



Building Bridges Instead of Walls: Engaging Young Children in Critical Literacy Read Alouds

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ABSTRACT

Situated in the months after the 2016 United States presidential election, this qualitative case study illuminates third-grade children's sense-making about the GOP Administration's proposed border wall with Mexico. In light of these present-day politics, close analysis of how young children discuss social issues remains critical, particularly for social studies educators. Looking across fifteen book discussions, we zero in on three whole-class conversations about (im)migration beginning with initial read alouds through the final debrief wherein children conversed with a local university anthropologist about the clandestine migration of individuals across the U.S.'s southern border. During initial discussions, children in the Midwestern school demonstrated their frustration towards racist laws of the mid-1900s. Others responded with empathy or made personal connections to their own family heritage. In the findings, we note a clear progression in how children understood (im)migration issues as evidenced by how their questions and curiosities shifted in later lessons. We highlight how, when children are encouraged to engage with social topics, they can act as critical consumers and position themselves as politically active and engaged citizens.

KEYWORDS

social studies, critical literacy, children's literature, immigration, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

“It’s because this stuff isn’t just *trash*, it was *real people* that owned that stuff,” replied Katie, a 10-year-old white girl, when asked about the importance of learning about (im)migrants’ stories. For six weeks, Katie and her third-grade classmates had been immersed in an integrated humanities unit planned in response to the turbulent 2016 Presidential election in the United States. Her teacher Ms. Honey, a 34-year-old white woman, had used daily read alouds in their morning meeting to introduce concepts and spark conversations related to (im)migration. Katie and her peers had engaged with numerous children’s literature texts, ranging from stories about refugees’ journeys to the tales of migrant workers fighting for improved working conditions.

After weeks of building background knowledge about historical and contemporary (im)migration issues, the children spoke with a local expert, Dr. Jason De León (2015), a highly regarded anthropologist studying the clandestine migration of individuals across the U.S southern border. With intrigued eyes and attentive ears, the children eagerly attended to the smartboard screen where Dr. De León shared with the children objects (im)migrants crossing the border left behind.

“What were some of the messages you found?” asked one young learner. “How many backpacks have you found?” asked another. The children peppered Dr. De León with questions. As in the previous book discussions, the children displayed concern for (im)migrants, particularly upon hearing about the challenges they faced to enter the United States. However, as evidenced in Katie’s response, the children understood *people* were at the center of (im)migration debates. After weeks of engaging in reading historical fiction and contemporary texts, the children were more knowledgeable about (im)migration and more inclined to critique policies they deemed unjust and inhumane while positioning themselves as politically aware, socially-engaged community members.

Operating from an understanding that young children *are* capable of and interested in critical social issues (Halvorsen, 2017; Hauver, 2019; Payne, 2018; Payne et al., 2019; Vasquez, 2004/2014), in this paper, we share key moments of children’s sense-making about the GOP Administration’s proposed border wall with Mexico. This is a topic that lingers in American politics ahead of the 2020 presidential election, as the Trump administration recently announced \$3.8 billion from the National Guard would be diverted to the wall (Choi, 2020). In light of these present-day politics, we argue that close analysis of how children discuss social issues remains critical. In this qualitative case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), we were guided by the following question: How might a series of critical literacy texts and class discussions focused on (im)migration inform young children’s civic participation?

In this paper, we first describe relevant studies from early childhood and elementary classrooms wherein children discussed critical topics and, specifically, inquiries wherein children’s literature was used as a vehicle to do so. Then, we outline our methods and modes of

inquiry before detailing read aloud sessions in the findings. Finally, we close with a discussion about how we see this work informing the educational communities now and in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMING

As documented in humanities scholarship in early childhood, children are consistently shown as capable of engaging in dialogue about critical social issues like climate change and natural disasters (Wargo, 2019; Wargo & Alverado, 2019) and gun control (Ghiso, 2011, 2015). However, in practice, teachers often avoid seemingly “adult” topics, naming them as “too political” (Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). Instead, teachers of young learners often opt to talk broadly about ideas of community issues, perhaps glossing scientific facts (e.g., the rate the Earth is warming) and forwarding individualistic solutions (e.g., recycling will save the planet).

