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## HOW DO HISTORY AND RELIGION AFFECT THE READING HABITS AND PRACTICES OF LATINO STUDENTS?

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**I**worry about Latino students and their reading habits and practices. To inform our work with these students we need to know the factors that affect those habits and practices. I seek to bring to our attention a set of factors that have been ignored in the theory and practice of American education – those regarding the role of religion and history on reading and literacy. I hope to show how this set of perspectives can provide unique ways in which we can engage and sustain student interest in history and social studies.

### What Do We Know About Latino Students' Reading Skills?

To get a quick sense of where Latino students stand on reading, I turn to the latest figures we have for the new CAASPP, the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, driven in large part by the national Common Core State Standards, and including the Smarter Balanced Assessment System. In 2015, the CAASPP for grades 3-8, and 11 were implemented (California Department of

Education, 2015). You have already been introduced at your school and district to new teaching methods and preliminary assessments, and later I will discuss the promise that new teaching and assessment methods have for improving the reading habits and practices of Latino students. For now, I use the 2015 test results to make quick comparisons (CDE, 2015).

It does not make strong sense to compare the Hispanic/Latino test scores to those of “All” students because Hispanic/Latino students in California are over half of the “All” category.

- 3,684,180 tested, Grades 3-11, in 2015
- 1,719,666 Hispanic/Latino, or 51.5% of total
- 784,055 White, or 23.5% of total
- 287,182 Asian, or 8.6% of total

So, in the tables that follow, I compare the test scores of the Hispanic/Latino students and the next two largest groups, White and Asian students, selecting the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grades.

<p align="center"><b>CAASPP English Language Arts/Literacy, 2015</b>  <b>Reading: Demonstrating understanding of literary</b>  <b>and non-fictional texts</b>  <b>by Ethnicity</b></p> <p align="center">% of Hispanic or Latino students (HL)            % of White students (W)            % of Asian students (A)            scoring at each level</p>			
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade n = 262,896 HL n = 110,663 W n = 40,935 A	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade n = 241,998 HL n = 113,261 W n = 40,902	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade n = 224,949 HL / n = 111,128 W n = 39,170
Above Standard	10 HL 30 W 37 A	13 HL 33 W 45 A	21 HL 43 W 50 A
At or Near Standard	39 HL 44 W 43 A	47 HL 48 W 42 A	53 HL 44 W 39 A
Below Standard	51 HL 26 W 20 A	41 HL 19 W 13 A	26 HL 13 W 11 A

The above table shows, as an example, that in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, at the Above Standard scoring level, 13% of Latino students score at this level, compared to 33% of White students and 45% of Asian students. The table, thus, shows that at each of three grades, significantly fewer Hispanic/Latino students score at the Above Standard level than their White and Asian counterparts. In contrast, more Hispanic/Latino students score at the Below Standard level than their White and Asian counterparts.

The new CAASPP system disaggregates data not only by ethnicity, but also by socioeconomic status. Available data compares students by “ethnicity for economic disadvantage,” meaning that it is possible to compare the test scores of poor students of any ethnicity. There is also a category of “ethnicity for not economic disadvantage.” But in both cases, the data shows the same: significantly fewer Hispanic/Latino students scoring at the Above Standard level, and more Hispanic/Latino students scoring at the Below Standard level, than their White and Asian counterparts.

For test score data specific to history/social studies, we do have to rely on the “old” Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) system, heavily relying on the California Standards Tests (CSTs). The latest data available in that system is from 2013 (CDE, 2013). The results for the CST History/Social Studies do mirror the ones on the 2015 CAASPP.

