PEER-REVIEWED

Developing Cultural Competence and a Better Understanding of Latino Language and Culture through Literature

What a Latino Author Tells Us

PATRICIA MONTIEL OVERALL

Cultural competence has become an essential ability for public librarians to improve services to school-age Latino children, particularly young Spanish speakers, who make up one of the largest populations of youth in the United States. According to the Pew Research Hispanic Center's recent report on Latinos in the United States, the growth in young Spanish-speaking Latinos is expected to continue well into the twenty-first century.[1] Providing culturally competent services to young Latinos, particularly children who bring from their native countries cultural experiences that are often very different from those in the United States, is a major challenge for library and information science professionals. How best to address the literacy development of Latinos, and how also to ensure that they, like other populations, become proficient library users depends on each librarian's ability to become informed about cultural differences related to the Latino population, to develop a deeper understanding of the unique circumstances of Latinos in this country, and of linguistic and cultural attitudes affecting their literacy development.

Bridging Cultural Differences through Personal Stories

This article discusses several Latino language and cultural issues identified in the writings of a young popular Latino author, which can serve to inform the profession about Latinos and further develop cultural competence in working with this population. First is the importance of including the language of the reader in stories as a way of developing literacy. Second is the use of stories and folktales in identifying and resolving cultural differences. The third is providing stories as a way of better understanding cultural traditions.

These are found in children's literature by author René Colato Laínez, whose works include *Waiting for Papá, Playing Lotería*, *I Am René, the Boy/Soy René*, el *Niño, René Has Two Last Names, The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez, My Shoes and I,* and *Let's Play Football/ Juguemos al Fútbol.* Colato Laínez was one of the opening speakers at the 2012 Latino Literacy Roundtable (LLR)—an annual event held in Tucson, Arizona, that brings individuals together to discuss literacy of Latinos. At the event, Colato Laínez, who was one of three Latino authors who shared their personal stories as writers, spoke about the importance of providing children with stories they could identify with as a way to develop literacy, while at the same time providing insights into Latino culture.

The stories written by Colato Laínez come from his own personal experiences. They are compelling accounts of real life events in the United States, which were often difficult for the young Latino from El Salvador to experience. For example, the author recounts a number of his own personal experiences as an undocumented immigrant, which he shares in several of his books. His stories bring back bittersweet memories for readers who have had similar experiences themselves. The sto-

Patricia Montiel Overall, *PhD, is Associate Professor in the School of Information Resources and Library Science and Affiliate Professor of Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona in Tucson.*

ries gently expose some of the difficulties Latino children and their families face as they cross the border to a new country, including leaving family, language, and culture. Colato Laínez's firsthand observations as an undocumented immigrant are told in his touching story *My Shoes and I.* In this story, the author writes about his long, treacherous journey, including the significance of the shoes he wore as he walked from El Salvador to the United States. The shoes had been sent to him earlier by his mother, who waited for him and his father to meet her in the United States. When young René and his father finally arrived in the United States after the arduous and lengthy trip over mountains and through rivers, he still had his shoes, although tattered and torn. He writes,

> *Uno, dos, tres,* my shoes and I are almost there. We have made it all the way from El Salvador to here. We can finish. Yes, we can . . .
>
> My shoes are with me. They still walk everywhere I walk. We crossed the finish line together. [2]

Colato Laínez's stories also inform readers who have never had these experiences (leaving a familiar culture for an unknown one in a new country) and vividly describe the extreme difficulties that come with being an undocumented immigrant.

Colato Laínez's inclusion of personal experiences within the content of many of his writings came after he saw the enjoyment that his storytelling brought to his Latino kindergarten students. As their teacher, he shared his stories with children who listened with great interest and enjoyment, and their reaction was the impetus for transforming his storytelling into written works. Many of the books he has written have become significant to Latino children and their families because they illustrate, with great sensitivity, the challenges many faced themselves, and their reactions to the struggles. His works provide inspiration to his students, and by bringing to life the culture of Latinos, the author facilitates cultural understanding.

