



## **Developing a Culture of Literacy through El día de los niños /El día de los libros**

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**Abstract:** Using the cultural and community knowledge of the community, members of REFORMA, a professional organization of librarians serving Latinos and the Spanish speaking in the United States, an affiliate of the American Library Association, have effectively developed a campaign to promote a culture of literacy in the Latino community. By reaching out to the growing Latino community through libraries, the organization has partnered with the Association for Library Services for Children (ALSC) as well as with local educators, service providers and community organizations to effectively develop what has become a national effort to promote literacy development through libraries through a program called El Día de los niños/El día de los libros.

**Keywords:** El día de los niños/El día de los libros; U.S. Latinos; National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking, REFORMA.



## **Introduction**

Since 1996, REFORMA, the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking, an affiliate of the American Library Association founded in 1971, has played a leading role in the library profession in developing, promoting and shaping the library literacy outreach campaign El día de los niños / El día de los libros, a national day of literacy that incorporates the spirit of community in a celebration to honor children and the powerful role that children's books can play in a child's literacy development. Working in partnership with the Association for Library Services for Children (ALSC), the children's divisions of the American Library Association, which serves as Día's home ([www.ala.org/dia](http://www.ala.org/dia)) members of REFORMA's Children's and Young Adult Services Committee (CYASC) have provided the leadership, knowledge, expertise and '*metis*' for the programs that ALSC and REFORMA have jointly sponsored. REFORMA librarians have also shaped the understanding of the critical role that one's own culture and language can play in developing a nation of readers. Through the annual celebration of El día de los niños / El día de los libros, herein called Día, librarians have been reaching out to culturally and linguistically diverse communities in order to more effectively develop a culture of literacy among the new, primarily Spanish speaking immigrants. During the annual celebration libraries from throughout the United States hold special events and partner with other community organizations in support of bilingual and multilingual literacy. Families are encouraged to attend Día celebrations where they can listen to stories, hear an author, illustrator or storyteller, watch a puppet show or enjoy an array of literary performance based on a children's story. They can also take advantage of the hands-on exhibits and free bilingual books giveaway program available to participating children, courtesy of local non-profit and/or generous donors.

## **Socio-cultural Context for Change**



With approximately 46 million Latinos in the United States, 66 % of whom are of Mexican descent who hail from a neighboring country that shares a 1,969-mile border, schools and public libraries are challenged to provide the much-needed programs and services to help this large population group to acculturate into the educational, social and political life of the community. These challenges, posed by the large number of Spanish speaking immigrants into the United States, however, are not new. The *Mexican* presence in the United States, however, dates from long before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 created the artificial border between Mexico and the United States as a result of the Mexican War, when Mexico ceded almost half of its territory as a condition for surrender.

As REFORMISTAS became more aware of the impact of the social and economic changes occurring in a rapidly changing society, CYASC members saw Día as a mechanism to address the low literacy rates of Latino children. At the same time, libraries were racing to transform the public library from a human services model to a self-serve consumerist model with an increased focus more on technology and information access. Latino communities were experiencing what the renowned sociologist Manuel Castells (1998: 164) came to describe as ‘fourth world’ communities, pockets of urban blight in first world countries. REFORMA CYASC members remained concerned about equity of services to addresses the systematic neglect of library services for Latino and poor children. With limited staff and budget shortfall struggles, libraries were hard-pressed to provide the much needed outreach services necessary to reach out to communities and youth in need.

### **Roots and Re-invention of El día de los niños / Children’s Day**

The origin for El día del niño in Mexico dates to 1924 when the first World Conference for the Well-being of Children, sponsored by the League of Nations, a precursor to the United Nations, drafted the “Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child “ urging all countries to pay special attention to the needs of young children. Mexico was one of the first countries in the world to take the lead to establish a Children’s Day, selecting April 30<sup>th</sup> as their designated day. (TEC de Monterey, Página del Día del niño, 2002).



In 1996 Pat Mora, a distinguished poet, essayist and author of many books for both adult and children, was particularly concerned about the low literacy rates among Latino students and began thinking about ways to promote literacy through books and libraries.

Mora approached Oralia Garza de Cortés, founder and then-chair of the Children and Young Adult Services Committee of REFORMA to discuss the idea of establishing such a day and sought REFORMA's support in that effort. Much like the problem-solving nature of the beloved fairy tale, Mora posed a "what if" question: "What if" we took the idea of *El día de los niños* but add to it the concepts of books, culture, and language to create a day to honor children's home languages and cultures and celebrate literacy for children and families throughout the United States? This formula would honor the traditional concept of Children's Day as celebrated in the home country on April 30<sup>th</sup>, but it would also feature other important elements that promoted literacy development. Such a program would benefit the children who needed community support for literacy, the families who needed the affirmation that the public libraries recognized the value of their cultural traditions and were willing to open their doors widely and celebrate their heritage, and for the public librarians who needed to try new strategies for reaching out to the growing population of Latino families in their midst. Día was rapidly embraced by the library community for several reasons: (1) it utilized a grassroots approach to literacy, (2) it was flexible and could be shaped and implemented in any form, and (3) it fit community needs and (4) it provided libraries with opportunities to work with other partners and with members of their community to build upon the strength and abilities of the community (Naidoo, Montiel-Overall, Garza de Cortes, Gonzalez, Patterson, 2010: 6).

### **Developing a Culture of Literacy: A Theoretical Framework**



A Culture of Literacy occurs through the sum total of all the daily practices that children can possibly be involved in with regards to reading, be it at home, in school or in the community. By establishing an environment whereby children are fully surrounded by positive reinforcements that promote and encourage reading, children are re-enforced at every turn. Because economics and lack of educational opportunities were barriers that hindered Latinos' access to enriched reading environments, it was vital to create a community-wide culture of reading. Such supporting environments make a difference and influence whether children will learn at high levels, become fully literate, read their world and decide to participate fully in the civic and cultural life of the community.

Día's theoretical framework for developing such a culture of literacy is based upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development (1979: 3, 4). Bronfenbrenner theorized that many factors are at play and influence a child's ability to learn. He believed that a child thrives best in the context of a system of inter-twined relationships in support of his or her environment. His theory best fit what REFORMA envisioned as necessary for developing a culture of literacy that takes into account how a community embraces literacy and supports the child in that development.

Día's work is also grounded in John Dewey's classic theory of education as experience (1938: 18). Because Latino children's reading scores as a whole continuously trail those of Anglo and African American students, it is important to continually find ways for Latino children and families to engage with literature through different mediums or methods of learning and to be motivated to learn experientially through the senses. Librarians must explore with different ways to incorporate multiple literacies or what Howard Gardner calls "intellectual competencies" (Gardner, 1993: 8) into their programming. Learning takes on new meaning when a child is given the opportunity to interpret a story, or paint illustrations based on the story they may have just heard. When a child can interpret a literary work through dance, song, drama or the theatre arts, students can get into the story in a very concrete way, unencumbered by an inhibiting, intimidating or foreign text.



From the beginning, REFORMA CYASC leadership envisioned Día as a literacy campaign that recognized the important role that families and communities must play in developing a culture of reading. CYAS envisioned Día as a vehicle through which to introduce children and families to libraries as institutions that could provide them with access to books and resources that could help them to overcome the linguistic, educational, cultural and economic challenges that they face. Through relationship building the librarian serves as a mediator in partnership with a community unified in its effort to eradicate the monumental task of illiteracy.

### **Models of Institutional Support for Día**

From its inception, the library leadership in Texas warmly embraced Día. Both the Texas Library Association and Texas State Library found ways to implement Día into their administrative structures to help librarians develop local strategies to implement the celebration in their local communities. Where initially the Texas Library Association offered mini-grants to fund and implement Día programs throughout Texas libraries, today, the Texas Library Association has a standing committee for Día that functions through the Children's Round Table. More recently, the state of California has begun to take the lead in implementing Día programs in libraries through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grants and awards. Through a program called Día California, Día has grown into one of the most popular and successful outreach programs used by libraries to reach out to their Latino constituents of children and families ([www.diacalifornia.org](http://www.diacalifornia.org)).

### **Present Day Challenges**

Modern day challenges posed by the massive migration of people from Mexico and other Latin American and Spanish speaking Caribbean countries are primarily due to the effects of globalization, NAFTA and other free trade agreements and the current global economic crisis. Of the approximately 11 million undocumented persons residing in the United States, 80% hail from a Latin American country, with Mexicans comprising approximately 60% of those immigrants.



In light of the pervasive nativism and anti-immigrant climate most recently evident in the blatantly anti-immigrant legislation such as that of H.B. 1070 enacted in Arizona, REFORMA's work in strengthening access to reading materials in a child's first language becomes increasingly more difficult. Programs such as Día are ever more important because they enable the library professional to be more intentional in her efforts of promoting diversity and building multicultural literature collections. Día serves as an example of how to provide effective services to diverse populations in a pluralistic society. In so doing, it sends a different, positive message than the ones that the targeted population is hearing from the traditional new media, this one a welcoming message that is deliberate in its effort to extend an open arm to Latino communities and welcoming them into the folds of the public library and introducing them into yet another educational institution at their disposal to help them help their children to succeed.

### **Attributes of Success**



Día de los niños/Día de los libros is considered one of the American Library Association's most successful outreach programs to the Latino community. It continues to meet ALA's Key Action Area goals developed in 1998: Diversity; Education and Continuous Learning, Equity of Access; Intellectual Freedom and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literacy (ALA, 1998). But Día's success is attributed to the expertise and the knowledge base utilized by REFORMA members who utilized a grass roots approach and built Día with the *mētis* (Scott, p.313) gathered from their own local cultural and practical knowledge and intelligence of the community, important information needed to be develop a successful campaign "from the bottom up." Día was build on the strength of community partners who willing to work together with libraries to built a culture of literacy. But Día also succeeded because it carried with it those cultural elements that the late Dr. Américo Paredes termed 'Greater Mexico.' Paredes, considered the father of Mexican American folklore, conceptualized "Greater Mexico' as the constitution of those practices, customs and folklore traditions that Mexicanos carry with them wherever they go (Paredes and Bauman, 1993). In the case of Día, parents and teachers were attracted and drawn to Día because they recognized it as their own. Día touched an emotional chord about a traditional childhood custom that Mexican immigrants carried with them as a reminder of childhood and family-back home. By using their language and customs, libraries demonstrated invitation through respect for and recognition of their culture. The community in turn, responded to the library's invitation. Día serves parents as a reminder of the importance of sharing meaningful cultural traditions they may have experienced as children with their own families. It also serves as a bridge for inculcating new literacy practices that include reading and books. Reading is the new ritual that must be incorporated into everyday practices; it must be exercised faithfully as ritual at home and through community.

## **Conclusions**





Currently there are sixteen million Latino children in the United States comprising twenty-two percent of all children less than five years of age. By 2050, thirty-nine percent of all minority children are projected to be Latino (U.S. Census, 2008). Given these population projections, libraries must continue to deliberate on ways to welcome children and serve bilingual families by help them to make the necessary transformation needed to become library users and readers.

By utilizing the *mētis* or local knowledge or cultural intelligence of a community, librarians can increase the use of their libraries and utilize the library as a place to develop local models of participation among new citizenry. Using *Día* as traditional cultural practice, libraries have effectively syncretized old childhood traditions with new, literary models. Libraries have an opportunity to work with their local community to forge new literacy traditions that will help the children of the next generation. *Día* has the potential to pave pathways for children that are fully supported by a community of caring librarians, teachers, parents and family members who work to insure that all children's cognitive growth and development are nurtured and developed.

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