<b>CST History/Social Studies, 2013</b>			
% of Hispanic or Latino students (HL) % of White students (W) % of Asian students (A) scoring at each level			
	8 <sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies n = 236,630 HL n = 120,566 W n = 39,299 A	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade World History n = 236,173 HL n = 112,981 W n = 37,186	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade US History n = 220,278 HL / n = 123,663 W n = 42,482 A
Advanced	18 HL 42 W 57 A	14 HL 33 W 44 A	15 HL 34 W 43 A
Proficient	23 HL 25 W 21 A	22 HL 27 W 26 A	24 HL 29 W 28 A
Basic	31 HL 20 W 14 A	33 HL 24 W 20 A	28 HL 20 W 17 A
Below Basic	12 HL 6 W 4 A	12 HL 6 W 4 A	15 HL 8 W 6 A
Far Below Basic	16 HL 7 W 4 A	20 HL 9 W 6 A	18 HL 9 W 6 A

That is, fewer percentages of Hispanic/Latino students score at the top two Advanced and Proficient levels, and greater percentages score at the lower Basic, Below Basic, and Far Below Basic levels, than their White and Asian counterparts.

### **What Factors Affect The Reading Habits and Practices of Latino Students?**

Many factors affect Latino students' reading habits and practices. It is interesting, however, that depending on the political biases of an individual reader, these factors can be seen as either legitimate explanations or poor excuses for low literacy levels and academic underachievement in general.

***Economic Disadvantage.*** As Gándara and Contreras note, “A consistent finding in the literature is the strong relationship between social class and both test scores and grades” (2009, p. 201). While the California State Department of Education’s Academic Performance Index does not have a category for “social class,” it does have one for Economic Disadvantage, defined as a student neither of whose parents have received a high school diploma, or a student who is eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch program, also known as the National School Lunch Program (NSLP). Using that definition, the STAR system tells us that in 2013 (CDE, 2013):

- 81% of the Hispanic or Latino students who took the California Standards Tests were categorized as Economically Disadvantaged (almost 2 million out of 2.5 million students).
- 60% of California Standards Test (CST) takers across the state were categorized as economically disadvantaged, and Latino students constituted 71% of that subgroup.

Guided by the state definition, I divide the Economically Disadvantaged category into material poverty, or low income, and low parent literacy and education level. They are related, but distinct.

***Lack of Financial Resources.*** Without exception, across all racial and ethnic groups, “as income increases so do test scores” (Gándara and Contreras, 2009, p. 201). To compare the Hispanic/Latino students and their White counterparts, approximately 20-25% of Hispanic/Latino students come from a low-income home, whereas only about 5% of White students come from a similar background (p. 204). Low income often results in less reading material in the home, a condition that Stephen Krashen has called the lack of a print-rich environment (1999, p. 3). Little disposable income can result in there being few magazines, newspapers, and books in the home, and students that do not read because they do not see their parents reading. Poor parents work multiple jobs, leaving little to no time left to take their children to the public library or a bookstore. Material poverty results in cramped living quarters, meaning no quiet room or corner in an apartment or home where a child can read quietly. A large family in which a student has to take care of younger siblings exacerbates the situation. Material poverty essentially means no leisure time, space, and money, the essential conditions for a student and their family to go from meeting their basic physical needs and desire to be entertained, to satisfying an intellectual need learn and be informed through print.

***Parent Literacy and Education Level.*** Gándara and Contreras point out that Mexican immigrant parents come from a country in which the average formal educational attainment is much lower than in the U.S., compulsory education only extends to the middle school level, and many children leave school even “earlier out of economic necessity or lack of access to schooling (p. 206). Parents with less than a high school education generally read less than those with more than a high school education, and are less able to promote literacy in the home. Parents who do not speak English, or do not speak it well, are less able to reinforce their children’s learning of academic English at school. If they spend less time with their children, the parents probably monitor homework less, take their children to the public library less often, and provide less reading material for their children at home.

