

# Once Upon a Cuento

Bilingual Storytimes in  
English *and* Spanish

JAMIE CAMPBELL NAIDOO *and* KATIE SCHERRER



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# Introduction

## SERVING LATINO AND SPANISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN IN THE LIBRARY



**T**he Latino population in the United States represents a vast spectrum of diversity, every bit as unique as that of the American population at large.<sup>1</sup> It can be too easy to generalize about this population, to assume that Spanish-speaking and Latino communities are uniform, with the same informational, recreational, and educational needs. Just as when talking about “millennials” or “children” as one group, some valid information might be gained from generalizations, but librarians often miss the nuances that allow us to truly connect with these individuals if we stop there. Yet, we must start somewhere, and national demographic information can help us begin to get to know the Latino population in the United States.

Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States. According to a 2012 report from the Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project,<sup>2</sup> Hispanics make up 16.9 percent of the total population. More than half (64.5 percent) of Hispanics (10.9 percent of the total population) are born in the United States. The self-described heritage of most Hispanics in the United States (64.2 percent) is Mexican, followed by Puerto Rican (9.3 percent), Cuban (3.7 percent), Salvadoran (3.7 percent), and Dominican (3.1 percent). The concentration of Hispanic origin groups varies by geography. For example, “Mexicans make up 78 percent of Latinos in the Los Angeles area but, in the New York City area, Puerto Ricans (28 percent) and Dominicans (21 percent) are the largest groups. Meanwhile, Salvadorans (32 percent) are most numerous in the Washington, D.C., metro area, and Cubans (54 percent) are the largest group in Miami.”<sup>3</sup> The Hispanic population grew at the second-highest rate by race or ethnicity between 2000 and 2012 (50.4 percent), and the majority of that growth (61.9 percent) came from the growth of the native-born Hispanic population. Not only is the Hispanic community the largest minority group in the United States, it is also the youngest, with a median age of just 27, ten years younger than the national median of 37. One-quarter of all newborns in the United States are Hispanic.<sup>4</sup> In seventeen states, at least 20 percent of kindergartners are Latino, up from just eight states in 2000. This

change includes states in the Pacific Northwest (Washington, Oregon, and Idaho), the Midwest (Nebraska and Kansas), and the Northeast (Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey).<sup>5</sup>

There are 37 million Spanish speakers in the United States, making Spanish the most spoken language other than English.<sup>6</sup> Many Latinos, but certainly not all, speak Spanish at home. About 38 percent of Latinos describe themselves as Spanish-dominant, while 36 percent say they are bilingual and 25 percent are English-dominant.<sup>7</sup> These percentages are a little different for younger Latinos, with 36 percent of Latinos ages 16 to 25 describing themselves as English-dominant, 41 percent as bilingual, and 23 percent as Spanish-dominant.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, most (98 percent) native-born Latinos in this age group say they can speak English very well or pretty well, but this ability does not mean abandoning Spanish. When it comes to the children of immigrants, 79 percent of second-generation young people and 38 percent of third generation report proficiency in Spanish. Seventy percent of young Latinos report using Spanglish (a hybrid mix of Spanish and English) when talking with family and friends. Though the exact future of Spanish language use in the United States is impossible to predict, it is very clear from the data available today that the Spanish language, whether in conjunction with other languages or on its own, will continue to play an important role in American society.

## **LATINO AND SPANISH-SPEAKING CHILDREN IN THE LIBRARY**

Why is it important to begin a book on bilingual programming with statistics about Spanish-language usage and Latino population growth? The answer is simple: the landscape of America is changing. People from diverse cultures speaking languages other than English, most often Spanish, are present in almost every city and county throughout the United States. In many places, Spanish-speaking and Latino patrons, particularly first-generation immigrant Latinos, are visiting libraries for the first time. A report from the Pew Research Center on Hispanics and public libraries acknowledges, “When it comes to public libraries, immigrant Hispanics pose both a challenge and an opportunity to the library community.”<sup>9</sup> Although librarians in some areas of the country have been offering bilingual or Spanish-language programming for decades, other librarians are faced with the exciting, though somewhat intimidating, prospect of providing these programs for the first time. As the statistics suggest, the Latino and Spanish-speaking populations of one area of the country may be completely different from those in another area. It is important that librarians serving these populations look at census data for their communities to understand which specific Latino cultural groups are represented and then plan the best programs accordingly.

