

## ***Dora the Explorer: Empowering Preschoolers, Girls, and Latinas***

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*“Dora the Explorer” is a highly successful animated program on Nickelodeon. This critique explored how Dora may change the “face” of children’s television while empowering three traditionally powerless groups: preschoolers, girls, and Latinas. Two episodes were found to contain elements with the potential to empower young viewers, particularly female viewers of Latin heritage. Although the episodes appeared to communicate polar opposite portrayals of Dora (the savior vs. the damsel in distress), she ultimately functioned as the heroine of both stories. In addition, Dora’s direct gaze and her appeals for help from viewers empower her biggest fans: the preschool audience.*

The powerless in society are often discussed in mass communication texts in terms of race and gender. But why do markers of race and gender stand out to a media audience? According to Healy (1995), “our attention is drawn to the characteristics that have come to identify the dividing lines between groups. . . . We have been taught to look for markers of race and gender to evaluate people; we are a ‘race-conscious’ and ‘gender conscious’ society” (p. 162). Both of these constructs, however, are social inventions; the importance of race and gender in American society has less to do with physical attributes *per se*, and more to do with “society’s interpretation of what it means to be a member of a particular gender or racial/ethnic group” (Lind, 2010, p. 6). These interpretations are often captured in the electronic media.

As Lind notes, each person identifies not only with a race or gender, but is a product of a combination of many experiences that the author terms “intersectionality.” This intersection of identities must also, then, include age. In examining markers of age, race, and gender, past studies focused on *older* children and issues of power and media texts (e.g., Potts, 2001). Rarely, however, does an analysis examine how a television program gives power and agency to preschoolers. Therefore, this

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article focuses on Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer*, and examines the program's empowerment of girls, Latinas, and the under-5 audience.

## Context

It is crucial to examine the context surrounding the *Dora the Explorer*. In a guide to textual analysis, McKee (2001) stressed the importance of examining not only the text itself, but also the context within which the text is found. "There is no way that we can attempt to understand how a text might be interpreted without first asking: Interpreted by whom? And in what context?" (p. 144). The context is what "ties down" the interpretation of the text. Accordingly, an examination of the preschool television audience to which *Dora* is marketed is presented first, followed by a discussion of the phenomenon that is *Dora the Explorer*.

### Children as a Television Audience

Research in the positivist tradition reveals that young children form a unique audience. Neither entirely passive receptors of media messages, nor worldly and discriminating translators, these children are vulnerable in the media environment (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). They bring less experience and real-world knowledge than adults to their mediated experiences, and thus may fail to understand or process a media message completely. They often have difficulty putting mediated messages into context (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002), but at the same time display an eagerness to learn that is not seen in adults (Dorr, 1986). Thus, children may be as open to media messages as they are to other "teachers" about the world.

How children understand social interaction on television also changes as a function of their stage of cognitive development (Bearison, Bain, & Danielle, 1982). According to Piaget (1963, 1965), preschool children are in the "preoperational" stage of development; to them, social understanding is limited to overt descriptive features, without any understanding of underlying motives and perspectives that differ from their own. According to Bearison et al. (1982), children at this stage focus on the immediately observable aspects of television, describing events primarily in terms of physical aspects of the setting and repetition of dialogue. Thus, it is appropriate to examine "immediately observable" aspects of *Dora* to arrive at a potential preschool-aged reading of the text.

### *Dora the Explorer*

Beyond the two episodes analyzed in this study, Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* is a worldwide phenomenon. The Peabody Award-winning show is seen in 74 countries, encouraging young children to expand their vocabularies in not one,

but two languages (Fernandez, 2005). What makes this program even more unique is that its star is both a 7-year-old girl, and a girl of Latina heritage, sparking one writer to exclaim, "By all the laws of pop convention, this media moppet has no right to rule. Curious and ambitious. Decidedly ethnic. A thinker. Bilingual. And positively free of bling. Convention, though, rarely starts a revolution" (Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). And start a revolution she has, rewriting the rules of what sells in the market of preschool television. Three networks in the United States (Nickelodeon, Noggin, and CBS) air the program weekly, capturing in an audience of over 25 million people each month (Fernandez, 2005). Clearly *Dora* is a favorite among American children.

