

Teaching Immigration Issues in Elementary School Classrooms on the US/Mexico Border: Transborder Pedagogy and Its Significance

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ABSTRACT

This case study uncovers how controversial issues such as the recent influx of refugees and immigrants were being addressed in upper elementary classrooms on the United States (US) side of the US/Mexico border. Public school administrators and sixth-grade teachers from two school sites participated. Transborder pedagogy contextualized the findings of the research. With the COVID-19 pandemic, classroom discussions of border issues have been superseded with other concerns. This research underscores the immediacy of transborder pedagogy during times of uncertainty.

Keywords: elementary social studies, immigrant issues, interdisciplinary curriculum, transborder pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Key issues such as immigration and the conditions of refugees, including children, are all too often underemphasized in classrooms. Moreover, the underlying conditions of refugees and immigrants are not often a part of discourses. Parents of immigrant, migrant, and refugee children dream of a better life for their children (Oliveira & Segel, 2022). Students and their parents experience multiple disruptions on their journeys to the United States, and Gonzales (2016) argues for a better consideration of those experiences.

Research for this study was conducted just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when the researcher set out to uncover how contentious issues, including the detention of migrant children under the

since-ended Migrant Protection Protocols, or “Remain in Mexico” policy, were being addressed in United States sixth-grade classrooms on the United States/Mexico border. Educators from two local school sites in a public school district participated in this case study of pedagogical approaches in US border classrooms. The study transpired prior to when public education on the US/Mexico border region became preoccupied with concerns about how to meet the basic pandemic era educational needs of underserved student populations. Nonetheless, implications for pedagogy as students returned to in-person, face-to-face campus settings are also addressed.

Purpose of Study

The researcher set out to uncover to what extent and how current transborder issues, including immigration and the treatment of refugees, were being addressed in the cases of two schools and three upper elementary school classrooms. The impact of transborder pedagogy, if provided, was also to be evaluated. There was a conscious attempt to lessen my role as an outsider. Participants were reaffirmed of their roles as experts in the research. Thus, the research question is, “From the perspectives of local educators, how can the teaching and learning of current border issues be promoted through transborder pedagogy? How can these approaches be implemented in upper elementary school classrooms given the current emphasis on high test scores?”

Borders, Border Pedagogy, and Transborder Education

Borders

The concept of border provides a valuable and ongoing antecedent for understanding the interactions among multiple cultures, languages, literacies, histories, sexualities, and identities. Various zones of engagement are labeled as borders. Within these contexts, “power operates to either expand or to shrink the distance and connectedness among individuals, groups, and places” (Giroux, 2005, p. 2).

Martínez (1994) defines the US/Mexico border as an interdependent region, whereby regions in both countries are symbiotically linked. Staudt and Spener (1998) argue that diverse and contradictory elements converge in border spaces. According to Flores and Clark, “the border region should be viewed as an energetic, constantly changing area where new possibilities are always on the horizon” (2002, p. 9).

Border Pedagogy

Border pedagogy serves as a counternarrative to one-sided or dichotomous perspectives. Varied cultural codes, experiences, and languages are part of individuals’ and society’s roles within border pedagogy (Giroux,

1988). Interpretations such as traditional storylines and dominant cultural perspectives are challenged as participants deconstruct and reconstruct personal histories and experiences.

Socially and historically constructed borders may be challenged through border crossings. Giroux (1988) notes that there are wide-ranging borders with the potential for subsequent border crossers.:

Students crossover into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten as the codes and regulations that organize them become destabilized and reshaped. Border pedagogy decenters as it remaps. The terrain of learning becomes inextricably linked to the shifting parameters of place, identity, history, and power (p. 166).