Developing Literacy in Any Language

Colato Laínez's development of literacy in English is instructive. He learned English as a second language and learned to speak and write English as an adolescent. He had become a competent reader and writer in his first language, Spanish. From an early age, he had access to his uncle's ample library of Spanish literature. His interest in writing bilingual books for children grew out of his desire to document the difficulties he encountered after migrating to the United States where he was initially unable to speak, read, or write English although he was a prolific writer in Spanish before migrating to the United States. He had even won prizes for youthful writing in El Salvador having been influenced by his great uncle, Tío Jorge, a popular author in El Salvador who encouraged his great nephew to follow the dream of being an author like himself before coming to the United States.

Colato Laínez was also a fluent reader in Spanish who delighted in visiting his great uncle's library of books that were unavailable to him in his own humble home. When he began school in the United States, he longed to be able to understand the books he was given in class to read. Although he eventually became able to read English, he realized how valuable it had been for him to have access to Spanish speakers who helped him transition to English. Colato Laínez explained that he encourages his students to tell, write, and read in Spanish until they can read and write in English, and that he has witnessed the great success of students becoming proficient in both. Colato Laínez also explained that writing also helps his students identify misunderstandings that occur when two cultures meet. As an example, Colato Laínez discussed his own experience, which led to writing his story, *The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez.*

Understanding Cultural Differences

One day, Colato Laínez's teacher in the United States asked her students to write an essay about an early experience they remembered. He was already fourteen years old, but he loved remembering early events in his life so he eagerly began writing a story about one of them, losing his first tooth.

After struggling to complete the essay, he proudly handed the essay in to his teacher who read it with a look of confusion. She called young René to her desk and asked him to explain the story because she didn't understand what he was writing about. René recalled that after he explained his story, his teacher said, "Oh, I get it. The story is about the Tooth Fairy," and she went through his paper and crossed out "*El Ratón Pérez*" and inserted "the Tooth Fairy." René left the teachers' desk very confused and disappointed. He had never heard of the tooth fairy, and he did not know what tooth fairy meant. He looked up "tooth" in the dictionary. He looked up "fairy" in the dictionary. He looked up "tooth fairy" in the dictionary. He asked his friends if they knew what "tooth fairy" meant, and he asked his parents, but no one knew. As his understanding of the cultural differences increased, he eventually learned about the tooth fairy and many other traditions in his new country's culture not found in the dictionary.

The experience left a lasting impression on young René, and when he became a teacher himself, he created a story about *El Ratón Pérez* and the Tooth Fairy for his students, who were mostly Latino, to help them understand an unfamiliar custom in the United States. Thus, the book *The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez* was born. He recalled how his students loved the story and begged him to retell it. The story delighted them so much that Colato Laínez made it the subject of one of his books. He hoped that through the story, children would be able to bridge the gap between the two traditions and cultures.

The new fairytale created by Colato Laínez is grounded in both cultural traditions. The first pages of the story, which describe the preparations by the Tooth Fairy and el Ratón

Pérez to retrieve a tooth from a child, create an atmosphere of anticipation. Each separate character, el Ratón Pérez and the Tooth Fairy, sparks the imagination of the reader and instills ethnic and cultural pride in their hero. The new fairytale allows children to expand their fantasies about what happens when a child loses a tooth, and affirms the values of two cultures. The tug of war for *Miguelito's* tooth between the Tooth Fairy and el Ratón Pérez cleverly illustrates the tensions between the two cultures, and misunderstandings that are bound to occur.

Even within cultures there are differences in folktales. For example, there are multiple versions of el Ratón Pérez. In some countries, el Ratón Pérez leaves bread. In other countries el Ratón Pérez is a little mouse (*ratoncito*) who takes the tooth, instead of a rat (*ratón).* In Spain, the tale el Ratoncito Pérez by Olga Lecaye is a favorite for children. In her story, the protagonists are bunnies who receive a beautifully wrapped gift under their pillow left by el Ratoncito Pérez when they lose a tooth.