The program was created within an initiative at Nickelodeon to expand the presence of Latino creators and actors on television. According to Nickelodeon president Herb Scannell, programs like *Dora* were "the results of a conscious effort to again find new voices with great stories to tell for kids" (Scannell, 2002, n.p.). Executives at Nickelodeon sought to create a character with a "multicultural bent, someone who would resonate with kids who grew up in bilingual households" (Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). Professors, authorities on race relations, and other multiculturalism experts were consulted, and they recommended making *Dora* Latin American rather than Mexican American to broaden her appeal, making her spoken Spanish more universal rather than specific to a region of Latin America (Fernandez, 2005). A cultural consultant for the program explained, "They really wanted to make a show that broke new ground with a Latina heroine" (quoted in Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). Co-creator Valerie Walsh admitted that while molding the character of *Dora*, she thought of her as an "alternative to Barbie and the blond, princess myth often hammered into young girls" (quoted in Fernandez, 2005, n.p.).

According to Nickelodeon, each episode of *Dora* features seven intelligence lessons, only one of which is bilingualism (Mason, 2003). In fact, *Dora* was designed using "multiple intelligence theory" as a guide. This theory posits that in addition to skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, children should be encouraged to engage in linguistic, musical, and bodily-kinesthetic skills (Gardner, 1993). However, it is *Dora*'s bilingualism that receives the most attention from scholars and popular press alike, as it distinguishes *Dora* from other similar children's programming (Oppegaard, 2003). Others also credit *Dora*'s characteristic direct gaze with her popularity with preschoolers: "She looks directly at them, her eyes are wide open . . . if you watch *Dora*, she gives them time to interact with her. They trust her and have an emotional response to her" (quoted in Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). Children may be responding emotionally to *Dora*, but what messages might they receive from this program about race and gender?

## Race and Gender, and Children's Programming

Markers of race and gender in children's programming are important to analyze because children of all races want to see people on television who look like them;

the messages they receive via television about themselves, and their place in the world have great impact on their lives (Espejo & Glaubke, 2002). According to a poll of children, kids of all races agreed on three reasons why it was important to see people of their own race on television: it told them that people of their race were important, it made children of that race feel included, and it provided role models (Espejo & Glaubke, 2002). Palmer, Taylor Smith, and Strawser (1993) explained that due to the lack of diversity on television, children of color who watch a lot of television may have low self-concepts, feel alienated, and become uninterested in participating in activities outside of their communities. Huntemann and Morgan (2001) found that this impact on children's identity development may be especially strong for children of Latino heritage who rarely see children on television who look like them. Thus the importance of examining the text of a children's program featuring a Latina lead character.

Markers of gender are also important to examine in children's television. Wood (1994) noted that television interacts with gender in two ways: by reflecting cultural values, and by serving as a "trusted conveyor of information and images" (p. 231). Decades ago, feminist scholars were concerned that the media "symbolically annihilated" women by not featuring them as often as men (Tuchman, 1978). But while the number of women on-screen increased over the years, there is still concern that female characters are portrayed in stereotyped, biased, and outdated gender roles (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004). The danger for the preschool audience is that they may subconsciously develop behavioral stereotypes based on exposure to such content (Oliver, 2001); children play an active role in their own gender identity development and by age 5 will seek out role models after which to pattern themselves (Wood, 1994). Characters representing negative stereotypes pose a real danger to young girls who look to media for role models to inform their gender performance. Thus, it is key to examine the texts to which young girls are exposed.

### **"Dora" and Power**

This study examines *Dora the Explorer* and highlights markers of race and gender, as well as Dora's directness with her preschool audience, within two typical episodes of the program. *Dora* seems to be changing the face of children's television, featuring a Latina as a lead character in a world where "television executives deliberately and consciously adopted a policy of having dominant male characters in . . . children's programming" (Carter, 1991, cited in Wood, 2001, p. 283), and "tacos don't get numbers" (Zoglin, 1988, p. 134).

