

The Muddy Waters of Comfort vs. Conflict: The transitioning of Latin@ topics in Upper Elementary/Middle School Literature

Picture books and literature for the young creates a space for children to retain their innocence. Often, children's literature remains a place where adult themes are inferred and emotional topics remain off the pages. Conversely, young adult literature leaps into the emotional and tumultuous topics of violence, prejudice, stereotypes, family strife, identity issues (ethnic and gender), homelessness, and mental health. There appears to be no middle ground as books transition from virtuousness to real-life issues with real-life consequences. Literature which first embraces naivete, quickly hurdles into sensitive but timely topics.

This paper presentation examines the transition of Latin@ literature in upper elementary/middle school literature. While we would like to believe there is an "easing in" of topics, the presenters propose that there is limited ability to distinguish literature for the upper-elementary/middle school years to the complex topics and themes of young adult literature. Through a critical examination of "middle" level literature, we argue that literature appears to be an "all or nothing" type of approach.

Using children's books, we read and see that multiethnic Latin@ families live in harmony through Ada's story of *I Love Saturdays y Domingos*. Mora supports the experience of thankfulness present in a two-parent home where family times are celebrated in *Gracias: Thanks*. Multiethnic children are made to feel unique and special for "looking" different than those who identify with their cultural group as Brown celebrates "skin is brown...but your hair is the color of carrots" in *Marisol McDonald Doesn't Match* (4).

Conversely, Latin@ young adult literature leaps into adult themed topics as Latin@ youth discover the nuances of belonging both to your cultural group and challenges to identifying with groups outside your ethnic background. Medina demonstrates the angst Piddy Sanchez encounters as she changes her non-Latina image to match her Latina peers in *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. At times though, it is the conflict that arises from within the family as traditional expectations clash with ideas of youth and change. Quintero in *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces* not only encounters conflicts of tradition, but teen pregnancy, a father's drug addiction, a friend's coming out, and violence in the home.

In examining literature for this "between" age group, we report how sensitive topics and themes are introduced. We will share how the authors of these books of Latin@ emphasis introduce the topics and then how sensitive issues are resolved. In examining this focus on Latin@ literature and the "muddy waters" of this in-between span, we argue it is important to have this in between space where it is not all about conflict, but also not all about harmony. That topics of conflict can be introduced to support Latin@ youth who are beginning to experience real-life problems, without extinguishing their innocence.

Ada, Alma. Flor. *I Love Saturdays y Domingos*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2002.

Brown, Monica. (2011). *Marisol McDonald doesn't match*. Lee & Low Books, Inc., 2011.

Medina, Meg. *Yaqui Delgado Wants to Kick Your Ass*. Candlewick Press, 2013.

Mora, Pat. *Gracias, Thanks*. Lee & Low Books, Inc., 2009.

Quintero, Isabel. *Gabi, A Girl in Pieces*. Cinco Punto Press, 2013.