### **Academically Successful Families Read**

Gándara and Contreras also looked at Latino students and families who overcame low socioeconomic status and low parent education level to achieve advanced college degrees. These families shared two principal characteristics. The first was parents who taught their children “that their present socioeconomic state was anomalous, uncharacteristic of their family,” and “that they were not only capable of great achievement but

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practically owed it to the family legacy” (p. 207). The second was a significant exposure to reading and writing provided by parents who “scraped together the money to buy encyclopedias and other books for their children, even in circumstances where the next meal was not a certainty.” The vast majority of the parents in these successful homes read the newspaper or other print sources in Spanish, and talked about politics and current events in the home (p. 208).

***Autobiographical Note I.*** The work of Gándara and Krashen resonated with me because my own situation was like that of the “successful” cases they had studied. My parents emigrated from Mexico in 1965. My father did not advance past the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in Mexico, and came to the U.S. as a “guest worker” during the Vietnam War era - a “bracero” farmworker in the fields of California, and later a busboy in South Central L.A. My mom had a high school diploma from Mexico and became a stay-at-home mom. I started school knowing no English, but my mother taught me to read in Spanish and the literacy skills transferred to a new language (Krashen, 1999, p. vii-x). My father taught me about my ancient Mayan heritage, about the intellectual power and achievements of the Mayan civilization, and I grew to have the sense that I was an heir of that cultural legacy. My parents scraped together money to buy us a set of the Encyclopedia Britannica, and my father read *La Opinion* daily, Los Angeles’ Spanish language newspaper. We talked about politics and current events in the home.

In the work of Gándara there is a hint of the influence of religion on literacy. Among a sample of 70 Latinos of Mexican descent who had achieved a Ph.D., some number of them had mentioned reading the Bible at home (p. 208-209), most in Spanish. I remember preparing for my 1<sup>st</sup> Communion in the Catholic Church by reading prayers and part of the Bible, in Spanish. But as Gándara admits, the link between religion and literacy is “highly understudied” (personal communication, July 15, 2015). It is here that we need to engage with the limits and possibilities of religion as an influence on the reading habits and practices of the Latino home.

### **The Influence of Religion on Literacy**

While many Latino children, if they are Catholic, prepare for their 1<sup>st</sup> Communions by reading prayers and parts of the Bible, I raise the possibility that many Latino students have inherited an approach to reading and literacy that distinguishes Latin American Catholicism from English Protestantism, and even from Judaism. To explore this possibility, we can turn to some of the work of the Reading Like a Historian/Stanford History Education Group program, a program designed to help teachers meet the national Common Core Standards. One key point of entry is the “Martin Luther” lesson, in the Medieval Lesson Plans section of the World History Lessons (RLAH, 2015).

The lesson includes an excerpt from Martin Luther’s writings that shows that in 1535, 14 years after he was excommunicated by Pope Leo X, Martin Luther criticized and accused the pope as having taken on “power, rule, and authority over...the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God,” and attributing “more power to the Church, which is begotten and born, than to the Word, which has begotten, conceived, and born the Church.” This was one of the central thrusts of the Protestant Reformation. It put the most important text of the time at the center of an individual Christian’s life, replacing the clergy who read, interpreted and explained the book to the people, and challenging the individual to make his own interpretations. Another thrust involved departing from the mass in Latin, instead insisting on the mass being in the language, or the vernacular, of a particular region or country (Barraclough, p. 80). What came to be known as the Protestant Reformation was thus about

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“the importance of individuals encountering the Bible for themselves and in their own language,” and resulted in “raising the level of education among the general European population” (Eppheimer, 2007, p. 80).

In the 1500s, it was primarily Christian monks and the clergy who read and wrote, reading the Bible and writing about it. The printing press made books available to many more, and the Catholic Church confronted the Protestant challenge in writing. As Barraclough and his collaborators point out, “Of the 250,000 or so works printed in Europe between 1447 and 1600, about 75 percent concerned religion. The Reformation and the Catholic response would have been impossible without printing presses...” (Barraclough, p. 182). The Protestant Reformation put more of the Book and other books into more lay Christians’ hands and minds in Europe than Catholicism previously had. Protestant Christianity gave its adherents in Europe an advantage in reading and literacy, and whether it left a legacy we can still see today is a fair question to ask.

