



For Latines, better education starts with a book

In American schools, Latine children make up nearly a third of students. Are we teaching them in ways that ensure their future, and ours? Latine literature shows a path forward.

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Robin Chenoweth: Ohio State student Eddie Bautista-Garcia remembers just about every book he ever read in his small-town, Ohio, middle school and high school.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: In sixth grade, we read *Crispin*. ... In seventh grade, we read *A Christmas Carol*... *The Outsiders*, which was a really good book. ... *Tuesdays with Morrie*. No 12-year-old was also going to understand that book. ... And then in eighth grade, we read *The Giver*. We read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. ... *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* ... *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Yeah, then in ninth grade we read... tenth grade *Angela's Ashes*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *Snow Falling on Cedars* ... *The Fountainhead* and *The Bell Jar*.

Robin Chenoweth with Eddie Bautista Garcia: You know something? I'm actually really impressed that you remember all these. I can't believe that you know every book you read.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: I still have them. I'll be honest, I still have almost all of them. And we also read, yeah, *Things They Carried*. ... *Frankenstein* and then *Pride and Prejudice*, *Invisible Man* we did read *Invisible Man*... But yeah, I think you can see the common thread that's going in there.

Robin Chenoweth: Or, maybe you don't see it. Here it is.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: Most of these are written by white people.

Robin Chenoweth: Bautista-Garcia is not white. His parents immigrated from Mexico to the United States then moved to Ohio's heartland, where he was born. And in case you didn't notice, he loves literature. Lives and breathes it. This fall he begins his fourth year as an integrated language arts education major. He wants to help high school students to become

ignited by the books they read. But his teaching approach will be different from what he experienced.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: It would have been incredible to be able to read a work by someone who is me. You know, someone who understands and someone who's been through some of these experiences. A writer who understands the gap and who is filling the gap with their own original experiences.

Robin Chenoweth: The gap, meaning, the space between being a white American kid and being brown and also an American child of immigrant parents.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: Because specificity is representation. ... What are we doing? Like, look at who you're teaching. Look at the wave of brown that is here. These students are here, and they're here to stay. It's in our best interest to nurture them and to empathize with them and understand them and to, to teach them about their history as best as we can. To give them books that they can look at the cover and be like, that looks like me!

Robin Chenoweth: We know that underrepresented students who learn their history and culture perform better academically and graduate at higher rates. Activist Julián Castro said the destiny of our country is intertwined with the destiny of the Latino community like never before. So, what are schools doing to embrace a population that now makes up almost one third of America's public-school students? In this episode of the Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we talk to a Latine Ohio State professor of literature for children and young adults, a school educator and a soon-to-be educator about the pieces in American education that are missing for Latine students. And, we consider one viable solution that can go a long way to fill the gap: the vibrant, lyrical and empathic literature of Latine authors.

Patricia Enciso: We can learn from one another and build on one another's pasts and imagined futures. We don't want, as has been the problem in children's literature all these years, this all-white world of schooling. That is not who we are. And that's not who we're going to become. So, we need to start opening up the spaces for dialogue and learning and asset-oriented teaching.

Robin Chenoweth: I'm Robin Chenoweth. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. Eddie Bautista-Garcia, like 68% of Hispanic Americans, was born in the United States. Like them, he has a story to tell, and his starts in the heart of Ohio.

Robin Chenoweth with Eddie Bautista-Garcia: What's the community like?

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: It's a small town, I believe it's like 10,000 or so people in Tuscarawas County, Ohio. ... Small, like Friday Night Lights, you know. ... It's a predominantly white community, however, like the 2000s have really seen an influx of Latinos, mostly those of Guatemalan descent. ... When I was in middle school, I felt like every other kid. I was very

outspoken. I was out there, you know. I was making friends with whoever I could. I loved talking to people. Still do. ... When like 2016 hit, and the election, it really kind of shattered my sense of the world. I've always been an optimist, I feel, and I've always tried to see the best in people. However, that, that period of time was a lot to take in. ... You know, students looking at me differently, or regarding me just in a different light, because now they had permission to do so. ... Also, I think that it's important to mention that I also wanted to be the teacher I never had growing up. From elementary school to high school, first year of college, even, I'd never had a Latino teacher, like a teacher who really understood what it's like to be Mexican American, who understood what it's like to be raised by immigrants, to navigate this system that isn't built for people like us.

