"But What Happened to Your Dog?":

Inquiry Into Immigration in a First-Grade Texas Classroom

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Abstract: Increasing numbers of children in Texas communities and across the U.S. are immigrants. One way to support students in exploring the history and contemporary topic of immigration through literacy is with inquiry, a teaching method that centers around students' questions, incorporates informational and narrative texts, and creates opportunities for discussion, writing, and advocacy. In this classroom innovations article, a teacher's enactment of inquiry-based units on immigration in her first-grade classrooms is described. This article outlines planning strategies for inquiry and highlights ways to address curricular goals and objectives while still centering on students' perspectives. Tips are provided for connecting inquiry units to social and emotional learning goals as well as state standards and learning targets. This article shows how, through innovative teaching, even the youngest students can be engaged in meaningful literacy learning and the discussion of important social issues, such as immigration.

Keywords: inquiry, social emotional learning, content area reading, informational texts, emergent literacy

> *And when we made it to the other side, thirsty, in awe, unable to go back, we became immigrants. Migrantes, you and I* (Morales, 2018, p. 5-6).

Immigration is a reality. According to the American Immigration Council (AIC, 2020), one in six Texas residents is a *migrante,* including many Latinx Spanish speakers. In Texas, and across the U.S., people who were born elsewhere are integral to our communities.

Although immigration is part of many students' lives, it often goes unmentioned in classrooms, which can suggest to students that their experiences are unusual or unworthy of acknowledgement (Bishop, 1990). In this article, we describe an inquiry unit on immigration taught in a first-grade classroom to show how one Texas educator honored the experiences of immigrants in her inquiry-based literacy teaching.

Inquiry

Instructionally, inquiry involves student-driven units of study focused on contentious topics (e.g., climate change) or questions (e.g., Why doesn't everyone have a home?) (Maloch & Zapata, 2011). Addressing these issues creates opportunities to dig into students' interests while integrating multiple content areas. Some scholars have argued that inquiry is not just a teaching approach, but "a philosophical frame from which we view the whole of education" (Harste, 1994, p. 519). In this sense, teachers take an inquiry stance by emphasizing problem-posing, valuing curiosity, and inviting exploration.

No single activity defines inquiry-based teaching. What matters in inquiry is that students' wonderings are central, and that instructional decisions are adapted to individuals. Here, an inquiry stance fit the topic of immigration because it provided space for first-grade students to share different views, and let their views shift over time, while they read both fiction and informational texts.

Informational Texts

Engaging poems, songs, and stories can certainly spark students' interest about a topic, but inquiry is the perfect place to include informational texts (Duke, 2016), which are often missing from early literacy experiences (Dreher & Kletzein, 2016). The inclusion of nonfiction is especially important when addressing topics with potential to spark controversy, such as immigration, because it helps students learn to ground their beliefs in information rather than rhetoric (Gibson, 2018). Informational books show that immigration is not just the subject of stories but a reality to explore through text, images, and dialogue.

Ways of Relating to Literature

The metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors (Bishop, 1990) shows how books can present worlds similar to and different from readers' lives as well as invite readers to mentally engage in new experiences. Sadly, readers from marginalized positions, such as immigrants, are less likely to see themselves mirrored in text than readers who identify with dominant cultural positions. When these readers see themselves over-represented, it creates the false sense that their experiences are the norm. Building on this metaphor, indigenous scholar Debbie Reese (2016) has added the idea of curtains, suggesting authors may intentionally keep parts of their culture unseen. Reese notes how marginalized communities have endured "hundreds of years of white people looking in our windows, not understanding what we were doing, and then writing about what they saw in a very authoritative way" (2016, n.p.).

These metaphors helped us realize that some students would have more complex experiences with immigration than others, and no two stories would be identical. Thus, we decided to use texts to expose students to new experiences and to honor the experiences they already had, with the understanding that empathy building was crucial. Consistent with frames of inquiry and notions of curtains, we valued different forms of student participation, including the right to keep one's story private.

The Unit: Inquiry Into Immigration

We first designed this unit in 2016 when Jodi was a preservice teacher. She felt it was necessary to have conversations about immigration in her classroom, and she wondered if in doing so, she could integrate social studies, art, and social and emotional learning (SEL) (CASEL, 2019), an initiative focused on learning about conflict, emotions, goals, and decision making, and involving standards related to empathy. As Jodi's field supervisor, Catherine encouraged Jodi to use inquiry and informational texts to meet her goals. Since then, Jodi has taught this unit annually over three years.