Accordingly, this analysis is informed by Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony. Gramsci explains that hegemony represents "a ruling class's . . . domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the engineering of mass consent to the established order" (as cited in Gitlin, 1979,

pp. 14–15). This “mass consent” does not necessarily stem from decisions of the dominant class as a whole, however. Hall (1982) explained that such decisions may come from writers, journalists, and the mass media; the ruling class has little actual control over the mass media. Hall also noted that the media do not merely reflect and sustain hegemonic consensus but produce it as well, manufacturing consent. The ideological power of the media is explained by Hall (1982) as the ability to represent “the order of things” in such a way as to make them appear “universal, natural, and coterminous with ‘reality’ itself” (p. 65). Thus, as Schneeweis (2005) noted, the mass media audience’s acceptance of media messages is what facilitates hegemony.

However, it is possible for some media messages to upset such hegemonic ideology, particularly when media producers strive to create programming to empower traditionally underrepresented groups, and those programs are as embraced by the national audience as *Dora the Explorer*. While some may argue that the current social context, so ripe with Spanish-language media, is not so hegemonic, the dearth of multicultural (and female) main characters and messages in children’s programming certainly points to the need for closer study. Though current American media seemingly embraces Spanish-language television formulas (e.g., the *telenovela* as adapted by ABC’s *Ugly Betty*), there remains a cry for programs like *Dora* because the vast majority of young children’s programming is male-dominated, and White (Baker & Raney, 2007). Thus, this article explores whether *Dora* is upsetting the established balance, perhaps empowering not only preschoolers and girls, but Spanish-speaking and bilingual children across the country.

## Method

A textual analysis of two quite different episodes of *Dora the Explorer*: “*Dora Saves the Prince*,” and “*Dora’s Fairytale Adventure*,” forms the basis of this paper. Both episodes are considered “typical” because they follow the characteristic *Dora* formula: Dora has a task to complete, she has three or four stops along the way (detailed by the Map), and she needs viewers’ help to locate items in Backpack to complete the journey. Dora always makes it past obstacles, and once arriving at the final destination, all the characters sing the “We did it!” song (Nickelodeon, 2008). Each episode breaks “the fourth wall” (Stevenson, 1995), which refers to the imaginary boundary between the fiction and the audience. Dora continuously addresses the audience directly, revealing her apparent awareness of the viewers.

These two episodes were chosen based upon *Dora’s* creators’ claims that Dora is the “anti-Barbie” and that the program functions to highlight a traditionally underrepresented slice of the population, which in turn has the potential to challenge hegemonic ideology. “*Dora Saves the Prince*” was chosen because it appears to be an almost anti-fairy tale, highlighting Dora’s ability to “save the day.” Rather than Dora—a young Latina—finding herself in trouble and needing rescue, it is instead a

prince who needs to be saved, and Dora is just the girl for the job. "*Dora's Fairytale Adventure*" involves Dora's quest to save her friend Boots by turning into a princess. This episode was chosen because on its face it appears to be the antithesis of "*Dora Saves the Prince*"—with an image of Dora striving to become the quintessential princess seen in fairy tales such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*. Thus, one sees two very different sides of the heroine.

According to Acosta-Alzuru, "unlike content analysis, the text is not the end in textual analysis. It is the means by which we study a signification process, a representation of reality" (2003, p. 278). Thus, one of the objectives of this analysis was to identify how Dora's race and gender were presented through language, visual images, and cultural cues. McKee (2001) explained that a scholar performs a textual analysis, making "an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text" (p. 140). Indeed, Kellner (2003) cautions that every analysis of a text spotlights some features of a text while ignoring others; each reading of a text represents only one possible interpretation from one person's point of view. Hall (1980) refers to the polysemic nature of texts, explaining that due to the split between the encoding of the text and the decoding of a text by the audience, there is always a possibility of a multiplicity of textual readings. This analysis, therefore, posits only one interpretation of "*Dora Saves the Prince*" and "*Dora's Fairytale Adventure*."