For many teachers, children’s literature is a starting point for investigating community issues. One common approach to reading and analyzing such texts is through a critical literacies approach. Broadly, the term *critical literacies* refers to the use of the technologies of print and other media of communication to “analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2004, p. 21). Importantly, a critical literacies approach is not a checklist of instructional tasks or analytic strategies one employs as they read. Instead, it is a way of being in the world (Vasquez, Janks, & Comber, 2019). As such, critical literacies is not only of and for the English language arts (ELA) block, but it is interdisciplinary in nature because the approach foregrounds how all persons can learn to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). In doing so, individuals and collectives can act for a more just society.

In social studies and ELA, a critical literacies approach begins with the understanding that no text is neutral; the political nature of any text—from a children’s picture book to a history textbook—can be explored and critiqued (Dywer, 2016). Further, a critical literacies approach allows children to engage in critical meaning-making and to create analytical repertoires; they can apply to social phenomena such as poverty, unemployment, or workers’ rights (Comber, 2015). A critical literacies approach to teaching and learning is an “overtly political orientation” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Critical literacy is part and parcel of our understanding of global literacy and ultimately plays an important role in forwarding just civic and social values (Callow, 2017).

With this understanding that teaching and learning are value-laden tasks (Barrett & Buchanan-Barrow, 2005) and that texts are ideological (Street, 1984), in our study we used a diverse array of children’s literature to historically ground children’s understandings about contemporary issues of (im)migration. We used texts in similar ways and for similar purposes to scholars like Cipparone (2014) who used the book *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013) to engage fourth grade students in conversations about the challenges involved in emigrating from Mexico to the U.S. We also read the book *My Two Blankets* (Blackwood & Kobald, 2014) with the same intention that Callow (2017) did in their work with primary

students—to encourage them to understand and display empathy as well as recognize the plight of refugees.

While we intended to engage children in conversations about (im)migration using texts in similar ways to Ciapparone (2014) and Callow (2017), we found it impossible to discuss this social issue without also introducing topics related to diversity in critical ways. Bridging scholarship from across the disciplines in early childhood, our thinking was informed by scholars like Husband (2018) who argued that multicultural picture books promote racial awareness and justice among children. In particular, we were informed by Husband's (2018) claim that educators should abandon colorblind approaches to race within their classrooms. Teaching children about racism both deals with racial stereotypes and messages and assists children in developing a sensitivity to racial injustices in their everyday lives and within society (Apfelbaum et al., 2010; Husband, 2018).

While scholars have documented how literature can challenge misconceptions and expose stereotypes, so too can picture books perpetuate them. For instance, Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) noted portrayals of disabilities in children's literature often included themes of pity and exclusion. Grounded in the belief that books influence our understandings, Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) argued that inclusive children's literature must feature characters with agency and multidimensional lives who hold diverse identities (in their study, disability labels). Building on the work of scholars like Bishop (1990), Kleekamp and Zapata (2018) contend there exists an ethical imperative for children to read texts representing their own lived experiences. In this way, intentionally incorporating diverse picture books affords children the opportunity to gain insight into the lives of characters who experience the world like them, and those that live life differently than them (Kleekamp & Zapata, 2018; Solis, 2004). Likewise, Correia and Bleicher (2008) contend such reflections are part of a teachable skill set; in early learning spaces, children are frequently taught to make such connections by identifying whether the connection was to another text, to themselves, or to the world (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). Additionally, we suggest exposure to such texts is critical because children live raced, classed, and gendered lives; thus, they deserve the opportunity and space to interrogate such topics (Mirra & Garcia, 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW AND FRAMING

Situated within a public elementary school in the Midwestern United States, the larger study occurred across the 2016-2017 academic year. The data we draw on here was part of an integrated (e.g., social studies and ELA) unit wherein third graders were asked to contemplate contemporary social issues. Specifically, they were asked to consider the role of government and community members related to (im)migration policies. In the following sections, we detail the context, participants, and our methods for readers.