Bilingual Stories

As an author, Colato Laínez's stories also often incorporate complete translations or bilingual phrases. *The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez* is an example of a story is written primarily in English with the addition of Spanish words such as *papá* (father), *mamá* (mother), *niños* (children), and phrases such as "a new *diente*" (tooth), which are easily understood within the context of the story. The phrases add a level of interest for both Spanish- and English-speaking children, and the context of the story provides sufficient clues to the meaning of the phrases so that the story is clearly understood by non-Spanish speakers. Colato Laínez's use of two languages is supported by research, which indicates that context is an essential component in developing literacy in another language.[3] Colato Laínez's text provides a rich context for understanding stories by both English and Spanish speakers.

Mixing languages is a well-accepted and common phenomenon of speakers of two languages, and is referred to as code-switching in linguistics. It generally occurs in spoken language by individuals who are fluent speakers of both languages in which they code-switch. Code-switching "follows functional and grammatical principles and is a complex rule-governed phenomenon."[4] Using two languages in a text or when speaking is not detrimental to developing literacy and has significant benefits besides helping readers understand text. In *The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez*, the use of Spanish adds interest for the reader and gives a flavor to the story that would be missing were the book to have had only English text.

The Tradition of Surnames

Another example of Latino culture that Colato Laínez explains in his children's literature is the importance of maintaining two last names. In his book, *René Has Two Last Names*, the author describes the drama of the experience of losing one of his last names. His teacher told him that he could only use one of his two surnames (*apellidos*). She explained that children in the United States did not use two last names, and that as a cultural practice, only one last name had to be used. She selected one last name for him. Colato Laínez describes how difficult the experience was for him because by using only one family name, he felt he was disowning one of his families. How could he do this either to his mother or his father?

As is the practice in Latin America, individuals take the surname of the mother as well as the father as a gesture of respect to both sides of an individual's family. In using only one family name, young René felt he was being disrespectful of the family whose name he was not using. He knew that by using only his father's name, his mother was sad and disappointed. His father felt the same when René used only his mother's name. For a time he even alternated. However as an adult, he decided that he would not use only one name and insisted (even with his publishers) that both names be used and also that they include correct Spanish spelling (i.e., accents and tildes).

The custom of using two last names has generally not been historically practiced in the United States because of the strong influence of Great Britain in American naming tradition, even though many ethnic groups who immigrated to this country including Finnish, Iraqis, and Mexicans have a cultural tradition of identifying family lineage in their names. The practice of assimilating diverse groups, which has long been a tradition in the United States has resulted in abandonment of ethnic customs so as to fit into US culture. Often even visitors to the United States do this. For example, many foreign students use one last name, and often take an English first name (e.g., Xiaolong may become "Luke"). However, it is interesting to note that many well-known and respected individuals including authors, politicians, physicians, and athletes who use double surnames are generally referred to by both names in the United States and worldwide. One notable example is the author Gabriel García Márquez, whose two surnames are always correctly used.

This custom has changed in recent times. The practice of using two last names is becoming more common among the younger generation. Among women, the use of two surnames increased during the 1960s era of women's rights, but it is only recently that using two surnames (e.g., a maiden name and a married name) has become a more accepted practice, particularly in writing.

Hyphenated last names are also more common, although this is often to ensure that an individual's two surnames are kept together. Many organizations (including libraries) indicate that the reason they do not use two surnames is that their computer systems do not accommodate multiple surnames. However, Perez-Quiñones, an associate professor in computer science and associate department head and director for graduate stud-

ies at Virginia Tech, believes that computer software could easily be updated to process two surnames.[5] Until that occurs, this author will continue to use a hyphen to ensure that both surnames appear on publications.

