

# “Lo agarraron y lo echaron pa’tras”: Discussing Critical Social Issues with Young Latinas\*

## “Lo agarraron y lo echaron pa’tras”: discutiendo críticas y temas sociales con niñas latinas

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### **Abstract**

The avenue for enacting a critical literacy curriculum in this primary bilingual classroom was through literature discussions about critical social issues that impacted the children’s lives. These discussions provided the children the space to discuss and question social issues that were significant to them and with which they identified. The analysis explored the responses of two young Latinas and demonstrated that these young Latinas did indeed think seriously about the critical social issues raised in the books discussed. They connected the books to their lives through the stories they told and shared their experiences as they sought to make meaning from the books and the issues raised. Children like the young Latinas in this study need a critical literacy curriculum that helps them contest social inequities in which they may be living and challenges them to think beyond the book and make connections to their lived experiences.

**Key words:** critical literacy, bilingual, literature discussions, social issues

### **Resumen**

En un salón de primaria bilingüe, se implementó un currículo pedagógico de alfabetización crítica por medio de pláticas literarias. Las pláticas fueron un espacio en el que los niños pudieron pensar, hablar y preguntar acerca de temas sociales que tenían significado en sus vidas y con cuales los niños se identificaban. El análisis presenta una exploración de las respuestas de dos niñas latinas y demuestra que las niñas realmente pensaron muy seriamente sobre los temas críticos que contenían los libros. Ellas hicieron conexiones entre los libros y sus vidas y contaron las historias de sus vidas como un modo de interpretar y entender los temas sociales expuestos en los libros. Los niños, como las niñas latinas del estudio, necesitan un currículo de pedagogía crítica que les ayude a combatir las inequidades sociales que ellos puedan estar viviendo y que al mismo tiempo los estimule a pensar aun más allá del libro, haciendo conexiones con experiencias que han vivido.

**Palabras clave:** pedagogía crítica, bilingüe, pláticas de literatura, temas sociales.

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## Introduction

“A mi pa’ lo agarraron y lo echaron pa’tras, so, y luego cuando fue para atrás tenía todo raspado de los pies\*”

“My dad, they [Border Patrol] grabbed him and they sent him back [to México], so, and later when he got back [to the United States], he had his feet all scraped.”

In this brief excerpt from a discussion of *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993) Cecilia (all names are pseudonyms) tells us about one of her father’s unsuccessful attempts to enter the United States. Although only seven, Cecilia, like many other children living in the United States, is very familiar with crossing the border.

Of the 54 million children enrolled in U.S. public schools in grades K-12 in the year 2008, 10 million were identified as ‘Hispanic’. Additionally, if one includes children aged 3-4, the figure is close to 11 million (<http://pewhispanic.org>). The demographics clearly illustrate the growing number of Latino children in our schools. If all populations were served equally under the law, it should follow that the curriculum reflect the children in our classrooms; however, Latino literature and the life experiences of Latino children are typically not made a part of school learning (Medina, 2004; Moje, 2004). Consequently, our Latino children feel that they are not valued members of school communities which can be potentially harmful in their achieving academic success (Nieto, 1999; González, 2005).

### *Rationale*

As a bilingual Latina teacher, it was particularly important for me to make this body of literature a part of my curriculum. I believed that my curriculum needed to reflect the lives, languages and cultures (Nieto, 1999), of the children in my classroom. As a young Latina

growing up in Boston, I never saw myself reflected in the curricula. When I became a teacher, I did not want my Latino students to suffer the lack of connection to and identity with the school curricula that I did. Rather than promote a curriculum that rendered my Latino students “voiceless and incapable of action” (Vasquez, 2004, p. xiv), I needed to infuse a critical perspective throughout my curriculum, one where my students were included as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” (Freire, 1970, p.81) and where the stories of their lives formed the basis of our daily classroom life. Through dialogue and thoughtful examinations of the critical issues that so many of my students confronted on a daily basis, we sought to “discover alternative paths for self and social development” (Shor, 1997, p. 1). Drawing on critical literacy pedagogy (Bartolomé, 2003; Shor, 1997; Shor & Pari, 1999, ) I saw my role as a classroom teacher to prepare my students “to deal with injustices encountered inside and outside the classroom” (Bartolomé, 2003, p. 413). As a teacher-researcher (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) who is acutely aware of the political act (Freire, 1985) of teaching and believes that children have the right to have their voices heard and to participate actively in creating curriculum, the means with which I carried this out was by engaging the children in “explicit discussions about their experiences” (Bartolomé, 2003, p. 413). The present teacher research study (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993) will explore specifically how two young Latinas responded to a critical literacy curriculum while participating in literature discussions.