Context and Participants

Community School J (CSJ) was one of two elementary schools within the wider district that served children in grades 1 through 4. The school was the academic home for roughly 350 children that hailed from the neighborhood. The majority of children attending CSJ benefitted from the free or reduced lunch program. According to official school reports, the population at CSJ was predominantly white (52%); 48% of children were identified as children of Color (36% African American, 9% Asian American, 4% Hispanic, 1% Other). Students at CSJ were not only racially diverse, but many children arrived at school speaking a number of languages other than English. In this way, the racial and linguistic diversity of the school mirrored national demographics in the United States (Taylor, 2014).

Twenty-two children (7 who self-identified as white, 5 as Black or African American, 4 as mixed or bi-racial, 2 as Asian American, 1 as Asian, 1 as Latino, 1 as Mexican American, 1 as Mexican, and 1 as Muslim) were enrolled in Ms. Honey's classroom. In Table 1, we offer a list of the children who appear in the findings as well as their self-selected pseudonyms and demographics.

Table 1: Children's Self-identified Demographics

Child Participant	Self-identified Demographics
Katie	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 10-year-old Girl
Gem	Southeast Asian, Multilingual, Refugee, 11-year-old Girl
Faith	Mixed-Race (Black/White), Monolingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Girl
Ari	Mixed-Race (Black/Brown), Monolingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Girl
Nicki	Mexican-American, Multilingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Girl
Sameerah	Muslim, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 8-year-old Girl
Savannah	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 8-year-old Girl
Jada	Black, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Girl
Gabe	Mexican-American, Multilingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Boy
Phi	Vietnamese, Multilingual, U.S.-born, 8-year-old Boy
Abe	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Boy
Fidget	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 9-year-old Boy
Elliot	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 8-year-old Boy
Ian	White, Monolingual, U.S.-born, 10-year-old Boy

Prior to this study, Cassie had spent three years at CSJ and was a familiar face within the school (for more see, Brownell, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). As a white, monolingual, U.S.-born cisgender woman in her early 30s, Cassie fit readily in with the professional community at CSJ as her appearance paralleled that of the majority of the faculty. For instance, she and the focal teacher, Ms. Honey, shared these characteristics. Further, as a past early childhood educator, Cassie could readily communicate with Ms. Honey, despite the fact that Ms. Honey had nearly a decade more teaching experience.

Although Anam, a trilingual, Pakistani-Canadian and Muslim cisgender woman in her early 20's, was not present during data generation, she worked alongside Cassie as an undergraduate research assistant during data analysis during her third year at university. Given Anam's role as an intern with an International Non-Governmental Organization using play-based learning to empower vulnerable children around the world, she was well-suited to assist with this project. Specifically, Anam built upon her experiences analyzing, summarizing and writing project briefs on the positive impacts of play-based learning for children's life skill development, as well as content from her courses as an International Development Studies major. With Cassie, Anam synthesized and analyzed how the children engaged in critical conversations.

Ms. Honey was a seasoned educator with 10+ years of teaching. Having started her teaching career in the Southwestern United States, she returned to the focal state where she was born and raised to teach at CSJ three years earlier. During her tenure at CSJ, Ms. Honey became recognized as an educational leader and was frequently selected by the administrator to facilitate professional learning. Moreover, Ms. Honey was deemed a "successful" teacher because students in her class consistently performed well on top-down standardized assessments. In return for her leadership and marked success, Ms. Honey was granted more curricular freedom than some of her peers. Additionally, in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election, Ms. Honey felt teaching civic issues and governmental procedures was an ethical imperative, not just a curricular goal. Given all this and the past experiences Ms. Honey and Cassie had in completing a previous inquiry, they decided to collaboratively plan and implement the focal unit.

Unit Overview

Cassie and Ms. Honey created this unit for the purposes of integrating social and political activism in the social studies classroom. The integrated social studies and ELA unit served as a way for Ms. Honey to engage the children in discussion about controversial topics in a thoughtful manner, using children's literature as the vehicle to do so. The texts covered topics such as refugees, (im)migrants, and, more generally, the process of displacement and migration. The focal teacher, Ms. Honey, led the read alouds with children during their daily morning meetings; all conversations were recorded and later transcribed.

Data Generation

In the larger interpretive study (Erickson, 1986), Cassie considered children's diverse communicative practices related to critical social issues. Thus, she generated data in a number of different ways for this case study (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Specifically, she used ethnographic methods such as participant observation, photography, and fieldnotes to generate data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Children were well-aware of the role of Cassie as a researcher and knew about her interest in their thinking about critical issues. Frequently, children would approach her to share ideas they thought Cassie might be able to use as part of what the children termed her "kid experiments." This included sharing their compositions or other resources they thought may be interesting to her.

Cassie also generated daily audio- or video-recordings of classroom happenings, activities on the playground, and conversations in the cafeteria. Cassie frequently engaged Ms. Honey and the children in conversation, both as formal interviews and informal discussions. Like other talk, these were audio- or video-recorded for later transcription and analysis. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on a series of classroom conversations focused on children's literature related to (im)migration.

Data Analysis

Working alongside Cassie, Anam transcribed verbatim the collection of audio recordings Cassie generated. This included transcription of the daily read alouds as well as the whole-class conversations that occurred before, during, and after each reading. While transcribing the data, Anam paid particular attention to the key themes present in children's discussions, such as how they articulated their feelings and shared personal connections in response to the stories they were reading.

Cassie then reviewed the original audio recordings alongside the transcripts and Anam's notes, reading these texts alongside the fieldnotes generated at the time of the study. Together, we developed a more detailed coding scheme for examining the texts in a way that accounted for our noticings. We looked for moments when kids made connections between texts, between texts and themselves, and between texts and their world (local world or a global world), a heuristic Ms. Honey used in her teaching. Children were encouraged to make these connections as part of a more thoughtful social studies curriculum.

Table 2: Coding Examples from Class Discussions

Transcript Excerpt	Type of Connection (to Text, Self, World)	Assertion	Picture book Used in the Lesson
Katie: It was like in the book about Ruby Bridges...she was a girl in the school and she was Black and people were mean to her.	Text-to-Text	Children drew from previous class texts to make sense of school segregation and its impact on children of color.	<i>Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation</i> (Tonatiuh, 2014)
Phi: Like my Mom...there was a war in Vietnam, so she had to leave.	Text-to-Self	Children formulated personal connections and drew on familial experiences when discussing the forced displacement of refugees.	<i>My Two Blankets</i> (Blackwood & Kobald, 2014)
Ari: The wall rips apart families.	Text to World	Children became more comfortable to critique and share their opinions on social and political issues, particularly on (im)migration.	<i>Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote</i> (Tonatiuh, 2013)

Note. This table was adapted from Keene, E. O., & Zimmerman, S. (1997). *Mosaic of thought: The power of comprehension strategy instruction*. Portland, NH: Heinemann.

FINDINGS

In this paper, looking across fifteen book discussions, we zero in on three whole-class conversations about (im)migration. We first describe an early read aloud, then a mid-unit book discussion, and finally, we share about a whole-class debrief of the conversation children had with Dr. De León. Across these three findings, we showcase how children's thinking about the topic of (im)migration was enriched within the integrated social studies and ELA unit. Additionally, we highlight how children shifted from only learning about new historical content

from the picture books (e.g., segregation in the U.S. was not just Black/White) to eventually critiquing contemporary policies and structures (e.g., the proposed wall is oppressive and therefore wrong) using their learning from the books.

Beyond Black and White: Facing the Hard History of U.S. Segregation

In one of the earliest sessions of the six-week unit, Ms. Honey read aloud Tonatiuh's (2014) *Separate is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family's Fight for Desegregation*. As noted in the title, the story details how Sylvia Mendez, a U.S. citizen of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, was denied enrollment to a "Whites only" school in her home state of California. For the children, this read aloud was one of the first in which they came to understand that the issue of school segregation (and segregation in the wider society) included more than just individuals who were Black or White. This was also the first time the children engaged in an explicit conversation about the realities of racism related to Mexican (im)migrants.

Ms. Honey opened the lesson by gauging children's familiarity with the term segregation, a topic they had briefly discussed a few months earlier in relation to Black History Month. She activated their background knowledge by engaging them in a conversation wherein the children shared that they understood segregation as the separation between Black and White individuals. Children made mention of particular historical figures like Rosa Parks and child-activist Ruby Bridges, with one Black child noting she had known about Ruby Bridges "since second grade."

Nearly all children seemed to understand segregation as an issue of "back then." For instance, another Black girl commented she had seen the "White people on one side and Black people on the other side" signs during a class trip to a local historical museum a few months prior. While the children's knowledge about the segregation of Black and White communities was, in many ways, robust, it was simultaneously limited; all children were unfamiliar with the segregation of Mexican American children.

As Ms. Honey read the story, the children appeared disheartened by the hardships faced by Sylvia and her family. With prompting from Ms. Honey, they made sense of how segregation negatively impacted Mexican Americans as they heard how Sylvia's father advocated on her behalf. Mid-way through the book, Ms. Honey commented that she noticed something about Sylvia's family and, after a turn-and-talk, asked the children to share what they were noticing.

Ms. Honey: What are we noticing? Katie.

Katie: That the family fought.

Ms. Honey: Good, so you're starting to notice that this is where they [the family] started to fight and speak up. What else?

Ian: I think that he [Sylvia's father] is a little scared to face them [school officials], but then again he wants everyone to get a good education so they can become what they want to in the future.

Ms. Honey: Question. How would you feel if I was your teacher and I didn't believe it [Mexican American children were smart], and I thought that none of you would make it to high school? How would you feel if your teacher didn't think you could succeed? Wouldn't you feel yucky?

Children: Yeah!

Evident in their comments, the children were starting to make sense of the importance of collective action taken by Sylvia's family to desegregate the school system; a theme that became clearer as the children continued to read about how Sylvia's father would travel across the area looking for other families that were disappointed by the limits on their children's schooling due to their racial or ethnic identity.

As the story continued, the children expressed frustration and disbelief as they listened to how Mexican American children were denied attendance to the same school as their White counterparts because they were considered "unworthy" and "dirty" (Tonatiuh, 2014). To guide children in critical thinking and to engage their voices and perspectives, Ms. Honey encouraged the children to converse with their peers using the prompt, "I feel this because...". After turning-and-talking with a peer, the children shared aloud their thoughts in a whole-class discussion, where many expressed anger about the circumstances.

Savannah: I feel sad because it's not fair!

Ms. Honey: Gabe?

Gabe: I feel *angry* because most of my family is Mexican.

Ms. Honey: And how, do you think it matters?

Gabe: No! It's just who we are!

Ms. Honey: Could you imagine if you lived here in earlier times, how your family might have been treated?

Katie: It's rude to treat Mexicans like that because, what if it was the other way around?

Nicki: I'm mad because they're judging people based on their skin color.

Faith: They were just judging them because of their color and what Katie said is true. What if the White people had the Mexican school and the Mexican people had the white school? They would be saying the same thing. The Mexican people would care, but the White people wouldn't.

Here, the children's understandings about the inequities of the situation, as described in the historical fiction text, become clearer. The children articulated a wide range of feelings—sadness, anger, frustration, and a general sense of displeasure and disappointment. For some like Gabe, the feelings they harbored were due to text-to-self connections, particularly as they considered how such harmful policies may have impacted their own schooling.

In the latter part of the conversations, children spoke one after the other and in response to one another. As Katie, Nicki, and Faith conversed, there was a shift in how they talked as they considered what things might be like if the roles were reversed. Underlying their comments is the notion that caretakers of all backgrounds want what is best for their children and that all children deserve a “good” school. With this shared understanding, the children’s eruption into applause upon hearing the result of the Mendez court case (a win for Sylvia and her family) or in hearing about how proud Sylvia was to have made friends from all backgrounds and knowing that this was because her family had fought for her, should not have been a surprise.

