

Analyzing Children’s Picture Books for Themes of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI)

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Instructor’s Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study assisted by students in the Summer Undergraduate Research Fellow (SURF) program was to analyze past Pura Belpré Award-winning children’s picture books (from 2013 to 2023) and examine whether they addressed issues pertaining to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). Our findings revealed the scarcity of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues addressed in Pura Belpré Award-winning children’s picture books, despite the need for more books that discuss JEDI related content (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). The majority of the JEDI issues addressed in the award-winning children’s picture books centered around issues of education, language, and immigration. There is, thus, a need to also diversify the JEDI issues addressed in such picture books. Moreover, though some of the justice issues addressed were explicitly explained and could easily be understood by young children, others were more implicit and would require adults to support young children to understand the JEDI issues addressed. The significance of these findings has deep implications for teacher educators, teacher education programs, and the field of early childhood education at large. There is a need to support future and current early educators on how to select children’s picture books that lend themselves to conversations around justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) within young children.

- Aura Pérez-González, Assistant Professor of Education-Early Childhood Studies, October 2024.


Children’s picture books are often misconstrued by early educators to be neutral and apolitical curriculum choices that are only meant to support young children to read, write, speak, and listen. Literacy is often misunderstood to mean only reading and writing; however, literacy can mean reading words and reading worlds. Research suggests that books, in spite of their academic stature, can leave a lasting impression on young children because they are beginning to learn and form opinions about themselves, people unlike themselves, and their environment. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of reading literature to children that includes and emphasizes justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Undergraduate researchers were involved in a qualitative research study that entailed a content analysis of past Pura Belpré Award-winning children’s picture books for themes pertaining to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). The Pura Belpré Award is granted to outstanding works of literature for children and young adults that best portray, affirm, and celebrate the Latino cultural experience. We found that although many books catered to children to promote culture and common experiences between the Latino community, many lack visual representation of how Latinos can look, thus promoting

a stereotype. We also discovered that there is a lack of inclusion in children's books. For example, there is a lack of representation in physical appearances, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, skin tone diversity, and more. To offer children a truly inclusive perspective of culture, we learned it is important for educators to actively address the culture and diversity gap and include justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in their literacy curriculum.



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

Purpose

Ladson-Billings (1992) once argued, "the literacy message in the United States is decidedly apolitical while at the same time advancing a political agenda that helps maintain the status quo" (p. 381). Accordingly, children's picture books are often misconstrued by early educators to be neutral and apolitical curriculum choices that are meant to only support young children to read, write, speak, and listen. Literacy is often misunderstood to mean only reading and writing symbols; however, literacy can mean reading words and reading worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Souto-Manning, & Yoon, 2018). As Ladson-Billings asserted, there is no such thing as literary neutrality. All books can leave a lasting impression on young children because they are beginning to learn and form opinions about themselves, people unlike themselves, and about societal themes pertaining to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) (Adichie, 2009; Tschida, Ryan, & Tidnor, 2014; Spencer, 2022).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to analyze past Pura Belpré Award winning children's picture books (from 2013 to 2023) and whether they address issues pertaining to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI). The Pura Belpré award is a highly prestigious award granted to outstanding works of literature for children and young adults that best portray, affirm, and celebrate the Latino cultural experience. A content analysis of the past Pura Belpré Award winning children's picture books (from 1996 to 2023) was conducted to examine the children's picture books for themes pertaining to JEDI.

Methodology

The methodology we utilized included a critical content analysis (Johnson et al., 2016) of eleven Latinx children's books chosen for their reception of the annual Pura Belpré Award. Specifically, we examined children's picture books that received the Pura Belpré award or honor for narration or illustration. Moreover, we chose to analyze children's picture books that were appropriate for early childhood and children ages 0-8, beginning with the most recent Pura Belpré award until the present (2014-2024). The criterion of the accolade indicates that a Latinx writer and illustrator best portrayed, affirmed, and celebrated the Latino cultural experience in a work of literature for children and youth (Association for Library Service to Children, 2024).

Children's Picture Book / Author & Illustrator	Book Cover Image
<i>Planting Stories: The Life of Librarian and Storyteller Pura Belpré</i> by Anika Aldamuy Denise and illustrated by Paola Escobar	
<i>Mango, Abuela, and Me</i> by Meg Medina and illustrated by Angela Dominguez	
<i>La Princesa and the Pea</i> by Susan Middleton Eya and illustrated by Juana Martinez-Neal	
<i>Juana & Lucas</i> written and illustrated by Juana Medina	
<i>Dreamers</i> written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales	
<i>Pincho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale</i> written and illustrated by Duncan Tonahut	
<i>Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i> written and illustrated by Duncan Tonahut	


Our research team analyzed and coded the literature using a set matrix of prompts that reflected justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, as defined by the group at the beginning of our research study. Each component in the matrix was then further scrutinized for multicultural-pedagogical intention (Martinez-Roldán, 2016) embedded within each book's use of illustration, storyline, and relationships between people, litestyles, effects on children's self and social identities (Boelho & Rudman, 2009), children and adults engaging in actions for change, authentic Latinx details (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016), and loaded words. Our collective analysis also created annotations for the author's or illustrator's background and perspective, copyright dates, and overall appeal to children.

Preliminary Findings

- Justice**
 - 42% of books addressed issues of justice
 - Justice issues addressed explicitly: (1) access to equitable education (2) inclusion of books in Spanish
 - Justice issues addressed implicitly: (1) rights of immigrants
- Equity**
 - 42% of books addressed issues of equity
 - Inequities intertwined w/ issues of justice and inclusion
 - Linguistic inequity - All books on Pura Belpré award list written in English w/sporadic Spanish
- Diversity**
 - 71% of books addressed issues of diversity through illustrations (characters w/ diverse skin tones)
 - 57% of books set in the U.S.
- Inclusion**
 - 28% of books addressed issues of inclusion
 - Inclusion issues addressed explicitly: (1) educational inclusion, (2) linguistic inclusion
 - Inclusion intertwined w/issues of justice and equity

Theoretical Framework

A Latcrit theoretical framework (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) was employed to examine how Latinx are represented in children's books that were awarded the Pura Belpré award. The Pura Belpré award is given to children's picture books that best portray, affirm, and celebrate the Latinx experience as well as are written or illustrated by a Latinx person. Using a LatCrit theoretical framework allowed for an analysis of race/racism, challenging dominant ideology, commitment to social justice, experiential knowledge, and interdisciplinary perspectives found in the Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books and their relationship to themes of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.



Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Do Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books address issues of justice? If so, what?
2. Do Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books address issues of equity? If so, what?
3. Do Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books address issues of diversity? If so, what?
4. Do Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books address issues of inclusion? If so, what?

Discussion

Our preliminary findings reveal the scarcity of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion issues addressed in Pura Belpré award winning children's picture books, despite the need for more such books (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). The majority of the JEDI issues addressed in the award winning children's picture books centered around issues of education, language, and immigration. Thus, there is a need to also diversify the JEDI issues addressed in such picture books. Moreover, though some of the justice issues addressed were explicitly explained and could be easily understood by young children, others were more implicit and would require adults supporting young children in understanding the JEDI issues addressed.