Robin Chenoweth: In 2023 in Ohio, less than 1% of teachers were Hispanic. So, if Latine teachers aren't yet in classrooms to represent the culture, can literature and curricula work to fill the gap? I asked Patricia Enciso, professor of literature for children and young adults in the College of Education and Human Ecology, and Stella Villalba, an English language lead teacher in Dublin City Schools who is pursuing her PhD in multicultural and equity studies at the college.

Robin Chenoweth with Patricia Enciso and Stella Villalba: Tell me why educators, leaders and all of us need to understand and make space for the Latine experience?

Patricia Enciso: From my own experience as a woman in her 60s whose heritage is Mexican, I know what it's like to not see yourself in the curriculum, in any kind of conversation in schooling, for decades, really. I was in my 30s before I saw my name in print. That is a poet, whose last name was Enciso, a Mexican poet, wrote a beautiful poem. And I was just moved to tears not just because of the poem, but because there was someone with my name, who was a writer, who was representing the world through words. And when that is centered in any part of the curriculum, that part of me that loves and is inspired by Latine histories and the people that I know comes to life. And that should be the experience of children in schools. It should also be the experience of children who don't know or have close relationships with Latines because Latine people are part of the history of North America, of the Americas.

Stella Villalba: As someone who is an immigrant, a multilingual learner, and an educator working in public school education, serving communities from all around the world, especially a very large percentage of Latine students, I know it's not just important, it is crucial that our Latine children, students, like Dr. Enciso said, see themselves in a world of possibilities. I feel... in every professional development session that I get to do with teachers, I love to start with the book *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera.

YouTube, DG Storytime, *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera: Imagine. If I let the stars at night paint my blanket milky light with shapes of hungry birds while I slept outside. Imagine what you can do.

Stella Villalba: Because we all have a Juan Felipe Herrera in our classroom, sitting down, waiting and ready to absorb the world.

YouTube, DG Storytime, *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera: If I move to the winding city of tall, bending buildings and skipped to a new concrete school I had never seen. Imagine.

Stella Villalba: Knowing that our Latino students are not a monolith group. They have different experiences, different background knowledge, different funds of knowledge and so much potential. But we've got to be able to read books that also represent those dreams. And *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera does exactly that. It tells his story, as a migrant child come into the United States, with all his beautiful language in Spanish, knowing how to read and write in Spanish, and arrives in a classroom where he only hears one sound, and is the sounds of the English language.

YouTube, DG Storytime, *Imagine* by Juan Felipe Herrera: Imagine. If I grabbed a handful of words I had never heard and sprinkled them over a paragraph so I could write a magnificent story. Imagine.

Stella Villalba: But because he already brought his funds of knowledge of loving words and noticing words, he was immersed in learning also English. And fast forward, you know, he becomes a beautiful writer and the first Latine Poet Laureate of the United States of America. And that's what I want to remind all of our educators is that there is a Juan Felipe Herrera sitting in our classrooms.

Patricia Enciso: This is a part that I think is missing from people's understanding of Latines across the Americas, is that we're poetic people.

Stella Villalba: We love our language.

Patricia Enciso: We love our language!

Stella Villalba: Yes!

Patricia Enciso: The poets, the poets were revered and continue to be revered. If you go to Mexico City, you see bookstalls everywhere. People are reading and writing and telling stories and creating poetry.

Stella Villalba: Which makes so much sense, right, Dr. Enciso? We love music. Latine communities from around the ... you know, or Central, South America love music, love poetry, and love rhythm.

Patricia Enciso: Rhythm. Right?

Robin Chenoweth: U.S. Poet Laureate Juan Felipe Herrera credited his third-grade teacher with changing his self-perspective. He wrote: "'You have a beautiful voice.' Say this to someone and you will change their lives. Think of the third-grade teacher in San Diego, Mrs. Lelya Sampson, in 1956, uttering these words to a shut-down farm-worker country boy — that child was me."

Stella Villalba: Somebody sees me, somebody hears me, somebody notices me. And I think that's the beauty of bringing books like this into our children's hands and into the educators' hands, because it is, it is a way of seeing somebody's humanity.

Robin Chenoweth with Stella Villalba and Patricia Enciso: I've had some educators tell me that many Latine students don't realize their own history, especially their history within this country. Do you see that, too?

