



The
Social
Studies

TEXAN

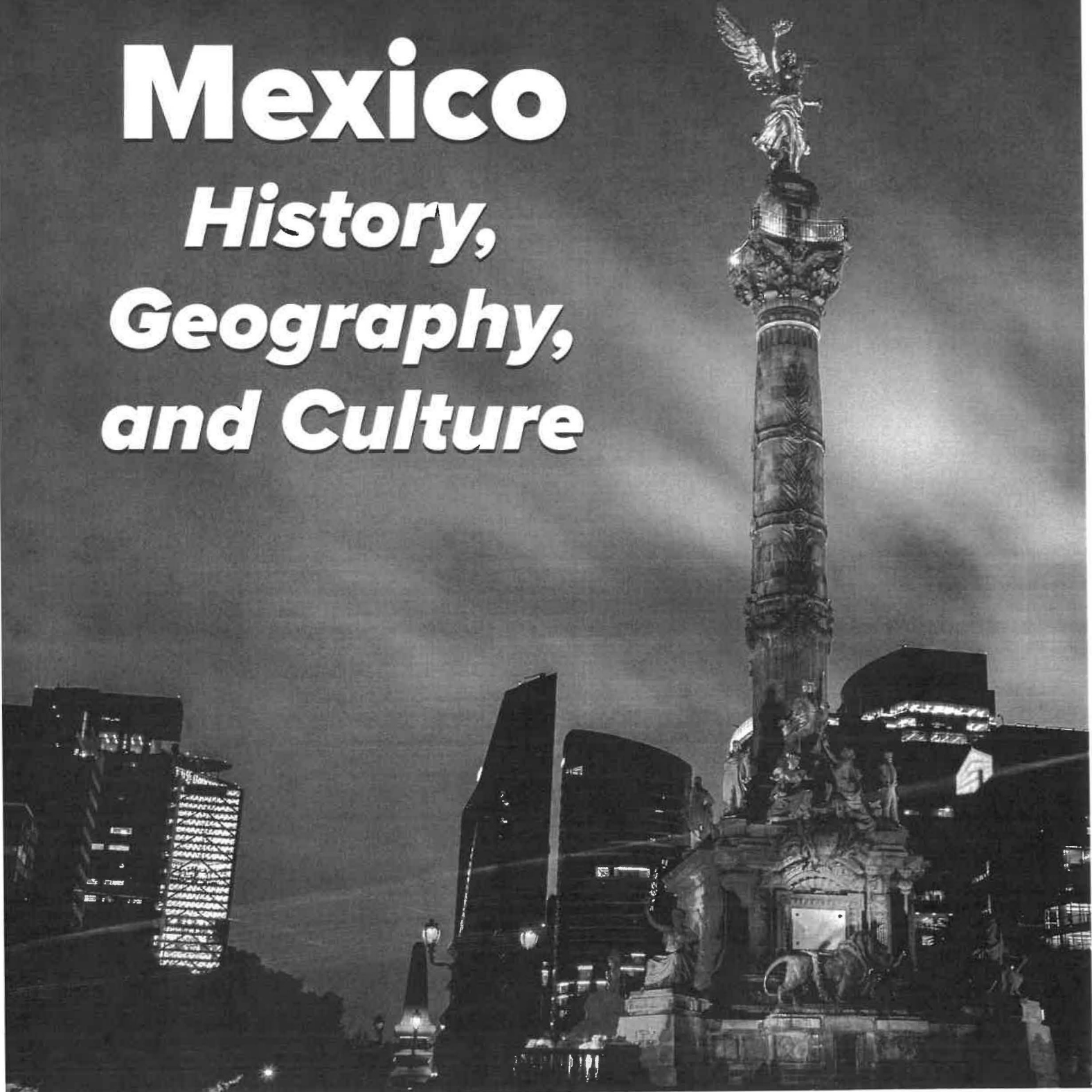
Summer 2021

Volume 37 • Number 2

The Official Publication of the Texas Council for the Social Studies

Mexico

*History,
Geography,
and Culture*



Windows, Mirrors, and Doors into Mexico

Children's Literature Reflecting Mexican and Mexican-American Voices

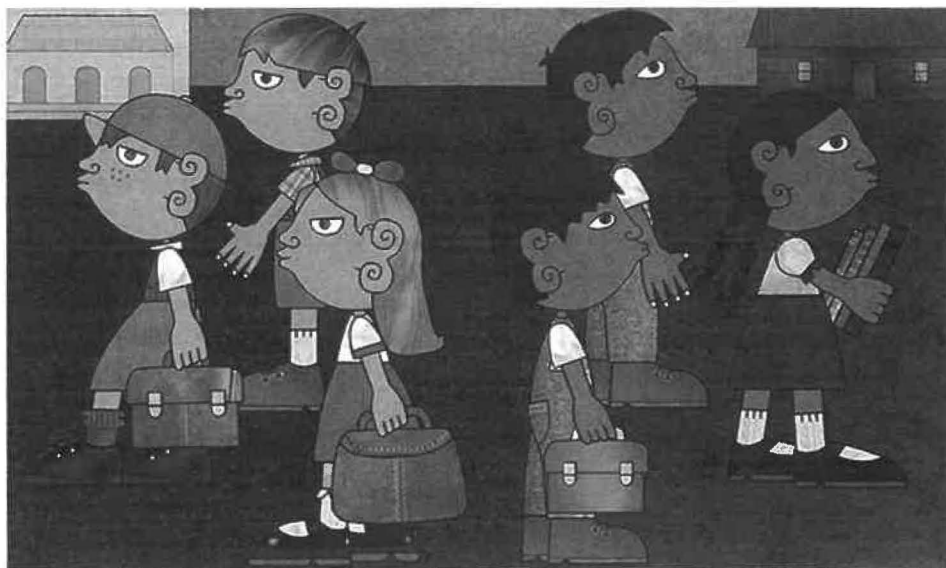
Dr. Lisa K. Pennington
and Dr. Donna Fortune

It is well known that students need to be exposed to diverse perspectives in the classroom. In order to see themselves in and make connections to the content, students need to learn about the many different groups that contributed to United States history. One method to introduce students to multiple perspectives, no matter the grade level, is children's literature. Whether a book is included in a formal lesson plan or simply included in a classroom library for ease of access, the benefits of including diverse children's literature in the classroom are many. Children's literature offers windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) that can expand the curriculum and ensure diverse voices are shared with students. It supports culturally responsive pedagogy in several ways, including allowing students to connect with texts, develop empathy, understand different perspectives, feel valued, work with high interest material, and generally learn material more easily (Gay, 2002; Understood, n.d.).

However, when choosing children's literature to include in lessons and classroom libraries, teachers must also be critical of such texts to ensure they are culturally responsive and appropriate (Gay, 2002). In particular, teachers should examine texts for racism, sexism, stereotypes, and misinformation, for example (Derman-Sparks, 2016). Fortunately, there are multiple rubrics and guides to aid teachers in the critical analysis of texts.

With the introduction of Mexican American studies courses in Texas, and the general goal of making sure multiple perspectives are included in K-12 social studies classrooms, we searched for children's literature that reflects Mexican and Mexican American voices. In doing so, we drew on several rubrics to guide our search and determine appropriate texts. We found several books for elementary grades that we believe are appropriate and respectful of the voices they portray.

The criteria we used to analyze the



Duncan Tonatiuh Wants Latino Children to See Themselves in Books

selected texts came from existing children's book rubrics (Derman & Sparks, 2016; Hollie, 2017; Lee & Low, n.d.; Sharma & Christ, 2017) that were adapted to include analysis of the specific storylines, illustrations, and identities of the characters. The purpose of this project was to look for children's texts that authentically represented the Mexican and Mexican American characters and cultures within the story. We further identified criteria to note any stereotypes that might be depicted, the relationships of the characters, and specifically analyzed the texts to avoid books that included tokenism. Additionally, we identified the author's connections to the storyline. With these guidelines in mind, we feel that the following ten books are accurate and culturally appropriate in their depictions of Mexican and Mexican American topics. The remainder of this article shares each text, along with author information and a brief synopsis, in the hopes that these selections will serve as a starting point for new resources.