As Ms. Honey read aloud the story, the children demonstrated curiosity, concern, and empathy. It was during this read-aloud and the subsequent conversation that we noticed how children first started to make sense of critical topics like segregation, racism, and migrant work by articulating their feelings with the support of prompts from Ms. Honey. For us, this initial discussion demonstrated how children’s literature can evoke critical conversations amongst children, allowing them to understand the unfair laws of the past and, as we demonstrate in the latter findings sections, reflect on present-day politics.

Sowing Seeds of Understanding: Explaining the Precarity of Employment

After using the Tonatiuh (2014) picture book to situate race as a systemic issue impacting more than just those deemed Black or White, Ms. Honey used the text *Harvesting Hope: The Story of Cesar Chavez* (Krull & Morales, 2003) to discuss connections between race and class in a later week. This piece of historical fiction brought to life for the children the story of Cesar Chavez—a Mexican American labor leader who formed the National Farm Workers Association and fought tirelessly to improve the working conditions of migrant workers in the United States. Beginning with Chavez’s childhood, the picture book details instances early on when he felt powerlessness because of policies that undervalued Chavez’s humanity as a non-White, Spanish speaker. Later, the book traces his role as a labor leader and the radical shifts he made in this role.

Unlike most of the other books, Ms. Honey read aloud the story of Chavez over two days. This afforded her time to discuss the book with the children and to emphasize the precarity of migrant work. On the opening day of the read aloud, for example, Ms. Honey and the children had a long discussion about the impact of drought on farms and, in turn, on the families of those working in the fields. As noted in the following transcript, Ms. Honey had the time to facilitate a discussion about who a migrant worker was and the challenges they faced in their work. During the two days of conversation, the children appeared more comfortable discussing (im)migration and, similar to the Tonatiuh (2014) reading, some children made personal connections to the text. As the children listened to the story, how they made sense of the moral implications of the stories of the real people portrayed in the texts became evident as well.

- Ms. Honey: We learned about how the conditions were not great [for migrant workers], do you remember? What were the conditions like on the farm where they worked? What were some of the things that made you go, oh no!
- Matt: That one person in one day would only make thirty cents.
- Ms. Honey: Right, they weren't making much money at all. Katie? What else?
- Katie: That their beds were all soaking. They were wet and damp.
- Ms. Honey: Thank you...Sameerah?
- Sameerah: That they couldn't say anything like they don't want to work anymore because they [farmers/bosses] could murder or hurt them.

In grappling with the reality of Chavez story, the children appeared more inclined to make personal connections. For example, Gem told her classmates she herself was new to the United States, telling her peers, "I'm an immigrant." In this expression of her identity as a newcomer, Gem made a connection from the text to herself. While this sort of connection was one we saw many children make over the 15 read alouds and the related conversations, Gem was a unique case insofar as her place in the class shifted from a seemingly quiet classmate to a confident learner with specific expertise on the subject matter of the unit. Thus, for children like Gem, stories about activists like Sylvia Mendez and Cesar Chavez opened new avenues for her to participate in the social studies and ELA curriculum.

Children also appeared willing to share their thoughts about the injustices faced by (im)migrant workers in the post-discussion. They had a seemingly shared opinion on the atrocious work conditions created by White individuals for Mexican American workers. Additionally, some children began to feel emboldened to state they specifically wanted to share their individual opinions.

- Ms. Honey: Alright, what an inspiration. Because during this time, White people didn't think to count for people [migrants] as being human. They felt like they could treat poor people in a way that you should not treat people. They thought of them like they were just things...things that could do their work for them because they were poor. What do you think about that?
- Children: Yuck!!
- Gabe: I want to share my thoughts on this.
- Ms. Honey: Alright. I'm happy to hear it, Gabe.
- Gabe: Alright, I'm happy, but I'm sad because who thinks another person is less than another person? That's a disgrace! And the reason I'm happy is because they actually made it [referring to march Chavez made with labor colleagues]!

Gabe's text-to-self connection in earlier course readings and shared identity as a Mexican American with labor leader Chavez likely informed his willingness to assert these sorts of

connections in class. Like Gem, Gabe's read of the picture books included reading himself into the texts and, in turn, his classroom and world. In this way, the daily read alouds cultivated new avenues for children to feel they belonged, especially for children from marginalized communities that may not typically see themselves represented in literature or popular culture.