### ***Reading in Catholic Latin America***

We know that Catholic Spain and Portugal went on to conquer what are now Mexico, Central America and South America. My fear is that the reading habits and practices of Latino students in the United States is influenced by the cultural legacy of a Latin American Catholicism that did not emphasize the reading and interpretation of text on the part of the natives it aimed to convert, leaving those literacy practices largely to the clergy and a few hand-picked natives.

Why might this religious perspective matter? In 1979, Mexican philosopher and poet Octavio Paz wrote that the most significant difference between the U.S. and Mexico was not about race, class or ethnicity (Paz, 1979). Instead, the key difference was that the U.S. was a Christian Protestant nation with no significant indigenous identity - the culture and influence of the American Indian having been almost completely destroyed - while Mexico was a Roman Catholic nation centered on an indigenous history and identity. Paz argued that Mexican Catholicism, a combination of Spanish and indigenous traditions, had different approaches than European Protestantism toward freedom of thought and many other topics.

This powerful idea should begin to make us aware that there are cultural legacies that Hispanic/Latino students have inherited which may affect their reading habits and practices. While Hispanic/Latino persons have historically been perceived as “brown” people in a country of mostly “white” people, or poor people in a wealthy country, or Spanish-speakers in an English-speaking country, or immigrants among a native-born population, an often ignored dimension is that many of them are descendants of Latin American Catholicism in a predominantly Protestant Christian country.

### **What Are The Numbers Here?**

If we consider people’s religious affiliation or background, as opposed to their race or ethnicity, what do we find in this country? The U.S. Census Bureau collected data on religious affiliation and religious organizations from 1906 to 1946. But since 1976, Public Law 94-521 has prohibited the Bureau from collecting data on religious affiliation through demographic surveys or decennial census on a mandatory basis (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

For a number of years the Pew Charitable Trusts, a non-partisan think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C., has conducted the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey. By surveying over 35 thousand Americans over the age of 18, the 2014 Survey has found the following (Pew Research Center, 2015):

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- While 70.6% of Americans identify themselves as Christian, the country has become a minority Protestant Christian country: 46.5% of Americans report that they are members of Protestant denominations.
- The Protestant population is characterized by diversity and fragmentation, encompassing hundreds of denominations loosely grouped around three fairly distinct religious traditions: evangelical Protestant churches (25.4% of the overall adult population), mainline Protestant churches (14.7%), and historically black Protestant churches (6.5%).
- 20.8% of Americans identify as Catholic.
- 3.3% of Americans identify with other Christian faiths, including Orthodox Christian, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witness.
- 5.9% of Americans identify with non-Christian faiths, including 1.9% as Jewish, and 0.9% as Muslim.
- 22.8% of Americans say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith, including those Americans who identify as atheists, agnostics, or "nothing in particular."

So as a snapshot, it appears that of every 4 Americans, approximately 2 are Protestant Christian, 1 is Catholic, and 1 is something else or is unaffiliated.

But among Hispanics and Latinos, more are Roman Catholic, though the numbers are declining. Consider the following.

- 48% of White, non-Hispanics are Protestant Christian, and 19% are Catholic.
- But among Hispanics, only 26% are Protestant Christian, while 48% are Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2015), though this is down from 55% in 2013, and 67% in 2010 (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 11)
- Of the Hispanic Protestant Christians, 19% identify as Evangelical, and 5% as Mainline.
- Among Hispanic immigrants who are foreign-born, 60% are Catholic (p. 11).
- 20% of Hispanics are religiously unaffiliated (Pew Research Center, 2015).

The Pew Research Center attributes the decline in Catholics among Hispanics to the increase of both the evangelical Protestant and the unaffiliated populations, in both the U.S. and Latin America. But even if the trend of a decline of Catholics among Hispanics continues, it is not going to erase the effects of the 523 years that have passed since Columbus, sponsored by Catholic Spain, sailed the ocean blue in 1492.