Patricia Enciso: Oh, yeah. I mean I think that's true of a lot of histories. But I would say that the Latine history is pretty much invisible. I can't even think of what part of a history book across the social studies spectrum it would even show up. And yet, Latine people have been central to social movements to creating communities, establishing educational practices and programs, contributing to literature. There's a huge history there that is mostly absent.

Stella Villalba: 100%.

Patricia Enciso: There's so much prejudice and discrimination, that I think for teachers to begin engaging with this history and doing that in an informed way, takes some work. It takes some background knowledge and talking with people and really developing an understanding of the complexities of an entire population, a very complex population.

Stella Villalba: And there are so many ways to tell history nowadays. You know, it doesn't have to be just in the context of a traditional format of a social studies classroom. It should happen there. And it should also happen in language arts, in writing. ... I think about author Gloria Anzaldúa. She blends in you know, the very, very nuanced, complex history of Mexico and the United States and the relationships and the things that happen at the border, throughout all her writing. ... That's the work right there. And that's the challenge, to be able to get ahold of those books, being able to put those books in the hands of children, students, adults so that we can continue to inform ourselves and interrupt and disrupt the notions of history that we may have had before.

Patricia Enciso: One of those misconceptions is that Mexicans are new to this country. My family is three generations, Ohioans. So, there have been Mexicans in the Midwest for generations, there have been certainly Mexicans in the Southwest for generations. Latines like to say the border crossed us. We were here before those treaties happened, before the missionaries came in. And that we still see in teacher education as we're sharing histories, especially border histories, that they don't understand that our students don't understand that communities have been developing and thriving for generations.

Stella Villalba: We have to make an intentional effort to make sure that these books exist in our classroom libraries. Because Latine authors and writers are not usually the first ones that are being promoted every Tuesday when new books come out.

Robin Chenoweth with Patricia Enciso and Stella Villalba: Dr. Enciso, you just were quoting a statistic earlier...

Patricia Enciso: Out of the 3,500 books, approximately, that are published annually, only 5% of those are by or about Latine people. And 2.5% of those are by Latine authors.

Robin Chenoweth with Patricia and Stella: For listeners who can't see this, Dr. Enciso has this, I want to call it a suitcase on wheels, full of books, and she keeps pulling them out as we hit a different topic.

Patricia Enciso: Well, this is *A Seed in the Sun* by Aida Salizar. And she is part of I think she started Las Musas.

Robin Chenoweth: Las Musas is a collective that spotlights Latina authors of children's literature.

Patricia Enciso: *A Seed in the Sun* is the story of a young girl in California, at the time of the great boycotts with Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta.

Google Play Books, *A Seed in the Sun* by Aida Salizar: I sometimes think about how I lost my voice. I could have buried it in the earth. In the surco, the long row of dry dirt where we planted onion bulbs last spring while the heat of a too-hot California day fell on our arched back like barrels of sun.

Patricia Enciso: It's her story of entering into a union to stop the oppression and the terrible working conditions of the grape fields and in the migrant workers' experiences. So, it's told in verse. It's a beautiful story.

Google Play Books, *A Seed in the Sun* by Aida Salizar: I've taken what Concha once told me to heart. No matter how much we miss, no matter if teachers are mean, no matter they sometimes punish us for speaking Spanish, no matter if we can't keep friends — school is ours.

Patricia Enciso: And it's the winner of the Tomas Rivera Award, which is another way to find great books. Go to the awards, Tomas Rivera Award for Mexican American children's literature, and Pura Belpre, which is part of the American Library Association Awards.

Robin Chenoweth: Though publishing companies might not promote them, there are lots of representative books if you know where to look. I asked Bautista-Garcia which titles he would read if he could have a do-over of his high school years.

Robin Chenoweth with Eddie Bautista-Garcia: If you could go back and put the book into the hands of the teacher who was distributing them to your class, what books would you have given them?