### *Theoretical Framework*

Critical literacy has been defined in numerous ways by teachers, scholars, and literacy researchers. Shor & Pari (1999), drawing on Freire and Dewey, believe that “the praxis of critical literacy involves language in and for action beginning from the everyday words and

knowledge students bring to class” (p. 15). A critical literacy pedagogy opens the curriculum to all, it asks children to question and wonder about what is happening in their world; “it makes significant diverse children’s cultural and social questions about everyday life” (Vasquez, 2004, p. xv). Critical literacy actively involves children in engagements where they must use written and oral language (Dyson, 1997) to communicate their understandings of our ever changing world and their place in it. Critical literacy “connects the political and the personal, the public and the private, the global and the local, the economic and the pedagogical, for rethinking our lives and for promoting justice in place of inequity” (Shor, 1997, p. Intro).

In this primary bilingual classroom an avenue for enacting a critical literacy curriculum was through literature discussions about social issues that impacted the children’s lives. The literature discussions took place twice a week throughout the school year and provided the children a space to discuss and question social issues that were significant to them and with which they identified. Because the discussions were contextually based within the broader curriculum, the children were able to make connections across the school day and draw from their own experiences which helped them understand that neither their lives nor their social issues existed in vacuums; there were others who lived and struggled with issues similar to theirs. Talk about social issues was not limited to the literature discussions; however, providing this one focused space helped the children realize that they were a part of and could have an impact on the world around them. During these literature discussions, a group of children discussed the understandings and personal connections that they made based on the text that they read or had read to them (Short, 1995, 1997). The children had the opportunity to contribute their emerging understandings of issues while also listening to

other children’s thoughts and understandings. These discussions involved the children in what Rosenblatt (1978) called a “two-way reciprocal relation” (p. 27) with the text and necessitated that they use dialogue to develop a more complex interpretation of the text.

## Literature Review

While classroom studies about critical literacy primarily focus on students in the upper elementary or intermediate grades of mainstream classrooms in non-bilingual settings (Clarke, 2005; Enciso, 1994, 1997; Foss, 2002; Heffernan & Lewison, 2000, 2005; Moller, 2002; Silvers, 2001), a handful of studies were found where children in the primary grades were participating in literature discussions about critical social issues. These young students discussed issues of poverty (Leland, Harste & Huber, 2005), election processes (Burns, 2004), classroom inequities (Norton, 2005) and social justice and equity (Vasquez, 2004). Additionally, in her study of 3-5 year olds, Vasquez (2004) found that having critical conversations with her primary-aged students “moved well beyond the traditional topics of study often associated with primary school curriculum” (p. 2).

One particular set of studies examine a primary bilingual classroom where the language spoken in the discussion is Spanish and where children discuss critical social issues of racism, gender, poverty, illiteracy and illegal immigration (Lopez-Robertson, 2000; Lopez-Robertson, 2003; Lopez-Robertson, 2004; Martí-nez-Roldán, 2005). The present study will provide an examination of the use of literature discussions about critical social issues as a means to enacting a critical literacy curriculum and will explore the responses of two young Latinas and how they made meaning from and connections to critical social issues raised in books they read.

## Methodology

This year long teacher research study (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993) took place in a bilingual second grade classroom at Wyman Elementary School. Located in a working class area in a southwestern city of the United States, Wyman is a school serving preschool through grade 5. The majority of the children attending Wyman (about 95%) were classified as English Language Learners (ELLs) while 98% of the children receive free lunch and 2% qualify to pay reduced lunch fees.

While all eighteen of the children in my classroom participated in the literature discussions, five Latinas were selected through purposeful sampling. Because my goal was to understand the manner in which the children made sense of critical issues during our literature discussions, I chose the “sample from which the most could be learned” (Merriam, 2001, p.61). Gabriela, Shayla, Jomaira, Kati, and Cecilia were selected based on the following criteria: they actively participated during literature discussions, they enthusiastically shared their connections and meaning making, and they consistently made personal connections. Each of the girls self-identified as Mexican, all had family living in Mexico, all traveled to Mexico regularly with their families, all were seven years old and bilingual; they read, spoke, and wrote in both Spanish and English. Only one of the five girls, Cecilia, was not in school regularly during the spring semester.