All children need opportunities to hear their language spoken and see their lives validated through engaging cuentos (stories) that reflect their cultural

experiences. It is imperative for library programs and material collections to reflect the rich diversity and languages of all the children in the community served by the library.<sup>10</sup> Latino and Spanish-speaking children deserve the best library and literacy programs that include songs, cuentos, rhymes, dichos (proverbs or sayings), books, and digital media celebrating Latino cultural heritage. Providing culturally relevant library materials as well as programs, such as bilingual storytimes, in the first language of a child sends the resounding message that the library cares about Latino and Spanish-speaking families and values the contributions of their cultures to society.

Though very little information is available on library use by Latinos and Spanish speakers, one report did find that most Latinos have a positive perception of the public library.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, and key for library staff members to keep in mind as they develop outreach strategies, the perceived friendliness of staff was found to have a strong effect on public library use by Latinos, even stronger than access to materials in Spanish. Another report from the Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project also found this strong positive perception among Latinos toward public libraries. Notably, though immigrant Latinos were less likely to have used a public library than were other demographic groups, those who had were the most appreciative of the variety of services the public library offers.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this book we provide suggestions and strategies for librarians interested in welcoming Spanish-speaking and Latino children and their families into the library and greeting them with high-quality customer service, collections, and programs.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The book begins with a discussion on the importance of bilingual programming in the lives of Latino and Spanish-speaking children, addressing the unique educational and informational needs of bilingual children. We use the bilingual programs and outreach of pioneer librarian Pura Belpré within the New York Public Library system to frame this discussion. Chapter 2 offers practical suggestions for beginning outreach to Spanish-speaking and Latino communities, emphasizing the importance of relationship-building and community collaboration. This chapter addresses why outreach is needed and profiles a library professional who has had great success engaging Latino families in her rural community.

We follow this discussion of outreach in chapter 3 with suggestions for planning and implementing bilingual storytimes when a librarian does not speak Spanish. This aspect is essential because many librarians who do not speak Spanish are very hesitant to plan bilingual storytimes. The chapter also includes information on selecting bilingual Spanish-English picture books as well as culturally authentic Latino children's books. Chapter 4 describes the various types of bilingual programming available. Specifically, we identify the ways in which the potential goals of a bilingual storytime may impact its design and

outline varying styles of using English and Spanish throughout the program. The chapter provides several templates for bilingual storytime design, arranged by specific age groups.

Chapter 5 includes a timely discussion about digital media use by Latino and Spanish-speaking families and addresses the potential of digital apps in library storytimes to meet the multiple literacy needs of bilingual children. We share examples of bilingual digital storybook apps as well as creative apps reinforcing Latino cultural heritage along with commendable literacy and library programs in the United States that incorporate digital media in their service and outreach to Spanish-speaking and Latino families. Considerations for selecting apps to use in bilingual programming are provided as well.

We also include eighteen ready-to-use program plans for bilingual storytimes developed by library professionals with experience working with Spanish-speaking and Latino children. The program plans cover all age groups and include mixed-age and family programs. This feature is particularly important, as many Latino families attend library programming as a unit, and librarians who want to target this population need to develop programs that engage children of multiple ages as well as their adult caregivers. Program plans are arranged by age and theme and include an ending craft or activity, additional suggested materials on the theme, and suggested relevant websites for further exploration.

We conclude with a list of professional materials and online resources to assist you in planning your bilingual storytimes. These resources are accompanied by extensive lists of recommended children's books and songs to use in bilingual programming. Throughout the book we recommend various books, digital apps, music, and other materials for bilingual storytime. As the landscape of bilingual and Spanish-language materials changes, a wonderful and recommended book, digital app, or song may not be available when you are ready to plan a particular themed program. If this is the case, we encourage you to use the sources recommended in the final section as well as the suggestions for evaluating and selecting bilingual books and digital apps to find replacements.