### ***Protestant vs. Catholic Approaches to Reading Text***

To go back to the work of Octavio Paz, one of those effects was on the degree of intellectual freedom in both societies based on religion, a freedom characterized by different approaches to reading text. One key comparison Paz made was that in colonial Mexico, Catholic "orthodoxy prevented examination and criticism," while New England communities were made up "of people who believed that the Scriptures should be read freely" (Paz, 1979, p. 147). Both Spanish Catholics and English Protestants in the New World were carrying on an existing tension between two different approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible.

Earlier we cited Martin Luther, writing in 1535, that the Pope and the Church had assumed more importance to their own interpretation of the Holy Scriptures than to the Scriptures themselves. As one example, here is a

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Catholic response found in the 1609 Douay-Rheims Holy Catholic Bible, published by the English College, a French seminary heavily influenced by English Catholics who fled Elizabeth I's re-imposition of Protestantism in England (Herbermann, 1913). This version of the Bible includes a preface of over 200 names of "principal commentators" of the Bible who should be consulted for further reading, including St. Augustine, St. Ignatius and St. Thomas Aquinas. But the list also marks over 60 of those names with a cross preceding their names, including Calvin, Luther, Maimonides, Pliny the elder, Philo the Jew, J. J. Rousseau, Spencer, and Voltaire. A note at the end of the list then explains, "Those who have a Cross prefixed to their Names, have been perhaps Men of Learning, but they have erred from the Faith which was once delivered to the Saints, and can therefore be consulted only as Critics, or to be refuted" (Douay-Rheims, 1609). The note indicates less intellectual freedom than a list of recommended authors without crosses and other warnings.

It is important to note that rather than take sides in a historical and theological debate, this article points to cultural legacies that many Latino students have inherited that may affect the way the students and their families approach the reading of books and other text.

*Autobiographical Note II – The Experience of One Latino Catholic.* One of the 13 California Teacher Performance Expectations, TPE 8, requires that teachers learn about their students in order to plan instruction and design learning experiences for them (CCTC, 2013, p. 13). In particular, teachers must be "knowledgeable about students' community contexts and socio-economic, culture and language backgrounds," and should "understand how these factors influence student interactions and student learning." If I were a student and you gave me a writing assignment so that you could learn about my faith background and how it might relate to classroom instruction, this is what I would write.

Reading Scripture freely, making one's own interpretation of the Bible, and examining and criticizing what the Bible, the priest, and the Church was telling us, were not practices that characterized my upbringing as a Catholic in East Los Angeles, a predominantly Mexican-American community. These were also not traditions that characterized my upbringing as a Catholic in Mérida, Yucatán, México, my parents' hometown, during childhood summers in the 1970s, including the completion of my 1<sup>st</sup> Communion and Confirmation sacraments.

Forty years later, as I bring up my own children within the Catholic Church in Los Angeles, not much has changed. Certainly many Catholics memorize the rituals and prayers of the weekly mass, and missal booklets are in the pews, but in general, most Latino Catholics during the weekly mass do not appear to have the Bible or missal in hand, following along with the readings as official readers read them from the lectern.

It may be that many attendees listen actively and understand all parts of the mass. Many have memorized the prayers and other parts of the mass, engaging in choral response to the priest at various points. But as I informally consult with others who have had and have the same experiences I had, many find the Catholic mass to be a passive experience. People sit and hear a series of prayers being spoken, they hear someone else read from the Bible, and they hear a priest explain the readings. Even if a Latino Catholic child is able to follow and understand the priest's homily, or sermon, it is difficult to determine how much of the prayers and readings the child actually understands. The child is not actually reading the spoken words in print, a simple act that would improve his comprehension and spelling skills considerably.