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: Diane Guerrero's *In the Country We Love*. I don't know if you're familiar with Diane Guerrero, but she was on *Orange is the New Black*. It is such a good read, but it is also heavy because she was 14 years old and both of her parents were deported, just like that. And, so, she comes home to an empty house, and she doesn't know what's going on. And it's her having to navigate what that's like, in the country we love. So, that's one. Two, Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us*. I read the memoir for a class; it was a reader's choice. And it was Grande reuniting with her father on the other side. They made the journey to America as well. And that one's also heavy but it's beautifully written. There's a quote in there I just thought was so real, I think. The quote is, "And I didn't stop hating my name until many years later, when I realized that it wasn't a name to be ashamed but the one to live up to." I think some of us have that sort of ... if it's not shame, it's like embarrassment. ... I know when I was in middle school, people would be like, "Why do you have such long last name, Eddie Bautista Garcia?" And some of my friends would joke like, "Yeah, Eddie Bautista Garcia Lopez Fernandez Hernandez." Like, you know, they were adding on last names to it. But, you know, I embrace both my last names, because, the second last name is my mom's last name and I, I embrace both of them. That's my name. It's who I am. But I think that quote can undoubtedly echo with the population, with some of those kids.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: One I do really want to shout out is Victor Martinez's *Parrot in the Oven*. I think it's the 1996 National Book Award winner for young adult literature. And it is 14-year-old Manny trying to discover what it means to be like a respected man in 1970s, I believe '70s California, and it is funny. It is relatable at some points. It's so good. I actually purchased that book this year and I loved it. ... I would also recommend Javier Zamora's *Solito*. ... And that's his own journey as a child coming to America to reunite with his family. I read that over a Saturday; I could not stop. It was so ... I was just engrossed by it.

Stella Villalba: Of course, the immigration situation, and that our communities face, is ongoing, is detrimental. And our children, our students are very aware. Very, very aware of those stories and very aware of those situations.

Robin Chenoweth: Stella Villalba saw Zamora speak in Columbus last June. The *New York Times* best-selling author was nine years old when he was abandoned mid-trip by the 'coyote' hired to transport him.

Stella Villalba: His journey of walking from El Salvador to the United States, basically, by himself, and with the help of strangers, was able to be reunited with his family.

Google Play Books, *Solito* by Javier Zamora: I want what the baker's family has — everyone in the same room. All my friends and I want to be with our parents. Where everything is new, fresh. Where garbage is collected by trucks. Where water comes out of silver faucets. Where it snows the whitest snow.

Stella Villalba: And he was able to talk about how he wanted to forget what happened to him. And for everybody in his school — the teachers, the counselors — they knew he went through

something big, but they couldn't get him to tell any stories. But it is through drawings and through art that little by little he started to. And it was his therapist that actually helped him in the journey of telling that story. Now that book is a must-read for everyone. It's a story that I know for a fact represents many of the children that we serve in our school systems, and how lonely they are many times because immigration is judged and misunderstood. And because there's only one side of the story that is being told, and we forget that there is a human being behind all these situations.

Patricia Enciso: We need more than one story of humanizing experience. And when I think children begin to understand what borders do, on both sides of the border, they begin to formulate, what is right? What is humane? What is legal? What is illegal and why we need to be finding ways to belong together. All of these books raise these questions. There is no clear single answer. But the, but the collection of these stories is a really a powerful experience.

Robin Chenoweth: There is despair in the stories, but also beauty. In the enduring family ties. In the moments of overcoming. In the hope. And not just the written stories but the living ones and the lived ones. Like Villalba's father, who escaped the dictatorship in Paraguay by fleeing to Argentina, but still grilled asada there on Sundays to remember home and taught his daughters to hear music beyond the English lyrics on vinyl records. And Enciso's grandfather, who after living for years in the United States, working hard, raising a family and, yes, dealing with racism, went back home.

Patricia Enciso: My grandfather went back to Mexico, at the end of his life, so he could be with family members who could bury him properly, and they would take care of his grave. ... To go back to Mexico where he could be the person he wanted to be without all of that ugly attack...sure. Let's put my body at rest in another part of this world, in the part of the world that I was born into. So, I've gone back to Mexico several times. ... I love going because I think it helps me to imagine my heritage, how my grandparents would have walked through the streets. ... You have to imagine. You have to recreate. And it's part of why I love this literature. Sometimes there's a story that just really catches me.

Stella Villalba: As I'm listening to you tell that part of your story, you know, and I find myself overwhelmed with emotions. As an immigrant, as somebody who is transnational, I hold emotional ties; my family is back home. I think about the literature that lives in my heart, that is not published in the format of a book. This is, again, the power of stories. So, I do want for, for people that are listening to this podcast to understand that the power of that oral storytelling, that oral tradition of telling stories, that it's very much part of our Latine communities, that it is as equally important and as beautiful as all these books that we share today. Because Dr. Enciso, nobody could tell that story but you, what you just did.

Robin Chenoweth: Eddie Bautista-Garcia's story is one of perseverance, and it's an ever-evolving story. He and his older brother are the first in their family to go to college. At Ohio State, he is a Weiler Scholar.

