

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

"This is what is happening to my students": Using Book Talk to Mediate Teacher Discussion on Immigration and Social Justice

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8w93f1q7>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 11(1)

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/D4111024384

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When Maria Dolores talks about how she misses her mother and writes her letters it made me sense the pain she was feeling. It also kind of made me think in a few of my students that at the beginning of the school year were suffering because they were away from their parents. I could see their suffering in their faces and when I was reading this chapter it made me picture them.

(Ceci, Teacher of Recent Immigrants)

Ceci, a teacher on the U.S.-Mexico border, wrote the above journal entry reflecting on her reading of *Return to Sender*, a young adult novel by Julia Alvarez (2009). In the story, Mari, one of two main characters, is suffering the loss of her mother who disappeared when attempting to re-enter the United States with *coyotes*—human smugglers—after having to leave to visit her dying mother. Additionally, Mari fears that *la migra*—Border Patrol or Immigration agents—will detain her, her father, and her uncles, separating them from her younger, American-born sisters. Like Mari, Ceci's students deal with the stressful conditions of immigration. Ceci is witness to the issues immigrant children face, like family separation and acculturation stress. Teachers are often the first points of contact between local immigrant communities and U.S. society (Olson, 1997; Suárez-Orozco, Bang & Kim, 2011). Approximately, one in five children in the U.S. are children of immigrants (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), and this has important consequences for how schools address the education needs of immigrant groups. It is important that teachers have opportunities to make sense of what is happening to their students and their families so they may nurture their integration to U.S. society and support their academic achievement.

Schools and educators are indispensable in helping immigrant children navigate the often stressful process of immigration. Beyond emotional support, positive teacher-student relationships are crucial to student achievement and access to social capital (Hao & Pong, 2008). However, this can be difficult for teachers who have not experienced immigration first-hand or whose life experiences are very different from immigrant communities. Currently, the U.S. teaching corps lacks racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity (Sleeter, 2001). Amidst this reality, researchers have called for better preparation of our teachers to work with culturally diverse communities (Nieto, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). While there is much that teaching preparation programs can do, improvement must be systematic and part of the in-service teacher experience.

This article is about two Latina teachers reading a novel centered on the topic of immigration. The book club was part of a professional development experience facilitated by the researcher for using literature discussion strategies in the classroom. My goal here is to examine how the book club mediated teachers' talk about immigration as they made connections between the book and immigrant

students' experiences. I argue that professional development opportunities must offer a space where teachers can develop the awareness and competencies needed to support increasingly diverse schooling populations (Nieto, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Schooling agents and their training must be in tune with the sociopolitical realities of the communities they serve to ensure positive home-schooling relationships and academic success.

Conceptual Framework

I draw on three areas of literature to make sense of the teachers' conversation: (1) teacher caring as a venue for social capital, (2) teacher preparation for working with diverse communities, and (3) book talk. Together, these different perspectives re-define traditional understandings of teaching and teacher preparation. Addressing the complex needs of an increasingly diverse school population will require a multi-disciplinary approach to helping build teachers' cultural competences.

Teacher Caring and Positive Schooling Relationships

Teacher caring is an important competency for all teachers working in multicultural settings. Caring theory focuses on the caring *relationship*, in which the cared-for receive and respond to the relationship (Noddings, 1992). However, teachers and students may have different understandings of caring school relationships, which can subsequently strain their interactions (Valenzuela, 1999). In her seminal high school ethnography, Valenzuela found that many non-Latino teachers emphasized academic knowledge. Conversely, students' definition of caring centered around *educación*, a cultural understanding of education that adds moral, social, and personal responsibility and respect. These competing definitions strained student-teacher relationships and permeated the schooling environment with animosity, distrust, and low academic achievement. Likewise, Ladson-Billings (2009) found that successful teachers of African-American students shared the belief that their students were part of an extended family. The teachers cultivated relationships using out-of-school venues (e.g., church, the Girl Scouts) and by hosting social events at their homes. They knew their students as individuals situated within larger networks of family and community.

Teacher-student social relationships are an integral part of the social capital that immigrant students need to access resources, information and advice (Kao & Rutherford, 2007). Social capital is defined as "closed systems of social networks inherent in the structure of relations between persons and among persons within a social group to promote cooperative behavior and to serve specific needs of its members" (Zhou & Kim, 2006, p. 6). Positive relationships with school personnel are crucial to accessing social capital, and this is more likely to happen in contexts

where school personnel have a sense of collective responsibility for student learning (Hao & Pong, 2008). Social capital is crucial to the survival of immigrant communities, especially for academic achievement.

However, it is important to consider that not all immigrant students benefit from their positive schooling relationships. Immigrant students can often face hardship and trauma making them easy targets of pity. Deficit perspectives based on pity lower teacher expectations, which may foster outwardly positive teacher-student relationships that do not support immigrant students emotionally or academically (Ream, 2003; Valdés, 1996). It is important that teachers understand their roles as nurturing and understanding, but not patronizing. This important distinction is not always easy to make without critical interrogation of how teachers view immigrant families; opportunities for interrogation must be part of teacher preparation and continued development.

Teacher Preparation, Critical and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Teaching does not occur in a vacuum, but within sociopolitical spaces and environments (Nieto, 2006). It is important that teachers possess or develop what Banks (1996) coined as *sociocultural consciousness*—“an understanding that people’s ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors as race/ethnicity, social class, and language” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 22). The research, however, indicates that teachers are rarely challenged to develop sociocultural awareness (Nieto, 2006; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Villegas and Lucas (2002) argue that, generally speaking, teacher education programs have a limited capacity to prepare pre-service teachers for diverse contexts. While there may be a few courses focused on multicultural education, there is often disconnect with their relevance to other content courses. Furthermore, Nieto (2006) argues that the definition of a “highly qualified teacher” as defined by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* fails to acknowledge sociopolitical contexts and the competencies these demand.

It is important that professional development content and practice be culturally and politically relevant to the community’s experiences. Ladson-Billings (2009) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as a “subversive pedagogy” that is about “questioning (and preparing students to question) the inequality, the racism, and the injustice that exist in society” (p. 140). Cultural relevance includes a close examination of existing power hierarchies. By offering professional development opportunities where teachers are called to question power, we ask them to recognize institutionalized power structures and fight for social justice. Social justice is “about *power*—who has it, who controls it, and how it impacts everyone—and *democratic* principles of inclusiveness and fairness” (Nieto, 2006, p. 5).

From a critical perspective, teaching is a “political act” that requires educators to fight for freedom and justice through curriculums that challenge

students to “read the word and the world” (Freire, 2007). Unfortunately, teachers are often stripped of their professional freedom and creativity through teacher-proof curricula and top-down professional development. Professional development that addresses community needs and realities offers a space for teachers to collaborate with colleagues and discuss the important issues of their profession.

Book Talk and Teacher Book Clubs

It is imperative that teachers have the opportunity to dialogue about what happens in their classrooms and communities. Similar to Lewis and Ketter (2004), I use Bakhtin’s (1981) idea of dialogue where speakers respond to those in physically shared space, and to speakers across context and time. Therefore, book talk or discussion about a text, invites the reader to make connections with other texts, the world, and self in order to discuss larger themes and ideas (Roser, Strecker, & Martinez, 2005). Texts with high relevance to a reader’s context can mediate critical thinking.

Our discussions regarding *Return to Sender* were part of a book club in which two or more readers conversed around a common literature text by sharing personal response and interpretation (Roser et al., 2005). Literature can be provocative and offer opportunities to examine thoughts, beliefs and actions (Langer, 1995). Kooy (2006) used teacher book clubs to examine the ways teachers understood and made sense of their lives and constructed teacher knowledge regarding texts with elements of schooling and teaching. Similarly, Flood et al. (1994) used teacher book clubs to focus on the theme of multiculturalism in American society using contemporary fiction. Participants in that study expressed a growing understanding of other cultures, connections with their experiences and their students’ lives. Rogers and Mosely (2008) incorporated a book club format to examine pre-service teachers’ racial literacy, or their understanding of race as a construct used to reproduce and maintain power structures. Participants engaged in dialogue about race by questioning, challenging, and offering their perspectives. Teacher book clubs, as spaces for meaning making and critical reflection, offer a more productive professional development experience than traditional expert-led trainings because it is rooted in teachers’ own connections and experiences.

Research Design and Methods

This study focused on two Latina in-service teachers, Ceci and Andrea (pseudonyms), participating in discussions of *Return to Sender* by Julia Alvarez in the summer of 2010. The book club came about in reaction to the national political climate and as a professional development request from Ceci and Andrea; they had approached me about ways to use literature discussion strategies in their classrooms.

In the summer of 2010, immigration was at the forefront of national discourse. Arizona had passed SB 1070—a state law that required law enforcement to detain people they “reasonably” suspected of being undocumented and required immigrants to carry their documentation at all times (Archibold, 2010). The legislation introduced a national discourse on immigration with a particular focus on border security, and even a move by Congress members to deny citizenship to the U.S. born children of undocumented immigrants (Jordan, Guerrero, & Meckler, 2010).