Throughout the spring semester, the children and I were involved in a classroom unit of study of Migrant Farm Workers. Engagements during the study included presentations by several guest speakers (including our Family Support Liaison and a University Professor) who shared their experiences as migrant farm workers, on-line research, the critiquing of videos and reading many books, including books discussing issues of immigration. The literature discussions were

contextually located within this classroom unit of study. A sample of the books we discussed included: *Friends from the other side/Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993), *Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca* (Mora, 1997), *La mariposa* (Jiménez, 1998), and *Radio Man* (Dorros, 1993). As the study strongly encouraged the power of family and valued the resources that children bring from their homes (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), the children took the books home to read and discuss with their families prior to our classroom discussions. During these home discussions, the children were asked to place a sticky note on the part of the book that they had a connection with; these would be used as a starting point during our classroom discussions. They were also asked to write a journal entry about their questions, thoughts, wonderings, and/or connections with the book. This engagement provided the children a space to read and discuss books with their families in their own homes and in their home language while also sending the message that they were readers and writers both at home and at school.

### *Data sources and analysis*

Given the research context, I collected the data through a range of strategies. The data pool consists of audiotapes, transcriptions of seven literature discussions, children’s written and illustrated responses as well as their parents’ written responses, informal interviews with the girls and their mothers, and field notes taken during the discussions.

The data for this study was gathered in a concentrated period of time within the boundaries of my bilingual second grade classroom. Data analysis was constant as the study progressed and triangulation of data occurred through interviews with the girls, through my field notes and transcript reviews. Constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to identify patterns and connections while grounded theory (Glaser

& Strauss, 1967) was used to create and code initial categories and see relationships among the data. Following the tradition of interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982), discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) was employed to study how the girls created meaning through their interactions during the literature discussions; these interactions were with each other, with the books that we read, and with the stories they told. The situated meanings (Gee, 1999), “the images or patterns that were assembled on the spot”, (p. 81) as the girls communicated within the literature discussions, were based on their understanding of the particular context and on their prior experiences. These situated meanings were constantly being negotiated during and within each of the discussions and could only be understood within the context of each discussion.

### *Literature Discussions*

There were a total of seven literature discussions that connected to the classroom unit of study of Migrant Farm Workers. Categories were formed to examine the girls’ contributions in the literature discussions: Family Stories, Cuentitos sobre mi (Stories about Me), Border Issues, La Migra (Border Patrol), and Los Pueblitos (The Towns). This paper will present data from the category Border Issues and will examine only Gabriela and Cecilia’s stories because they reflect the major topics discussed by the girls and seem to be extremely relevant to today’s political discourse.

### *Border Issues*

The category of Border Issues, a recurrent theme in all of the discussions, looks at stories told by the girls about matters having to do with the border between the United States and México and the impact these matters have on their lives and the lives of their families (immediate and extended).

## **Findings**

Towards the end of our discussion of *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993), a story of a young Mexican boy, Joaquin, and his mother who enter the United States without permission and Prietita, a young Mexican American girl who befriends them, Gabriela was talking about a connection she had made between Prietita being selected as the new curandera (healer) in the story, and her own mother’s use of home remedies to cure Michael, Gabriela’s older brother, of a stomach ache. Following this, Cecilia then remembered something that had happened when she and Gabriela were playing with blocks a few days earlier:

Gabriela, que estabas diciendo –dame los chiquitos- y te decía que los medium, y me dijiste que no dijeras médium porque era novia de...

