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No room for silence: The impact of the 2016 presidential race on a second-grade dual-language (Spanish-English) classroom

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Cover Page Footnote

¹He wants to take out all the South Americans! He wants only the whites to stay. [Note: throughout the paper, the Spanish is presented verbatim as spoken or written by the students, including errors. The English translations are corrected grammatically in order to ensure clarity of meaning.] ²All student and teacher names are pseudonyms

No Room for Silence: The Impact of the 2016 Presidential Election on a Second-Grade Dual-Language (Spanish-English) Classroom

Sandra L. Osorio

*“Quiere sacar a todos los suramericanos! Quiere quedarse con solo los blancos,”*¹ shouted second grader Salvador² to his classmate Victor. They were supposed to be reading *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* by Doreen Cronin, but somehow the conversation had turned to the then presidential candidate for the Republican Party, Donald Trump. That was how Trump and his rhetoric entered our dual language classroom.

Far too often, the voices of students of color, their experiences, and their lives are not validated in the classroom. When Salvador and Victor’s conversation about Trump erupted, the teacher and I—the teacher researcher in the classroom—knew we had to bring this topic to the forefront. If two students were discussing it, the chances were that it was on the minds of many. As Costello (2016) explained, Trump’s words and actions during the campaign impacted classrooms throughout the United States because “the [presidential] campaign was producing an alarming level of fear and anxiety among children of color and inflaming racial and ethnic tensions in the classroom” (p. 4).

This article examines how the teacher and I implemented culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) in our classroom in response to Trump’s rhetoric about immigration. I focus on how the students, who were distressed by that rhetoric, discussed what Trump was saying about immigration, as well as on how we worked together to support them.

Professional Dyads and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

This study took place during the 2015–16 school year. I had applied to be part of a professional dyads and culturally relevant teaching (PDCRT) program organized by the Early Childhood Education Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English. The PDCRT program sponsors partnerships

1 He wants to take out all the South Americans! He wants only the whites to stay. [Note: throughout the paper, the Spanish is presented verbatim as spoken or written by the students, including errors. The English translations are corrected grammatically in order to ensure clarity of meaning.]

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between a teacher educator and a classroom teacher who work together to research and develop culturally sustaining practices and implement them in the classroom. I had met Natalia, the teacher with whom I worked, several years earlier when I was transitioning out of classroom teaching, just as she was beginning her career at the school.

The Importance of Culturally Sustaining Classroom Practices

Culturally sustaining practices “seek to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012, p. 93). They require teachers to “support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). CSP has four key features: (1) *a critical centering* on dynamic community languages, valued practices, and knowledges, (2) student and community agency and input (*community accountability*), (3) *historicized* content and instruction, and (4) a capacity to contend with *internalized oppressions* (Paris & Alim, 2017).

While there is more and more research focused on CSP, it has tended to center on middle school and high school classrooms. However, some scholars have demonstrated that this work can also be done with early childhood students (McNeela, 2017; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016). It was important for us to use CSP because it allowed us to tap into students’ lived experiences and use their discussions to support the development of the students’ critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). This study adds to the research on CSP in early childhood settings by focusing on multilingual Latinx second graders in the hostile and fearful political environment during the election for the 45th president.

The Classroom

The classroom was part of a 90-10 dual-language³ (Spanish-English) program. In second grade, students received 70% of their instruction in Spanish and 30% in English. There were 24 students in the class, 15 native Spanish speakers and nine native English speakers. All but four of the native Spanish-speaking students were of Mexican descent. The others were from Central America and South America. Six of the native English speakers were White, and three were biracial. Two of the biracial students had one Latinx parent and one European American parent, while the other had one African American parent and one White parent.

3 A 90-10 dual-language program is where in kindergarten students receive 90% of their instruction in Spanish and 10% in English, and then each year continue to decrease in Spanish and increase in English until instruction reaches 50-50.