The inclusion of historical fiction was most definitely a tool for children to make personal connections. However, it was also a vehicle for children to engage in and demonstrate critical thought. While in earlier lessons, children used prompts from Ms. Honey to critically reflect on the texts, in this lesson Gabe used the story of Chavez to highlight the innate value of all humans, no matter their identity or background. Gabe did so without a sentence starter from his teacher, instead stating he had something to share and then actually sharing it with his classmates. Although the children made sense of each story in unique and personalized ways, across the 15 read alouds, we noticed how children like Gabe progressed in thinking about (im)migration and how their curiosities began to shift.

Unpacking Critical Concepts Through Real-World Experiences

In one of the final weeks of the unit, Ms. Honey read aloud a second picture book by Tonatiuh (2013), *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*. While many of the books included in the unit were historical fiction, this text differed from the others in that it was an allegorical tale featuring animal characters. For unfamiliar readers, in this text, Tonatiuh (2013) described the journey of the young Pancho Rabbit who lived south of the Rio Grande River. After his father did not return to the family home after completing his work as a migrant worker, the worried Pancho Rabbit packed a bag and headed north. Along the way, Pancho Rabbit met Coyote who offered to help him to travel toward his father, but ultimately Coyote wished to deceive Pancho who was eventually rescued by his father.

Ms. Honey and Cassie used this Tonatiuh (2013) text to once again emphasize the hardships (im)migrants faced, particularly those that must cross the United States' most southern border. After reading the full story, Ms. Honey also read the author's note. In it, Tonatiuh (2013) described the role of "coyotes" (e.g., smugglers) in assisting individuals crossing the border without the documents deemed necessary by the U.S. government. Additionally, Tonatiuh's (2013) author's note provided space for Ms. Honey to discuss dual-citizenship and deportations with the children. Although such topics were discussed in prior readings and, at the time, these issues were frequently appearing in the news.

Ms. Honey: Remember we talked about that word? Deported? Do you remember what that means? What does that mean Katie?

Katie: That they find you're there when you're not supposed to be and they send you back.

Across the course of the unit, children learned new terms such as deportation and came to understand what those terms meant in relation to (im)migration. In our review of the 15 read

alouds, we saw a significant growth in the children's line of questioning as well as their understanding of (im)migration and its related terms. We also noticed instances wherein Ms. Honey shared more about individuals and communities she knew that were impacted by the (im)migration policies and practices Tonatiuh (2013) discussed in his author's note. Specifically, we noted how Ms. Honey spoke about how her former students in Arizona and their families' lives were influenced by U.S. laws. In speaking from personal experience, Ms. Honey brought to life the issues Tonatiuh (2013) wrote about and those the children had heard in previous weeks, such as in the transcript that follows.

Katie: I didn't know that there were such weird laws that were so mean about people just trying to survive.

Ms. Honey: Exactly. Yes, it was a really scary time. And it wasn't long ago, I remember it happening and feeling like that it was unfair and I had friends that, who were affected by that wall. And my students were affected by that wall because a lot of their parents were immigrants and they were really worried all the time that they might get deported. If they got caught, if the kids were born in the U.S., they would stay and the parents would be sent back.

Elliott: But who would they live with? Cause they [children] can't live by themselves.

Ms. Honey: Family, sometimes. Sometimes they were put in foster care. Sometimes it's just one of their parents that is deported and sent back.

We also used the Tonatiuh (2013) picture book and Ms. Honey's personal connections to prepare the children to learn more about the real people involved in (im)migration policies. Specifically, we used Tonatiuh's (2013) story to frame the virtual discussion the children had later in the day with Dr. De León. During this conversation, Dr. De León (2015) connected the Tonatiuh (2013) picture book to the work he engaged in as a researcher. He showed the children the items he found along the Arizona-Mexico border, including backpacks, children's toys, and food containers.