Thus, codified descriptions are evaluated, and liminal spaces are challenged through a commitment to border pedagogy. Border classrooms can be analyzed for their authentic engagement in border pedagogy (Cashman, 2013; Flores & Clark, 2002; Garza, 2007; Giroux, 1991; Reyes & Garza, 2005; Romo & Chavez, 2006). Giroux (1991) recommends the promotion of new identities within existing configurations of power. Students develop critical thinking and debate skills and consider their sense of place, both locally and globally. In the context of this research, border pedagogy is put forward as a means of providing students with better contemplation and clarification of their positions in a region. Embedded within the discourses of border pedagogy are the goals of transformative education (Garza, 2007; Giroux, 1991; Romo & Chavez, 2006). Romo and Chavez (2006) offer that border pedagogy encourages tolerance, ethical sophistication, and openness. Thus, methods and practices work to decolonize and revitalize learning and teaching to promote liberation and social justice. Border pedagogy particularly engages K-12 students in multiple references that constitute different cultural codes, experiences, and languages to help them construct their own narratives and histories and revise democracy through sociocultural negotiation.

Reyes and Garza (2005) maintain that border pedagogy makes possible the development of more informed, independent learners. The work of educators who strive to meet the needs of English language learners on the US/Mexico border has implications for school curricula outside of the border region. (Cashman, 2013). The amelioration of conditions for worldwide immigrant and refugee populations are key aspirations for teaching and learning. Thus, border pedagogy as theory and practice has become ever more necessary in nonborder communities with the increase in immigrant and refugee populations throughout the US (Ramirez et al., 2016).

Transborder Education

Transborder education, as a specific approach within border pedagogy, illuminates knowledge and promotes border crossings and understandings across perceived limitations. In turn, it allows for the teaching and learning of border crossings, whether physical, political, social, or emotional. Border crossers can be described as individuals who routinely traverse obstructions. On the US/Mexico border, individuals negotiate borders on a regular basis. Interactions between socially and economically unequal positions produce or reproduce political and cultural boundaries as well as economic inequalities. Making sense of the border region requires analyses of power-laden inequalities and struggles over possible configurations, rather than inflexible adherence to structures (Heyman, 2017).

Transborder education must also take into consideration physical border crossers, whether adults or children. Alonso (2020) posits that there are inaccurate estimates of how many students physically cross the border every day. Accordingly, many border crossers are US passport holders, but due to personal or family conditions, they do not reside in the US. Many transborder students struggle because they are not easily categorized. Students may fear being discovered as transborder crossers because of residency and financial aid requirements.

Transborder education, including theories and research, provides a framework for understanding history, language, immigration, residency status, phenotype, and citizenship (Bejarano, 2005). *Transborder pedagogy*, along with borderlands theoretical perspectives, allows us to examine limitations and boundaries between groups. Additionally, important considerations include how hierarchies and positions of power affect economic conditions. In this manner, transborder pedagogy is characterized by the teaching and learning of border theories and practices (Cashman, 2016).

RESEARCH METHOD

In 2019, local public school district administrators were approached and provided their consent to be interviewed as well as to have their school sites observed. Two school district administrators agreed to be involved in the study. After being informed of the purpose of the research, the administrators agreed to be interviewed and recommended that teachers from their school sites serve as study participants. All research participants were interviewed, observed, and provided documentation for evidence of either border pedagogy or transborder education in their classrooms or at their school sites. Both schools were ranked higher than the statewide average, with over 92% and 99% of the students identified as “Hispanic” at the two school sites. Ninety-nine percent of the students were listed as “economically

disadvantaged” at both schools per the state’s public education department website.

As the investigator, I needed to reflect on my understandings of educators and students in a border community. I considered how positions of power influenced my perspectives of educators and students in the border community. With the dual roles of white educators and long-term residents on the US/Mexico border, I needed to gain trust, reconnect, and accurately analyze selected conditions in US/Mexico border classrooms. Consequently, this study was designed so that the voices of educators, all of whom identified as being from US minorities, particularly Latinx administrators and teachers, were represented. I had to reiterate and, specifically, clarify that their ideas were interpreted accurately. The study participants engaged in dialog that continually reaffirmed or amended my interpretations during interviews and observations with participants, such as “Am I hearing you correctly?”