Getting Started with Literature Discussions

After Victor and Salvador talked about Trump’s desire to have only White people in the United States, Natalia and I met to discuss how to respond. We wanted to find an appropriate way to bring the topic of Trump and immigration into our classroom in order to support not only Victor and Salvador but also other students who we knew were struggling with current events in US politics. Natalia recalled that I had practiced literature discussions with my students in the past (Osorio, 2015). She suggested we do similar work with texts that focused on immigration. I thought this was a great idea and agreed to look for appropriate books. Since literacy instruction in the class was in Spanish, the texts had to either be bilingual (Spanish-English) or Spanish. I was disappointed that I was able to find only one non-Latinx immigrant experience story in Spanish, *Mariama, diferente pero igual*⁴ by Jerónimo Cornelles. I wanted students to be able to see various immigrant experiences from a wide range of countries. The other texts chosen were *Al fin en casa*⁵ by Susan Middleton Elya, *Un mundo nuevo*⁶ by D. H. Figueredo, *La mariposa* by Simon Silva, and *Super Cilantro Girl/La superniña del cilantro* by Juan Felipe Herrera. Students were able to choose which book they wanted to read and discuss.

However, to demonstrate the process we would be using in literature discussions, we decided to start with a book we could discuss as a whole class, *From North to South/Del norte al sur* by René Colato Laínez. We specifically chose this book to support students’ discussions about immigration and separation. In the story, José, who lives in California, finds out that his mother has been deported. Readers then follow José as he travels across the border along with his father to visit his mother in Tijuana. While some teachers may feel uncomfortable bringing these issues into the classroom, we knew that immigrations and separation were a part of the children’s lived experiences and that our students needed to have a space to talk about them and express themselves. The children were never forced to share their experiences or asked specific questions about their family or immigration status, but we considered it important to give students the opportunity to do so, if they wished.

We quickly learned that the students possessed a wealth of knowledge regarding the citizenship process as well as about what it meant to have “papers” versus not having them. The students had funds of knowledge—“the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005,

4 *Mariama, Different but Just the Same*

5 *Home at Last*

6 *When the World Was New*

p.133) —that had not been previously welcomed into the classroom. Their funds of knowledge about immigration, documentation, and citizenship were vast and rich, even though those topics had not been formally covered in class, because those issues were directly related to many of our students' everyday lived experiences.

We also used *From North to South/Del norte al sur* to model fat vs. skinny questions. Fat questions were open ended and allowed for discussion, while skinny questions usually required only one-word responses. We wanted students to develop fat questions to ask later in discussion groups. I helped Natalia prepare for the read aloud and discussion by typing up examples of fat and skinny questions and pasting them throughout the book. That way, Natalia had model questions to ask and talk about with students while she read to them.

As the class listened to *From North to South/Del norte al sur*, Tomas, one of the students, revealed his knowledge about its topic when he stated, “*Los papeles son importante porque si no vienes con los papeles you don't have rights.*”⁷ Another student, Adan, asked, “*¿Un papel, por que un papel is so importante?*”⁸ As the conversation continued, Adan shared, “*No importante tu skin color o dónde vivas . . . si quiere vivir aqui para buscar algo mejor.*”⁹ As Salvador reiterated later on in the conversation, “*no importante que raza eres solo eres persona.*”¹⁰ He was stating something that many of the students felt, as could be seen through their shared conversation. They didn't think that anyone should be treated differently because of where they come from, what their background is, or which language they speak.

While students in our class had varying degrees of knowledge about citizenship status and what it means to be documented, one topic to which everyone could relate was that of family separation. Most students had experienced what it feels like to be separated from their parents, although for different reasons and lengths of time. When Natalia read the part in *From North to South/ Del norte al sur* where José crosses the US-Mexico border to visit his mother, the students connected on a human level, across social, economic, and racial lines, with how it feels to be separated from a parent. They shared how sad this made them feel. They could empathize with the character in the story as well as with their classmates because each had felt this pain before. This was precisely the reason I had decided that *From North to South/ Del norte al sur* would be a good book to bring in; I had used it with a previous class and

7 Those papers are important because if you don't come with papers you don't have rights.

8 A paper, why is a paper so important?

9 It doesn't matter what your skin color is or where you live . . . if you want to live here to find something better.

10 It doesn't matter what race you are, you are a person.

had seen how it opened up a space for students to safely connect to their lived experiences and share them.

Some students shared that they now lived with only one parent because their parents had separated. Jairo said, *“Mi papá se fue a Washington. Me siento un poquito triste pero aun lo quiero mucho. Además tengo otro papá.”*¹¹ Jairo took the opportunity to share that his parents had separated and that while he no longer saw his dad, he still loved him. Victor shared how his father was currently away in Washington, DC for four days. He said that he actually liked it when his father traveled because, he explained, *“mi mamá me deja hacer muchas cosas que mi papá no me deja.”*¹² While both of these students understood what it was like to be separated from their fathers, the reasons for those separations were very different. Jairo wasn’t able to see his father, who had left the family; Victor knew his father would come back and so could enjoy some freedoms while his dad was away.

All this sharing from a wide range of her classmates encouraged one of our quieter students, Soledad, to say, *“Mi papá está en Florida como cinco años.”*¹³ Soledad went on to share that she had not seen her father since then because he now had another family. This was new information to us, and it was important for us to know in order to better support Soledad. She mustered the courage to share her own story, no matter how painful it was, at least in part because we had created a space where personal narratives could be shared and emotions safely expressed.

Salvador and Victor’s discussion about current issues and the stands that Trump was taking led us to provide the opportunity for the class to talk about other sensitive topics. Instead of silencing students, we openly encouraged the discussion of emotional and difficult subjects, such as separation, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Our goal was to support our students and to learn with them, and over time they felt increasingly comfortable learning about each other, supporting each other, and building stronger relationships. This also allowed them to discuss how policies that cause the separation of families are unjust, and learning and talking about oppressive structures nurtured the students’ critical consciousness.

Students clearly understood that life would be different under a Trump presidency. During a whole-class discussion, Danilo said, *“Yo no quiere que Donald Trump sea presidente porque mi papá es del otro lado,*

11 My dad left for Washington. I feel a little sad but I still love him a lot. Anyways I have another dad.

12 My mom lets me do different things that my dad won’t let me do.

13 My dad is in Florida for like five years.

no quiero que mi papá se vaya.”¹⁴ Here, Danilo expressed his fear over what life could be like if Trump became president. Iliana shared how it wouldn’t affect her parents because they had papers, but that her aunt and uncle might have to leave if Trump were elected: *“Me siento un poco triste pero no tanto porque toda mi familia si tiene los papeles pero no mi tío y mi tía...Ellos no tienen papeles y no quiere que se vayan.”*¹⁵ She went on to explain how the deportation of her aunt and uncle would affect the family because someone would have to take care of their three children: *“Si se los llevan no sabemos con quien se van a quedar mis primos porque tengo tres y a lo mejor si los llevan se quedan con nosotros.”*¹⁶ The students realized that the deportation of one of their relatives would affect not only their immediate family, but their extended family as well.

As one of the classroom teachers, I had to be aware of the real fears that affected students’ classroom behavior, attention in class, relationships with others, and learning. By providing a space for students to express their feelings and begin to process them, I demonstrated that I didn’t have answers but was willing to immerse myself in the learning process with the students. Outside of school, many of them were regularly hearing Trump’s discourse; inside the classroom, they had a space to freely express their fear, anxiety, stress, and uncertainty without being judged or questioned.

Infusing Art into Emotional Discussions

While reading *From North to South/Del norte al sur*, Natalia came up with the idea of having small groups of students draw what they imagined life would be like if Trump were to become president. Natalia is very artistic and creative and on many occasions tried to incorporate art into the classroom. She chose groups of about four to five students who worked on their drawing while the other students were in their literacy centers. The groups worked on their own, without any teacher input, for two to three days, and then another group was chosen to create a drawing.

In every group, the students depicted children and families as sad, sometimes even crying, because they were separated from someone they loved, whether a family member or friend. One group drew a police officer walking up to a man and woman and telling them, *“Tienes que ir a Mexico”*¹⁷ (Figure 1).

14 I don’t want Donald Trump to be president because my dad is from the other side and I don’t want my dad to leave.

15 I am a little sad, but not too much because all my family has their papers, except my uncle and aunt...They don’t have their papers and I don’t want them to have to leave.

16 If they take them, we don’t know who my cousins will stay with because I have three cousins and probably if they take them they will stay with us.

17 You have to go to Mexico.

Another group drew a boy saying, “*Yo odio Mexico,*”¹⁸ while a girl next to him cried (Figure 2).



Figure 1. “*Tienes que ir a Mexico*” / “You have to go to Mexico”



Figure 2. “*Yo odio Mexico*” / “I hate Mexico”

All the groups drew the wall that Trump said he would build to protect the United States from Mexicans. One group wrote the words “*visas papeles, no Mexico*”¹⁹ across their wall. Many of the students drew things that were familiar to them, such as the local ice cream shop and a small Mexican grocery store, but showed that they felt these things would change under a Trump presidency. One group drew a Mexican grocery store closing down, while another drew it with nothing but American brands of candy left inside because, they imagined, it would not be allowed to sell anything of Mexican origin.

18 I hate Mexico.

19 Visas, papers, no Mexico

All the students believed that life would change significantly if Trump were president. One group drew a picture of Trump saying “*Soy presidente,*”²⁰ with a person next to him asking, “*¿Qué pasa aquí?*”²¹ (Figure 3).



Figure 3. “*Soy presidente*”/ “I am president”

The students of Mexican descent used the drawings to represent the hate that Trump expressed toward them; one drawing included a sign that said, “*No me gustan los de Mexico, son malos*”²² (Figure 4). For those students who didn’t share these fears—either because they were not at risk for deportation or because they did not think a Trump presidency would affect them directly—the exercise helped them gain a better understanding of their classmates’ emotions and of the political reality of Trump’s campaign. The pictures were placed on the wall and each student wrote about their group’s drawing and how they felt life would change if Trump were elected. This activity gave students the opportunity to process their feelings and discuss their thoughts and ideas freely. Students were able to learn together and think critically about Trump’s rhetoric.



Figure 4. “*No me gustan los de Mexico, son malos*”/ “I don’t like those from Mexico, they are bad.”

20 I am president.

21 What is going on here?

22 I don’t like those from Mexico, they are bad.

Taking Action

Hearing each other's stories and drawing how life might change under Trump's presidency made students want to do something, to take action. This is one of the final and most important steps in developing critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Souto-Manning, 2010). Students decided to write letters to different presidential candidates, voicing their concerns about Trump. They wrote letters to Trump, Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, and Marco Rubio. They also wrote to Ivanka Trump. Here we experienced how teachers can support students in the development of their critical consciousness by daring to use students' personal experiences to empower them in the struggle against oppression. Both of us were working and learning alongside our students while supporting their use of resources available to people living in a democratic society, such as freedom of expression.

In their letters, all the students explained, by connecting the election to their own lives, why they wanted a particular person to be or not be president. For example, one wrote "*Querido Hillary Clinton, Yo quiero que si esta en el eleccion se ganas porque Donald trump quiero que todos los mexicanos [muevan] en mexico y mis amigas son de mexico yo no quiero que se mueva.*"²³ This was a sentiment expressed by many of the students, who all had friendships across racial and cultural lines. The letter writing was an opportunity for us as a class to rally around hope and respect.

Other students tried to reason with Trump by writing things such as "*Querido Donald Trump, Quieres llevar los mexicanos, cuando viven en otros sitios y tiene un color diferent. Porque es tan malo los colores de los mexicanos? Porque solo son colores de gente. Pero gente nacio con esos colores porque es tan mal los mexicanos tiene colores diferentes. Por ejemplo, si tu realmente comparas papel blanco con piel de persona blanco no son los mismos pues realmente el color de personas blancas es un poco café.*"²⁴ Another student wrote, "*Donald Trump porque vas a poner un muro como te gustaria . . . que tal si te bieran separado de tu amigo o amiga pero te gustaria cuando seas bebe te gustaria que te qiten a tu mama cuando seas bebe.*"²⁵

Students in the class developed critical consciousness throughout this process. Through their letters,

23 Dear Hillary Clinton, I want you to win these elections because if Donald Trump wins, he wants all the Mexicans to go back to Mexico and my friends are from Mexico and I don't want them to move.

24 Dear Donald Trump, You want to take away all the Mexicans, when they live in other places and have a different color. Why are the colors of Mexicans bad? They're just the colors of people. But people were born with these colors, why is it so wrong for Mexicans to have different colors? For example, if you really compare a white piece of paper with a white person's skin they are not the same, well actually the white person's color is a little brown.

25 Donald Trump, why are you going to put a wall. How would you like it? . . . What if you were separated from a friend, would you like if you were a baby and they took your mom away from you? (*I added punctuation to clarify meaning.*)

they questioned what was going on in society and what life could be like with Trump as president. They took action against oppressive structures. We teachers did not shy away from this process, but struggled right alongside the students, enacting CSP through *historicizing*—putting immigration issues into context through children’s literature; *critically centering* students’ funds of knowledge about immigration, documentation, and family separation; exercising *community accountability* through action; and creating space for contending with *internalized oppressions* (Paris & Alim, 2017). We did not ignore or suppress the initial conversation about Trump; instead we took it as an opportunity for our students to engage in dialogue. By exploring their feelings about Trump’s candidacy together, the students both bonded as a group and developed new skills in processing and articulating their emotions.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented how two teachers implemented culturally sustaining pedagogies to create a space for dialogue for their students, who were navigating the daily fears and stresses caused by Trump’s rhetoric on immigration. Salvador and Victor’s exchange provided an opportunity to create a pedagogical response to a very difficult topic and became the impetus for having the entire class discuss issues of immigration and how those issues are directly connected to students’ lives. Through this engagement, students were able to develop their own critical consciousness around their personal identities. The students’ reaction to this pedagogical response demonstrates that children can successfully engage in a meaningful way around challenging topics.

It is important that we, as teachers, speak out when we hear anti-immigrant rhetoric, for our silence sends a clear message—the message that Latinx students are not valued or welcomed. In our classroom, instead of shying away from these difficult topics because they did not directly align with the standard school curriculum, we brought them to the forefront. Together as a group, teachers and students alike, we fought against Trump’s oppressive discourse in order to build critical consciousness. We were able to do this because of the dialogic relationship we had built with our students, learning with and listening to each other. Teachers must work to promote the development of critical consciousness, and students have to learn to question everything around them instead of just taking things at face value. These are skills that all people need in order to be productive contributors to our democracy.

Implications

All students' lives and experiences are different and unique. What every teacher can do is position him- or herself as a learner and welcome students' funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) into the classroom. Teachers must be willing to create opportunities for students to share their lived experiences. Some additional ways that Natalia and I did this in our classroom were by including multicultural children's literature, inviting families into the classroom, having a Latinx author visit the classroom, and taking up topics students brought into the classroom (e.g., *La Llorona*,²⁶ Mayan legends, and immigration).

Engaging in CSP requires rethinking classroom practices and changing the curriculum to focus on students of color who are being attacked every day by the rhetoric and actions of our 45th president and his spokespeople and appointees. It is not acceptable for teachers to do nothing in the face of this. They need to ask themselves, "What am I doing to support the students of color in my classroom?"

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