Weekly Outline

Since each lesson unfolds based on students' questions, an inquiry approach can make planning difficult. However, in order to be prepared to follow young students' wonderings, a unit outline, including a selection of texts and corresponding guiding questions, can provide a foundation (see Table 1).

Guiding questions. Each day, Jodi paired a broad guiding question with a text. Initial lessons included simple questions such as

Guiding Question	Texts
Immigration: What is it?	*Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (Tonatiuh, 2013) *First Generation: 36 Trailblazing Immigrants and Refugees Who Make America Great* (Wallace, Wallace, & Nowicka, 2018)
Why do people migrate?	*The Colour of Home* (Hoffman & Littlewood, 2003)
What does it mean to belong?	*Painted Words/Spoken Memories* (Aliki, 2019)
What does it mean to not belong?	*Four Feet, Two Sandals* (Williams & Mohammed, 2007) *Carmela Full of Wishes* (de la Pena, 2018)
Where do immigrants come from?	*All the Way to America: The Story of a Big Italian Family and a Little Shovel* (Yaccarino, 2011) *Refugees & Migrants* (Roberts, 2017)
What would it feel like to leave your home?	*Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* (Ruurs, 2016) *A Refugee's Journey from Syria* (Mason, 2017)
Is immigration safe?	*The Journey* (Sanna, 2016) *La Frontera / The Border: El viaje con papá/My Journey With Papa* (Mills, Alva, & Navarro, 2018)
What would it feel like to be separated from your family?	*Angel Child, Dragon Child* (Surat, 1989) *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (Danticat, 2015)
What does it feel like to be in a new country as an immigrant?	*A Different Pond* (Phi, 2017) *Me and My Fear* (Sanna, 2018)
How should we treat those new to our country?	*The Wall in the Middle of the Book* (Agee, 2018) *Dreamers* (Morales, 2018)

Table 1: Unit outline.

"Immigration: What is it?" Later lessons were more involved, focusing on questions like "What does it mean to belong?" Guiding questions began the conversation, but student conversation quickly gained momentum and informed the next day's guiding question.

Text selection. To center authentic perspectives, Jodi favored books written and illustrated by people who had personal experiences with immigration (Fox & Short, 2003). To determine this, she sought out author and illustrator biographies online to determine what had inspired their choice of topic.

Jodi also included informational texts with different text structures, such as narrative nonfiction, memoir, and poetry. To engage her first-grade students, she also sought texts with interesting visual elements. For example, the English and Arabic text *A Refugee's Journey from Syria* (Mason, 2017) is told through sculptures made from stones the illustrator collected from the Syrian seashore.

Daily Outline

Each lesson started with discussion of the guiding question followed by an interactive read aloud. Jodi intentionally used questions—both hers, and her students'—to drive discussion of the text. Then, Jodi encouraged her students to connect what they experienced with past SEL lessons. She related perspectives on immigration to the social contract (see Figure 1), an agreement constructed and signed by the class that included ideas like "caring for others" and "sharing." Finally, Jodi ended with a closing circle for reflection (see Table 2).

To the Standards (and Beyond)

As professional educators, we resist the idea that we need to justify our teaching decisions to anyone, especially since there is much more to meaningful teaching than covering curricular standards. However, teaching about immigration was nerve-racking. While a person's decision to move from one place to another is not inherently controversial, recently the politicization of immigration has increased. We realized that for the unit to exist in the official curriculum, we needed to align it with district-sanctioned objectives. Table 3 shows how this unit met first-grade standards in literacy, social studies, art, and SEL.

Figure 1: Social contract.

Culminating Activity

The inquiry culminated with a guest visit from an immigrant. This centered an insider's perspective and de-centered our worldviews, which was especially important since we were both white women

Practice	Description	Time
Guiding Question	A daily question is posed. Students discuss what they already think and make predictions about the day's reading.	5-10 minutes
Read Aloud	A text connected to the daily question and the topic of immigration is read aloud.	15-20 minutes
SEL Connection	Students discuss the text in relation to previous SEL lessons and discuss how the message aligns with their social contract.	5-10 minutes
Closing Circle	Students reflect and discuss next steps.	5-10 minutes

Table 2: Daily outline.

English Language Arts and Reading (TEKS)	Art (TEKS)	Social Studies (TEKS)	Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)
(9) Multiple Genres	(3) Historical and cultural relevance	(15) Culture	Social Awareness
The student recognizes and analyzes literary elements. The student is expected to: (A) discuss topics and determine theme using text evidence with adult assistance; (B) describe the main character(s) and the reason(s) for their actions.	The student develops global awareness and respect for the traditions and contributions of diverse cultures. The student is expected to: (A) identify simple ideas expressed in artworks through different media; (B) demonstrate an understanding that art is created globally by all people throughout time.	The student understands the importance of family and community beliefs, customs, language, and traditions. The student is expected to: (A) describe and explain the importance of various beliefs, customs, language, and traditions of families and communities.	The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

Table 3: Standards alignment.

born in the U.S. Furthermore, it provided an anticipation point for students' questions, which they would be able to ask.

The first year, Jodi invited a friend who was a refugee from Syria. Since then, she has invited other speakers, including a fifth-grade student from Iran, a teacher from Bulgaria, and a parent of a student in her class who immigrated from China. Inviting guests who were part of the school community helped students put an especially familiar face to immigration.

Reflections on the Unit

Across this teaching, we regularly reflected together using frameworks such as mirrors, windows, sliding glass doors, and curtains. We first noticed that the distinction between mirrors and windows is not always clear-cut; many students had nuanced personal connections to immigration. For example, some students were immigrants, but had moved at such a young age that they could not remember the experience. One student began, "I'm a Mexican American, and I kind of am Mexican, but kind of not." These reflections, which were common, spoke to the multitude of mirrors that were necessary. Our students began to realize—and we were reminded—that there is no single version of what it means to be a Texan or an American.

Students' questions also revealed empathy building. After reading *A Refugee's Journey from Syria* (Mason, 2017), in which a goat is left behind, students continued discussing pets. When one guest described giving away her dogs when she immigrated, there was an audible, collective sigh of relief among the students that both animals had found new homes. At first, we were concerned that students were focusing on something we saw as trivial. Had we not taken an inquiry stance, we probably would have directed the conversation elsewhere. However, through reflection on the metaphor of sliding glass doors, we realized that the feeling of love for a pet, and the loss of leaving behind that pet, was something students could empathize with even if they had never experienced immigration. Thus, we supported this line of inquiry.

Suggestions

After reflecting on this teaching, we offer a few ideas to others. We recognize that as a professional, you know your students. However, 14 percent of U.S. residents are immigrants (AIC, 2020) and the English learner population is growing faster than the non-English learner population (Quality Counts/Education Week, 2009). Through inquiry, you may find that your students have more experience with immigration than you realized. Thus, we encourage you to adapt these ideas as you engage in purposeful literacy learning in your community.

1. Build community.

Find allies and critical friends who will remind you what really matters for your students. Consider joining teachers' groups related to literacy (e.g., Texas Council for Teachers of English Language Arts, National Writing Project affiliates) and/or social justice (e.g., Educators in Solidarity). This connects you with possible guest speakers, pen pals, and other collaborators.

2. Use standards.

Align your teaching with state standards and/or standards from other national organizations. When students' wonderings seem tangential ("But What Happened to Your Dog?"), you will have more confidence to proceed if your teaching is aligned with official goals.

3. Engage with families.

Invite parents into the conversation as guest speakers. Getting to know our students' families is not simply a nice thing to do; we have found that we make braver decisions in our teaching, and unnecessarily censor ourselves less, when we know more about our students' parents and caretakers.

4. Create a text-rich space.

Especially if you're not an insider to a particular experience (in this case, not an immigrant), use texts and guest speakers to fill in gaps in your knowledge. No single teacher could possibly have experienced everything! Consider taking a stance of co-inquirer by reading inviting narrative and informational texts written and illustrated by those with relevant experiences.

5. Persevere.

Some days, conversations fizzle or books fail to capture students' interests. Persevere and remember that the impact of your teaching cannot always be immediately measured. It is unimportant whether your teaching matches anyone else's definition of inquiry as long as you center your students' curiosity and grow alongside them.

Looking Ahead

Currently, Jodi is experiencing many of the same uncertainties as other teachers due to COVID-19. However, she is not uncertain about her students; she decided to "loop" to second grade with them. We look forward to exploring what opportunities might exist for students with even greater reading and writing abilities to engage in individual inquiries and write to outside audiences as advocates for change. We hope you will explore these possibilities as you teach to honor the experiences of the *migrantes* among us.

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