*Gabriela, you were saying –give me the small ones- and I would say the medium ones- and then you said not to say medium because she was the girlfriend of...*

As demonstrated by the excerpt, Cecilia wasn’t able to finish her sentence; Gabriela instantly knew what Cecilia was referring to and shared the following story to the group:

Es que tengo un primo que se casó con un, se casó obligado con una, con una muchacha que se llama Miriam. Esa muchacha lo amenazó, lo amenazó le dijo porque él no tiene nada de papeles, le dijo que si no se casaba con ella que um, le iba a meter a la cárcel. Y se casó y cuando salió de la Misa porque tuvo que, lo hicieron obligar para decir que –acepto- y cuando salió de la Misa empezó a llorar bien feo, no se quería casar con ella. Y yo la odio mucho a ella por eso, toda mi familia la odia mucho a ella, y él, y, y va a Mission, y mi primo va a la Universidad y él tiene 21 años y ella tiene 16. Y desde

um, desde um, yo y mi prima somos las que más, más, la odiamos a ella, se llama Miriam y va a la Mission y era amiga, antes era amiga de mi hermana Sarah.

*It's that, I have a cousin that got married to, he was married against his will, to a, to a girl named Miriam. That girl threatened him, and she threatened him because he doesn't have any papers, and she told him that if he didn't marry her that um, she was going to have him put in jail. And he got married and when he came out of the Mass, because he had to, they obligated him to say -yes- I accept, and when he came out of Mass he began to cry real ugly like, he didn't wanted to marry her and I hate her very much because of that, all of my family hates her and he, she goes to Mission and my cousin goes to the University, he is 21years old and she is 16. And like um, me and my cousin were the ones that hate her the most, her name is Miriam and she goes to Mission, she used to be my sister Sarah's friend.*

Gee (1999) believes that “language always simultaneously reflects and constructs the situation or context in which it is used” (p. 82); in this excerpt, the word ‘medium’ and the manner in which it was interpreted took us from block play a few days prior to a story about witnessing a family member marry as a result of extortion. Phonologically speaking, the word ‘medium’ and the name ‘Miriam’, when pronounced in Spanish, sound very similar. The meaning of the word ‘medium’ in this particular context was negotiated “through communicative social interaction” (Gee, 1999, p. 81) by those participating in the discussion. An outsider to this discussion would not understand the situated meaning of ‘medium’ or how it evolved into the present narrative; a narrative that goes beyond the standard curriculum which requires students to regurgitate rather than analyze and draw from personal experiences.

Gabriela’s narrative is an example of how she used language to communicate her understandings of border issues in general and a forced marriage and the emotions tied to that. Gabriela’s narrative helps us understand; 1) her knowledge about border crossing and issues that affect the emotional fabric of a family, 2) how she positioned Miriam, her cousin, and herself and 3) her awareness of complex family relations and traditions that bring with them conflicting emotions and how these emotions are forceful in light of the wider society’s restrictions and sanctions.

Gabriela begins her story by telling us that her cousin was married against his will, “se casó obligado” and then proceeds to explain, “Esa muchacha lo amenazó, lo amenazó le dijo porque él no tiene nada de papeles, le dijo que si no se casaba con ella que um, le iba a meter a la cárcel/ That girl threatened him, and she threatened him because he doesn’t have any papers, and she told him that if he didn’t marry her that um, she was going to have him put in jail” (line 4). Although Gabriela never tells us that her cousin is in the United States without proper permission and documentation, we learn that she has some understanding of the wider society’s restrictions and sanctions in relation to border crossing--she clearly demonstrated knowledge of what it means not to have papeles/papers: you go to jail.

In addition to the border knowledge she demonstrated in the above excerpt, Gabriela demonstrated a sophisticated use of language in another aspect as well: in her positioning of Miriam, her cousin, and herself. From the very onset of the narrative, we know that Gabriela is not fond of Miriam by the way she refers to her as “una, una muchacha llamada Miriam/a, a girl named Miriam”.

Miriam is presented as a bully, conqueror and villain; she coerces Gabriela’s cousin to marry her or suffer the consequences, be turned into

the authorities and sent to prison (lines 2-4). In lines 5-6, Gabriela's cousin is so distraught after the wedding ceremony that he began to cry, "real ugly" (line 6); this is a result of the marriage that was forced upon him by Miriam. Miriam continues in her given role as villain when we learn in lines 7 through 9 that even though the entire family hates her, no one hates her more than Gabriela (and another cousin); Gabriela lets us know that she hates Miriam for making her cousin marry her.

Finally, Miriam is given the role as perpetual outsider, when in the last line of the story, Gabriela tells us that "she used to be my sister Sarah's friend". Gabriela is letting us know that in the past she used to be a friend and that now, as a result of her horrid treatment of her cousin, she will always be hated and remain an outsider even though she is now part of the family.