A Legacy of Cultural Competence

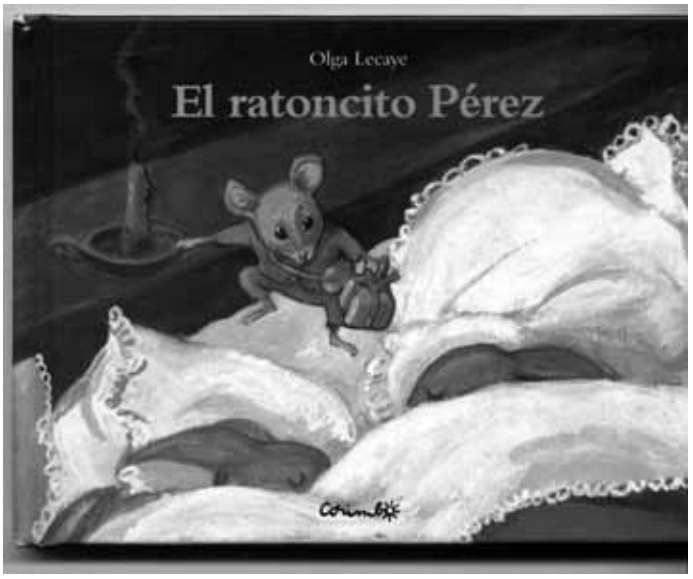
These issues are of interest to our profession and are becoming increasingly focused upon as library professionals provide services to an increasingly diverse population, in particular Latinos, who include Mexican Americans, Mexicans, Central and South Americans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Spaniards, and others, whose cultural traditions are often different from those of the United States. The notion of cultural competence espoused by the profession is exemplified through greater understanding and respect of cultural traditions such as the use of two last names and diverse folk beliefs (e.g., *El Ratón Pérez*).

Librarians develop cultural competence, which is defined as the ability to respect and understand diverse cultural backgrounds and characteristics including one's own, and integrating cultural and socioeconomic groups into library services in order to enhance the lives of those providing and receiving services, through a process of self-reflection and interaction with diverse communities.[6] In the case of surnames, that means first becoming aware of naming traditions in one's own family culture, examining the history of naming traditions in the United States, and then recognizing differences that exist in the naming traditions of other communities. The exercise of self-reflection brings about a better understanding about similarities and differences among cultural groups, and helps identify areas that could result in tensions between different cultural traditions. The example provided by Colato Laínez of changing a child's name highlights the importance of reflection in the process of becoming cultural competent.

Colato Laínez's books that reflect the lives and experiences of Latino children follow a tradition of best practices of authors and librarians who preceded him in developing literacy among non-English speaking children including Latinos and other ethnic and cultural groups. For example, author Ann Nolan Clark (1896–1995) and Pura Belpré (1899–1982) led the way in developing literacy in children through authoring and storytelling.

Belpré, the first Latina librarian at the New York Public Library, promoted literacy of Spanish-speaking children in Queens, New York. Her dedication and service to Latinos have been memorialized in the Pura Belpré Illustrator and Authors Awards, established in 1996, honoring Latino/Latina authors and illustrators.

Her dedication to Latino children has been an inspiration to librarians across the nation. Through bilingual storytelling and bilingual activities for Latino children she instilled a love of books, reading, and stories. By using puppets who spoke



English and Spanish, and by retelling familiar tales, Belpré enthralled young Latino children and helped them become lifelong readers and learners. Today's storytellers and authors such as Yuyi Morales and José Luis Orozco honor Latino cultural heritage through stories, songs, and celebrations such as el Día de Los Muertos, and el Día de los Tres Reyes Magos.

Clark's books were based on personal experiences with Native American and Latino children. Books such as *Santiago*, *Secret of the Andes,* and *Tía María's Garden,* incorporated real-life experiences of Latino children. Her seminal work, *Third Grade Home Geography,* which was later published as the book, *In My Mother's House,* vividly describes the development of literacy among children and their parents through their life experiences that included familiar settings, and language.

