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# ALTERING THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN HISTORY LANDSCAPE: INCORPORATING LATINX CULTURALLY RELEVANT BIOGRAPHIES IN SOCIAL STUDIES

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance to teachers on how to incorporate Latinx culturally relevant biographies into their social studies classrooms with English learners (ELs). In the social studies curriculum, United States history often is regarded as one of the hardest courses for newly arrived immigrants to learn due to the unfamiliarity of American history content (Dunne & Martell, 2013). Using a culturally relevant approach to teaching social studies has the potential to connect EL students to content in powerful and meaningful ways. As the number of Spanish speaking EL students grows in the American public school system (Cruz & Thornton, 2008), the use of culturally relevant Latinx biographies allows teachers to incorporate different reading levels, bilingual narratives, and historical photographs in their sheltered (EL only) or mainstream (traditional) classroom. Teachers can differentiate assignments for students based on English proficiency, as well as challenge students who are learning new English skills. Additionally, the use of culturally relevant biographies can help teachers change the landscape of American history s/heroes and these shifts can be impactful for native-born students also (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008). In this article, we provide a sample lesson where EL students in United States history study female Latinx activists to construct body biographies.

The English Learner (EL) population is growing rapidly in the United States (Cruz & Thornton, 2008). This fast increase presents a challenge for schools, teachers, and students who are English learners, as ELs are finding themselves placed in classrooms without teachers who are certified instructors in English to Speakers of Other Language (ESOL). English Learner is the term used by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2016) and will be used throughout the article to refer to students who are emergent bilinguals as it is synonymous with the term English Language Learner (ELL) that often is used in schools. Specifically, in the social studies curriculum, United States history often is regarded as one of the hardest courses for newly arrived immigrants to learn due to the unfamiliarity of the American history content (Dunne & Martell, 2013). The absence of culturally relevant instruction can also contribute to the potentially overwhelming nature of the social studies curriculum for emergent bilinguals/trilinguals. The purpose of this article is to share how one teacher incorporated Latinx culturally relevant biographies into her social studies classroom of predominantly Spanish speaking English learners (ELs) to support their language and content learning objectives. We also use the term Latinx throughout the narrative, which is a gender neutral alternative to Latino and Latina.

Culturally relevant pedagogy serves as the theoretical foundation of this approach to teaching social studies content to EL students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Historically, the United States history curriculum has not reflected the needs of ELs in diverse classrooms (Salinas, 2006). One reason for this absence is the lack of culturally relevant textbooks in American classrooms (Gay, 2010). Culturally relevant teaching and books that display student culture often show multiple and varying perspectives of United States history content (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Using a culturally relevant approach to teaching social studies has the potential to connect EL students to content in powerful and meaningful ways. Additionally, the use of culturally relevant biographies can

help teachers alter the landscape of American history s/heroes and these shifts can be impactful for native-born students as well (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008).

Salinas (2006) argues the social studies curriculum needs to foster an inclusive curriculum that challenges inequalities, injustices, and hegemony. A more democratic curriculum is necessary for the increasingly diverse classrooms in public schools. Ideally, United States history curriculum taught in the classroom should move ELs from consumers of society to active citizens (Salinas, 2006). Thus, the implications from Salinas' research are to encourage social studies teachers to consider introducing information about immigrants into their lesson plans.

The majority of high school ELs are foreign born (Franquiz & Salinas, 2011). They are often lumped together in one classroom, even when the students possess different linguistic and cognitive abilities. They hail from a variety of countries and enjoy a range of levels of language acquisition. Many new immigrants face marginalization in the classroom when their experiences are ignored (Cho & Reich, 2008). In order to make ESOL social studies content impactful, teachers must do more than simply implement a few ESOL teaching strategies (Echevarria, Short, & Powers, 2006). Furthermore, teachers must implement age appropriate strategies in order for students to understand complex social studies concepts (Short, 2002; Cruz & Thornton, 2008). However, "despite federal court cases (*Castañeda v. Pickard*, 1981; *Lau v. Nichols*, 1974) and mandates, growing evidence supports that ELs do not have access to mainstream curriculum" (Slama, 2014, p. 221). Often times, ELs do not receive high quality social studies instruction because of the lack of ESOL certified teachers, which leads to a larger achievement gap (Oliver & Oliver, 2013).