The first four texts are all by Duncan Tonatiuh, a Mexican American author and illustrator who draws on pre-Columbian Mixtec codices to inspire his illustrations. Tonatiuh's texts touch on a variety of topics related to Mexican and Mexican American culture. He aims to write stories that are

relevant to children today, while honoring the past (DuncanTonatiuh.com, 2019).

The Princess and the Warrior: A Tale of Two Volcanoes retells a Mexican legend that celebrates Aztec culture. It includes historical and cultural information that is easily accessible to children either for a read aloud or for the classroom library.

Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and her Family's Fight for Desegregation describes a school desegregation case in California that preceded *Brown v. Board of Education* by eight years. Thurgood Marshall represented Sylvia Mendez in this case, and would use some of the same arguments in *Brown v. Board*. This book gives students a broader understanding of the fight for school desegregation.

Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras gives the history of the calaveras, or the iconic skeleton characters associated with *Día de Muertos* and the artist who created them. The text also provides background information on *Día de Muertos* as well as how the artist used calaveras as political commentary.

Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin is Duncan Tonatiuh's first book, and tells the story of two cousins, one living in America and one living in Mexico. Through letters to each other they share how different yet

continued on page 20 ►

similar their lives are. The text includes both Spanish and English words to name the different topics they write about in their letters.

The next two texts are versions of well-known folk or fairy tales. Both texts include words and phrases in Spanish throughout the retelling, and offer the opportunity to consider familiar stories from different perspectives, allowing students to see similarities and make connections across cultures.

The Three Little Javelinas by Susan Lowell. This tale of The Three Little Pigs is set in the Southwestern desert. The javelinas' (Spanish for wild boar) houses are built with tumbleweeds, saguaro sticks, and adobe bricks and the wolf has been transformed into a coyote. Lowell was born in Mexico, and lives in the Southwestern region of the United States, where many of her stories take place.

Adelita: A Mexican Cinderella Story by Tomie dePaola. In this version of Cinderella, the glass slippers are replaced by a rebozo, or shawl. Beautiful illustrations accompany this retelling, and a listing of the Spanish phrases, translations, and a pronunciation guide are included at the end. Though dePaola, a prolific children's author, has no connection to Mexico, he has written many diverse and progressive children's texts.

With the final four books we tried to touch on different topics related to Mexican and Mexican American culture, such as music and food, to introduce students to a wide range of ideas and experiences.

What Can You Do With A Paleta? by Carmen Tafolla. Written by a Mexican American author, this book tells the story of a young girl who shares what you can do with the paleta (a frozen fruit-flavored treat). The illustrations and story depict the details of what life might be like in the barrio on a hot summer day.

The Best Mariachi in the World by J.D. Smith. This story is from the perspective of a boy whose entire family are talented mariachis, and his struggle to find his own place as a mariachi. The text incorporates Spanish phrases as it focuses on culture through music, and bold illustrations showcase Gustavo's attempts to fit into the band. Like dePaola, Smith has no connection to Mexico, but is sensitive to the culture and portrayal of mariachi.

Dreamers by Yuyi Morales. Many children's books featuring Mexican or Mexican American perspectives focused on immigration, and while we realize that this is an important and relevant topic, we wanted to make sure other experiences besides the immigration story were shared. Books about immigration may also gloss over the real issues or provide happy resolutions (Cipparone, 2014). Therefore, we selected only one text focused on immigration, and it should be noted it does not touch on the difficult and complex issues leading to immigration. The author shares her experience moving to the United States, struggles learning English, and her discovery of the public library. The illustrations are a bright and colorful mix of mediums. A brief autobiography is included. Spanish words are sprinkled throughout the text and a Spanish version is also available.