Clark and Belpré have become models for librarians nationwide demonstrating a long-standing commitment to bilingualism and biliteracy, and to research-based practices for developing biliteracy, which indicate that one of the first steps in language acquisition is comprehension. Innovative library activities for children such as *El día de los niños/El día de los libros,* initiated through the efforts of Pat Mora, are the result of library professionals' commitment to a philosophy that promotes literacy through bilingual and biliterate services for Latinos and Spanish speakers. Colato Laínez follows in the steps of these giants.

This article notes several important issues raised during the first Latino Literacy Roundtable (LLR), which focused on children's and young adult literature. Librarians must understand these and other similar issues they encounter every day when working with Latinos and Spanish-speaking populations. The personal stories retold by Colato Laínez and found in the children's literature discussed in this article have many lessons for furthering our understanding of Latino language and culture. *My Shoes and I* illustrate the power of personal stories as well as cultural dif-

ferences, *The Tooth Fairy Meets El Ratón Pérez* incorporate Spanish language words and phrases, and *Waiting for Papa/Esperando a Papa* and *I Am René, the Boy/Soy René, el Niño* provide readers with English and Spanish text, and *René Has Two Last Names* attempts to explain the long held tradition of using two family surnames with the cultural tensions they present.

These stories exemplify cultural differences from the perspective of a Latino author. They are intended to provide a glimpse into the emotion and feelings aroused by cultural experiences such as those described in the stories of Colato Laínez, and the difficulty especially for children, to abandon emotional ties to cultural traditions such as having two last names, and changing perceptions of folk heroes such as el Ratón Pérez. They afford significance to the experiences of the young reader as well.

Librarians have a special role in working with Latinos from other countries and from different cultural backgrounds, and addressing their needs as new library users. The ability to carry out this role requires a deeper appreciation and understanding of the unique circumstances of Latino library users. Culturally competent librarians develop a deeper understanding of these and other cultural differences by acknowledging the value of personal stories and experiences reflected in children's literature in literacy development, and by encouraging children's first and second language acquisition as a means of developing and supporting literacy in both languages.

Bilingualism and biliteracy are gifts, and culture and traditions are integral parts of both. To the extent that librarians are able to encourage and increase these gifts to reach their potential, they will help improve the lives of not only Latinos but of all members of the community. If the goal of library professionals is to develop literacy and make lifelong learners of library users, we must be able to interest and motivate young Latino readers through stories they understand and love. We must also be able to demonstrate our own understanding of the literature and the deep-rooted sentiments that are associated with stories that tap into the cultural experiences of the reader. &

Bilingualism and biliteracy are gifts, and culture and traditions are integral parts of both. To the extent that librarians are able to encourage and increase these gifts to reach their potential, they will help improve the lives of not only Latinos but of all members of the community

References

1. Pew Research Hispanic Center, "A Nation of Immigrants," Last modified Jan. 29, 2013, accessed December 30, 2013, www.pewhispanic.org/2013/01/29/a-nation-of-immigrants.
2. René Colato Laínez, My Shoes and I (Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills, 2010).
3. Guadalupe Valdés, Sarah Capitelli, and Laura Alvarez, *Latino Children Learning English: Steps in the Journey* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011).
4. Roberto R. Heredia and Jeanette Altarriba, "Bilingual Language Mixing: Why Do Bilinguals, Code-Switch?" *American Psychological Association* 10, no. 5 (2001): 164–68.
5. Manuel A. Pérez-Quiñones, "Hispanic Last Names: Why Two of Them?" Last modified March 2002, accessed February 26, 2014, http://perez.cs.vt.edu/twolastnames.
6. Patricia Montiel-Overall, "Cultural Competence: A Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals," *Library Quarterly,* 79, no. 2 (2009): 175–204.