## The Text

"*Dora Saves the Prince*" featured a small cast of characters: Dora, her friend Boots the monkey, Backpack, Map, a prince, a witch, Swiper the Fox, and three unnamed animal friends (a snail, a frog, and a grasshopper). The episode began with Dora and Boots reading a story about a prince who loses his ball in the witch's forest and summarily gets locked in a high tower by the witch. Dora and Boots jump into the storybook and navigate their way through the Big Gate, across Crocodile Lake, and finally to the High Tower to save the prince. "*Dora's Fairytale Adventure*" features many of the same characters as the first episode, and involves Dora's quest to become a princess to save Boots, who ate an enchanted banana and became "Sleeping Boots." In order to become a princess, Dora must go to a dragon's cave to find a red ring, find the Giant Rocks and teach them how to sing, find "winter" and turn it into spring, and finally bring the moon to the queen and king.

## Analysis

The analysis revealed that both episodes contain elements with the potential to empower young viewers in various ways, particularly female viewers of Latin heritage. These results are discussed below.

## Giving Power to Preschoolers—Involving Them in the Adventure

As noted above, *Dora's* creators intentionally crafted Dora as a direct, inquisitive character who often turns to the audience and asks questions about where to go during her adventures. In fact, at the beginning of each episode, Dora looks directly at the audience and introduces herself: “¡Hola! ¡Soy Dora!” According to Fernandez (2005), Dora’s directness communicates respect for her audience, and creates an emotional bond between the character and the child audience. This directness deserves detailed analysis.

In both episodes, Dora and Boots often turn to the viewer and ask for guidance. Much of the time, Dora looks directly at the audience and wonders aloud how “we” are going to complete a task (i.e., “We need to find the castle. ¿Dónde está?”). Use of the word “we” implies that the audience is just as much a part of the story as Dora and her animated friends. Preschool children may believe that they are an instrumental part of solving Dora’s problems; a belief that has the potential to positively affect the self esteem and confidence of audience members. For example, both episodes begin with Dora and Boots reading a storybook into which they “jump.” In the second episode, after reading about Fairytale Land, Dora turns to the audience and asks, “Do you want to come with us to Fairytale Land?” and after a pause, yells, “All right!” Such pauses appear to be included to encourage the child audience to respond orally to Dora and her friends, involving the viewer in the adventure. Clearly, Dora wants the audience included in every step of her journey; as in every episode, she needs their help in order to solve the problem at hand.

But just how and why does Dora ask for help? Dora usually needs help figuring out which way to travel, and for that she turns to her friend Map. As she asks the audience in the second episode, “Who do we ask when we don’t know which way to go?” and after a pause, “Map! Right. You have to say ‘Map.’” Map shows Dora the hurdles she must overcome in order to complete her journey, and during the remainder of the episode, Dora turns to the audience for help remembering the hurdles. After Map explains the trip, Dora always asks the audience, “Where do we go first?” and pauses, assuming the audience has yelled out the correct answer. Ostensibly, without the audience’s help Dora would not know the way to go.

Map also talks directly to the audience, encouraging them to help Dora and praising them when they assist her successfully. For example, after the audience says “Map!” following Dora’s triumph at the dragon’s cave, the Map says to the audience, “Wow, you got past the dragon. You’re so brave!” Map then informs the audience they must tell Dora that “next we go to the Giant Rocks.” Immediately, Dora turns to the audience and asks, “¿Dónde están? Do you see the Giant Rocks?” After a pause she thankfully says, “Sí, allí están,” and runs up the correct path. Interactions like this involve the child audience in every decision, creating the illusion that the audience directs the character.

When Dora reaches her destinations, she often needs help making it past an obstacle. In the first episode, in order to make it through the Big Gate, the audience

must yell “*abre*” (“open”) along with Dora. In order to get past the crocodiles in the lake, the audience must yell “*cierra*” (“close”) to get the crocs to close their mouths so Dora and Boots may make it safely across the lake. Audience participation is key in such moments. Dora also needs the audience’s help when she needs something from her backpack in order to complete a task. For example, in the second episode, Dora needs her bag of sunshine to turn winter into spring. The audience must say “Backpack” in order for Dora to have access to the bag she needs. Then Backpack presents Dora with several bags of different colors, and she asks the audience to help her choose the correct bag, praising them when they do.

