

Writing Rights to Right Wrongs: A Critical Analysis of Young Children Composing Nationalist Narratives as Part of the Larger Body Politic

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Many researchers have considered recent and intergenerational immigrant children's perspectives on immigration policies. Fewer have investigated nonimmigrant children's views despite children's sociopolitical identities forming long before they can vote. Drawing from data generated in spring 2017, the author illustrates how young children at an urban, midwestern school argued against the Republican administration's (anti-)immigration policies. Framed as an ethnographic case study, the author focuses on how third graders enacted justice-oriented identities as they wrote to congressional representatives about contemporary immigration policies. By attuning to how children embedded multiple institutional and political contexts in their written rationale, the author explicates the tensions and possibilities for nonimmigrant children in writing policies and possibilities for tomorrow. Ultimately, the author argues adults must intentionally sustain children's civic participation in ways beyond the niceties that plague early years classrooms.

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MANY educational scholars offered strategies for managing race-related trauma resulting from the 2016 presidential election, whereas others detailed teachers' responses immediately following the election (Garcia & Dutro, 2018; Sondel et al., 2018). Fewer studies considered children's experiences. Those that did typically focused on older elementary children and middle schoolers for shorter periods of time (Caffrey & Journell, 2019; Payne & Journell, 2019; Yoder, 2020). Likely, this is because most adults rarely view young children as "young people" interested in activist work, arguing children are too naive for such endeavors (Yoon, 2020).

Political scientists (Haug, 2017; Sapiro, 2004; Stoker & Bass, 2011) and educational theorists (Glennie et al., 2009; R. Hess & Torney, 1967/2006) have noted uncertainty about how children's sociopolitical development unfolds persists. More studies interrogating how regime shifts and governmental changes inform children's long-term civic participation are needed. Likewise, critical consideration must be given to how children index (un)just discourses "represented in local and national media and the language arts curriculum" in their daily lives (Enciso, 2011, p. 22).

Studies investigating young people's engagement in *all* civic discourse are crucial. The turbulence of the current political era in the United States necessitates nuanced consideration about *how* young children employ rhetoric (Bos et al., 2021; Oxley et al., 2020). Scholars have documented that countless children desire to transform their world for the better, and many are skilled rhetoricians (Ghiso, 2015). Less research illustrates instances wherein children perpetuate

oppressive hyperbole, despite the general understanding that children bring "broader political-historical knowledge" to school (Pacheco, 2009, p. 18).

One does not have to look far to identify instances of children (and teachers) employing hateful rhetoric. Recent news stories depict students using racial slurs on social media, nooses found in classrooms, and persistent assaults on queer and transgender students in school. The day after the 2016 election, a prominent example of hate speech reverberated across national media. It occurred down the road from the focal school. Here, a chorus of seventh graders at a predominantly white middle school chanted, "Build that wall! Build that wall!" in the cafeteria during lunch (Dickson & Williams, 2016). In my reading of this example of (white) children engaged in political discourse, children's words and actions presented as racist, nationalist hate in the here and now, rather than as a desire for a more equitable future. Nevertheless, nationalist rhetoric can also appear in the words of children seeking justice.

Drawing from data generated in spring 2017, I illustrate how children at an urban, midwestern school argued against two Republican (anti-)immigration policies: the proposed border wall with Mexico and the #MuslimBan. I detail how children enacted justice-oriented identities as they wrote to their congressional representatives about these policies. I first situate this work in relation to civics education before detailing prior research about immigration and schooling. Next, I outline my theoretical approach, contextualize the site, and describe my methods. Then, I provide analytic



snapshots of children's rhetorical moves. In closing, I offer possibilities for future research.

Political Discourse in the Early Years

Many in education understand schooling's purpose to be preparing democratic participants (Gutmann, 1999; Labaree, 1997), but analysis of students' capacity for politics tends to focus on adolescents close to voting age (Payne, 2018). Little work has examined younger children's socialization as democratic participants, including how cultural discourse influences children's pathways of civic participation (Halvorsen, 2017; R. Hess & Torney, 1967/2006; Sapiro, 2004). Recent research has enhanced our understanding of civics in elementary grades (Hauver, 2019; Mitra & Serriere, 2015; Payne et al., 2020). Yet research examining how children develop long-lasting affiliations and habits of civic participation remains needed (Haug, 2017). Such explorations are critical in our tenuous political moment, since civic participation has long been considered a primary schooling tenet in the United States (Gutmann, 1999) and globally (Torney-Purta, 2002).

An Integrated Approach to Civics Education

Framed as a core element that prepares children for future democratic engagement, most adults understand civic participation as instrumental political acts (e.g., voting) and conventional knowledge (e.g., organization of local, state, and national governments; Halvorsen, 2017). Civics education is often considered the domain of social studies; many philosophical and pedagogical approaches exist for engaging students (e.g., Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Social studies scholars write extensively about students learning to identify social problems, deliberate issues, and act through inquiry, particularly in middle-grade and secondary classrooms (D. Hess, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1997).

I build on recent conversations about civic participation that expand beyond electoral induction, especially within educational research (Glennie et al., 2009; D. Hess, 2008). In an increasingly global, technology-laden, and politically polarized world (Banks, 2004; Jenkins et al., 2015), scholars across disciplines are expanding definitions of civic participation. Today, civic participation includes various activities through which individuals and communities participate, both in face-to-face settings and online spaces (Curnow et al., 2019; Kirshner & Middaugh, 2015), to critique power systems (Rubin, 2007; Sabzalian, 2019).