Five educators in total, including three sixth-grade teachers and two administrators, participated in this case study. The study participants represented two separate school sites from Southwestern Border School District positioned on the US side of the US/Mexico international border. The two school administrators recommended teachers who could serve as contributors. Open-ended questions were posed to participants, who also provided reflections, observations, and personal perspectives for the research.

The Southwestern Border School District contains 27 schools and 13,142 students. According to published sources (US News and World Report, 2022), 69.2% of district students are economically disadvantaged. The student body at the schools is listed as 96.7% Hispanic/Latinx, 2.7% White, 0.4% Black, 0.1% Asian or Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.1% American Indian. Additionally, 48% of students are female, and 52% of students are male. These demographic figures have remained somewhat constant since 2019, as the overall student population of the school district has neither grown nor lost students. In Southwestern Border School District, 37.1% of students are English language learners. A majority of students maintain transborder Mexican cultural and family connections.

The socioeconomics of the student populations reflected the overall demographics of the border communities served. Thus, under federal guidelines, one elementary school site was listed as qualifying for federal funding of free and reduced lunches for 100% of their student population. The second elementary site received federal funding under the same program for 70% of its students (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2018). In terms of gender and ethnic/racial and ethnic background, the two administrators, one female, and one male self-identified as Latinx and African American. A female teacher identified as a Latinx of Cuban family background, and the two male teachers identified as a Latinx of Mexican

American heritage. In all, three males and two females provided contributions.

The research follows Stake's (2000) model for a substantive case study designed to examine naturalistic phenomena. Transcriptions for the oral responses to questions in face-to-face interviews were recorded. Data collection included notations on the frequency and categories of data. Interpretive explanations were based on both participants' and the researcher's observations. Data were collected from interviews with participants, and archives were reviewed by the researcher, including scheduling, curriculum, and textbooks (Creswell, 2013).

The study focused on educators and multiple perspectives from school administrators and those who teach sixth grade social studies and interdisciplinary language arts. Questions posed to educators were based on recent, compelling issues facing the US/Mexico border, including the following:

1. How do you feel about the amount of time devoted to social studies in elementary classrooms? How might this affect students later?
2. How do you feel discussions of border issues impact students?
3. How much time is available for discussion of border issues and US international policies? How can these ideas be age appropriate?
4. What types of discussions of current events take place in your classroom, including discourses on the issues surrounding Central American migrations?
5. How might controversial issues be better addressed in classrooms?

Key elements of the data analysis were multiple coding phases (Creswell, 2013). Initial data analysis began during the interviews (Glesne, 2011). Thematic analysis (Glesne, 2011) comprised data being read many times in search of emerging themes. Categories and subcategories of themes were then clarified.

Research participants represented racial, gender, and ethnic backgrounds consistent with the demographics of a school district positioned in the US near the US border with Mexico (See Table 1). Pseudonyms were provided as replacements for the administrators, teachers, and school sites to retain the anonymity of the participants. Data coding, pattern identification, and theme articulation were essential to the postdata analysis of video- and audio-recorded interviews and observations.

FINDINGS

Codification and categorization produced the following emergent themes: (1) pedagogical approaches, (2) reflective practice, (3) time/emphasis concerns, (4) local concerns/considerations, (5) considerations for recent immigration, and (6) the need for professional development.