Dora also asks the audience to participate in physical activity. While trying to sneak into the dragon’s cave without disturbing the dragon, she explains, “I need your help to tiptoe past the dragon. Will you help me tiptoe? Great. You have to stand up to tiptoe. Stand up, please!” Clearly, Dora directs the audience to get up and move around. When teaching the Giant Rocks to sing, Dora asks the audience to sing and dance with her. Later in this episode, Dora needs the help of some special stars to get her up “as high as the moon.” Several of her friends catch stars to help, but she needs one more—the special “fairy star.” Dora instructs the audience, “She comes to you! Catch it!” and once the audience ostensibly catches the star, all the characters yell, “¡Viva! Awesome! ¡Excelente!” and Dora says, “We all did it together!” The use of audience physical movement helps Dora overcome her obstacles, apparently communicating to preschoolers that their actions are important.

### **Giving Power to Girls—Gender Cues and Dora as “Savior”**

Dora is a 7-year-old girl. She wears the same outfit in every episode: pink shirt, orange shorts, yellow socks, white shoes, and purple backpack. Some may believe such infantile clothing detracts from Dora’s “girl power” impact; however, note that she wears shorts on her adventures and not the skirt/dress that other female lead characters in cartoons such as *Strawberry Shortcake*—always pictured in a red and white dress—wear (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Interestingly, however, when Dora jumps and dances, her shirt will “ride up” a bit, showing her stomach. This is certainly a gender cue, as male characters in animated series generally do not show their tummies. In addition, as an accessory to her multi-colored outfit, Dora wears a bracelet with a blue flower on it. This is a fairly obvious gender cue, as the male characters in the show wear no such jewelry. It seems that, despite purported efforts to make Dora an “anti-Barbie,” she still represents femininity with the gender-stereotype-appropriate accessories and belly-shirts.

Regarding the use of language, Dora has been praised for her directness in dealing with the audience—the aforementioned breaking of the “fourth wall.” She will often look into the camera and ask the viewers how to proceed. However, seeking advice from others may be read as a weakness, or a “typically feminine” trait. Indeed, van Zoonen (1994) noted that the stereotypical female is depicted in the media



as “passive, indecisive, submissive, dependent, etc.” (p. 17). Others may disagree with this reading, however, as the parasocial interaction Dora encourages in the audience may actually empower the viewer, regardless of how the character may be perceived (see Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Aside from seeking advice from the audience, Dora asserts herself in the first episode, exclaiming “I’ll save the prince!” after reading that there was no one else to save him. She immediately turns to the camera, asking, “Will you help save the prince?” and after a pause, “Great!” Dora communicates to the audience that fairy tales are not always scripted as the prince saving the “damsel in distress.” This Latina is well-equipped to do the saving. Indeed, while on their trek to save the prince, Boots—a male character—constantly turns to Dora for direction and help. For example, after they avoid the witch at the Big Gate, Boots grabs her hand, looks up at her and says, “Come on Dora, we’ve got to hurry—where do we go next?” Dora, with Backpack and Map at her side, always has the answer.

Dora is also very physically active in the first episode. She runs with Boots to get to the Big Gate, jumping over logs on the way. Once they get to Crocodile Lake, they jump on each crocodile’s head to make it across the lake. Dora and Boots dance and sing, holding hands and swinging each other around in a circle. They run toward the high tower and once inside have to build a staircase to reach the room where the prince is held captive. Throughout the second episode, there is a sense of urgency; in order to save Boots, Dora has a finite amount of time to turn into a princess. Most of Dora’s adventures involve such movement, which clearly reflects the goal of Gardner’s (1993) multiple intelligence theory which values bodily-kinesthetic skills. In this regard, rather than typifying van Zoonen’s (1994) “passive female,” Dora instead shows that girls can be, and should be, active.

Halfway through the quest to find the prince in the first episode, Dora and Boots encounter Dora’s nemesis, Swiper the Fox. Swiper is tall and skinny, light tan in color, and walks on his hind legs. He wears a mask and gloves, both royal blue. Paired with Dora in her pink shirt, this confrontation appears to be “boy vs. girl,” both trying to get to the prince’s ball in the forest. Dora asks the audience to help her defeat Swiper by chanting, “Swiper, no swiping!” Unafraid of the would-be thief, Dora gets to the ball first and Swiper leaves the forest empty-handed with his characteristic exclamation of, “Oh, man!” Once again, Dora asserts herself in the face of adversity and, without a physical confrontation, emerges victorious. Not only does she communicate to the audience the power of words to diffuse an upsetting situation, but also demonstrates girls can stand up for themselves and not sit idly by as passive victims.