### ***Literacy Skill Development***

The Catholic mass does not require attendees to use words familiar to many recent teaching credential graduates in California, nor to “analyze or interpret” Biblical text, to “explain their reasoning,” to “critically evaluate accounts or interpretations” of the Bible, or to “defend their judgments.” These words come from the Performance Assessment for California Teachers Teaching Event (PACT TE) in history/social science, an assessment familiar to many new teachers (PACT Consortium, 2010). If we use similar language from the Reading Like a Historian program, the Catholic mass provides no room for parishioners to evaluate and source the text, contextualize it with an analysis of the time in which it was written and our present times, and corroborate it with other sources (Stanford History Education Group, 2015). We could find similar literacy skills in the Common Core Standards that are also not employed and practiced in the Catholic mass by those attending. The only person in that church employing these skills appears to be the priest when he prepares his sermon and delivers it.

Multiply this experience by hundreds of hours, week in and week out, in the course of the K-12 schooling of young, church-going Latino Catholics, and I think this helps explain “the achievement gap” we see in their reading and English language arts scores. There are, in fact, striking similarities between the pedagogical and instructional practices Latino Catholic children experience in the weekly mass, and daily in the least adequate of their public school classrooms: passive instruction involving listening to the priest/teacher, and no authentic opportunities to speak about, interpret and discuss challenging text and ideas. The teacher does most of the critical thinking in the classroom, not the students. Student interest and engagement depends almost entirely on the dynamism, charisma, and public speaking skills of the classroom teacher/priest, not the actual text, and not the academic and intellectual work that is done.

### ***But The Mass Is Not a Class***

My wife and other devout Catholics have informed me that I am misunderstanding the mass. The mass is a sacred ritual, not an academic class. Especially in the second of its two parts, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the weekly ritual serves to remind the faithful of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made to ensure their salvation. The priest’s sermon, or homily, is intended to explain the readings and teach official Church doctrine, not to be a free-for-all discussion section in which people just share their opinions. If what I am looking for is a discussion section, the Church has developed other ways of doing that over time.

The Catholic Church has a long, historical tradition of excellent scholarship, exemplified by the writing of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. Ignatius of Loyola, and many others. Catholic elementary and secondary schools offer a solid education, and Catholic colleges and universities are some of the best in the world. Individual parishes have programs of religious education, catechism, 1<sup>st</sup> Communion and Confirmation training, and bible study, all of which require students to read and talk about the readings. Modern Catholicism allows for much more interpretation of the Bible than in the time of Martin Luther, perhaps even more so than many Protestant denominations that stress more literal interpretations, especially of the King James’ version of the Bible. The Church expects that parents will read, study and discuss the Bible with their children at home. There is a tremendous network of on-line blogs and websites, and print publications, through which devout Catholics can comment on Bible readings and historical and contemporary issues.

Understood.

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But I ask the following – how many poor Latino students have actually engaged with that long tradition of scholarship, and the reading and literary and interpretive practices on which it should be based? During the first half of the Catholic mass, the Liturgy of the Word, featuring three readings, how many poor Latino Catholic youths are actually reading in print what is being spoken to them, and attempting to interpret the message in the moment? How many of them, outside of the mass, read and study the Bible and discuss it with their families? Only a minority of poor Latino Catholic youth attends Catholic schools because there is a considerable financial cost involved. How many poor Latino Catholic youth who attend public schools participate in bible study or other ministries of their local church? How many poor Latino Catholic youth read Catholic publications, newspapers, websites, writing blogs and other responses and comments to weekly readings? How many of their parents are engaged in these activities?

Another important question would ask whether undereducated Latino Catholic families have any incentive to engage in highly literate activities in order worship and express their religiosity. There may be a cultural legacy here of Latin American Catholics deferring to the clergy in positions of power and authority, ascribing to them high levels of moral and social authority, willingly accepting the tradition and practice of listening obediently to educated and trained professionals. Why read if the authority figure is going to recite then explain the text?