It is our hope that you will find in this book creative ideas, suggestions, and strategies for planning dynamic bilingual storytimes. Katie has used her years of experience working with Latino and Spanish-speaking families to offer suggestions for planning and implementing programs that not only promote literacy development but also celebrate Latino heritage. Her advice has proved valuable to hundreds of librarians who have attended her training workshops. Jamie has also tapped into his experiences working with Latino children's literature, digital apps, and digital picture books and with Latino families to suggest recommendations and guidelines for selecting materials that will motivate and empower Latino and Spanish-speaking children to embrace their culture as they explore the world around them. Together, we have created what we hope is a librarian's toolbox of skills that will jump-start your programming. It should be noted that neither Jamie nor Katie is of Latino heritage, though both have extensive experience working with Latino families in library settings as well



as planning and presenting bilingual programs. Every effort has been made to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of Latino and Spanish-speaking communities and bilingual programming, though our cultural lens undoubtedly impacts our own experience. For this reason, we have included many other voices from across the country who share their expertise in the various aspects of bilingual programming. Many of these professionals are of Latino heritage, and most are affiliated with REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-Speaking).

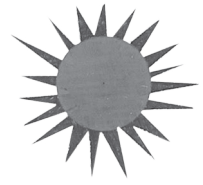
We encourage you to dare to embrace the rich cultural diversity in your library community! Select the best bilingual and Spanish-language materials for your storytimes. Prepare yourself for a rewarding journey that begins with “Once Upon a Cuento . . .”

## NOTES

1. The terms *Latino* and *Hispanic* are often used interchangeably in the United States to refer to the same population of people who either live in or have ancestors in Mexico, Central and South America, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Spanish-speaking islands in the Caribbean. People who are new immigrants from a Latin American country, U.S. residents of Latin American heritage, and current citizens in a Latin American country are all precariously grouped under these labels. Each term is loaded with social and political implications and is accepted or rejected in various degrees by the people the term purports to represent. Throughout this book readers will find the two terms used interchangeably, depending on the research being cited, though we often opt for the term *Latino*, as it is thought to be more inclusive than the label *Hispanic*. Nonetheless, these labels are used for clarity only. We fully respect the right of all individuals to adopt the term they feel best describes their life experiences, diverse heritage, and unique culture.
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3. Jens Manuel Krogstad, “11 Facts for National Hispanic Heritage Month,” Pew Research Center (September 16, 2014), [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/16/11-facts-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/16/11-facts-for-national-hispanic-heritage-month/).
4. Pew Research Center, “Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America” (July 1, 2013), [www.pewhispanic.org/2009/12/11/between-two-worlds-how-young-latinos-come-of-age-in-america/](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2009/12/11/between-two-worlds-how-young-latinos-come-of-age-in-america/).
5. Jens Manuel Krogstad, “A View of the Future through Kindergarten Demographics,” Pew Research Center (July 8, 2014), [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/08/a-view-of-the-future-through-kindergarten-demographics/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/08/a-view-of-the-future-through-kindergarten-demographics/).
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7. Krogstad, “11 Facts for National Hispanic Heritage Month.”



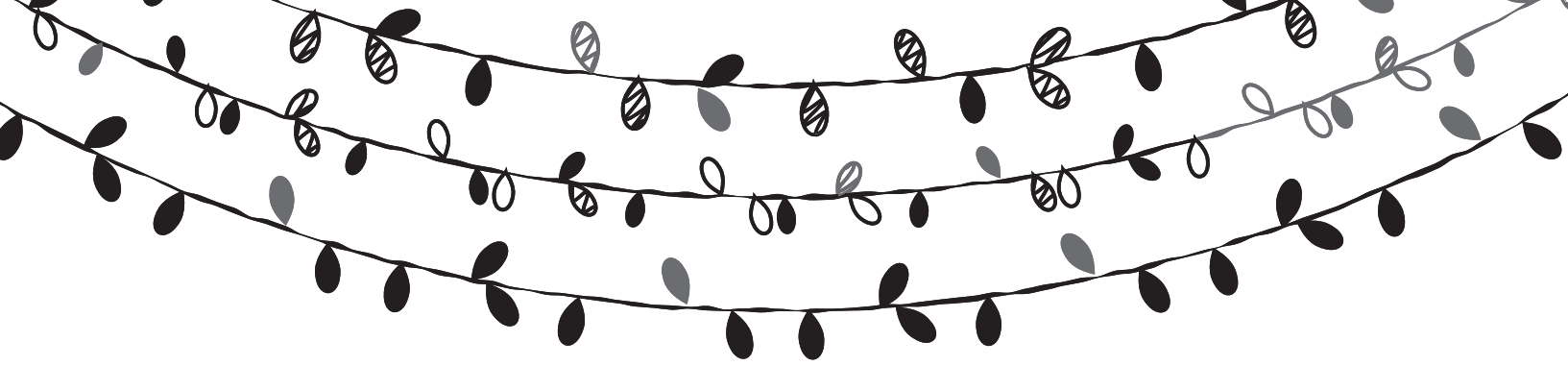
8. Pew Research Center, "Between Two Worlds: How Young Latinos Come of Age in America."
9. Anna Brown and Mark Hugo Lopez, "Public Libraries and Hispanics: Immigrant Hispanics Use Libraries Less, But Those Who Do Appreciate Them the Most," Pew Research Center (March 17, 2015), [www.pewhispanic.org/2015/03/17/public-libraries-and-hispanics/](http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/03/17/public-libraries-and-hispanics/).
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*Part One*