Yet placing ELs in mainstream, or traditional social studies classes creates different challenges because the content depends heavily on English language proficiency (Short, 1994). Often, these students come to class with linguistic, cultural, and geographic knowledge of their home countries, but normally without a strong background knowledge in United States history. Teachers should consider connecting students' prior knowledge to United States history content to help foster relevant teaching and learning. However, many high school newcomers are learning about United States history for the first time, whereas native born high school students frequently have been taught United States history content several times in both elementary and middle school (Short, 1994). ESOL social studies instruction can turn out to be a difficult transition for teachers to make, as well, especially if they are used to teaching students with strong familiarity and knowledge of United States history.

### **Culturally Relevant Latinx Biographies in the Social Studies Classroom**

Implementing Latinx culturally relevant biographies in secondary social studies classrooms can happen in both the sheltered (EL only) or mainstream classroom environments. One example of an excellent text for classroom use is *Portraits of Hispanic American Heroes*. This text includes twenty "Hispanic American artists, scientists, athletes, activists and political leaders [who] are profiled in this stunning picture book" (Herrera, loc. 23-24, 2014). A set of established criteria should be used to evaluate whether the biographies are useful for integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into instruction. Example criteria to consider include: the nature of the biographical story, the accuracy of the historical information presented, the locations depicted, and the languages offered in the texts. Some recent, excellent additional culturally relevant biographical book titles include, *Becoming Maria* by Sonia Manzano, *My Beloved World* by Sonia Sotomayor, *Sylvia and Aki* by Winifred Conkling, *Flying Lessons and Other Stories* by Ellen Oh, and *Enchanted Air: Two Cultures, Two Wings* by Margarita Engle.

Often, culturally and linguistically relevant texts are difficult for teachers to locate and not readily available due to the risk publishers have of the books not selling (May, Bingham, & Pendergast, 2014). In 2015, children's books including minoritized perspectives totaled under 15 percent (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2016). Books with Latinxs represented 2.4 percent, books with Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific Americans represented 3.3 percent, books with American Indian/First Nation represented 1.2 percent, and books with African Americans represented 7.9 percent (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2016). United States history standards mimic the bookshelves for English learners where Cesar Chavez is typically the only Spanish speaking historical figure named in a sampling of the standards who learned English in school (Georgia Department of Education, 2004; Mississippi Department of Education, 2011; New York Department of Education, 2015; South Carolina, Department of Education 2011; Tennessee Department of Education, 2013).

## Latinx Activist Body Biography Sample Lesson

In this manuscript, we provide a sample lesson using culturally relevant Latinx biographies with EL students. This lesson was implemented nine times over the course of three years in a high school classroom in a large metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. Even though the lesson was implemented quite a few times, the lesson presented in this article comes after much reflection and revision over the course of its numerous implementations in a sheltered ESOL United States history course. In the region where the lesson was developed, the Latinx population is growing rapidly, but a long tradition of teachers working with EL students, such as exists in Texas or California, had not developed because the immigration influx is much more recent. Thus, a tangible need persists for teachers to learn effective strategies for working with EL students. The teacher who implemented the lesson had attended the state's flagship institution and earned both an undergraduate and master degree in social studies education as well as certification in ESOL instruction. She had ten years of classroom teaching experience. She taught both on level United States history where EL students were mixed together with regular education students, as well as sheltered United States history where all the students were English Learners.

### Lesson Introduction

The following lesson was implemented in a sheltered ESOL United States history class. The day prior to the lesson, students read biographical selections on Cesar Chavez as they began to study the Latinx Civil Rights Movement. Before each class, desks were arranged in a large circle. The classroom organization allowed students to collaborate with their shoulder partners (individuals sitting next to each other), and see the faces of each of their classmates to encourage active listening. Additionally, the classroom arrangement gave the teacher the ability to move easily amongst the students to support reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills.

### Opener

As an opener to the lesson, students began by discussing what it meant to be an activist. The prompt, "discuss what it means to be an activist," was written on the board and a class brainstorming session followed. While students were verbally responding to the prompt, the teacher compiled student replies and listed them on the board. After the students' responses were deliberated and questions clarified, the teacher shared with the students that they would be reading about Latinx historical figures who were considered activists.

### Procedure

Linking to the prior day's reading, the teacher announced that some activists worked alongside Cesar Chavez, while others preceded or followed his work in the 1960s-1970s. For the lesson, students studied female Latinx activists pre-selected by their teacher. She chose the following individuals: Sylvia Mendez, Dolores Huerta, Emma Tenayuca, Adelina Otero-Warren, and Nydia Velázquez. She selected these female activists because they are often omitted from traditional American history narratives. Indeed, similar to Latinx activists, gender also remains an under developed area of study in social studies curriculum and instruction (Bohan, 2017). Students were each allowed to choose one activist to study, and then shifted seats in the circle to work collaboratively with peers who had selected the same activist. Thus, students worked in groups of three or four.