I had used *Return to Sender* with bilingual student teachers in a reading methods course where I was the teaching assistant. Having been a teacher of recent immigrants, I recognized the book’s themes and events as similar to the struggles my former students shared. I presented the book to Ceci and Andrea, former colleagues of mine who worked with immigrant student populations. They agreed the book was a relevant piece for many of their students and were interested in reading the book, learning more about literature discussion strategies, and finding a way to make it part of their classrooms.

Participants

Ceci and Andrea taught and graduated from the same school district on the U.S.-Mexico border. Both were U.S. born citizens with ties to Mexico. Ceci was raised between the U.S. and Mexico. In adolescence, she made a permanent move to the U.S. with her family; therefore, identifying with her immigrant students’ experiences as newcomers. Ceci, a traditionally certified teacher¹, taught for eight years at various grade levels, and had recently completed a Masters degree in School Administration at the local university. She taught a mixed age, 3rd-5th grade bilingual classroom for recent immigrants, created for students who have been in the U.S. for 0-2 years. Andrea’s family had moved to Mexico and returned to the U.S. during her infancy. Having been raised in the community, she identified as a member. An alternatively certified teacher², Andrea had six years of teaching experience and taught a 5th grade English-only classroom. Her students were immigrant children and/or children of immigrants, some of whom had been transitioned out of bilingual and recent immigrant classrooms.

¹ Traditional teacher certification is obtained through a university or college-based program, and includes coursework on teaching and learning and supervised student teaching experiences prior to having a teaching assignment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

² Alternative teacher certification, administered by private, state or district education agencies, is outside the traditional university or college-based program. After some initial coursework on teaching and learning, alternative programs place teacher candidates in a classroom as they simultaneously continue with teacher certification coursework (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Ceci and Andrea were my former colleagues; we had collaborated in our teaching. I grew up primarily on the U.S. side of the border, but frequently crossed the border into Mexico to visit family. As a doctoral student and teacher educator, I was interested in examining how teachers from the U.S.-Mexico border made sense of a novel exploring sociopolitical themes related to immigration. For border communities, the concept of *border* is not as clearly defined as the national debate around immigration suggests because U.S. and Mexican communities are interdependent on each other for business, work, and family.

Data Collection

Data included two audio-recorded sessions of book discussion. Each participant was asked to read the novel at home and keep a reader's journal, a record documenting the reader's reactions and reflections. Only Ceci kept a consistent journal. Additionally, each participant was interviewed separately before and after the literature discussions. Interviews focused on using multicultural literature in the classroom, addressing political issues with students, the experience of reading the novel, participating in the book club, and follow up of participants' commentary. Field notes were kept for all events.

The teachers and I met twice at a local coffee shop and at a public library to discuss the first and second half of the book. Each meeting lasted approximately 2.5 hours and consisted of discussion, engaging in literacy discussion strategies like graffiti board where readers draw and/or sketch images, symbols on a shared poster that capture important themes of a text (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996). Additionally, our second discussion included brainstorming literature discussion activities for a classroom literacy unit, a goal for the book club. Sessions began with discussion of initial thoughts and reactions. During this time, the teachers shared favorite passages, quotes, and made direct connections between the book, the world, other texts, and themselves.

My role was facilitating the discussion and was driven by wanting to understand how the teachers' connections between the book and their classroom experiences influenced what they viewed as most important to discuss. As suggested by Roser et al. (2005), I guided sessions with open invitations to share interpretations or important ideas. I shared quotes and ideas that stood out to me and offered my experiences. I listened as Ceci and Andrea discussed their ideas, and propelled the conversation when it stagnated or an important idea emerged.

Analysis

Drawing from frameworks like teacher caring and culturally relevant and critical pedagogy, I was focused on codes related to teaching as fostering ideas of respect and social responsibility (Valenzuela, 1999) and as political work (Ladson-

Billings, 2009; Freire, 2007). I manually coded field notes, transcripts, and artifacts (i.e. graffiti board, journal entries, brainstormed activities), using inductive analysis to create two main categories: connections and critical insight (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Themes then emerged where teachers connected to people and contexts, and critically examined issues of social justice that required teacher promotion of acceptance. Examples include speaking to student experiences, difficult realities present in the larger community, and how immigrants are positioned in schools and general society. Triangulation of the various data sources across themes and peer examination, where a colleague and I discussed the themes, were used to support the findings (Merriam, 1998).