In stark contrast to Miriam's role as villain-we have Gabriela's cousin whom she has undoubtedly positioned as the victim; in Gabriela's eyes, he is helpless. He did not want to marry Miriam; this is evident when we learn that he came out of Mass, crying "real ugly". Gabriela may have also unknowingly suggested that her cousin is also a victim of their family and their traditions, beliefs, and customs; in line five, Gabriela tells us that "they obligated him to say -yes- I accept". This hints that perhaps her cousin was considering an alternative. Family traditions, beliefs, and customs guided the decision for a church wedding because this union was to be sanctioned by God; again, Gabriela's cousin is the victim. Finally, her cousin is also a victim according to society's rules; regardless of the fact that he may be contributing positively to his community, if here without permission and caught he must pay the price: deportation.

Up to this point, Gabriela has successfully positioned Miriam as despised villain and her husband as victim subject to both Miriam and

his family's and society's traditions, beliefs, and customs. Gabriela, meanwhile, has positioned herself as her cousin's guardian. The manner in which she speaks about her loathing for Miriam may be her way to protect her cousin; he cannot demonstrate his hatred for Miriam, so Gabriela does it for him. She can verbalize her feelings all she wants without consequence, her cousin cannot. Interestingly enough, Gabriela never reveals her cousins' name. Was she protecting him once more by not naming him? Perhaps Gabriela felt that since he had no control over his destiny and was being bullied and coerced into doing things that his name didn't need to be revealed?

An arranged marriage, when not a custom or way of life for a family, brings with it a great deal of stress especially when there are such high stakes involved; as was the case for Gabriela's cousin's marriage--deportation. The marriage brought out an array of emotions in Gabriela: she felt intense anger towards Miriam, pity for her cousin's situation, a need to protect him and finally, to an extent, she also felt powerless; as much as she disliked her cousin's situation, there was nothing she could do to change or impact it. In her eyes, the only way to express her discontent was to hate Miriam. This incident could very easily be connected to the larger picture of the issues surrounding society's restrictions and sanctions on immigration. Gabriela's story is demonstrative of the volatile and real situations that border issues can bring up, including fear of deportation and extortion.

As the discussion of *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993) continued, Cecilia called attention to page 3 in the book and read, "Cuando él se agachó a levantar la leña, ella notó que sus brazos estaban cubiertos de llagas horrible/When he bent to lift up the cord of wood, Prietita noticed the large boils on his forearms." She then offered the statement that opened this manuscript:

A mi pa' lo agarraron y lo echaron pa'tras, so, y luego cuando fue para atrás tenía todo raspado de los pies.

*My dad got caught and they sent him back, so, and then when he got back, he had his feet all scraped.*

Cecilia made a clear connection between the boils on the forearms of Joaquin, the character in the book, to the sores on her father's feet. She then expanded her statement with a story about one of her father's unsuccessful attempt to cross the border.

Mi papá dice que había mucha agua y que estaba bien hondo, se estaba deteniendo de sabe que, y luego el perro de mi papá se brincó a salvarlo y después no pudo y se agarró de la pierna y vinieron los bomberos y los sacaron. Y la otra semana um, también me dijeron que, que se, que se, que se estaba, hay un árbol así que le dicen la piocha allá en México.

*My dad said that there was a lot of water and that it was very deep, he was holding onto who knows what, and then my dad's dog jumped to save him and then he couldn't and he grabbed his leg and the firefighters took them out. And the other week um, they also told me that, that there, that there, that there was a tree, that they called the piocha, there in México.*

Cecilia began to tell her story with an immediate connection to the book as she read the sentence on page 3 aloud to all of us. She then linked that opening sentence about her father's scraped feet with the story of his trying to cross the border at a place "había mucha agua y que estaba bien hondo/where there was a lot of water and it was very deep" (line 1). Cecilia's story includes a would-be hero, her father's dog, who had an unsuccessful attempt at saving him as it appears that the current may have been dragging him at first and eventually both of them (lines 2-3). In the book *Prietita* is the would-be heroine

as she 'rescues' Joaquin and his mother from the Border Patrol.