The children were intrigued and eager to know more about the (im)migrants' stories and developed thoughtful questions for Dr. De León. In addition to the questions detailed in the introduction of this paper, the children were also curious about why Dr. De León decided to become an anthropologist. Dr. De León explained to them his interest in exploring the objects people left behind during their journey and how these objects could be used to shed light on the stories of individuals passing through. It was evident that by the end of their discussion with Dr. De León, the children had come to better understand the multi-faceted dimensions of (im)migration and that, as Katie stated, there were *real people* behind the objects Dr. De León found along the U.S./Mexico border.

The following day, Ms. Honey and Cassie debriefed the virtual conversation with Dr. De León with the children. Eagerly, the young students shared their new insights about (im)migration:

- Ms. Honey: Alright, thinking about what we learned yesterday. Sameerah?
Sameerah: He said that every time he goes, he finds a thousand backpacks every year.
Abe: I learned that people have to leave a lot of stuff behind!
Fidget: I learned that he doesn't like the wall.
Ms. Honey: What does he think we should do instead, Fidget?
Fidget: Be friendly to people!
Katie: Just by looking at someone's stuff, you can learn a lot about a person.
Ms. Honey: Yeah, just by looking at a person's belongings, you can learn a lot about them.

As noted here, the children demonstrated they had made connections between the objects Dr. De León found, the stories of people those objects were connected to, and the factors that influenced why individuals crossed borders. The children appeared to enrich their understanding about the negative implications a border wall would have on (im)migrants and their families, but they also discussed the negative impact a wall would have on the environment. For instance, children shared the following:

- Nicki: He also said the wall is not good because it also hurts the animals and the habitat.
Ms. Honey: Yeah, good....
Savanna: The wall hurts the environment!
Ari: It rips apart families!

As demonstrated in this excerpt, by the close of the unit, a majority of the children came to understand that many of the GOP's proposed (im)migration policies would create harmful or dangerous situations for those seeking refuge in the United States. Moreover, the children understood from the various read alouds and related conversations the present-day realities many (im)migrants were challenged by, and they could imagine how proposed practices might inhibit others in the future.

DISCUSSION

Through snippets of transcripts from classroom conversation, we noted how children became more comfortable talking about (im)migration and called attention to how the children learned to critique current and historical policies. Moreover, we used these excerpts to showcase the role Ms. Honey had in thoughtfully engaging and facilitating conversations amongst her students as part of her social studies curriculum. While she initially encouraged participation

through stems like, “I feel this because...,” children became much more assertive in their commentary over time and eventually began with opening statements such as, “I want to share my thoughts on this” (see Gabe’s comments in the second findings section).

As children began to think more independently about (im)migration, they responded with empathy or by making personal connections to their own family heritage. The children also made connections between books. At times, this meant they recognized similarities in how individuals or communities advocated for themselves while at other times they noticed the oppressive policies which led to the marginalization of a community was what was similar. In turn, the children made connections between historical injustices and those which persist today. Cumulatively, we highlighted how, when children were encouraged to engage with social topics, they acted as critical consumers and positioned themselves as politically active and engaged community members.

Within the integrated curriculum, Ms. Honey’s role shifted as well. For instance, while in the earliest lesson there was a great deal of teacher talk and teacher-led conversation, in later lessons she encouraged children to reflect on their own. In this way, Ms. Honey engaged in teaching practices we would encourage others to take up as she became the facilitator, rather than the leader, of classroom conversations. To reach this level of conversation, Ms. Honey needed to scaffold the learning of her young students, assisting them with the task of analysis until they were able to do this work on their own.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we detailed not only how open children were to talking about these ideas or opening wide the proverbial doors of the United States, but also how the children grappled with the ethical implications of the stories that were presented and how they related them to their own lives. Teaching controversial and critical topics, like (im)migration, addressed more than curricular goals within social studies or ELA. The sort of critical teaching and learning within this integrated curriculum allowed children to voice their concerns while opening new avenues for them to connect to their personal experiences and perspectives within the social studies classroom. We see the teaching of critical topics like this as an ethical imperative insofar as such learning opportunities position children as critical, engaged, and active community members. This research demonstrates the importance of educators integrating social and political activism in their social studies classrooms for ethical and curricular purposes.

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