Findings

Multicultural literature has the potential to offer authentic representations of communities of color, which can challenge stereotypes and address sociopolitical themes (Bishop, 2003; Medina & Enciso, 2002). Bringing relevant novels into the classroom opens up spaces for students to share their experiences. By participating in professional development opportunities where students and teachers' experiences are discussed candidly, teachers develop the competency to create these learning spaces.

As Ceci and Andrea reflected on the novel, they discussed the sociopolitical realities in which their classrooms were situated. The findings have been divided into the two main categories related to connections and critical insight, including their corresponding themes. In the following section, I focus on the first book discussion where Ceci and Andrea are essentially stepping in and moving through the novel to understand the plot, characters, and make connections to themselves and the world (Langer, 1995). The teachers made connections to their students, the community, and the political context. The next section centers on Ceci and Andrea stepping out of the story and critically examining the world (Langer, 1995). Ceci and Andrea began to examine how immigrants are treated, how society talks about immigrants, and the teachers' role in promoting acceptance. Ceci and Andrea engaged in a conversation rarely used in teachers' professional development training: they focused on linking the sociopolitical experiences of their communities and the classroom.

Connecting the Novel and World

Ceci and Andrea were aware of the connections their students made with certain novels, particularly those that were relevant to their lives. Our book club sought to engage the teachers in a similar way. Their connections were especially focused on student experiences, issues in the community, and the political landscape. Their discussion opened up a greater sense of empathy for their

immigrant students' experiences, which is necessary for instilling a sense of teacher caring and cultural competency.

Connecting to students. A central theme of *Return to Sender* is the fear and longing children experience when separated from their families. Approximately 80 percent of immigrant children experience family separation and reunification as part of their immigration process (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Ceci connected Mari's longing to see her mother with some of her students, who were sent to live with relatives in the United States while their parents remained in Mexico:

This is what I was telling you about my students...they'll have that connection because she's writing to the mother. The mother left; she's in Mexico now. They are trying to come back and I'm thinking, "This is what is happening to my students." Because some of my students, their parents were in Mexico and they were here with the aunts or uncles. So I was like, the feelings that Mari has towards the mom [...] she wants the mother here so much, but then again she has to act like she's strong. The way she feels here, like how she misses her mom and everything, is how the students feel cause they cannot work the same way, like they are lacking something there. (Ceci, Literature Discussion, 2010)

Ceci's connections demonstrated a deep understanding of her students as emotional beings and the impact these experiences had on their work. Ceci's words are not just about the story; they transcend into her classroom's reality.

These same ideas emerged again with our graffiti board literature response activity. Participants, including the researcher, took a corner of a white poster board to share their insights. Ceci sketched Mari's small trailer home with her family (Figure 1), and a picture of Mari thinking of her mother (Figure 2). This was reflective of the connections she had made as a teacher between the novel and her students.

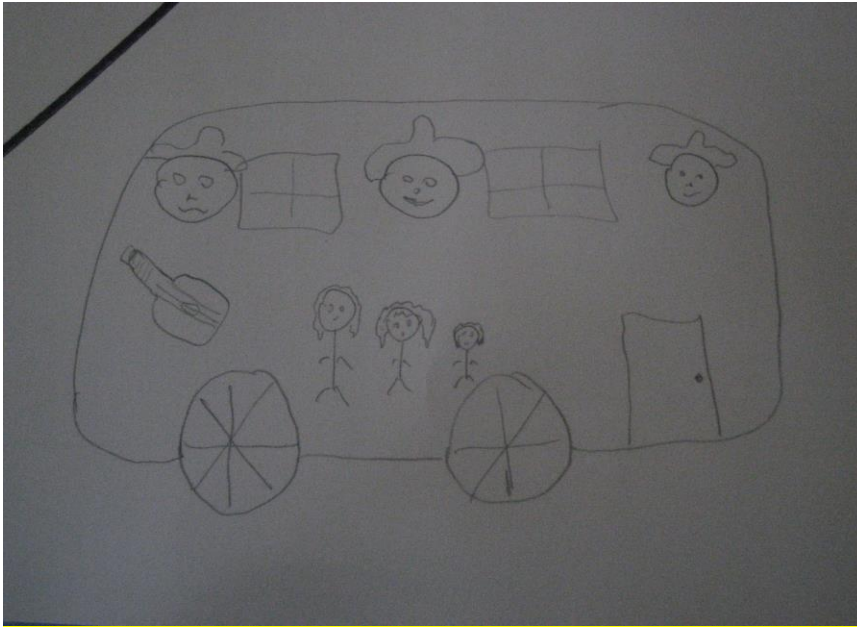


Figure 1. Ceci's Graffiti Board Sketch. Adapted from Short et al., 1996, *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*.



Figure 2. Ceci's Graffiti Board Sketch. Adapted from Short et al., 1996, *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers*.

Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) argue that immigration is a process of fragmentation and reunification impacting the psychosocial well being of immigrant children. Having teachers who can recognize and empathize with those emotions is crucial in providing immigrant students with a strong support network. Under these circumstances, teaching is no longer just about academic content, but about teachers feeling part of their students' lives beyond the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999). Ceci, in particular, recognized the book's plot as reflective of her students' lives. The book club was an opportunity to discuss the issue openly and bring her added perspective to the discussion (Rogers & Mosely, 2008). This proves especially important for discussing the dark realities that some immigrants, including children, face in their journeys to the United States.

Connecting to community. At times border-crossing experiences can be traumatic; immigrants' lives are at the mercy of individuals taking advantage of their desperation and lack of power. Julia Alvarez, the author of *Return to Sender*, addressed the dark realities of immigration through the disappearance of Mari's mother. Mrs. Cruz's fate as a slave to her coyotes is a painfully realistic consequence of the illegalization of immigration and its resulting human trafficking. I worried that Ceci and Andrea would have reservations about that storyline, but the two were unfazed and accepted the plot as a reality of immigration, life on the U.S.-Mexico border, and their students' experiences.

Ceci: I don't think it will be a problem because it's reality. And I'm sure that kids know the dangers of crossing so I don't think they will see it...they won't see anything different or anything bad about it. They already know...

Andrea: They're aware.

Ceci: ...and I'm sure some of them have lived it.

Andrea: Being that we...(inaudible) to the border...

Ceci: Somewhere in their family...one trying to cross. Probably one of them have lived it already. So it's just reality. And I don't think it would affect them at all. What do you think?

Andrea: Well, what I think is that given the proximity to the border, I'm pretty sure they have some sort of relative or at least a...know how somebody has gone through a situation similar to that...

(Literature Discussion, 2010)

Ceci and Andrea acknowledged their community's realities and appeared willing to address them. This likely stems from their own experiences growing up

on both sides of the border. They were well aware of the issues impacting the region. Additionally, their students' shared anecdotes brought these issues into the classroom.

The opportunity for teachers to discuss these topics in a collaborative setting mediated through literature helps develop teachers' competency for discussing difficult topics honestly with their students (Lazar & Offenber, 2011). However, this requires systematic opportunities for professional development and training. These are not easy conversations for teachers to support in the classroom if they have not had the opportunity to explore these issues themselves. Ceci and Andrea did not appear to shy away from difficult topics; they had used books with similar topics before, had experience working with immigrant families, and were aware of issues afflicting their community. The data suggests that these issues may have been mostly explored through the verbalized connections made by students rather than the teachers' deliberate attempt to critically examine them. Ceci and Andrea's brainstormed activities did not reference Mari's mother's plot line, which could be easily glossed over since the text relies on the reader's inference. Both mentioned activities focused on comprehension, vocabulary, and attention to plot and character feeling as their general approach to children's literature in the classroom. While it seemed unlikely that Mrs. Cruz's tragedy would have been explored with much depth, a willingness to acknowledge these events was an important start.

The novel's larger topic of immigration seemed most important to the teachers. Freire (2005) argued for teaching where students could engage what they learned in school to their communities and experiences. Teachers must be adept at helping students to bridge the story world with the world they live.

Connecting to the political context. As we discussed the novel, the political backdrop of 2010 could not be ignored. The teachers began brainstorming activities that would situate the story within current events, and decided to begin the novel by placing it against the context of Arizona's SB 1070 through YouTube videos and other media.

Well, especially the SB 1070...the video. That's what's going on right now the immigration law that's coming about in Arizona. And I believe that they said that the government from here, from [home state], is thinking in the same. So it's something that will surely come up right away. (Ceci, Interview, 2010)

Ceci believed this issue would come up immediately among her students. She recognized her students' backgrounds and made a conscious effort to provide a forum to express their fears. By bringing the events of the outside world into the classroom, teachers validate and acknowledge what occurs outside the school building (Freire, 2007). Furthermore, as Ceci and Andrea discussed how best to

bridge the novel with the political context, they were forced to discuss the politics around immigration.

Ceci referenced the fear of a similar law like Arizona's SB 1070 coming to her state. We often expect teachers and schools to be politically neutral, but teaching is political (Freire, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009). As the teachers began to step out of the novel, they contemplated the politics of immigration critically (Langer, 1995). Additionally, in discussing the political context, they discussed positive relationships between immigrant and non-immigrant students as imperative to constructive schooling experiences.

Critically Examining the World and Fostering Acceptance

In our second literature discussion, the teachers established that the book's moral lesson was to foster acceptance for people who are different.

Maybe that here in the book they're trying to give us a lesson *también, que* (also that) no matter where you're coming from you still have to be respected and have the right. (Ceci, Literature Discussion, 2010)

But I like what they taught the reader, I mean those biases, and [it] teaches young readers that its not right to be biased, its not right to discriminate, its not right to judge a book by its cover. I like the lessons, I guess, that young readers can get from the book. (Andrea, Literature Discussion, 2010)

This idea was salient during the second literature discussion. The teachers examined the book as a critical commentary on the immigrant experience. During her initial interview, Andrea expressed the idea that literature can "enhance children's experiences." In this book club, enhancing students' experiences meant pushing for social justice by fostering acceptance and using the book's plot to question how immigrant students are alienated in schools, bullied, and the teacher's professional role in taking a stand.

Examining how we treat others. The first issue the teachers explored regarding acceptance was to critique how immigrant students were alienated in school. In the story, Mari is ridiculed for being an immigrant, which negatively impacts her sense of belonging. Ceci, a teacher working directly with recent immigrants, expressed her frustration with how the sociopolitical environment positioned her students as "outsiders" in school.

...they're going to be the strangers here in the U.S. They're the ones that don't belong. They're also the ones that are going to be the left out all the time. Even though the principal says that students [are] always the same. They don't treat them

the same. [The classroom for recent immigrants] is always, the immigrant students, are always left out here and there. (Ceci, Literature Discussion, 2010)

Ceci's claim that immigrant students are often left out from school activities prompted discussion about our experiences with immigrant students in schools.

Ceci: I don't know about over there [Andrea's campus]. Are they left out?

Andrea: Well, I don't believe so because they're not in the same setting maybe as [your] campus because they are recent immigrants, but they're within the regular classroom...the bilingual classroom. So they're not really seen as different...

Ceci: Mmm....

Andrea: And apart.

Ceci: Ah yeah cause you have Spanish classes.

Andrea: Yes, and they're...

Ceci: ...bilingual classes.

Andrea: Bilingual classes. They're included. The [classroom for recent immigrants] teacher does pull them out and provide some sort of recent immigrant interventions, but they're not necessarily in a classroom by themselves.

Ceci: Mine, the building is over here and we're out in the portables. And...

Andrea: No. And...on our campus its so because (...) we don't have enough rooms or regular classrooms for them to be inside, but they're not necessarily out.

Ceci: And we're out there...

(Literature Discussion, 2010)

Ceci's school placed recent immigrant students into one classroom, while Andrea's depended on a "pull out" program that allowed immigrant students to be with other students in their grade level. Andrea acknowledged Ceci's observation regarding the isolation of immigrant students, but this did not concur with her campus dynamics.

However, integration at Andrea's campus appeared focused on logistical practicality. Physical integration of immigrant students into mainstream classrooms is important. Many immigrant students experience a "separate school" away from their non-immigrant peers, severing their opportunity to have English role models

for language development, and develop important social capital via interpersonal relationships with non-immigrant peers (Kao & Rutherford, 2007; Olsen, 1997). However, without also explicitly addressing issues of acceptance and respect among different groups, true integration is obscured.

The separation of immigrant youth from their peers in mainstream classrooms can create feelings of alienation for immigrant students and position them as “foreign” to non-immigrant students. Ceci, as the newcomer teacher, experienced her students’ isolation within the larger school. The book club allowed for her to share her observations with another colleague who is less directly responsible for working with recently immigrated youth. In a book club, the participants’ range of perspectives is a resource that allows them to participate in the co-construction of meaning as they challenge and question one another (Rogers & Mosely, 2008). By sharing, we raise awareness on issues that might otherwise go unnoticed by those who do not have our same perspective. This can reinforce a collective sense of responsibility among school faculty for the education of all students, a necessary component for creating a positive learning community (Hao & Pong, 2008). Including immigrant students in the larger school community changes how they are positioned socially and politically.

Examining social discourse. Ceci and Andrea critically contemplated how discourse positions immigrants in society. The concept of acceptance emerged again with the term *alien*—a phrase often used in the national discourse to describe immigrants (e.g., *resident alien* or *illegal alien*). In the story, Mari takes offense to the word. Tyler, the book’s other main character, decides upon the word *Martians* to explain the undocumented workers on his family’s farm. Andrea felt that this was the author’s way of making the word *alien* absurd.