# GETTING STARTED





## Chapter One

# Bilingual Programming for Latino and Spanish-Speaking Children

The Board of Education began to appoint Puerto Rican teachers as coordinators in the school system, who helped children preserve their cultural background by means of storytelling and narration of selective materials suitable for their ages. As the public schools joined in the task in which libraries had long been engaged, classes came from the schools for book talks and orientation in Spanish. The library continued its services where requested, going in turn, into the schools to teach library instruction and acquaint children with the public library. By invitation, Puerto Rican mothers, members of the PTA, accompanied classes to the library to see activities offered to the children. After class, the mothers were escorted to the adult department where they could join the library. . . . At one of the libraries a mother discovering a collection of Spanish books exclaimed, “Come my children, quench your thirst.”<sup>1</sup>



**A**lthough it reads almost like a storybook excerpt, the preceding passage recounts events that occurred once upon a time in a public library in New York City in the 1960s. Spanish-speaking and Latino children and their families enjoyed bilingual storytimes, puppet shows, and other library programs infused with beautiful Spanish-language and culturally rich stories representing diverse Latino cultures from Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, and beyond. Through the work of several dedicated children’s librarians such as Ernestine Rose, Anne Carroll Moore, Mary Gould Davis, and Augusta Baker, decades of Spanish-speaking and Latino children throughout New York City reaped the rewards of the outreach efforts of library pioneer Pura Belpré. Collectively, these women empowered Belpré, the first Puerto Rican librarian in the New York Public Library system, to offer innovative bilingual storytimes and outreach programming to thousands of Spanish-speaking children.

Through Belpré's programs, children made important literacy connections with printed books and oral stories while seeing their language and culture celebrated in the library.<sup>2</sup>

Although many of these magical encounters occurred more than fifty years ago, contemporary librarians can look to the work of Belpré as they consider their library's services to Latino and Spanish-speaking children and their families. The key is to provide opportunities for these children to encounter their language and culture in library programs such as the bilingual storytime and to make the library welcoming and accessible for all families. Reinforcing many of the ideas behind the bilingual programs developed by Belpré, this chapter describes the role of language in the Latino child's development, underscores the importance of offering culturally relevant bilingual storytimes, and explores common myths related to Spanish-language literacy instruction and activities.

## **LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT OF LATINO CHILDREN**

Language influences identity development and is an inherent part of every child's culture. Young children rapidly develop new social, cognitive, and linguistic skills in their first three years of life. When children live in an environment that supports their language, they are free to explore, learn, and grow into lifelong learners. They can use print and digital media, their daily experiences, and their immediate contexts to better understand their place in the world and develop a sense of self.

For children growing up speaking a language other than English at home, it is important to have meaningful early literacy experiences in the home language. These experiences first and foremost support home language acquisition, an essential key for family communication and an integral part of cultural identity. Decades of research indicate that children learn best in their home language and that literacy encounters in a child's first language can support the development of a second language.<sup>3</sup>

Children whose first language is not English are faced with two challenges upon entering school: acquiring English as well as learning skills and gaining knowledge through English-language instruction.<sup>4</sup> If a child is not fluent in English, he cannot acquire the necessary information to advance in the U.S. educational system. Children who have a strong foundation of early literacy in their home language have an easier time learning a second language, such as English, than do those who have had less language exposure. Literacy instruction and activities in the home language of a child support cognitive development, encourage self-esteem, enhance social interactions, and strengthen family ties.<sup>5</sup> When young children are forced to abandon their first language for a

new language, they essentially begin the literacy process without any prior background knowledge to support their emergent literacy in the new language. As a result, children perceive a disconnect between their home and school environments, which can lead to feelings of frustration and inadequacy.<sup>6</sup> Their self-esteem begins to drop as they fall behind their native-English-speaking peers and learn that Spanish is considered subpar to English.