Next, the teacher handed students a copy of the body biography graphic organizer (see Figure 1) which was to be completed after students had finished reading about their particular activist. The body biography assignment encouraged students to examine the activists in a holistic manner, as the activity requires students to demonstrate a particular activist's entire life, not just the work she completed as a Latinx activist. By learning what inspired the individual, her country of origin, the various locations where she worked, and her plans and goals, students were able to develop a well-rounded and comprehensive view of the activist's life. The body biography organizer also served to keep the students' findings orderly.

Students enjoyed the use of a blank canvas for this assignment, as it allowed them to freely express their findings through drawing images and writing words. Because the teacher had good rapport with her high school EL students, she never experienced students defacing the blank body biography. While a teacher always needs to be mindful of classroom management with respect to lessons, the EL students the teacher taught over several years tended to be very respectful in the classroom, and thus never posed problems with conducting the activity. Indeed, the organizer celebrates linguistic and artistic diversity and allowed students to draw and/or write their

responses while using the provided questions as a guide (see Figure 2). Accordingly, most students appeared to enjoy the activity. As the students completed their body biography, they were encouraged to work with their peers to answer the questions posed in the body biography graphic organizer (see Figure 1). Students focused on the activists' community involvement, educational history, supporters, and political stances. The students were encouraged to discuss these aspects of their individual activists with their fellow classmates in small groups.

The students were enthusiastic as they learned the people they were continuing to study were bilingual and many had learned English in school. Additionally, the students appreciated learning about the Latinx activists' important roles in United States history. The students often reacted with pride when they learned about someone of similar Latinx heritage who had contributed to American history. The questions on the culturally relevant body biography elicited multiple student responses. Several students commented on Sylvia Mendez and stated they were "thankful for her and their ability to attend public school." Another student commented on Dolores Huerta and asked "why they had to read books [rather than the textbook] about Dolores to learn about her important role in the United Farm Workers strike?" Another student wrote, "They made me feel that if they did, I could do it too." These student examples demonstrate that materials that teach students to see themselves as a part of America's past and future can be empowering (Nieto, 1999).

### **Closure**

After students completed the body biographies with their words and pictures, they had the opportunity to verbally present their Latinx historical activist to the class. Emma Tenayuca's story of activism resonated with many students in the room. The fact that she was "our age when she fought for workers' rights" inspired the students. Following the presentations, students paired with a classmate who studied another activist to compare stories. We heard from one student "Adelina, had to fight for us to speak Spanish on the playground and in the hallway? Someone had to ask for that?" While another student commented, "She fought for us to vote. This woman did a lot!" The lesson on culturally relevant Latinx biographies allowed students to focus on reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills along with learning new social studies content. The incorporation of writing skills in small quantities is an excellent way for ELs to demonstrate their newly gained content knowledge (Franquiz & Salinas, 2011).

### **Assessment**

In sheltered classrooms, students often possess a wide range of intellectual and linguistic abilities. Thus, grading assignments can be challenging. However, teachers can assess the body biographies in several ways. Most often in this lesson, the teacher simply provided a daily grade for the assignment and used a check, check plus, and check minus system. If a student answered all questions at an exceptional level by providing detailed information about the Latinx activist, then a check plus was earned. If the student answered three-quarters or more of the questions in brief sentences, then the student was awarded a check. If the student failed to complete a majority of the body biography, then a check-minus was earned. In addition to a daily grade, however, the teacher used the activity to work on the speaking skills of EL students, as she sometimes recorded students spoken language throughout the year. At the end of the year, students listened to their earlier recordings, and often were surprised to hear how much progress they had made in terms of their command of the English language.

### **Potential Challenges**

Teachers may face some challenges when incorporating culturally relevant biographies into their classrooms. Due to the shortage of certified ESOL teachers but increasing need (Ruiz-de- Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000), regular social studies teachers may find themselves placed in situations where they are poorly equipped to engage English learners in learning about the history of the United States (Szpara & Ahmad, 2006). Yet, the increasing linguistic diversity in American schools continues to rise as does the ongoing need for certified ESOL teachers. Additionally, teachers may face the challenge of finding time and resources to locate and acquire biographies. Once the resources are obtained, teachers must weave culturally relevant historical figures into the standards based classrooms. Yet, there are many positive aspects of implementing culturally relevant Latinx biographies. These biographies promote positive engagement and increase English language use throughout the academic year. As new members join the classroom, the biographies can serve as a wonderful introduction to help all class members feel welcome.

## Conclusion

English learners in high school often find themselves in mainstream classrooms and are provided with various levels of support. Currently, there is a shortage of qualified ESOL teachers. The 2018 Reaching English Learners Act, H.R. 4838 is evidence of the nationwide phenomenon. As the overall number of ELs grows in the American public school system, especially with respect to Spanish speaking students, the use of culturally relevant Latinx biographies allows teachers to incorporate varying levels of language proficiencies, bilingual narratives, and historical photographs into their sheltered or mainstream classroom (Southall, 2016). Using culturally relevant biographies can help differentiate assignments for students based on English proficiency, as the teacher can select books with varying lexile levels, while also challenging the students with very new English language skills. Additionally, the use of culturally relevant biographies can help teachers alter the pantheon of American history s/heroes (Wineburg & Monte-Sano, 2008), a process that also can be impactful for native born students. The teacher in this manuscript used this activity in the general education United States history classroom, in addition to the sheltered ESOL class she taught. Students, teachers, teacher candidates, and teacher educators should all study the efforts of historically underrepresented figures, who are often left out of traditional social studies textbooks or who are typically only found in related sidebars. These Latinx female activists, and many other marginalized figures who worked to change America, need to be incorporated into a dynamic and complex historical narrative of United States history.

### Culturally Relevant Resources for Educators:

- [www.aubreysouthall.com](http://www.aubreysouthall.com)
- [www.diversebooks.org](http://www.diversebooks.org)
- [www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org)
- [www.teachingtolerance.org](http://www.teachingtolerance.org)
- [www.zinnedproject.org](http://www.zinnedproject.org)

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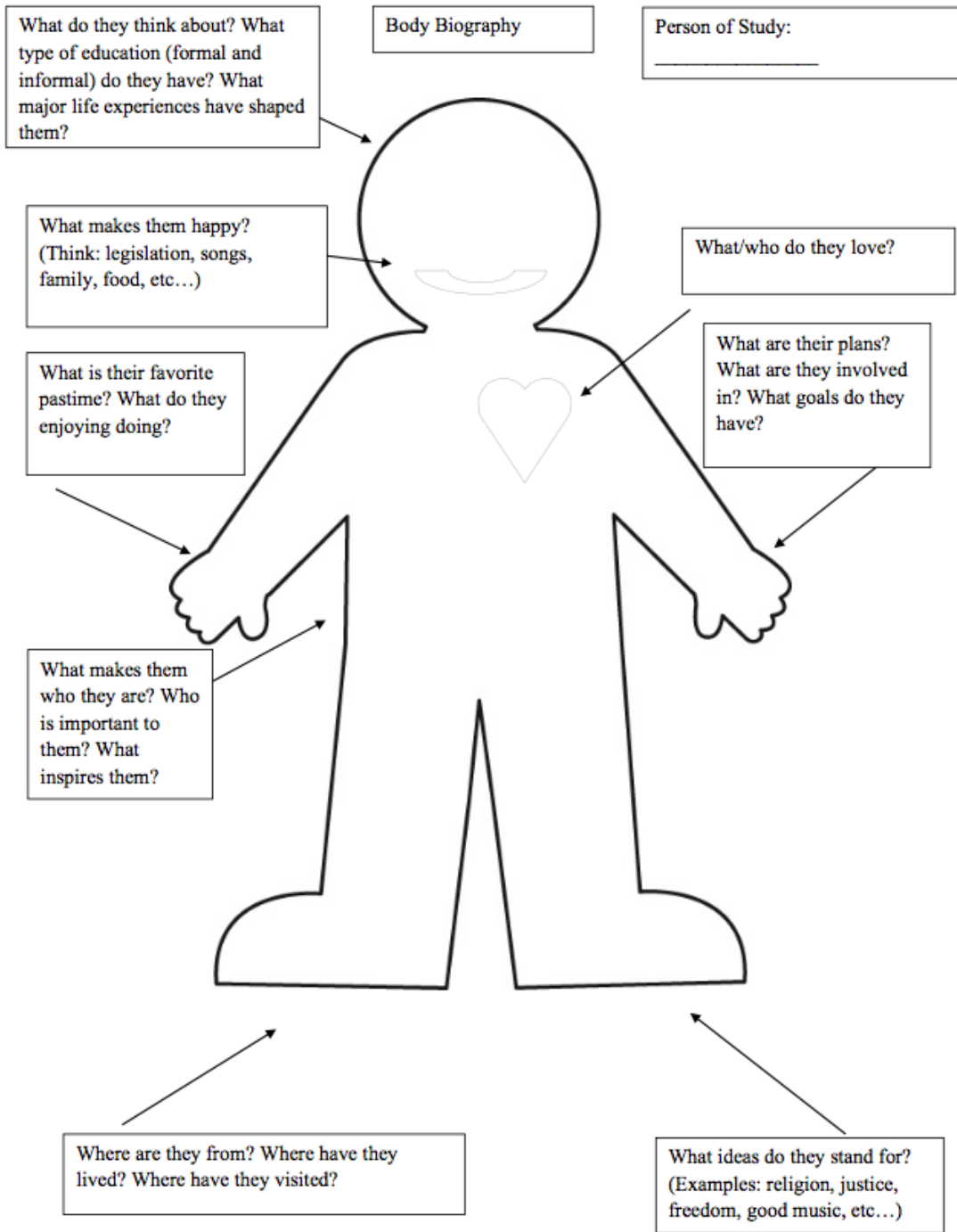
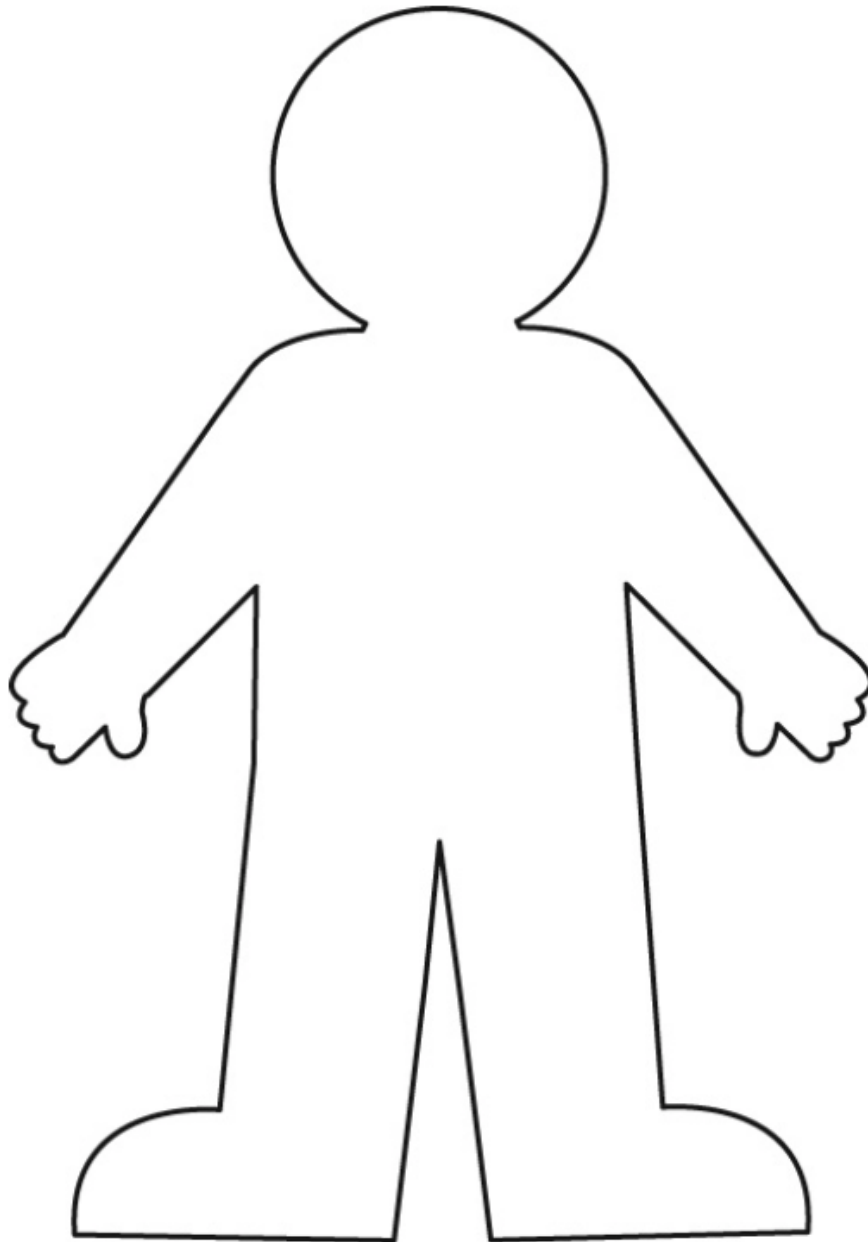


Figure 1

Created by Aubrey Brammar Southall, Ph.D.



Using the Body Biography questions, fill in the blank figure with words and pictures in the appropriate spaces.  
Use your imagination and feel free to add to the figure to complete your individual.



Created by Aubrey Brammar Southall, Ph.D.

Figure 2