Fostering Young Children's Civic Sensibilities

Within elementary education, a growing number of scholars and practitioners alike are forwarding new conceptions of civics education for schools' youngest patrons (Falkner & Payne, 2021; Hauver, 2019; Payne et al., 2020). Such

scholars argue for a paradigmatic shift wherein children are seen for the valuable contributions they make "as citizens in their own right" (Mitra & Serriere, 2015, p. 5). Decades of scholarship illuminate how discourse and encounters within and beyond the walls of classrooms influence young children's civic understandings and actions (Hauver, 2019; R. Hess & Torney, 1967/2006; Vasquez, 2004; Yoon, 2020). As Swalwell and Payne (2019) state, even though children "are not adults with concomitant rights and responsibilities, children do have an array of human and civil rights that make them civic beings" (p. 128).

Importantly, learning to read, respond to, and produce texts of all types to transform everyday systems is not solely the dominion of social studies (Wheeler-Bell, 2014). Critical literacies scholars also consider these concerns (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Vasquez et al., 2019). I use critical literacies to account for how children's civic participation includes individual and group expressions of sociopolitical identities, which occur through communicative acts. Notably, a critical literacies approach is not a checklist of instructional tasks or strategies one employs while reading but a way of being in the world (Vasquez et al., 2019). Critical literacies involve a process of naming and renaming the world, seeing its complexities and designs, and developing the capacity to redesign the world (Luke, 2012). Critical literacies approaches ask children to consider "sociopolitical circumstances of their life and schooling" while simultaneously encouraging them to reimagine the world anew (Pacheco, 2009, p. 19).

Social studies and critical literacies both position children to understand social issues, empathize with others, and reimagine more just futures (Halvorsen, 2017; Vasquez et al., 2019). Still, although social studies and critical literacies are related fields, they are not always in conversation with one another (Brownell 2021; Wargo, 2021). In this article, I merge these perspectives and analyze how broader sociopolitical discourses influence children's civic participation. Specifically, I focus on Republican immigration policies implemented in the wake of the 2016 presidential election.

Immigration (Policies) Come to School

Scholarship on immigrant students and schooling is vast. Broadly, in educational research, scholars have described newcomers' experiences within schooling, including how immigration policies and individual sacrifices shape familial relationships (Bartlett et al., 2018; Oliveira, 2020). Many scholars have examined immigrant children's diverse roles amongst their families (Oliveira, 2019; Orellana, 2009; Orellana et al., 2001) and how families remain connected despite being separated by borders (Becker, 2021; Oliveira, 2018). So, too, have researchers detailed how school-based relationships informed immigrant children's academic achievement (Suárez-Orozco, Pimentel, et al., 2009; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, et al., 2009) and sense of belonging, especially amongst transnational adolescents (Bondy, 2015;

Abu El-Haj, 2007). These scholars have enriched understandings about the diversity of immigrants who traverse borders (forcibly or by choice) while forwarding new avenues for cultivating humanizing practices (Jaffe-Walter, 2016).

Nurturing Politicized Knowledge

Unsurprisingly, immigration policies are a recurring topic in researchers' stories of immigrant children. U.S. immigration policies have shifted for decades, and immigration remains an "emotionally charged political issue" (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 6). Families continue to live in fear of loved ones being deported (Gallo, 2014) as they encounter anti-immigrant rhetoric on billboards (Pacheco, 2009) and in schools (Encisco, 2011).

Building from Moll et al. (1992), Gallo and Link (2015) depicted immigrant children's knowledge about immigration rhetoric and policy as "politicized funds of knowledge" (p. 358). They argued children developed politicized funds of knowledge from their experiences "crossing the border, navigating what it meant to have 'papers,' or serving as intermediaries between police officers and their parents" (p. 358). However, immigrant children have little opportunity to share such knowledge at school (Pacheco, 2009). Some suggest this is because children are aware these topics are sometimes considered taboo or worry that sharing about their families may bring unwanted attention (Gallo, 2014; Gallo & Link, 2016).

Others argue that the burden rests with teachers, administrators, and policymakers who do not always clarify the value or centrality of immigrant experiences (Encisco, 2011; Martínez et al., 2008). Recent battles about critical race theory, "diverse" books, and ethnic studies are present-day examples of how schools undermine immigrants' and racialized individuals' experiences. But today's debates are not new. They are symbolic of issues Chicana/o studies scholar Santa Ana (2002) described decades ago: "Textbooks say the United States is a nation of immigrants. However, while schoolchildren are steeped in the pageantry of American history, they seldom learn to appreciate the depth of its reprehensible acts and persistent inequities" (p. 65). Today, pageantry and celebration of immigrants remain a feature of the past and disconnected from present students' lives.

Cultivating a More Permeable Curriculum

The composition of the "official" curriculum persists as fodder for pundits and school boards. Scholars have shared numerous stories of teachers and students working to create a more "permeable" curriculum (Dyson, 1993, p. 1). For example, Pacheco (2009) and Martínez et al. (2008) worked with sixth-grade, Chicana/o and Latina/o students (predominantly immigrants) in East Los Angeles. They offered clear examples of how the "official" curriculum was flexibly negotiated and, simultaneously, created space for children's

politicized funds of knowledge. Pacheco (2009) highlighted how the middle schoolers contemplated personal intersections with sociopolitical circumstances. She detailed how the teacher drew on children's political-historical knowledge, including analyzing shared texts (i.e., freeway signs) and writing persuasive essays.

Pacheco (2009) identified connections between children's arguments and mainstream discourse as youth "pleaded with adults to stand in solidarity to demand collectively the just and humane treatment of (im)migrants" (p. 26). She noted how children used strategic positioning of the self and politicians in their letters, similar to what Martínez et al. (2008) noticed in their review of children's essays. As Pacheco (2009) described self-positioning within debates about immigration policy, Martínez et al. (2008) discussed how the middle schoolers shifted their positioning—and, in turn, voice—with their audience. Children tailored the language and structure of their argument based on whether they were writing to someone they knew personally (peer, caretaker) or a more distant authority (district, legislator).

Nuanced studies of immigrants' experiences—particularly related to U.S. immigration policies—promote new insights and knowledge. Yet limiting scholarly endeavors to *only* considering newcomers' perspectives may preclude systemic changes to governmental policy and educational practice. Without also investigating how nonimmigrant children make sense of or perceive immigrants and related policies, we will remain unable to disrupt oppressive systems of xenophobia, nationalist rhetoric, and vitriolic contemporary governmental policies.

In her study, Enciso (2011) detailed how immigrant and nonimmigrant middle-schoolers engaged in meaningful dialogue as they shared "stories of advocacy and bigotry" with one another (p. 22). Enciso described how the two groups of children—whose classrooms were "separated by a concrete brick wall" (p. 23)—used storytelling to create community and disrupt commonly held stereotypes. Her project gave children the chance to listen to and learn from peers they otherwise would not have encountered. By engaging immigrant and nonimmigrant children in embodied play and oral storytelling, Enciso provided new possibilities for thinking about immigration.

Enciso's (2011) inquiry is notable because it depicts an avenue towards a more inclusive and permeable curriculum. It also is one of the few studies that critically considers political perspectives of immigrant *and* nonimmigrant children. Studying immigrant and nonimmigrant children's views is particularly important because all children—those negatively impacted by oppressive structures because of their identities and those who reap benefits—must learn to "understand disparities and inequities as outcomes of both individuals' choices and systems" (Swalwell & Payne, 2019, p. 128). Like Encisco and others (Gallo, 2014; Pacheco, 2009), I argue that teachers must make space for immigrant

and nonimmigrant children to safely share and draw upon their politicized funds of knowledge within classrooms.

In this article, I foreground stories of how mostly U.S.-born third graders strategically employed rhetoric as they crafted arguments related to Republican immigration policies. My study is of particular significance at this moment because stark contrasts exist in discourse between the Obama and Trump presidencies. The political landscape shifted from a purportedly postracial nation-state under Obama to one wherein Trump explicitly extolled racism and white nationalism (Beirich & Buchanan, 2019). Because of this study's ethnographic nature and its relationship to the larger sociopolitical context, I paired sociocultural and critical theories to examine identity and power across discursive levels.

Theoretical Framing

My knowledge about sociocultural theory stems from experiences in disciplinary research, namely, literacies. Scholars like Street (1984) informed my understanding of literacies as ideological, social practices “inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society” (p. 433). Others like Heath (1983) and Moll et al. (1992) facilitated my understanding of how linguistic acts and cultural relations are always already grounded within broader social systems. By engaging a sociocultural approach, I sought to, as Wertsch (1998) argued, “explicate the relationship between human action and the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts” wherein such action is situated (p. 24).

Sociocultural theory affords insights into how culture informs practice, but many researchers have suggested that combining this perspective with critical theory can amplify how “inequities of power and privilege that exist in the larger society are reflected in classrooms” (Gutiérrez & Larson, 1994, p. 23). As Vossoughi and Gutiérrez (2016) outlined, bridging the two can enhance current conceptualizations about how schooling intersects with social reproduction. Thus, critical sociocultural theory is helpful for identifying how identity and power operate across scales (Lewis et al., 2007). Critical and sociocultural approaches foreground what children know and what they bring to bear on their learning (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2016). Therefore, a critical sociocultural perspective was useful as I wished to deviate from framing children in a deficit way to consider underlying assumptions at play in children's written words instead.

A critical sociocultural approach builds on the idea that discourse, as social-communicative acts, is a tool of power (Bakhtin, 1981). Discourse is a fundamentally dialogic social phenomenon (Bloome et al., 2008). Signs, images, media platforms, text, and talk work together to reproduce or transform power systems. In contemporary politics, these discursive tools create rhetoric that maps our worldviews and biases, even those on an unconscious level (Gutiérrez &

Larson, 1994). Discourse weaves its way into everyday communications, shaping how we view the world and ourselves in it. Previously, scholars detailed how U.S. media represented immigrants via damaging tropes and perpetuated inequitable opportunities and harmful narratives (Santa Ana, 2002). So too have researchers described how national discourse and (anti-)immigration policies permeate curricula and influence middle schoolers' uptake of such issues. Employing a critical sociocultural lens, in my study, I theorized how a group of primarily nonimmigrant third graders viewed immigrants and the construct of immigration. In turn, I considered how their identities and critical literacies were affected by access to discourses of power and nationalist rhetoric.