...I thought it was so funny how the author chose to...through this little boy, through Tyler, label them as aliens. And how the little boy, ‘Oh yeah they’re coming from outer space and the author, through Tyler, I think, portrayed the word “alien” as something that does not belong to illegals. How it made it so...before they even mention Mari being illegal...how it made it so evident to the reader that *alien* is something out of this world. Something that doesn’t belong here before Mari shows her own sentiment about the word. (Andrea, Literature Discussion, 2010)

As Andrea stepped outside and objectified the text, she examined the author’s word choice as purposeful and critical of a larger discourse on immigrants and immigration (Langer, 1995). Interestingly, Andrea used the term *illegals*, a direct translation of *ilegales*, a common term on the U.S.-Mexico border and a contested word by the pro-immigration community.

Discourse constructs social perceptions of marginalized groups through normalization and reproduction of powerful social and political ideologies (Bourdieu, 1993; Fairclough, 2009). It is easy for negative perceptions to go unchallenged unless there is an explicit effort made to complicate them. Reading the novel and engaging in discussion posited the idea of questioning the terms we use to describe undocumented immigrants. While Andrea used *illegal* as an unexamined label, she recognized the author's intentions in contesting the term *alien*, and later had some critical examination of the term *illegal* in her opposition of how Clayton and Ronnie, the class bullies in the novel, used it to intimidate Mari. The book presented a starting point for a critical consideration of how we talk about immigrant groups.

Teacher book talk can raise critical awareness by complicating negative social discourses (Flood et al., 1994; Kooy, 2006; Rogers & Mosely, 2008). However, these conversations need to be continuous to dismantle pervasive social discourse. The conversation about the term *alien* was a jumping off point for the teachers to discuss other important issues, like bullying and a teacher's role in advocating tolerance and acceptance.

Examining a teacher's role. As Ceci and Andrea continued examining the use of the term *alien* as hateful, they contemplated important ideas regarding how children learn hate and teachers' responsibility in countering those perceptions.

In the story, Clayton and his friend Ronnie taunt Mari with the term *illegal alien* and Tyler for befriending her. The participants discussed how Clayton is much too young to have formed his own opinions regarding immigrant communities. Rather, they believe that Clayton is reflecting ideas and comments that he hears elsewhere.

Andrea: He probably has no idea what *illegal* means at this point either. He knows nothing about policy. Later on, more than likely when he grows up and he becomes an adult and he studies, you know, somewhere else, he might change his point of view. But it's so unfortunate that he was taught hate at such an early age that it might change his perspective.

Ceci: And now he's making Tyler doubt his feelings. At the beginning, he had nothing against [Mari's family]. And now he's being bullied, he's kind of changing his perspective. (Literature Discussion, 2010)

The storyline mediated the discussion by having Ceci and Andrea ponder the prejudices that students bring to the classroom. They concluded that children learn how to react to difference from their families or local communities, but teachers also play an important role. This was an important element of the book

club experience, teachers had the opportunity to step into the story, relate to its characters, and then step back out to understand its real life implications (Langer, 1995). Here, professional development was not about learning to implement a program or a teaching strategy. This was an opportunity for the teachers to understand the underlying themes of the book and discuss what it meant for them. Additionally, our book club gave the teachers time to explore critical and culturally relevant perspectives of teaching.

Critical and culturally relevant pedagogical frameworks call for teachers to take a stance in the face of social injustice. Alvarez (2009) explored the issue of teacher advocacy in the novel through the character of Mr. B, Mari and Tyler's 5th grade teacher, who used his lessons to show students how they are all connected. Mr. B plays an important role at a Town Hall meeting where Mr. Rossetti, an elderly gentleman with strong opinions against immigration, raises concern over the growing number of undocumented workers in the community.

Mr. B responds to Mr. Rossetti's comments with a speech that reminds the town of the United States' immigrant past. Ceci and Andrea were excited about the event and decided to include a re-enactment of the scene as a possible activity for the book. In the book, the teacher played a crucial role in challenging anti-immigrant views. Ceci and Andrea agreed that Mr. B took a necessary stand and expressed their belief that a teacher's role includes teaching students (and their families when necessary) about acceptance.