As she concluded this story, it appeared that Cecilia tried to make sense of what her father was holding (lines 1-2) "se estaba deteniendo de sabe que/ he was trying to hold onto who knows what" when she said, in lines 4-5, "Y la otra semana, también me dijeron...que hay un árbol así que le dicen la piocha, allá en México/And the other week they also told me...that there was a tree called the piocha, there in México". Cecilia ended the story by connecting back to the beginning of her story and trying to make sense of the thing that her father was holding onto, perhaps it was la piocha.

As the discussion continued, the girls too began to wonder about la piocha and offered, "¿Ceci, tu crees que es mágico, el árbol?/Ceci, do you think that the tree is magical?" Her response, "Sabe. Yo nomás sé que mi pa y su perro no se murieron/Who knows. All I know is that my dad and his dog didn't die." Cecilia appeared to be finished with that particular story and shifted our discussion to the following:

Dos semanas cuando falle, es porque mi pa, no me pudo cruzar sin mi ma, porque mi ma no tenía pasaporte, so no le había metido en la cabeza que podía usar el pasaporte de mi tía Filomena pero no, casi, no, le estaban preguntando los policías muchas cosas; no te pareces, no te pareces a ésta, yo creo que no es tu pasaporte. Así estaban y nos teníamos que regresar y luego um, llegó la Mica.

*Two weeks when I was absent, it was because my dad, he couldn't cross me without my mom because my mom didn't have a passport, and didn't get it into her head that she could use my aunt Filomena's [passport] but, almost, no, they were asking her, the police, many things; you don't look like, you don't look like this one [passport photo], I think this isn't your*



*passport. That's how they were and we had to go back [home] and then um, the Mica [green card] came.*

In this story, Cecilia continues to discuss the issue of crossing the border only this time she is explaining her two week absence from school. In the opening line of her story, we learn that “mi pa, no me pudo cruzar sin mi ma porque mi ma no tenía pasaporte/my dad, he couldn’t cross me without my mom because my mom didn’t have a passport.” From the previous stories above we know that Cecilia’s father could not enter the United States with permission and we now learn in this story (line 2) that her mother did not have a passport, in other words, she was also unable to enter the country with permission. As the story progresses, we become more aware of Cecilia’s border knowledge, an understanding (however minute) of the particularities of issues dealing with the border, in this case, border crossing. In this story, Cecilia’s border knowledge is related to the matter of using another person’s passport to gain entry into the United States, lines 2-3, “podía usar el pasaporte de mi tía Filomena/she could use my aunt Filomena’s passport.”

While the story carries on, we learn that Cecilia’s mother did try to enter the United States with tía Filomena’s passport. After succumbing to a few questions by the police (lines 3-4); “le estaban preguntando los olicies muchas cosas; no te pareces, no te pareces a ésta, yo creo que no es tu pasaporte/ You don’t look like, you don’t look like this one [passport photo]. I think this isn’t your passport,” we learn that it was an unsuccessful attempt that resulted in their going back home [to México]; “Así estaban y nos teníamos que regresar / That’s how they [the police] were and we had to go back [home].” Later, we are not told exactly when, Cecilia tells us that there was a solution when “llegó la Mica/ the Mica [green card] came.”

Both Gabriela and Cecilia’s stories demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of border issues and border knowledge. Gabriela’s story revealed her understanding of the impact that an arranged marriage had on her cousin, “empezó a llorar bien feo/he began to cry real ugly” and also revealed her understanding of extortion; her cousin would go to jail if he didn’t marry this girl. Cecilia’s stories revealed her border knowledge; she understood, however slightly, the particularities of issues dealing with the border, in this case, border crossing.

## Discussion

The analysis demonstrated that these young Latinas did indeed think seriously about the critical social issues raised in the books we discussed. They connected the books to their lives through the stories they told and shared, their experiences as they sought to make meaning from the books, and the issues raised. Their stories serve as a reminder that “in life, we cannot parcel out certain conditions and put others aside” (Langer, 1995, p.7); the border and the issues surrounding it are very real for the girls, to not discuss it would render them voiceless.