Methods and Modes of Inquiry

The subset of data I share here is part of a more extensive ethnographic case study I conducted in Michigan during the 2016–2017 academic year. Through my engagement in two classrooms, I considered how third graders cultivated a diverse skill set of communicative practices, or what Shipka (2016) termed a “compositional fluency” (p. 255). The broader study considered children's use of alphabetic print alongside digital tools to remediate mandated writing assignments (i.e., personal narratives, informational texts, persuasive writing samples).

Immigration was not initially a feature of my inquiry. Immigration became central when the teacher made Republican policies the topic for the final writing unit. This article focuses on children's print-based, persuasive texts about (anti-)immigration policies. The texts I provide are from one classroom and were composed during May 2017. I first offer readers detailed information about the community context, primarily as related to the sociopolitical landscape, to build a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) before outlining my ethnographic methods (Emerson et al., 2011).

About the Community

The focal site was one of four third grades within Community School J (CSJ; all names are participant-selected pseudonyms), a public elementary school serving ~350 children in Grades 1 through 4. Ms. Honey's classroom was home to 24 children (10 girls, 14 boys; 8 self-identified as white, 5 as Black/African American, 4 as mixed/biracial, 2 as Asian American, 1 as Asian, 1 as Latino, 1 as Mexican American, 1 as Mexican, and 1 as Muslim). Numerous children spoke languages in addition to English (i.e., Spanish, Vietnamese, Thai, Arabic). One girl named herself a recent refugee from Southeast Asia. No other children mentioned being born outside the United States, but many acknowledged having family members in other countries, most frequently Mexico.

Ms. Honey's class mirrored U.S. national demographic trends (Taylor, 2014). Yet historically, the district was predominantly populated by white, upper- and middle-income students whose parents were executives and managers in nearby factories. As plants closed, wealthier white families departed, and working-class families—most of which were families of Color—made the district their home. Today, the population reflects the larger community's demographic shifts (e.g., working class, racially marginalized) and includes recent immigrants.

The community's sociopolitical stance was also salient to my study (Eisenhart, 1988). Michigan is currently considered a battleground state in federal elections. In 2008, Obama won the state by a 16.5% margin; and in 2016, Trump won by the narrowest margin of victory in Michigan's history—0.23%. In the county where this study occurred, Obama's victory was nearly 8%; Trump's was by 5.5%. Most recently, in 2020, Trump maintained his ground in the county by a margin of 499 votes or 0.77% over Biden. The community's sociopolitical background presented a complex site for examining how children negotiated competing policies and perspectives. I inferred children had likely encountered diverse discourse about social issues within this context.

Contextualizing the Researcher-School Relationship

This study was the third of four inquiries I engaged in across a 5-year partnership with CSJ. I initially entered CSJ as a volunteer and transitioned into a researcher role. Alongside my past experiences as an elementary educator and my affiliation with the large, midwestern university located nearby, my identity as a white, U.S.-born, 30-something, cisgender, English-speaking woman afforded me ready acceptance into CSJ. I attributed this to Ms. Honey and other adults at CSJ sharing these identity markers.

I sought to develop meaningful relationships through participant observation (Spradley, 1980), which I detail later. I participated in children's daily lessons, play at recess, and cafeteria conversations to cultivate reciprocal relationships with them. I attended CSJ's weekly professional development and third-grade team meetings; I assisted with instruction when requested. I joined in CSJ events (i.e., technology night, community fair) and off-campus activities (i.e., field trips, field day). As much as possible, I tried to engage as a humanizing researcher (Paris & Winn, 2014) by envisioning my role as a coresearcher, coteacher, and coplayer in ways similar to other early childhood scholars (Wargo, 2021; Yoon, 2020).

Data Generation and Analysis

For this interpretive project (Erickson, 1986), I used ethnographic methods to gauge children's understanding of (anti-)immigration policies. The stories I share herein focus

on children's written words and, specifically, letters they wrote to their congressional representatives about Republican policies that dominated the news in spring 2017. My findings are also informed by ~500 hours of participant observation from that year. Notably, that year included four significant election moments: 2016 party conventions, Election Day, Inauguration Day, and the early months of the presidency.

Focal Unit

This article focuses on Republicans' 2017 return to the Oval Office. I zero in on a 6-week unit I coplanned with Ms. Honey at her request (see Wessel-Powell et al., 2019). The unit's purpose was twofold. First, Ms. Honey and her grade-level peers were required to teach children persuasive writing. However, she was motivated to deviate from shared grade-level plans and commonplace debates about school uniforms. Instead, she desired to provide children the opportunity to write about pressing social issues. Following Republican Donald J. Trump's inauguration, Ms. Honey felt compelled to foreground equity issues across her teaching as protests about (anti-)immigration policies streamed across the media.

In March 2017, we planned the unit. Together, we scoured libraries and websites to locate picturebooks and videos representing immigrant experiences, including who immigrants are, what immigration is like, and how immigrants contribute to communities they join. Our goal was to build children's background knowledge about immigration and provide a shared vocabulary for discussion. We shared with children arguments made by proponents on both sides of the debate about the #MuslimBan and border wall.

Simultaneously, we taught children how to write a persuasive argument. We encouraged them to clarify their stance and articulate their rationale while giving evidence to support their reasoning. Near the unit's conclusion, we invited a renowned anthropologist studying U.S./Mexico migration, Dr. Jason De León (2015), to meet children virtually. Like the videos we presented to children, Dr. De León provided real-life stories about immigrants' hardships, both in choosing to leave home and in their travels.

In closing the unit, we revisited the branches of government and the names of their congressional representatives, which children had previously learned. We extended past lessons by discussing how various immigration policies (including Republican Trump's executive orders) came into effect. The unit culminated with children taking a stance on current immigration policies and writing a persuasive letter to their congressional representative using their knowledge about immigration.

From the unit's April start to its early June conclusion, I compiled data sources, including lesson plans and child-generated artifacts (i.e., assignments). Most days, I spent 2 to 4 hours with Ms. Honey's third graders for a total of 93

hours of observation during the unit. As children wrote their letters, I moved about the room to discuss their work. Thus, I was already familiar with their texts as they finalized them. When I finally reviewed their letters on my own time “outside” the field site, I read them multiple times, considering both the content and children’s rhetorical strategies.

First, I categorized children’s letters based on the content of their arguments. For example, several children opposed the border wall with Mexico. Some grounded their opinions in the damage it would cause to the physical environment and animals occupying the land. Other children who argued against the border wall claimed it would further disrupt familial connections. Only one child, a young white boy, favored the border wall. He urged the wall would ensure the United States remained protected (for more, see Brownell, 2021).

I then did a much closer textual analysis of their letters. I lifted individual sentences from children’s letters rather than categorizing their whole letters (which I had done previously). In deconstructing their texts, I noted children’s rhetorical strategies. They employed Aristotelian rhetoric, including *logos* (i.e., logic), *ethos* (i.e., ethics), and *pathos* (i.e., emotion), alongside tenets of cultural rhetorics, such as story, to persuade their audience (Brownell, 2021).

Another theme came to light as I did a line-by-line analysis of children’s letters. I noticed that among children who opposed the border wall and #MuslimBan, their arguments appeared to use similar rhetoric to what proponents of these immigration policies sometimes did. As I reviewed the letters again, I made notations about how children supported their claims and categorized their letters based on themes that appeared to undergird their arguments. Three primary themes emerged, as described in the findings.

Using a representative set of exemplar letters from the broader class alongside my residency at CSJ, I next highlight what I learned from a particular collection of children at a specific political moment. My intent is not to make large generalizations but to instead showcase in a “fine-grained way” how circulating nationalist discourse undergirded children’s written communications (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 130).

Findings

As I detail, many children were, in fact, interested in political discourse, and they were already quite well-versed in it. Nevertheless, as most children called for a more equitable world, they sometimes relied on nationalist rhetoric. In my critical review of their letters documented here, I detail how I categorized children’s writing according to the nationalist ideas they forwarded, including that the United States is (a) a reliable country; (b) a safe country; and (c) a country with an abundance of resources, including employment opportunities. I then connect these themes to Trumpian notions of what makes America great.

Understanding the United States as (Exceptionally) Reliable

Throughout the unit, Ms. Honey read aloud several books to children, many of which depicted stories of immigrants wishing to cross the U.S. border. These texts showed narratives of individuals seeking a new life; others were allegorical tales. Several books illustrated individuals’ or families’ journeys as they sought new opportunities in the United States, including “get[ting] a good education,” as Gem, a multilingual girl of Southeast Asian descent, noted in her letter. Having immigrated the prior year, Gem was the only third grader to identify as an immigrant, an identity she was proud to draw on throughout the unit (see Brownell, 2021).

Within her letter, Gem stated her positioning as a newcomer clearly, in a way not accessible to her peers. She used her personal experience to her advantage as she rationalized why immigrants wish to enter the United States. Gem also marked herself as part of “us” in ways seen in previous research with older immigrant children (Encisco, 2011; Pacheco, 2009; Martínez et al., 2008). Gem did so in two ways: both as an immigrant and as someone already “here” in the United States. For example, she wrote, “People can rely on us. We are a helpful country.” Her shifting positioning offered me insight into the desire to be seen as someone that belonged in/to the United States and as someone capable of providing help to others.

In writing herself into this multifaceted role, Gem positioned herself as part of a larger body politic and a reliable member of the global community. Her dual use of “us” stood out because she used “us” throughout the letter, instead of framing either party as an “other.” Gem’s wording foregrounded a need to defend prevailing narratives of the United States (i.e., as reliable) and to simultaneously push for those narratives to be used for “good” by bettering the lives of immigrants like herself (Santa Ana, 2002). Like the immigrant middle schoolers in Pacheco’s (2009) study, Gem’s rationale for inviting immigrants into the United States also alluded to a humanist obligation she (and others) already in the country carried. Ultimately, Gem’s self-positioning reflected how premises about who “belongs” within any nation-state are rooted in power systems.

Faith—a mixed-race (Black/white), monolingual, U.S.-born girl—was also among the handful of children who explicitly named the United States a reliable country. Faith opened her letter to her U.S. Senator by stating her belief that all immigrants “are welcome to the Country” and suggested her senator “positively welcome” them. Continuing, Faith wrote, “We are a Country to rely on and if we aren’t then we should be.” As evidenced here, Faith was deliberate in underscoring that she thought immigrants should have the chance to enter the United States. To some extent, the United States might owe it to immigrants to welcome them because

Framing the United States as a Safe Haven

of its dependability as a nation. Simultaneously, however, she emphasized that if the United States was not known for being reliable, the country could shift course by acting and welcoming immigrants. In this way, Faith perhaps showed doubt about whether the United States was quite as dependable as it could be.

In closing of her letter, Faith shared similar sentiments wherein she argued against the #MuslimBan, writing, “There shouldn’t be a ban. Because we are a Country to rely on! Now I hope you get this message and you agree on my opinion.” In my reading of Faith’s closing statement, I understood her words as suggesting the very act of having a ban on any person from entering was in and of itself a contradiction of who the nation was, if it was, in fact, “a Country to rely on.” I propose this because, generally, reliability means a person, product, service, or system is dependable; a sense of confidence or certainty undergirds it. For immigrants who fit the description of individuals whom Trump’s executive order banned (and, likely, for others as well), their confidence in the United States as a potential place of refuge was possibly shaken.

Like these two girls, many children alluded to and made connections to the United States’ reliability. Several children grounded their arguments on what the country could provide to immigrants. Some children generally wrote about how the United States is good at “helping” others, especially when times are tough. Yet, and as noted by Santa Ana (2002), benevolence is commonly understood as a trait of “superior” power and, frequently, is used to perpetuate injustices and maintain spheres of distinction (p. 86). I noticed many children seemed to forward a narrative of American superiority and exceptionalism as I read in their letters children’s calls for their congressional representatives and the wider country to embrace immigrants.

For Gem and Faith, their claims about the United States as a reliable and helpful country, to some degree, framed other countries, including immigrants’ countries of origin, as seemingly less capable of caring for or assisting in the ways the United States could. In this way, children appeared to understand the United States not just outside the norm but exceeding it.

Several children described educational and financial opportunities immigrants to the United States might not otherwise have access to, again reifying a sense of superiority (Santa Ana, 2002). Often, many depict the United States as a global leader, even a superpower, capable of exerting influence within the country’s home borders and far beyond. Still, what many rely on is situated in a settler-colonial imaginary wherein help can be provided because of a national identity as a superpower that is, in many respects, untouchable. For Trump, his supporters, and those on the right, although the United States has the power to “help” others, it may actively choose not to, and that, perhaps, is what makes America great.

Some may propose the very purpose of Republicans’ 2017 (anti-)immigration policies was to protect the United States, but many children argued the safety of the United States was all the more reason to show immigrants hospitality. In nearly all letters, safety was a theme as children wrote about the United States as safer than other global localities. Moreover, as children suggested, the United States has the authority and power to protect its people and those in other countries. This might read as a “savior” narrative whereby the United States cannot only protect but save immigrants from “less advanced” societies, a common trope and long-held conceptualization of immigration (Santa Ana, 2002).

For children like Rhianna—a monolingual, U.S.-born Black girl—she was straightforward in her letter, writing, “Their [immigrants] home is not safe.” She then directly implicated her congressional representative as someone charged with creating change, stating, “You should be responsible and take care of those poor children.” In what followed, Rhianna mentioned immigrants come to the United States “for a reason” and usually “have had a lot of heartbreak.” Thus, she declared it was on her senator and the United States “to make them safe.”

Rhianna shared similar sentiments both before and after writing her letter. Before letter writing, Rhianna recalled families’ separation from their loved ones in several class discussions. Documentary shorts and picturebooks we had shared with children had portrayed such ruptures to family life. Dr. De Léon also discussed this in our virtual meeting. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Rhianna described “heartbreak” in her letter. A few days later, she included similar sentiments as she remediated her initial letter as a videoed skit with a group of other Black girls (see Brownell, 2020). In their coproduced video, the girls positioned themselves as individuals (i.e., mother, daughter, sister) who embark on immigrant journeys. In turn, they discussed the “heartbreak” associated with family separation and leaving one’s home.

In her letter and her remediated version of it, Rhianna made a comparison between immigrants’ home countries and the United States. By emphasizing her senator’s responsibility to “take care of those poor children,” Rhianna highlighted her belief that the United States operated as a powerful, prosperous country. Like her peers, Rhianna’s comment indicated the United States *could* help others and, as a global leader, it *should*. Nevertheless, Rhianna made similar rhetorical moves to Gem in her letter as she positioned herself as different from immigrant children. She used language like “those” and “them” to discuss immigrants. In doing so, Rhianna demonstrated her “in-group” positioning as compared to a relative “Other” (Santa Ana, 2002).

Further, Rhianna described immigrant children as “poor,” an understanding she perhaps garnered from a video shown in a lesson. In the video, British children posed questions for

Syrian children who occupied a refugee camp about their daily life. In the discussion that followed, children articulated how hard it must be for Syrian children to be without material comforts they had, including a roof over their head or a school like CSJ to attend.

With time and space from the original conversation, I later understood children's comments—like the words written in their letters—as examples of how they formulated perceptions of an “other” through a deficit framework that emphasized suffering outside of the United States (Santa Ana, 2002). Here I find it essential to pause my analysis of children's texts to highlight how Ms. Honey and I likely contributed to children's understanding, at least to some degree. We were the ones who shared portrayals of children located beyond the United States' borders with the third graders. How might class conversations have shifted course if we had also presented the children examples of extreme poverty *within* U.S. borders? In what ways might children have attended differently to us/them language in their letters and rationale? Because how Ms. Honey and I were complicit is not this article's focus, and because space does not permit me to detail alternative ways we could have engaged children, I suggest readers interested in such issues read about them elsewhere (Brownell & Rashid, 2021).

Rhianna's classmate Beyoncé—another self-identified, monolingual, U.S.-born Black girl—used her letter to call attention to how immigration policies could physically tear families apart. Beyoncé talked back to Republicans' desire to build a wall with Mexico, writing, “I think we should not have the wall.” After stating her opinion on the policy, Beyoncé detailed her rationale, which had two parts.

First, Beyoncé discussed how building the wall would “break family's [*sic*] apart.” She then changed course ever so slightly as she argued a border wall had the potential to “block immigrants that may be in danger.” Elaborating on this point, Beyoncé justified her position by writing the wall “might trap people that are escaping war.” In other words, if the United States were to build a wall with Mexico, it would actively prevent people fleeing to safety in the United States because it would “block” them from entering. Although Beyoncé did not use “safe(ity)” in her letter, she hinted the United States is known as a safe country.

In my analysis, I noted many children understood the primary reason some immigrants leave their home is sometimes because they encounter danger. For Syrian children like those in videos we watched as a class, that may mean war on a national level. For other children, their families lives may feel threatened by others or events in their local community. Yet amidst written pleas from Beyoncé to “please let the wall not go on,” I wondered how children conceptualized safety. Did children understand safety only as having access to physical shelters, like their individual homes? Or did they liken safety to easy access to family? During the study, stories of police brutality and the

unnecessary loss of Black lives permeated United States news streams. I then wondered the degree to which Black children like Rhianna and Beyoncé felt the United States was safe for them. For me, the girls' notion of the United States as a safe place made me question under what circumstances is a country safe and for whom.

Unfortunately, my close reading of the girls' letters as imbued with nationalist rhetoric occurred after the study concluded. I could not ask them how they might make sense of their safety related to the security immigrants sought in the United States. Nonetheless, the girls' letters, paired with their positioning, present an interesting avenue for consideration. Rhianna's and Beyoncé's declaration of the United States as a safe environment illuminated possible tensions that arise for children when they learn America is a “helping” nation, particularly when such lessons are based on liberal notions of equality and when, simultaneously, Trumpian rhetoric degrades the value of children's own lives alongside those of their immigrant peers.

Establishing the United States as an Abundant Country

In the name of safety, pundits on the right have long suggested the United States close its borders to protect its citizens' physical well-being and safeguard its resources (Santa Ana, 2002). Many children discussed how coming to the United States could bring immigrants happiness through tangible means in their letters. However, layered in their responses was a similar “othering” rhetoric many on the far right used to call for the closing of U.S. borders. For example, returning to Rhianna, she wrote that “those poor people” should be cared for by the United States. One could assume this is because the United States has social programs to support individuals needing assistance (although, arguably, the country remains far behind others, including the United States' northern neighbor, Canada). However, framing “poor” people needing resources is the rhetoric proponents of strict immigration policies used. Namely, such individuals suggest immigrants entering the country will make the United States go broke as they eat up all (financial) resources, a message Santa Ana (2002) suggested framed immigrants as “a tax burden” (p. 96).

Children's logic stood in stark contrast to messages in public discourse about immigrants as “undeserving of resources” (Santa Ana, 2002, p. 98). Instead, the third graders' arguments reflected humanist undertones in ways similar to middle schoolers' writings in Pacheco's (2009) study. Most children in the class understood the United States to have abundant resources. Many justified the United States welcoming immigrants and argued this was a moral necessity. As Rhianna wrote, “Everyone deserves the essential of life, food, water, clothes, shelter clean air and safety [*sic*].” Children argued the United States should provide for immigrants in need and mentioned resources for the United States to share, such as water, housing, education, and technology.

In her message to her senator, Nicki—a multilingual, U.S.-born, Mexican-American girl—outlined what she understood to be apparent differences between the United States and refugee camps. Drawing on the information presented throughout the unit, alongside her lived experience, Nicki argued, “While refugee camps are helpful they are dirty, crowded plus have few resources. America would be more comfortable.” Nicki then narrowed her comparison, zeroing in on the specifics of education, writing, “Where refugees live they don’t have a lot of schools. But in america [*sic*] we have free schools.” Tyler, a monolingual U.S.-born white boy, offered a nearly identical argument. He wrote, “We should let refugees in America because we can give them a good education. Children deserve a good education. Schools in America are for everyone and are free.”

As children with likely limited knowledge about how U.S. schools are allocated resources, Nicki’s and Tyler’s comments here alluded to parity in schooling not just across communities but nationwide. Nicki and Tyler are not wrong that U.S. children receive “free” education, but decades of scholarship detail schooling inequities. Research documents differences between white children and their peers of Color (Ladson-Billings, 2006) and between the country’s wealthy elites and their peers in lower-income communities (Anyon, 1981). As an outsider looking in, I knew that despite Nicki’s and Tyler’s positioning of their education as “good,” their school had limited resources compared to schools down the road in wealthier, whiter suburbs. I understood their comments as representative of the American imaginary: All children within the country’s borders receive free, fair, and equal education, no matter their zip code.

As evidenced in my review of studies of immigrant children, their families, and schooling, education is traditionally considered an essential pathway for a new life. This is partly because of the myth of meritocracy whereby individuals who work hard enough (i.e., do well in school) can climb the social/economic ladder (Labaree, 1997). Far-right Republicans sometimes use this myth to argue U.S. immigrants will take away opportunities from “hard-working” Americans as they seek new pathways for themselves.

Some children perhaps relied on the myth of meritocracy; others offered an alternative perspective to sway proponents of strict immigration policies. For example, Faith wrote, “Lastly, they [immigrants] take jobs Americans don’t want. Those are jobs that aren’t worth a lot of money.” Nicki offered a similar argument whereby she directly noted some people think immigrants “take jobs but they just take hard jobs like farming so they don’t take a lot of money.” Thus, she contended, “We should let immigrants into our country. I think you should pass a law to let immigrants into america [*sic*].”

Initially, I found Faith’s and Nicki’s comments somewhat ironic as they inadvertently degraded newcomers to the

United States while calling for their entry into the country. Like other children, the girls positioned immigrants as an “other” who, even upon arriving in the United States, would still not be as valued as the Americans already in the country. The persistent mentioning of “those” immigrants in “other” locations led me to wonder if “those” children and families, once they arrive, may ever become “American.”

Each girl’s rationale was also likely meant to counter Trumpian claims that welcoming immigrants results in a loss of American jobs. Since these “others” may be willing to work for less, Trump and his allies proposed they would take hard-working Americans’ jobs. Such arguments about the loss of employment are another long-standing trope identified in the media (Santa Ana, 2002). Yet the foundation of this cliché rests on the complicated nature of the “political economy of exploited labor, various push-and-pull socio-economic factors, the legacy of racism, the dehumanizing effects of (im)migration legislation, and the deleterious effects of American-hypocrisy” (Pacheco, 2009, pp. 23–24). Ms. Honey and I tried to foreground how underlying racism and white supremacy perpetuated inequities in the United States by sharing stories about leaders like Cesar Chavez and Sylvia Mendez alongside allegorical tales like Duncan Tonatiuh’s “Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote.” However, Faith’s and Nicki’s written comments illustrated the need for a more nuanced approach to discussing immigrants’ contributions, especially related to labor.

Discussion

In Trump’s rise to the presidency, anti-immigration discourse and controversial rhetoric were ubiquitous in the news media and schools, much like in the 1990s (Santa Ana, 2002) and early aughts (Pacheco, 2009). Moreover, Trump disrupted feelings of stability held by many, including children, who worried about what might happen to immigrant families postelection. Nevertheless, general “calls for civility and common ground” abounded, despite that they were likely to only “create false equivalencies between those who seek to expose and dismantle policies rooted in racial oppression and those who support the racialized and racist status quo” (Gibson, 2020, p. 432). Anti-immigrant sentiments continue to circulate in the local and national discourse. In U.S. schools, numerous tensions related to immigration linger amongst children who identify as immigrants and those who do not.

As documented in the findings, children *can* design texts and enact justice-oriented identities (Vasquez et al., 2013 cf. Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Be that as it may, children in my study sometimes inadvertently forwarded nationalist rhetoric as they did so. Specifically, they often used nationalist rhetoric to make and support their claims about contemporary immigration policies. For example, even as children advocated for their congressional legislators to stand in

opposition to Republicans' anti-immigration policies, they reified ill-informed tropes.

The underlying contradictions of children's persuasive arguments described herein leave me with more questions than answers. Children's civic participation is crucial in this political moment, but I am left wondering, What happens when children use problematic discourse or engage in less justice-oriented ways? How might educators and other adults support children in addressing both rhetorical and conceptual misnomers like those evidenced in the third graders' letters? How might we, as adults, detail the complexity of children's civic development while attending to how they engage with problematic discourses?

I am also curious about what new questions may spur from considering the political perspectives of nonimmigrant children more frequently, especially related to immigration policy. In turn, how might such investigations extend current conceptualizations about how young children reason and engage with political discourses? How, too, might we, as scholars, yield practical suggestions for teachers about incorporating critical social issues in their curriculum in careful, just ways?

Alerting children to how anti-immigrant sentiments are present in the curriculum and their daily lives is critically important, especially since U.S. children learn immigrants founded the country in school and popular culture (e.g., the musical *Hamilton*). Teachers must pay attention to how national discourses "imbue them with particular values" as they help children not be passive consumers of nationalist rhetoric but critical theorists of it (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 7).

Conclusion

As McCorkle (2020) argued, teaching about immigration and related policies is fundamental if we understand preparing democratic citizens to be the primary purpose of education (Labaree, 1997). Teachers can extend conceptualizations about what it means to be a citizen beyond relegating the term to one's legal status while also affording immigrant and nonimmigrant children space to discuss immigration policy (Dabach et al., 2020). Teachers might promote a more profound sense of belonging for children by positioning them as experts whose lived experiences in the world have inherent value and as persons capable of interrogating institutional power structures (Falkner & Payne, 2021).

Teachers across all grade levels must offer opportunities for children to think through immigration. It is a critical social issue that directly impacts many in the broader nation and, likely, those in their home community. That is to say, more research detailing how nonimmigrant young people are learning to read "the world"—including immigration policies—is needed. Individuals and communities read the word and the world by unpacking common myths. They

build new ways of acting and knowing, which are fundamental to lifelong learning and democratic participation (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

By attuning to how children embedded multiple institutional and political contexts in their written rationale and identities, I illustrated tensions *and* possibilities for nonimmigrant children in writing policies and possibilities for tomorrow. Ultimately, I argued that children's letters made evident how "citizenship, rights, and belonging" are always already "politically, socially, and culturally constructed" (Gonzales et al., 2016, p. 1531). Therefore, I propose we must foster and *sustain* children's civic participation in ways that go beyond the niceties that plague early childhood education and the young children inhabiting early-years classrooms.

Open Practices

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