### ***Different Reading Practices In Other Faiths***

The Pew Research Center, analyzing data self-reported by respondents, notes that Hispanic evangelicals, inheritors of the Protestant Christian tradition, exhibit higher levels of religious commitment than Hispanic Catholics, with that “commitment” defined as higher rates of church attendance, Scripture reading, and Bible study groups (Pew Research Center, 2013; 2014, pp. 99-107). In all of those, actually reading text figures prominently. Anecdotally, I am told that at many modern day Protestant churches, the congregants are expected to have the Bible in hand, following along with the readings as they are spoken. This is in keeping with one of the central tenets of Protestant Christianity – the emphasis on each individual coming to their own interpretation of the Word. On the other hand, as mentioned above, the interpretation may be more literal, especially if based on the King James Bible, and thus less open to other types or forms of interpretation.

A similar comparison can be made with some Jewish traditions. From the time many Jewish people are children, during holiday celebrations their families sing and clap before the meal, each person with an open book in front of them (National Geographic Entertainment, 2015). The Latino parents with whom I work are very impressed to find out that the Bar Mitzvah and the Bat Mitzvah of 12- and 13-year-old Jewish boys and girls involves the young person learning how to read, interpret, and discuss challenging text with peers and elders. The ceremony is preceded by a period of time of study and interpretation of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, building and refining literacy skills in the process. In this culture, the principal marker of a boy becoming a man, and a girl becoming a woman, is the person’s ability to read, understand, and interpret challenging text. Jewish people state, with pride, “Whenever you put together two Jews you will always have three opinions” (Ronald Frydman, personal communication, July 21, 2015). Jews at Jerusalem’s Western Wall pray by reading from a book in their hand. Judaism is a culture in which being a life-long learner means being a life-long reader and interpreter of text.

In contrast to the Bar and Bat Mitzvah, Latino Catholics have the quinceañera tradition, the coming of age ceremony for 15-year-old girls, consisting of a mass followed by a joyous celebration. But having participated in and attended numerous quinceañeras in my life, I can categorically state that none involved the

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young woman reading, interpreting, and delivering commentary on some passage of the Bible to a congregation. In fact, no religious education or preparation is necessary to have a quinceañera because it is not a sacrament of the Catholic Church (personal communication, Amelia Leos Cepedia, St. Bernard's Catholic Church, July 20, 2015). Sometimes a young woman may read one of the week's readings during the mass, but no more than that. The quinceañera ceremony in Latino culture has many beautiful, spiritual and sacred elements and meanings that matter a great deal, but the ability to read and interpret and discuss printed text is not one of them. And Latino Catholic boys have no tradition at all - no mass, and no party.

It may be, however, that the academic preparation for a Jewish Bar- or Bat-Mitzvah may be more analogous, in the Catholic tradition, to the preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation. This sacrament completes the Christian initiation begun by the person's Baptism, and continued by the 1<sup>st</sup> Communion around the age of 7 or 8, or the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade of elementary school. To receive Confirmation a young person must reach an "age of discretion," (U.S. Catholic Conference, 1994, p. 364), and my local parish tells me that my children will be eligible to begin taking classes to attain Confirmation at the age of 14, or about the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

### **The Oral Tradition As A Strength For Latino Catholics**

The reading and interpretation of text may not be the principal feature of the Latino Catholic experience, but there is another feature of that experience, perhaps one of its greatest strengths, that should find a home in the public school classroom. This strength is compatible with elements of instruction that the National Common Core Standards expect more classrooms to achieve, and in this conjunction of goals and practices lies my hope that the coming years will see a significant improvement in the literacy skills and academic achievement of Latino students.