As its title suggests, the climax of the first episode involves Dora saving the prince. As Dora and Boots run to the high tower, the prince leans out the window, yelling, “Help me! ¡Ayuda me!” and Dora replies, “Prince Ramon! We’ve come to save you!” Once Dora uses the magic word to open the outside door (“*abre*”), she and Boots have to construct a set of stairs to reach the high tower room. This scene is reminiscent of many traditional fairy tales, such as “*Sleeping Beauty*,” where the handsome prince usually rescues the helpless fair princess from the tower room.

In this case, however, Dora rescues the Prince, who is unable to help himself. Once Dora opens the door to the room where he is held, the grateful prince exclaims, "You saved me! You knew the magic word! *Gracias, gracias, gracias.*" Dora effectively demonstrated that it is not always females who need to be rescued; females can do the saving, and it is acceptable for females to be saviors even when they belong to a minority group.

Interestingly, in the second episode, in order to save Sleeping Boots (a male character posing as an atypical Sleeping Beauty) Dora herself must turn into a princess. On its face, this goal appears to counteract the strength and "girl power" shown by Dora in the first episode. However, Dora faces adversity at every turn in this episode as well, doing everything in her power to save her friend Boots. What is particularly notable in this episode, however, is how Dora becomes a princess. At one stop along her quest, she "turns winter into spring" and is rewarded with a magic hairbrush that will make her hair grow very long. When used, she makes her hair grow long enough to help her friends climb up to the high tower. Here, Dora actually becomes Rapunzel, albeit with long, flowing, curling locks of brown hair—not blonde. So while Dora finds an ingenious way to problem-solve, transporting her friends to the top of the tower, she still manages to evoke the very stereotype she ostensibly fights against.

When Dora passes all the tests to become a true princess, she is immediately transformed. She is magically lifted into the air and given fancy yellow shoes with orange flowers, to which one of her companions cries, "Her shoes are so sparkly." Then she is suddenly in a long yellow dress with pink and purple trim and a ruffle around the bottom. Her companions exclaim, "Wow! What a shiny dress!" While the dress looks decidedly ethnic, her hat is traditional princess: a yellow cone-shaped hat with a pink bow and her long flowing locks of hair coming out of the top. However, while this dress initially appears to change the adventurous Dora into a helpless princess, Dora wastes no time in immediately running off to save Sleeping Boots. She reaches Boots in time, gives him a magical hug, and wakes him up.

This "fairytale" ending could be open to several interpretations. Perhaps the lesson here is that Dora didn't truly want to be a Princess, but that it was something she had to do in order to save her friend. The message to girls could be that the clothes are not important, but rather what makes a girl strong and independent is her commitment to her friends. However, an opposing reading could find girls believing becoming a *princesa* is something to which they should aspire. Are all the other positive messages lost due to her "beautiful" transformation? Dora is still not Barbie; "Princess Dora" or no, she still saved the day. The overall message to girls is the same as in "*Dora Saves the Prince*"—once again Dora rescues a male who was easily duped into eating an enchanted banana and was unable to help himself. Nevertheless, some might read this episode as only *simulating* opposition to traditional female stereotypes, encouraging consumption of female-typical objects such as hairbrushes and dresses while at the same time applauding Dora's traditionally male-dominated role of hero or rescuer. Perhaps forcing Dora to become a princess undermines her credibility in the "girl power" arena.