Table 1.*Traits of participants*

Name of participant	Position/Years of Experience	Gender	Racial/ethnic background	School site
Mr. Avila	Grade 6 Social Studies/Mathematics teacher (41)	male	Latinx (Mexican-American)	Border Elementary
Mr. Bell	School principal (40)	male	African-American	Border Elementary
Ms. Cruz	School principal (21)	female	Latinx (Mexican-American)	Southwest Elementary
Mr. Diaz	Grade 6 Language Arts/Social Studies teacher (15)	male	Latinx (Mexican-American)	Border Elementary
Ms. Estrella	Grade 6 Social Studies/Language Arts teacher (15)	female	Latinx (Cuban-American)	Southwest Elementary

Pedagogical Approaches

Giroux (2005) puts forth border pedagogy, at its core, develops a “democratic public philosophy that respects the notion of difference as part of a common struggle to extend the quality of public life” (p. 20). Border pedagogy is a process of considering the narratives of those who have been historically and culturally excluded. When educators facilitate border pedagogy, they serve as cultural workers (Kazanjian, 2011). Applications of border pedagogy are not limited by geographic boundaries or confined to the US/Mexico border (Cashman, 2019).

In this study, Border Elementary teacher Mr. Avila noted the lack of instructional materials for social studies in kindergarten through fifth grade. According to Mr. Avila, all social studies instruction is to be incorporated into a language arts block prior to Grade Six, but social studies were not effectively integrated. Opportunities for border pedagogy, in most cases, were not a part of classroom teaching and learning. According to Mr. Avila, the curriculum is test-driven in all grades, and teachers must focus on improving test scores for language arts and mathematics.

Nonetheless, Mr. Diaz reported that he incorporates the teaching of local, national, and international issues as a part of daily language arts lessons, which follows on recommendations for more interdisciplinary instruction for students K-12 (Alleman & Brophy, 2010). Mr. Diaz stated that he observed an improvement in standardized language arts assessments through the

teaching of interdisciplinary social studies concepts in his language arts courses.

At Southwest Elementary, Ms. Estrella's students engage in project-based learning. The personal responsibilities of students include investigating the biographies of influential individuals in world cultures such as Malala Yousafzai and subsequently composing opinion papers. In this manner, Ms. Estrella's students considered border crossings themselves as they considered the plight and everyday struggles of children from other parts of the world.

Mr. Bell, Border Elementary principal, reported on how one combination language arts and social studies teacher was particularly adept in the teaching and learning current events, including immigration and local border wall construction issues. Of particular note, one teacher uses a meaningful quote to frame the curriculum and instruction each week, whereas another staff member sponsors summer trips and extension activities. He put forth the following:

Some teachers promote learning about immigration by having students read youth novels such as *Esperanza Rising* and *House on Mango Street*. In such cases, students are learning social studies concepts and developing social studies knowledge in their language arts classes. One language arts teacher has sought to compare and contrast the treatment of Jews with the present policies toward Central American refugees. Students read *Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, which is set during the Jewish Holocaust and follows up with a comparison/contrast of the current treatment of refugees and immigrants.

Reflective Practice

The successful implementation of border pedagogy was inconsistent, at best, among school staff at the two school sites. Nonetheless, there were educators who strove to promote understandings of difference as part of a common struggle. Despite Mr. Avila's observations of a test-driven curriculum, Mr. Diaz put forth that he purposefully combines the teaching and learning of local border issues together with literacy skills.

Moreover, at Southwest Elementary, Ms. Estrella reflected on her incorporation of English cognates and visual aids for English language learners in her classes. As a consideration for the large number of immigrants in her classroom, she Ms. Estrella stated she also facilitates active learning and border pedagogy projects for ancient civilizations as specified within the Common Core Social Studies State Standards. For their ancient civilization projects, students select and research an ancient civilization. Next, the students compile and share with their peers an interactive notebook based on what they learned. Students attach sticky notes and literary analyses, as well as opinion papers and research papers within their interactive notebooks.

Finally, students compared what transpired in ancient civilizations with what transpires on the US/Mexico border today.

Mr. Bell considered how some teachers creatively integrate social studies with language arts. He also noted how important it is to implement focused questioning strategies. Mr. Bell, in his role as an administrator, noted the pressures teachers faced to receive high test scores in language arts and math and how those pressures influenced pedagogy.

Southwest Elementary School principal, Ms. