submitted by major publishers for consideration for a book award	What is the general treatment of multicultural characters in trade books submitted for the Carter G. Woodson Award?	Hispanics were among the least represented despite their numerical and cultural predominance in the United States.
Rocha & Dowd (1993)	Mexican American	29 fiction books for grades K-3, 1950-1990	Are Mexican American females portrayed differently in books published from 1950 to 1969 versus those from 1970 to 1990? How are the females depicted? What stereotypes of the Mexican American culture are conveyed?	Improvement since 1970. Less stereotyping, greater reflection of demographics. Mexican American females need to be portrayed more as leaders in homes, in professional positions, and in upper class neighborhoods.
Gillespie et al. (1994)	Origins of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture	73 fiction Newbery Medal books, 1922-1994	What is the ethnicity of characters in the Newbery Medal books, 1922-1994? What roles do they play?	The first Hispanic character appeared in 1927. The focus is on this character's illegal activity. Between 1950 and 1959 the first Hispanic main character appeared. Hispanic characters are in 10% of the books. They appear as main characters in 7% of the books and are minor characters in 3% of the books.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003 (continued)**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Cobb (1995)	Not defined	10 fiction books about Hispanic Americans for grades K-6, 1989-1991	How well are Hispanics portrayed? How are Hispanic characters described? What evidence is there of stereotyping?	Limited number of fiction books about Hispanics. Stereotyping still exists but is mostly positive. Females stereotyped more than males.
Mosley (1997)	Not defined	201 picture books in the Robert Fulton Elementary School library, Cleveland, Ohio	Does the cultural diversity of the picture book collection match the diversity of the students? What stereotyping is found? How realistically are the characters portrayed? What are the story settings? Are the books written and illustrated by individuals of the same culture as the characters in the stories?	Hispanics are the least represented ethnic group, and only 4.4% of the main characters in these books. Most settings were rural. Author background had no effect on quality and realism in the stories. Most stories were positively portrayed with little stereotyping. More books with Hispanics are needed in the collection.
Ramirez & Dowd (1997)	Mexican American	21 realistic fiction books set in the United States with at least one main or secondary character of Mexican American descent, 1990-1997	Is there a difference between realistic fiction books for young children published from 1970 to 1990 versus those from 1990 to 1997? What are the characteristics of the Mexican American females portrayed? What stereotypes of the Mexican American culture are depicted?	More titles were published from 1990 to 1997. In more recently published books, the Mexican American females are portrayed more positively despite some stereotyping. Plots reflect more contemporary concerns. Settings are more often rural now, not urban.
Klein (1998)	Not defined	1,522 fiction and nonfiction books annotated in <i>Books for You</i> (Alm, 1964); 630 fiction and nonfiction books annotated in <i>Books for You</i> (Christenbury, 1995); high school interest level	How have the roles, settings, and importance of Hispanic characters changed?	The number of Hispanic characters increased from 1.84% to 3.01%. Hispanic characters are depicted in more important roles, although the roles are not as varied. However, compared to their greater percentage in the U.S. population, Hispanics are now 300% underrepresented, as opposed to only slightly underrepresented in 1964.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003 (continued)**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Ayala (1999)	Not defined	59 books for young children portraying characters with disabilities	To what extent do the story line and characters mirror the educational and demographic trends in U.S. society? To what extent are cultural and linguistic themes evident in the story line?	While there are more disabilities portrayed in recent publications, few books contain linguistically and culturally diverse characters. Only one book incorporated cultural influences and dealt with Hispanic characters.
Christianson (2002)	Puerto Rican and Mexican American	2 fiction, 2 nonfiction	What ethnically representative linguistic patterns and language-use patterns are evident in the literature written by authors who are insiders? Do these patterns vary across works by insider authors of different cultures?	Eight language-use categories were found in Hispanic books but varied by genre. Books written by insider authors from other cultures showed different language-use patterns. Most common pattern in Hispanic books was code switching. Language use is viewed as a resource for transmitting information about other cultures and as a way to foster interest in children's own culture and native language.
Higgins (2002)	Origins of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Panama, and Caribbean islands	12 picture books and 1 chapter book of quality from assorted fiction and nonfiction, 1991-1998	What is the availability of quality books related to Hispanic/Latino culture?	There were more books with Asian and African American characters than Hispanic. Mexican Americans were more common in picture books; other Hispanic groups were found more in chapter books. Most picture books related to Cuban, Puerto Rican, or Caribbean themes have settings in the native country.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Summary of 21 content analysis studies, 1966-2003 (continued)**

Study	Hispanic defined	Book sample	Relevant research question	Findings
Agosto et al. (2003)	Not defined	4,255 genre fiction books reviewed (i.e., fantasy, science fiction, mystery and suspense, horror, westerns, romance, and sports), 1992-2001	To what extent are Hispanics the main protagonists or major secondary characters in middle school genre fiction books reviewed in mainstream journals?	Hispanics were the least represented of ethnic/racial groups, making up only 10% of all genre fiction characters. No Hispanics were found in science fiction. Hispanic protagonists were best represented in mysteries (18%).

often researchers did not address the language of the text at all (Adams, 1981; Cobb, 1995; Freundlich, 1980; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Gillespie et al., 1994; Klein, 1998; Madsen & Wickersham, 1980; McVaigh & Johnson, 1979; Reimer, 1992; L.S. Taylor & Napier, 1992). More recently, in an evaluation of the authenticity of multicultural literature, Christianson (2002) limited her study to book selections written entirely by insiders, which she determined by the authors' use of ethnically representative linguistic elements (e.g., use of dialect patterns, borrowed lexical items).

Most researchers in the studies employed more than one method for identifying book titles to evaluate. For example, to find books with Mexican American characters and themes, Rocha and Dowd (1993) consulted catalogs from large and small ethnic presses, checked published booklists, examined journal articles specifically addressing recent children's books about Hispanics, and consulted libraries serving Mexican American communities. Ramirez and Dowd (1997) also sent a message on a relevant Internet listserv requesting appropriate titles and sought personal recommendations of book titles from a journal editor.

**Research questions.** Another area in which studies varied widely was the research question(s) investigated. Most researchers addressed two or more questions. For example, with respect to fiction, researchers asked to what degree Hispanic characters appeared in the literature and if the roles had changed over time or if portrayal varied in dif-

ferent bodies of literature. Investigators focusing on nonfiction books evaluated the accuracy of factual information, the range of personalities covered in biographies, and the amount of male versus female coverage, among other areas.

Treatment of gender with respect to Hispanic characters was of interest to a majority of the researchers and handled in different ways. For example, Freundlich (1980) compared Puerto Rican male and female characters' roles to the roles of similar males and females in society. Others, such as Rocha and Dowd (1993) and Ramirez and Dowd (1997), compared treatment of Mexican American female characters in books published during two different time periods.

A question that researchers addressed across all time periods, but more commonly in recent studies, related to author ethnicity. As Mosley (1997) pointed out, the insider versus outsider author controversy questions whether authors who are part of the culture they write about do so more authentically and accurately because they might have lived through the pain and experience of prejudice. In addition, they might be more likely to present positive images.

In addition to investigating the quality and improvements in Hispanic literature over time, Ramirez and Dowd (1997) and Rocha and Dowd (1993) also noted special features books included. For example, both sets of researchers used book evaluation instruments that included items that asked if a glossary was incorporated into the book,

if contributors and consultants were mentioned, and if an author's relevant experiences were noted.

**Data collection instruments.** Although there was considerable overlap in the type of information sought by researchers from their samples of books, data collection instruments varied, but they primarily consisted of checklists or identified categories of information of interest to the analyses (Adams, 1981; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Mosley, 1997; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993).

**Reliability and validity.** The measures taken varied considerably and were addressed to varying degrees by the investigators. The most common measures included pilot testing the checklist instrument with college students, educators, or professionals from related fields who were knowledgeable in children's literature and Hispanic culture and then refining the instrument (Adams, 1981; Cobb, 1995; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993). Adams and Agosto et al. (2003) also implemented interrater reliability measures by having several persons rate the same book. By using the Chi-square "goodness of fit" test, Adams was able to determine if the agreement and disagreement rates on individual categories and whole sections were due to chance or were statistically significant.

## Results

The purpose of this research synthesis was to examine some of the ways in which books with Hispanic characters or books written about Hispanic-related themes have evolved in terms of degree of representation, role of characters, and sexual or racial stereotyping. A discussion of the results in each of these areas follows.

**Degree of Hispanic representation.** A number of the investigators across the studies do conclude that books with Hispanic characters, including Puerto Rican and Mexican American characters, are increasing in number (Agosto et al., 2003; Gillespie et al., 1994; Klein, 1998; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997). Of course, growth in this area can fluctuate considerably from year to year and may be influenced by publishers' perceptions of what types of books are "in," as well as a lack

of firm commitment to publish books on particular ethnic themes (Nieto, 1982b). However, noted improvements in the literature tend to vary by book sample (Adams, 1981; Agosto et al.; CIBC, 1975; Gillespie et al.; Madsen & Wickersham, 1980; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd) and reference point (e.g., time period or demographics). For example, of the books with Puerto Rican characters or themes obtained for the CIBC study in 1972, only 8 were found that were published between 1930 and 1960; 30 books located were published between 1960 and 1966; and 62 books were published between 1967 and 1971. Ramirez and Dowd also noted an increase compared with earlier studies in the number of books that contain at least one main or secondary female character of Mexican American descent.

It should also be noted that a majority of investigators suggested the number of books with Hispanic representation written for children from preschool through high school age remains deplorably lacking (Agosto et al., 2003; Ayala, 1999; Cobb, 1995; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Higgins, 2002; Klein, 1998; Mosley, 1997; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Reimer, 1992). For example, in the most recent study that included picture books, Higgins reported finding many picture books with Mexican American characters and themes, but few chapter books. Conversely, she found more chapter books on other Latino and Hispanic cultures (e.g., Puerto Ricans and Cubans) than picture books. In addition, she reported that most of the picture books she located with Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean characters and themes contain settings outside the borders of the United States. Thus, while it appears the availability of Hispanic-related children's books has improved over time (Higgins; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997), the degree of improvement in this area may vary by specific Hispanic subgroup and book type. Even within book type, such as genre fiction, Agosto et al. found Hispanic portrayal can vary; Hispanics appeared in 18% of all mysteries they reviewed but in none of the science-fiction works.

The most glaring deficiencies appeared in fiction selections published during the 1970s and 1980s. These books largely omitted Hispanic characters altogether, particularly in books for very young children, or presented them in constricted, stereotyped, and minor roles that were unrealistic

and sometimes negative (Adams, 1981; CIBC, 1972, 1975; Gillespie et al., 1994; Madsen & Wickersham, 1980; McVaigh & Johnson, 1979; Mosley, 1997; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b). However, major deficiencies were noted in books for older readers as well (CIBC, 1972, 1975; Freundlich, 1980; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b). More specifically, McVaigh and Johnson found only one Mexican child depicted in 64 picture books with play themes published from 1945 to 1974. Out of 72 fiction selections published from 1976 to 1978, Madsen and Wickersham found no protagonists who were Spanish American.

On the basis of his content analysis of 59 books published from 1974 to 1996 that portrayed characters with disabilities, Ayala (1999) found that, although more recent publications depicted greater diversity in disabilities, few books contained ethnically diverse characters. While 9% of the books contained Hispanic characters, only 1 book dealt with culture-related practices and influences. The author concluded the books do not reflect the culturally and linguistically diverse children with disabilities in U.S. schools. Ayala's findings further suggested that, while Hispanic characters are becoming more visible in children's books, the books do not yet reflect all the critical microcultures identified by Gollnick and Chinn (1994).

Despite a greater presence in children's books reported by some (Gillespie et al., 1994; Klein, 1998; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997), when relative representation in the literature is compared with relative Hispanic presence in U.S. society, Hispanics are grossly underrepresented in children's books, and this situation has worsened considerably over time. For example, on the basis of the U.S. Census in 1990, Klein noted Hispanics made up 8.99% of the U.S. population but were only represented in 3.01% of the annotations of books recommended in *Books for You* (Alm, 1964; Christenbury, 1995) for high school students. This illustrates underrepresentation of 300% in the literature and shows a radical change from the slight underrepresentation in the literature in 1964 when Hispanics made up only 1.93% of the U.S. population and were represented in 1.84% of the book annotations.

**Role of characters.** Changes over time in the variety of roles assigned to Hispanic characters also

appear to vary by Hispanic subgroup. Greater progress is evident for Mexican American, as opposed to Puerto Rican, characters. Of the four studies that dealt exclusively with content analyses of books with Puerto Rican characters and themes (CIBC, 1972; Freundlich, 1980; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b), all found serious limitations in characters' roles. For example, Freundlich found the 33 Puerto Rican-related fiction books published from 1950 to 1980 still did not align with demographic data. The characters in the books did not yet reflect Puerto Ricans' decreasing blue-collar jobs, increase in management positions, improved educational and socioeconomic status, and changes in geographic distribution, which meant fewer Puerto Ricans were now living in New York City. Nieto's (1982a) analysis of 56 books published from 1972 to 1982 yielded nearly the same results as the CIBC study 10 years earlier: Assimilation was a major goal, most settings were in urban ghettos, Puerto Ricans were seen as the cause of their own oppression, and whites were often depicted as "curing" Puerto Ricans' problems.

On the other hand, two studies of K-3 books with Mexican American characters and themes reported improvements over the CIBC (1975) study. Rocha and Dowd (1993) found in literature published from 1970 to 1990 versus 1950 to 1969 that characters' roles in the more recent books more closely mirrored contemporary demographics. Portrayed as "strong and enduring," female characters were more frequently employed, obtained an education, and assumed positions of leadership in schools and communities, as opposed to their depiction in impoverished contexts with little hope of improvement (CIBC, 1975).

**Sexual or racial stereotyping.** Studies throughout all decades show evidence of stereotyping of Hispanic characters in fiction and nonfiction books from the preschool level and up (Cobb, 1995; CIBC, 1972; Freundlich, 1980; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993). For example, the four studies of Puerto Rican literature report little diversity in characters' physical characteristics; living contexts (largely urban ghetto communities); and jobs, which were mainly low level, such as domestic and factory jobs requiring little education. Male characters appeared

in more books than females, who were often depicted as submissive and one dimensional.

Rocha and Dowd (1993) observed that improvements in more recent books published from 1970 to 1990 versus books from 1950 to 1969 included portrayal of female characters with higher levels of education and positions of employment. However, they also noted a need for greater portrayal of Mexican Americans' contemporary concerns and activities in traditional and nontraditional roles (e.g., lawyer, police officer, involvement in politics and religious activities) and Mexican Americans living in upper class neighborhoods.

With respect to more recent literature published from 1990 to 1997 versus 1970 to 1990, Ramirez and Dowd (1997) found that characters did face more contemporary concerns, such as issues related to their bilingualism and immigration. However, what is surprising is that they also noted that the more recent books portrayed a more stereotypical view of females' appearance in terms of traditional Mexican hairstyles and traditional Mexican dress than earlier publications. Female characters were depicted less often in educational contexts and employed outside of the home.

As a positive change, Ramirez and Dowd (1997) also noted more special features in recent books. Five of the 21 books were fully bilingual, while 8 introduced Mexican American expressions interspersed with the English text. Most of the books contained notes about authors' relevant experiences, 5 mentioned consultants or contributors, 5 included a Spanish glossary, 3 had recipes related to foods mentioned in text, and 1 included a craft idea related to the topic covered in the text.

Still more recently, having observed that ethnically representative language-use patterns vary across dialogue and narrative portions of text written by insiders of different cultures, Christianson (2002) evaluated Hispanic books for representative linguistic components of text (i.e., lexical items and dialect patterns from the author's native language) as a measure of their authenticity. Within the Hispanic-related books, she observed language was used in eight different ways that ranged in frequency across texts and included code switching (i.e., alternating use of two languages in terms of words, phrases, clauses, or sentences), which was the most commonly observed language-use pattern in the Hispanic books, and the use of a glos-

sary, among other patterns. Rather than view linguistic factors of text as obstacles, Christianson suggested they should be treated as valuable resources that hold the potential to promote readers' awareness of important issues related to culture and bilingualism. For example, Christianson suggested that from the code switching introduced in conversations between book characters, such as the Mexican American character, Lincoln, and his mother in *Taking Sides* (Soto, 2003), readers can infer bilingualism is common within Latino cultures. From additional information provided in text that Lincoln's Spanish is worsening, readers are likely to become more aware of some of the challenges bilinguals face in trying to maintain two languages. Christianson suggested that, as another benefit, linguistic factors of text may stimulate children's interest in their own culture and native language. Thus, while changes in Hispanic character portrayal are complex and, at times, uneven in terms of improvements, it appears there has been some movement in a positive direction.

## Progress, but work ahead

Like the seven blind men in the Indian fable I mentioned at the beginning of this article, if we collectively assemble the results from all 21 studies, what conclusions can we make about Hispanic portrayal in children's literature? The answer is "It depends." It depends on the nature of the book sample and the reference point for purposes of comparison. Compared to the amount of Hispanic portrayal in the literature 40 years ago, a number of studies suggest improvements have been made in the greater number of books with Hispanic characters and themes (Agosto et al., 2003; Gillespie et al., 1994; Klein, 1998; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez & Dowd, 1997). However, compared to the proportion of Hispanics who presently make up the United States population, there is indication that the relative proportion of Hispanic representation in children's literature has lost major ground (Klein).

While stereotyping still exists, it appears to be a less severe problem in K-3 literature with Mexican American characters or themes than in Puerto Rican literature, and it is less of a problem for male characters than female (Cobb, 1995; Freundlich, 1980; Nieto, 1982a, 1982b; Ramirez &

Dowd, 1997; Rocha & Dowd, 1993). The roles portrayed appear to be more positive and, to a limited extent, more reflective of Hispanics' roles in society. Progress is still needed in the portrayal of Hispanics with exceptionalities, in more varied socioeconomic levels, in upper class neighborhoods, and in leadership roles in homes and professions. Due to the many differences across studies, which made exact comparisons impossible, findings must be viewed with caution.

For sure, the situation is complex and ever changing. Produced mainly by smaller publication firms, multicultural books, in general, tend to go out of print quickly (Reimer, 1992), and books with Hispanic characters and themes tend to go out of print even faster than books related to other cultures (Norton, 2001). Thus, the status of Hispanic portrayal in children's books is dynamic and needs to be reevaluated frequently.

Researchers who undertake analyses of multicultural literature in the future should be careful to clearly define which Hispanic subgroup(s) they are investigating, as well as to identify the language (e.g., Spanish, English) and specific linguistic features of the texts (e.g., bilingual, interlingual) in their book samples. More studies of the language-use and the linguistic components (e.g., code switching, glossaries, dual-language text) of culturally diverse text are also needed in order to discover ways in which these features can serve as resources to readers. Considering texts from a linguistic perspective is a relatively new way to look at multicultural literature and holds great potential for uncovering ways to better serve the instructional needs of second-language and bilingual students. Christianson (2002) suggested that linguistic features in texts may be useful resources for helping native-language students develop greater understandings of bilingual communities. More studies are needed in this area to explore what students can learn from various text features.

Studies of multicultural literature from additional perspectives, such as from a critical, post-modern perspective, which challenges even the very definition of multicultural literature itself, may provide new insights into multicultural literature and suggest alternative criteria by which to judge it (Willis-Rivera & Meeker, 2002). For example, Willis-Rivera and Meeker pursued research in this area by examining some of the subtle ways

in which authors of multicultural children's books implicitly position the reader and characters of fiction as white, privileged, and separate from others of color.

As Nieto (1982a, 1982b) discovered, improvements in the children's literature base can happen slowly, and measurable progress may take more than a decade. Poor-quality books that are part of a library collection left untended can stay around for a long time. Thus, while there is a need for librarians and teachers in U.S. schools to keep abreast of new, quality publications with Hispanic characters and themes and add them to book collections regularly, it is also important to teach our students to become critical judges of the books they read.

Websites associated with awards established in the 1990s for quality Hispanic-related literature post the names of award-winning fiction or non-fiction selections with Hispanic characters or themes that might be welcome additions to classroom or school library collections. Awards include the Tomás Rivera Mexican-American Children's Book Award ([www.education.txstate.edu/subpages/tomasrivera](http://www.education.txstate.edu/subpages/tomasrivera)), the Américas Book Award for Children's and Young Adult Literature ([www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach/americas.html](http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/CLACS/outreach/americas.html)), and the Pura Belpré Award ([www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belprmedal.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/awardsscholarships/literaryawds/belpremedal/belprmedal.htm)).

Recognizing that a single book cannot possibly convey all the complexities of a culture, authorities on children's literature recommend exposing students to multiple books of different genres (Norton, 2001; Rochman, 1993; Yokota, 1993). With this in mind, teachers may want to consult another website, Latino/Hispanic Americans ([www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/latinowel.html](http://www.multiculturalchildrenslit.com/latinowel.html)). The link, "Children's Books," leads to a list of books organized by genre and includes realistic fiction, non-fiction, biography, and poetry, among others. There are additional links leading to potentially useful literature-related resources such as "Integrating Mexican-American History and Culture Into the Social Studies Classroom" and "Doorways to Chicano/Latino Culture and Tradition." An additional website that provides access to more sites relevant to multicultural topics and readings is Multicultural Literature and Reading ([www.edchange.org/multicultural/sites/literature.html](http://www.edchange.org/multicultural/sites/literature.html)).

For help with judging the quality of books presently found in classroom and school library collections, the following webpages might be useful: 10 Quick Ways to Analyze Children's Books for Racism and Sexism ([www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/10quick.htm](http://www.birchlane.davis.ca.us/library/10quick.htm)), Selecting Hispanic Books for School Libraries (<http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/mulhispse.htm>), and How to Choose the Best Multicultural Books (<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/instructor/multicultural.htm>) with the link "Latinos."

For helping children learn ways in which to judge the authenticity of books related to culture, teachers will find useful Norton's (2001) five-phase sequence for multicultural literature study, recently updated with recommended award-winning book titles currently in print, along with suggested reading strategies and related online and multimedia resources, all with Hispanic characters and themes (Nilsson, 2004). Originally intended for upper-elementary and middle school students, the framework can be adapted easily for use with older and younger students as well.

It should be noted that while it may be assumed that Hispanic American children prefer to read books about characters and themes related to their own culture, to date, there is little research to support this notion. The limited research that exists is inconclusive but suggests that for some age groups and reader types, Hispanic American children's reading preferences may not be so clearly defined (Mohr, 2003; G.S. Taylor, 1997). This is an area that warrants further study.

As the moral of the old Indian fable goes, "Knowing in part may make a fine tale, but wisdom comes from seeing the whole" (Young, 1992, p. 40). As is evident from a synthesis of the results of all 21 studies, while there has been progress in the portrayal of Hispanics in the U.S. children's literature base, there remains much work ahead.

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