At the same time that there is an "official" Catholic religion of a weekly mass, and outside of it, bible study groups, schools, colleges and universities, there is also what is called "popular religion." This popular religion, or the faith as it is practiced in the home and community, has symbolic markers in the U.S. Hispanic culture, including: curanderia (spiritual healing practices), hierveria (herbal healing practices), santos (the veneration of and appeals to various saints), folk religious sayings ('Con el favor de Dios' – 'through the grace of God'), Marianism (the veneration of the Virgen Mary and the Virgen de Guadalupe), madrinas/padrinos (the tradition of godparents/sponsors), veladoras (prayer candles), praying the rosary, building home altars, and street processions and reenactments of biblical stories and religious folk tales (Deck and Tirres, 1999). All of these religious expressions are the product of an amalgamation of three historical traditions in Latin America: the pre-Columbian (the indigenous culture before the arrival of Christopher Columbus), the medieval/baroque Spanish (the conquering/colonial Spanish influence), and African (the culture of the millions of slaves imported to augment and replace a decimated indigenous labor force). Each of those influences featured their own god or gods, myths, symbols, drama, sounds, rituals, and sacrifices.

The *Reading Like a Historian* program provides an interesting example in Latin America. The Martin Luther lesson is followed by one entitled "Atahualpa and the Bible" (2015). The lesson is about the 1532 meeting between the emperor of the Inca Empire with what is now Perú, South America, and the Spanish conquistadors, including a Catholic priest introducing the Bible. The lesson poses the question of whether Atahualpa held the Bible to his ear before throwing it to the ground, thus giving the Spaniards the excuse they needed to attack the Incas and initiate their conquest of Peru. I would suggest another very important line of inquiry would be about the Incas' literacy practices. The Incas apparently had no written language, and thus no printed text in the form of books. Government records were kept with knotted cords (Mosely, 1992, p. 12).

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In the long run, the absence of habits and practices of reading printed text compelled the Catholic Church to develop other mechanisms for promoting Catholicism in Peru, including drawing, painting, song and music (Mayté Ramos, historian and Peruvian Catholic missionary, personal communication, July 25, 2015).

In Mexico and Latin America, the way the “popular religion” of Catholicism has been passed on from generation to generation for over 500 years is through oral rather than literate mechanisms. As Deck and Tirres explain (1999, p. 144):

“Religious communication among Latinos...is fundamentally oral rather than literate...the three religious currents that configure Latino popular religiosity...all are primarily communicated orally, not in books or catechisms. They are almost always expressed in rituals and in narrative, but almost never in abstract propositions.”

In other words, in order to express their religiosity, Latino Catholics talk more than they read. They tell stories, recite and chant prayers, and make music and art, much more than read and re-read text, then discuss principles and ideas. I believe they probably do so more than Protestant Christians in the United States. On the other hand, and to repeat, the Pew Research Center has found that Hispanic Protestants, at higher rates than Hispanic Catholics, report they read Scripture and participate in prayer/Bible study groups weekly (Pew Research Center, 2014, pp. 99-107).

### **Implications For The History/Social Science Classroom**

This, then, is where my hope lies for our public school classrooms. Perhaps you do not agree that Latino students have different reading practices and habits because of inherited religious and cultural legacies. But we can agree that we should tap into these students’ inherited legacies of oral traditions as a way to meet National Common Core Standards. And this could be as simple as changing the order of instruction, and going back to the familiar principle of tapping into prior knowledge (see TPEs 7 and 8, CCTC, pp. 14-15).

As a general example, much instruction may dutifully follow Common Core State Standards guidelines and ask students to analyze and seek evidence in the text, determine text structure and author perspective, distinguish facts from opinions, distinguish claims from reasoned judgment, and determine chronology and causation/explanation (Miller, 2013, p. 19). This seems straightforward.

But rather than put the reading first, text on center stage, consider giving Latino students opportunities to first talk about underlying ideas and principles of what they are about to read, as they have encountered them in their daily lives, and as they have heard them commented on at home or elsewhere in their community. Students can have preliminary opinions and viewpoints on almost any topic before they are asked to do the reading.

Latino students grow up listening to grown-ups lecture and explain readings to them. This happens at home, at church and at school. To break that cycle and encourage Latino students to read, their classroom instruction should involve asking them before, during and after the reading, what they think about the reading.

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