## Giving Power to Latinas, One Spanish Word at a Time

Girls of Latin heritage may be the most likely to identify with Dora's character. Dora is presented as Latina: her last name is Marquez, and she speaks both Spanish and English. Physically, Dora has dark brown hair, big chestnut brown eyes, and light brown skin. She is of average build, not animated as overly "skinny," but rather like an average 7-year old. The biggest cue to Dora's race, however, is her use of language. Lest the audience forget Dora's heritage, virtually every sentence is peppered with Spanish words and phrases. For example, the book sparking the adventure in the first episode of *Dora* is entitled, "*El Príncipe y la Bruja*," which Dora translates for the audience as "*The Prince and the Witch*." She comments, "The book is in Spanish, but I can tell you what it says." While Boots struggles with the book, Dora explains that the book is magic and you need the magic word, "*abre*," ("open") in order to open it. Dora encourages the audience to interact with her in exclaiming "*abre*" to open the book. This audience participation not only teaches the viewers new Spanish words, but draws continuous attention to the fact that Dora is bilingual and Latina.

In the first episode, the characters in the storybook also speak Spanish. For example, when the young prince, whose physical coloring is the same as Dora's, accidentally kicks his ball into the witch's forest, he exclaims, "My ball! ¡*Mi pelota!*" and runs after it. The witch finds him and warns, "You've been a naughty *príncipe* to come into my forest. Now I will banish you to the high tower." Once locked inside, the prince yells out the window, "Help me! ¡*Ayuda me!*"

When Dora and Boots set out to save the prince, they begin to sing a bilingual song (a staple in *Dora*): "Come on *vámonos*, everybody let's go. Come on let's get to it, I know that we can do it!" Along the way, they come to Crocodile Lake, and must use Spanish words to communicate with the animals. Dora tells each crocodile to close its mouth so they can cross the lake: "¡*Las cocodrilas, cierra la boca!*" Even the crocodiles speak Spanish: once they make it safely across, Dora says, "*Gracias cocodrilas*" with a reply of, "*De nada*" from the animals.

In the second episode, many of the same racial and ethnic cues are again present. The characters decide to venture into Fairytale Land singing, "Come along and we can go to a *mundo mágico*." The witch in this episode also uses a lot of Spanish: she tells her broom to fly ("Now fly broomstick! ¡*Vuela!*"), issues a word of warning throughout the program ("Careful! ¡*Cuidado!*"), tells her henchmen to be quiet ("¡*Silencio!*"), and sings about making winter unbearable for Dora ("In winter *aye mío*, I love to keep it *frío*, I've frozen the *río*, I love it when it's *frío*"). The use of both Spanish and English serves not only as a bilingual cue, but may allow the audience to become familiar with a second language.

Other characters also represent the Latin heritage, though one would never guess it to look at them. First is Dora's ever-present purple backpack, who sings and interacts with Dora in every episode. While most of Backpack's communication is in English, he uses the same Spanish word every time Dora puts something in the bag: "¡*Delicioso!*" In addition, in these episodes Backpack also says, "*hola*,"

"excelente," "rápido," and "que bueno." In addition to Backpack, Dora has other friends who appear Latin, though they do not speak Spanish. The snail, frog, and grasshopper run through various scenes in both episodes playing mariachi-style music on three instruments: cymbals, an accordion, and a horn. While perhaps not a direct racial reference, the use of this genre of music serves as a Latino cultural cue. Children viewing the show may learn to associate this style of music with bilingual or Spanish-speaking people.

## Discussion

Taken together, these two episodes of *Dora the Explorer* appear to empower preschoolers, young girls, and Latinas in various ways. If hegemony involves the "production of consensus for cultural practices and ideas that will sustain power relations" based on shared meaning (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003), then *Dora* may very well upset the consensus that traditionally favors the White male patriarchy. Indeed, according to Banet-Weiser (2004), Nickelodeon is a key producer of girl power culture: "On Nickelodeon not only are there strong female characters on the programs, there is a general tone of empowerment and activism that shapes the network's self-image" (p. 122). Banet-Weiser also explained that Nickelodeon, by showcasing programs like *Dora* with female lead characters, is an important producer of girl-power politics, "as it explicitly connects commercial representation and the sheer visibility of girls on television with a larger recognition of girls as important empowered subjects in the social world" (2004, p. 125). By "saving" the prince and Boots in these episodes, Dora ostensibly communicates that girls may be heroes—a radical notion in much of the mass media.