I think he did a good thing. Cause he made Mr. Rossetti realize, (...) my family [were] immigrant[s] here. What would happen if my family wasn't allowed here? He made him realize like, okay (...) your family were also immigrants. What would have happened then if your family was taken out? Because you were the immigrants. You were the ones that didn't belong here. (Ceci, Interview, 2010)

I think as a teacher you try hard to try to make a connection between yourself and the community and I think its part of our role. Whereas if you see, not only as educators, your role is to educate the children, but if you see any fault in the parents, I think it's also our role to try to educate them. Why? Because we're also a part of the community, regardless, so we would want to change the way we live. (Andrea, Interview, 2010)

Both Ceci and Andrea discussed challenging intolerance and extending the teacher's responsibilities beyond the classroom. Andrea, in particular, saw herself as part of the community with an obligation towards *educación*, or supporting students' social and moral development (Valenzuela, 1999). Ladson-Billings (2009) argues that culturally relevant teachers are part of the community and strive for its well-being. Teaching is not about the individual, but part of a larger effort that concerns and impacts the entire community.

The novel's plot provided a meaningful point of conversation. Langer (1995) posits that as readers move through a story they connect with the text, including its characters. For Ceci and Andrea, Mr. B's actions represented their ideas about what a teacher's role should be in the face of prejudice. As they reflected and discussed the character's actions, they went beyond the story and looked inward to examine their profession's responsibilities towards social justice (Roser et al., 2005). It is this ability to connect to a text and use it to examine real world situations that makes book talk a powerful tool for continued teacher education.

Discussion

The book club offered an opportunity for Ceci and Andrea to discuss and reflect on the immigrant experience. As they moved through the story, Ceci and Andrea made direct connections to their students, community, and larger political context (Langer, 1995). Their connections were important for teachers' development of empathetic awareness for social justice issues. These ideas are crucial to immigrant students' support network as they find their place in American public schools and society (Hao & Pong, 2008). By making connections to students' experiences, teachers can create opportunities where students express their language, culture, and experiences (Freire, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Additionally, a culturally relevant curriculum requires candid conversations about the implications and realities of diverse societies so that teacher and students can question and challenge systems of inequity and injustice (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Before teachers can engage students in these conversations, they must have these conversations themselves.

In the second half of the book club discussions, Ceci and Andrea stepped outside the novel by rethinking and objectifying the themes of the novel against the backdrop of their world (Langer, 1995). Ceci pointed out immigrant students' alienation in school, and Andrea contemplated the author's complication of social discourse regarding immigrants. Both teachers recognized the character of Mr. B as exemplifying teachers' responsibility in fostering acceptance. The teachers discussed an expanded concept of teaching that includes *educación*, in which teaching has social and moral obligations for developing individuals and building communities (Valenzuela, 1999). The book club was a chance for the teachers to engage in important conversations about their students' experiences and their profession.

Strong disagreement was not salient in this particular book club. Ceci and Andrea mostly agreed with each other's ideas or tried to understand each other's perspective when divergent opinions emerged. This may not be the case in all book clubs. Agreement among participants is not required for productive book talk;

respect for divergent perspectives, however, is crucial. It is necessary that book clubs occur in spaces with a history of positive collaboration. Our book talk experience was supported by small-group intimate conversation and our positive professional history. Additionally, the role of the facilitator is to guide rather than control discussion, and position participants as important contributors to the dialogue (Roser et al., 2005). These are key to developing community and collaboration.

Conclusion

Teacher book clubs are valuable professional development opportunities for building teachers' competency working with diverse communities. Changing demographics make it necessary for teachers to possess cultural competency as part of their preparation (Nieto, 2006). Teachers must engage in critical inquiry where they examine the politics, ideologies, and discourses that negatively position communities of color. Olsen (1997) contends that "the renegotiation of power in race, culture, and language relations unfolds in the concrete daily workings of a school—in how people, in the process of going about work and school, live and respond to diversity" (p. 15). Therefore, a teacher like Ceci, who works with recent immigrants, collaborating with a teacher like Andrea, who works with a mix of immigrant and non-immigrant students can engage in a dialogue about their specific populations and their relationship to one another. As Rogers and Mosely (2008) contend, the participants' individual perspectives are part of the meaning making process that allows for exploration of critical issues. Professional development anchored in critical dialogue of others' experiences makes everyone responsible for fostering positive learning environments for all.

Book talk can open genuine discussion about teaching in minority communities so that teachers might be better prepared to empathize and advocate for their students. These spaces of dialogue may re-define "teaching" as beyond academic teaching and inclusive of building community, developing social responsibility, and interrogating power (Valenzuela, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Freire, 2007). This is crucial to offering quality learning, emotional support, and the development of social capital for all students to receive equitable learning opportunities and achieve academic success.

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