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: Meeting all these other first-generation Latinos, not just in my hometown, but meeting them at school, they are so inspiring, and they are empowering, and they're strong. And I think that that is something we all inherited from our parents. That's something we inherited from our families, because our parents by, just by being here, they already proved to us that anything is possible. ... The journey to America is one that ... it's just all about survival. And I think that that's something our parents have to deal with every single day. They have to survive, and they have to keep pushing. ... There is no stopping, there's no quitting; it's just not in their system. ... It's that spirit that we the kids then possess, that we are then incentivized by, strengthened by. My parents on my rock, and they really, even in college, when I've had some struggles, they remind me, you know, you didn't come this far to fail now, or to stop now. ... Because I've been fortunate with what I've been given, the belief that's been instilled in me. It'd be a waste if I can't pay it forward to the next generation. ... Like, I have to do something about it.

Robin Chenoweth with Eddie Bautista Garcia: You founded a student group at Ohio State called Latino Educational Empowerment. Can you tell me about what that group does, and why is it needed?

Eddie Bautista Garcia: It started because I was meeting so many exceptional Latino students back home. And, you know, God, these kids are so talented. And they're so wonderful. And yet they don't have the information. They don't have the resources. They don't have the access to understand higher education. They don't, you know, even know about something as small as like National Honor Society. You know what I mean? So how are they going to understand the higher education landscape, how are they going to understand how to apply to college, how to get into college, who gets into college. How? You know, all of those different questions.

Robin Chenoweth: Twice last year, his group brought Latine students from Tuscarawas County to the Ohio State Columbus Campus. They feed them lunch. They arrange speakers. But best of all, they pair them with mentors.

Eddie Bautista Garcia: It's about connecting these younger Latino students, with their older counterparts, for them to see that it is possible, if only they knew it was possible. That yes, you can become a pediatrician. Yes, you can become a teacher. You can become an attorney. Like it's out there. And here's someone who did it. Here's someone who's doing it. Here's someone who looks like you and comes from similar circumstances, and they're going to tell you how they did it.

Robin Chenoweth: So many signed up in the spring that Bautista-Garcia had to fundraise for a bus. The kids loved it. One wrote:

Eddie Bautista Garcia: I want to go to college because I will be the first in my Hispanic family to attend. Like that, that there. That's plenty. Literally, that's all we want.

Robin Chenoweth with Eddie Bautista-Garcia: I'm wondering, as an extension of what you're doing now, what do you hope that you can do for students, once you're a teacher?

Eddie Bautista-Garcia: I want them to write stories. I want them to write essays and to articulate themselves and to be passionate about whatever it is they're arguing. I want them to read fantastic literary works that represent them, that are organic in their representation, that feel just normal to them. I want them to have that kind of opportunity. And I want them to analyze those texts. And I want them to keep being learners. And so what I want to accomplish with my degree is just to continue encouraging students to pursue education, higher education, in particular, because it's so worthwhile. You're not going to regret it. And to chase their passion, you know. I feel like a lot of people don't take the risk because they feel that, or maybe they've been told or discouraged or whatever, that what their dream is unachievable. That their dream cannot happen. But again, like my parents are living testament, all our parents are living testaments that dreams can happen.

Robin Chenoweth: Birds, Dr. Enciso says, are often a metaphor for migrancy — those improbable journeys that some dare to take. And so, we leave you with this poem, read in Spanish by Stella Villalba and English by Patricia Enciso.

Patricia Enciso: *Words are Birds* by Francisco Alarcón. Words are birds that arrive with books and spring.

Stella Villalba: *Las Palabras son Pacados*, por Francisco X. Alarcon. Las palabras son pájaros que llegan con los libros y la primavera.

Patricia Enciso: They love clouds, the wind and trees.

Stella Villalba: A las palabras le gustan las nubes el viento y los árboles.

Patricia Enciso: Some words are messengers that come from far away, from distant lands.

Stella Villalba: Hay palabras mensajeras que vienen de muy lejos de otras tierras.

Patricia Enciso: There are no borders, only stars, moon and sun.

Stella Villalba: Para estos no existen fronteras. Solo estrellas, sol y luna.

Robin Chenoweth: To read a list of great literary works written by and about Latine people, see the link in our episode notes. Thanks to the Weiler family for their support of efforts by the Latino Educational Empowerment student group.

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