In addition, due to programs like *Dora*, the balance of ideological power may be shifting away from the (ever-decreasing) White majority to more multicultural equality. Although the Latino population increased by 60% during the 1990s, they are still not very visible in U.S. media (Popp, 2006). *Dora's* popularity could point to a shift in the way mainstream America views Latinos in commercial culture. In fact, one of the reasons behind *Dora's* creation was to reach out to bilingual children; *Dora's* executive creative director explained that "kids were embarrassed of speaking two languages . . . we wanted to make it be magical, powerful" (Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). Spanish-speaking children may very well feel empowered after watching *Dora*, giving them further status as bilingual citizens.

Preschoolers are also targeted—and conceivably empowered—by *Dora the Explorer's* creators. Historically, commercial television networks did not target the preschool market, but in the 1990s these networks began to realize the economic value in pursuing 2- to 5-year olds (Popp, 2006). While this type of empowerment references the recognition of this preschool market as *economically* viable, it also speaks to socio-political empowerment as well. Nickelodeon's recognition of children as empowered beings is quite different from earlier television programming that viewed children as unsophisticated and passive (Seiter, 1995). As

*Dora* co-creator Chris Gifford explained, “Pre-schoolers are our least powerful citizens. They can’t reach the light switch; they have trouble pouring the milk on their cereal” (“Meet *Dora’s* creators,” 2008, n.p.). Gifford distinguishes *Dora* from other preschool television characters because children “help” her on her journeys: “To have a character act as an avatar for them, they feel as if they are actively helping her every step of the way. That feeling of empowerment is so exciting to them” (quoted in Fernandez, 2005, n.p.). In effect, *Dora* directly partners with the viewers, giving them the opportunity to experience agency and power.

## Future Research and Conclusions

This reading of *Dora the Explorer* focused on the “immediately observable” aspects of the episodes in order to arrive at a potential preschool-audience reading of the text. By focusing on such immediate cues such as *Dora’s* appearance, her use of both Spanish and English, and her seeming direct gaze at the audience, however, perhaps some subtleties were overlooked. For example, while this reading assumes that *Dora’s* direct gaze confers a semblance of power upon her preschool audience, this gaze may also serve to reinforce the authority of the medium of television itself, which in turn may reinforce hegemonic ideology. Future research should examine this issue, perhaps by studying the preschool viewers themselves.

In addition, one must also be careful when conferring power from a program such as *Dora*, which appears on commercial television. Regarding gender representation, Banet-Wiser (2004, p. 127) explained that Nickelodeon “overtly situates gender identity as an important element of programming . . . at the same time, the network’s definition of empowerment is part of a larger system of consumer citizenship, where the recognition of an audience as a potentially lucrative one confers power on that same audience.” As Hall (1982) noted, American media corporations are free of direct influence, but at the same time they appear to create products that favor or confirm the hegemony of the powerful because that is their target audience. Read this way, could it be that Nickelodeon—through programs like *Dora*—merely winks at notions of feminism and multiculturalism while actually confirming hegemony? As noted above, one reading of *Dora*-turned-princess has the hero relying on typically female objects to save her friend Boots, which perhaps only simulates opposition to traditional gender roles. Future research can more directly address this issue; indeed, Goldman’s (1992) concept of “commodity feminism” might be a useful lens through which to examine *Dora* in this way.

Recognizing the polysemic nature of all texts (Hall, 1980), this analysis offers but one “preschool” reading of the international hit *Dora the Explorer*. This reading reveals the potential of the program to truly empower the youngest viewers, particularly young girls and Latinas. The intersectionality found in *Dora* is key to understanding the character, these specific episodes, and this program. *Dora* is never just *Dora*. *Dora* is almost universally described in the press as a “bilingual Latina

girl” (Goodman, 2001; Oppegaard, 2003), or a “bilingual heroine” (Fernandez, 2005; Frydman, 2005). Dora saved the prince and Boots, but she needed her “magic” Spanish words to do so. As mentioned previously, Lind (2010) believes that each of us identifies not only with a race or a gender or an age, but instead we are a product of a combination of experiences and identities. From this perspective, Dora is the product of her identity as a young child, a girl, and a Latina, which she shares with her viewers every week.

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