As discussed earlier, as a student I felt invisible and disconnected to school and the curricula and I did not want that for the children in my classroom. As a classroom teacher I challenged the educational system that typically “serves to silence students from subordinated groups” (Bartolomé, 2003, p.414) by seeking ways to make my students and their lives relevant and necessary parts of the curriculum. By explicitly discussing the events of my students lives and making them a part of the curriculum, my students became active participants in the creation of the curriculum; their stories served as the building blocks rather than superficial discussions based on

packaged non-critical curriculum typically found in most American classrooms, especially those classrooms populated by highly diverse groups.

The ‘political and personal’, ‘public and private’, ‘global and local’, ‘economic and pedagogical’ (Shor, 1997, p. 1) issues of immigration became the focal point of our critical literacy curriculum. By infusing the curriculum with Latino children’s literature that contained social issues with which my students identified, our literature discussions helped them “transform their lived experiences into knowledge” (i.e. border issues, border knowledge) (Freire, 1970, p. 19).

## Implications

Discussing critical social issues with these young Latinas demonstrated that through these discussions they “access the meaningful interaction and activity needed for effective literacy learning” (Gutierrez, Larson & Kreuter, 1995, p. 419) which is typically not present in classrooms with high numbers of children from linguistically and socio-economically diverse backgrounds. Children like the young Latinas in this study need a critical literacy curriculum that helps them contest social inequities that they may be living and challenges them to think beyond the book and make connections to their experiences.

While this study did demonstrate the young Latinas’ capability to participate in a critical literacy curriculum focused on literature discussions about social issues, there are some questions that remain unexplored that provide for a rich future research agenda. As stated previously, this type of curriculum that asks students of color to actively participate in thought-provoking engagements that invite their experiences and knowledge as an accepted method for making meaning is not typically provided. How does this knowledge compare to the knowledge that

“counts” for the institution? Along the same lines, with such a push towards standardizing curriculum, how is a teacher expected to meet the needs of the official curriculum while at the same time honoring and building upon students’ knowledge? And finally, in an era of increasing pressures for accountability, inviting and allocating a specific time for displays of student knowledge through literature discussions provide students the necessary time to thoughtfully participate in curriculum. Nevertheless, the question remains, how does a teacher connect student achievement to the literature discussions and how are these displays of student knowledge supporting their academic, social, and emotional growth?

The life experiences the girls shared through their stories have caused me to reflect on the lives these children are living; they worry about their family gaining entrance into the United States and they worry about being sent back to Mexico. They are living a dual-life; a life in the United States, a country that doesn’t necessarily welcome them and another in Mexico, a country which sometimes does not recognize them because they are now considered as being from “el otro lado/ the other side.”

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(Endnotes)

In order to honor the children's language, it is written here as they spoke it.

Although 'Hispanic' is the term used by the organization from which the data was cited, in this paper, I will use the term Latino "to include all persons of Latin American origin or descent, irrespective of language, race, or culture" (Hayes-Bautista & Chapa, 1987). Also included under the term Latino are

members of the "New Latino Diaspora" (Worthman, Murillo, Jr. & Hamann, 2002) who were born or trace their origins to Central America and México.

Children from families with incomes at or below 130 percent of the poverty level are eligible for free meals. Those with incomes between 130 percent and 185 percent of the poverty level are eligible for reduced-price meals, for which students can be charged no more than 40 cents. (For the period July 1, 2010, through June 30, 2011, 130 percent of the poverty level is \$28,665 for a family of four; 185 percent is \$40,793.) <http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/lunch/AboutLunch/NSLPFactSheet.pdf>

Engagements are activities in which the children actively participate to peak and increase their interest in the topic of instruction. They also provide children the opportunity to investigate an area of interest within the unit of study.

All of the books relate to the unit of study, migrant farm workers and /or immigration. *Friends from the Other Side/Amigos del otro lado* tells the story of a young boy, Joaquin, and his mother who immigrate from México in search of a better life. *Tomás y la señora de la biblioteca/Tomás and the Library Lady* tells the story of Tomás and his family and their life as migrant workers. *La Mariposa* tells the story of Francisco and his migrant worker family and his first few days at school and his struggles with English and his sense of belonging. *Radio Man* is the story of Diego and his migrant worker family and tells of their travels across the United States.

The constant comparative method is a qualitative method used to develop grounded theory. The process involves identifying broad themes and patterns or categories that emerge from the data. These categories are constantly compared, integrated, and recreated throughout the data collection and analysis process. The constant refinement continues until a strong theoretical understanding of an event has emerged.