Green is a Chile Pepper by Roseanne Thong. This picture book, written by an American author and illustrated by a Hispanic artist, is a bilingual telling of color words. Each new color includes the Spanish translation of the color and the authentic illustrations depict diverse children including different gender representations. The book also includes an in-depth descriptive glossary of the Spanish words including the cultural meanings.

These books are only a sample of the available children's picture books about Mexican and Mexican American culture and we encourage teachers to expand on this collection. Sites such as Lee and Low, Social Justice Books, and We Need Diverse Books offer lists and collections of appropriate texts. "When incorporated intentionally, thoughtfully, and purposefully, picture books provide entry points for exploring the complexities of the human condition: belonging, identity, suffering, caretaking, love, loss" (Wissman, 2019, p. 24). Using children's books to engage students with authentic texts allows teachers to present Mexican and Mexican American cultures and provide opportunities for students to see themselves represented positively in their own classroom and classroom library.

REFERENCES

- About Me. (n.d.). Duncan Tonatiuh. www.duncantonatiuh.com.
- Bishop, S.R. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives*, 1(3).
- Checklist: 8 Steps for Creating a Diverse Book Collection (n.d.). *Lee and Low*. <https://www.leeandlow.com/educators/articles/checklist-8-steps-to-creating-a-diverse-book-collection>.

- Cipparone, P. (2014). Reading *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*: An allegory of immigration sparks rich discussions. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 27(2), 9-13.
- Culturally Responsive Teaching. (n.d.). Understood. <https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/for-educators/universal-design-for-learning/what-is-culturally-responsive-teaching>
- Derman-Sparks, L. (2016). *Guide for selecting anti-bias children's books*. Social Justice Books. www.socialjusticebooks.org.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2), 106-116.
- Hollie, S. (2017). *Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching and Learning – Classroom Practices for Student Success, Grades K-12*. Shell Education.
- Lee & Low Books. (n.d.). *Multicultural Children's Book Publisher*. leeandlow.com.
- Multicultural and Social Justice Books. (2021, January 27) *Social Justice Books*. socialjusticebooks.org.
- Sharma, S. A.; Christ, T. (2017). Five Steps Toward Successful Culturally Relevant Text Selection; Integration. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(3), 295–307. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1623>
- We Need Diverse Books. (2021, April 13). diversebooks.org
- Wissman, K. K. (2019). Reading Radiantly: Embracing the Power of Picturebooks to Cultivate the Social Imagination. *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 57(1), 14-25. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bkb.2019.0002>

CHILDREN'S BOOKS REFERENCES

- DePaola, T. (2004). *Adelita: a Mexican Cinderella story*. Puffin Books.
- Lowell, S. (2011). *The Three Little Javelinas*. Rising Moon.
- Morales, Y. (2019). *Dreamers*. Findaway World, I.L.C.
- Smith, J. D. (2008). *The best mariachi in the world*. Raven Tree Press.
- Tafolla, C. (2014). *What can you do with a paleta? – ¿Qué puedes hacer con una paleta?* Dragonfly.
- Thong, R. (2016). *Green is a chile pepper: a book of colors*. Chronicle Books.
- Tonatiuh, D. (2016). *The princess and the warrior: a tale of two volcanoes*. Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Tonatiuh, D. (2015). *Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead Calaveras*. Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Tonatiuh, D. (2014). *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez; Her Family's Fight For Desegregation*. Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Tonatiuh, D. (2011). *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*. Abrams Books for Young Readers.
- Lisa Pennington is an assistant professor at Governor State University in University Park, Illinois. She work with preservice elementary educators and focuses on teaching social studies in the elementary classroom, particularly through the use of children's literature.
- Donna Fortune works with preservice elementary educators and integrates diverse children's books across all of her courses. She consistently works to help educators understand the importance of creating classroom environments and libraries where all students are visible.