## **IMPORTANCE OF OFFERING CULTURALLY RELEVANT BILINGUAL STORYTIMES**

Why offer a storytime in Spanish or bilingually in English and Spanish? Before passage of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and the bilingual amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, many Spanish-speaking children in the United States had few opportunities to encounter their home language in library and instructional materials, much less engage in language and literacy activities in Spanish. Although a few exemplary bilingual programs could be found in public libraries, such as those given by Pura Belpré at the New York Public Library from the 1920s through the 1940s and from 1960 to 1978, little attention was given to offering library programs for children either bilingually or in Spanish.

The preschool storytime has been used by public libraries for decades to socialize young children and connect them with high-quality literature. Within the past ten years, early literacy storytimes have become more common in libraries to help preschoolers develop emergent literacy skills and to educate parents on how to foster language development. Storytime is also the perfect place to connect with Latino and Spanish-speaking children. The use of Spanish during a bilingual storytime reinforces the perception that the library values the language and supports the cognitive and social development of Spanish-speaking children. Librarians who offer bilingual storytimes can build a bridge between the home and school cultures experienced by Latino and Spanish-speaking children. Spanish-language stories, rhymes, poems, and songs affirm and validate the language and culture of these children and their families.

A well-planned bilingual storytime enhances a child's literacy development by providing a meaningful, engaging approach to emergent literacy. Bilingual or Spanish-language cuentos (stories), dichos (sayings), and songs offer rich context and meaning through familiar words and phrases from a child's home language. As we will discuss later, high-quality children's books that mirror the home environments of Latino and Spanish-speaking children are ideal for validating a child's culture and heritage. Collectively, these materials, used within the context of bilingual storytime, affirm a child's language and culture and significantly help in the formation of a Latino child's ethnic identity development.



## But I Don't Speak Spanish

Although you may have a strong passion for serving Latino and Spanish-speaking children, you may find the task daunting. Often, librarians who do not speak Spanish or who know little about Latino cultures list these insufficiencies as obstacles to providing bilingual storytime and outreach to these families. As we discuss later in this book, you can offer dynamic service and bilingual storytimes to Latino and Spanish-speaking families by using the ingenuity and creativity in your librarian's toolbox of skills to help you connect everyone in the community with the wonderful resources in your library. Former outreach librarian Lillian López, who worked with Pura Belpré, offers reassuring advice to librarians serving diverse cultures: "The two words, love and trust, are among the most beautiful in the English language. When you serve with sincerity, people are going to trust you regardless of your ethnic background. A child can always tell when you are sincere."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, do not let perceived roadblocks or fear hinder you from reaching out to Latino and Spanish-speaking children and families in your community. Rather, collaborate with other organizations serving these families or work with Spanish-speaking educators and parents to help you plan your programs and services. Seek Latino and Spanish-speaking partners to assist you with bilingual storytimes and, most important, remember that your bilingual programs do not have to be confined to the four walls of your physical library building. Bilingual storytimes can be offered in playgrounds, community centers, churches, parks, schools, day care centers, and Head Start programs frequented by Spanish-speaking children and their families.

## Why Should I Use Latino Children's Materials in Storytime?

Culturally authentic children's books can be highly influential in assisting young Latino children as they develop their ethnic identities and make connections between their home culture and the larger educational culture found in schools and libraries. Research indicates that children's materials with Latino characters and themes can have either a positive or negative impact upon the self-esteem and identity development of young Latinos.<sup>8</sup> A picture book that authentically captures the nuances of a particular Latino subculture and accurately depicts daily experiences can reinforce the self-esteem of Latino children and validate their existence. For non-Latino children, the book can also serve as a window into the lives of their friends or classmates, creating a bridge of understanding. However, if an informational book portrays Latino characters as poor, dirty, or unintelligent, then Latino children are likely to be embarrassed by their culture, and non-Latino children may develop cultural stereotypes about Latinos.

Equally harmful to the ethnic identity development and self-esteem of Latino and Spanish-speaking children is the complete absence from library collections and storytimes of books that reflect their cultural experiences. When a

child never encounters her culture or daily experiences in the library, then she receives a resounding message that the library thinks she is unimportant or insignificant. Latino children's book creators such as René Colato Laínez and Maya Christina Gonzalez have described experiencing feelings of inadequacy during their childhood because of the absence of Spanish-speaking, bilingual, or Latino characters in the books they read in school or encountered in the library. Both of these authors have made a concerted effort to urge educators and librarians to include Latino children's books and other materials in the curriculum to assist Latino children with their identity development.

## MYTHS RELATED TO SPANISH-LANGUAGE LITERACY INSTRUCTION AND ACTIVITIES

When you plan bilingual storytimes or library programs in Spanish, you may face resistance from fellow librarians, administrators, local government officials, or community members. It is important to know how to respond effectively to any concerns and to reinforce the mission of the library to serve everyone in the community. In this section, we present some common misperceptions or myths related to offering Spanish-language or bilingual programs to children, along with facts that debunk those myths.

**MYTH 1** A Spanish-speaking child's language development in English can become delayed if a librarian or other educator offers bilingual English-Spanish literacy instruction or library programs.

**FACT** Each child is unique in his language development. Although there may be observable delays or lapses at particular stages in development, research indicates that second-language acquisition is actually enhanced when a child receives instruction in his first language.<sup>9</sup> Bilingual instruction reinforces language development in both languages.

**MYTH 2** The best way to help young children learn a new language is immersion, with all books, instruction, playful interactions (such as singing), and conversations in the new language.

**FACT** Young children need continuous learning support in the home language to provide a solid foundation for acquiring a new language. Children should have equal opportunities to interact with materials and to engage in literacy activities in both the home and new languages.<sup>10</sup>

**MYTH 3** Bilingual storytimes or literacy activities will confuse young native English speakers and inhibit their successful literacy development.

**FACT** When native English speakers are exposed continuously to a second language such as Spanish through bilingual instruction, their English literacy development is equally enhanced.<sup>11</sup> Like their non-native English-speaking counterparts, they too have the opportunity to begin acquiring a new



language—Spanish in this instance. In fact, many librarians who offer bilingual Spanish-English storytimes report that attendance by native English speakers is equal to, and often greater than, that of Spanish speakers.

**MYTH 4** Providing bilingual instruction or bilingual storytimes is expensive and a drain on resources for English-speaking children.

**FACT** Bilingual and Spanish books and materials do not cost more than English-language books. The acquisition of bilingual Spanish-English books and music CDs enhances both the English-language and Spanish-language collections. Moreover, both monolingual and bilingual storytimes require careful and purposeful planning. Although some aspects of planning for a new bilingual storytime may take more of an initial time investment than planning for a new monolingual storytime, that time investment is often required because the organization's current services to Latino and Spanish-speaking families are lacking, not because bilingual storytime is inherently more time-consuming. By making an appropriate time investment up front to ensure the program effectively reaches and engages Spanish-speaking families, the library is coming closer to ensuring its mission of providing equal access to all of its community.

A particularly useful resource for librarians who confront resistance to the library offering bilingual and Spanish-language storytimes is Linda Espinosa's "Challenging Common Myths about Young English Language Learners."<sup>12</sup> This brief report explores several myths about language acquisition and Latino cultural values and provides research-based information to debunk these myths. You can use this resource when responding to concerns.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

All children need opportunities to hear their language spoken and to encounter book characters reflective of their cultural heritage. The public library that is offering vibrant, developmentally appropriate bilingual storytimes holds significant potential for connecting with Latino and Spanish-speaking children and their families. Almost fifty years ago, children's librarian Toni de Gerez surmised, "The earlier a child is exposed to books in both English and Spanish, the sooner he will feel at home in both cultures. He will enjoy 'exploring' even when he may know little or nothing of one language, and his confidence in one will carry over to the other. Once he is no longer ashamed of the language he speaks at home, he will move with pride and dignity."<sup>13</sup> By providing rich opportunities for all families to encounter children's literature and literacy activities in both Spanish and English, the library can be a place where pride and dignity indeed flourish.

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**NOTES**

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*Titles of books and CDs are shown in italic.*

*Titles of rhymes and songs are shown in quotes.*

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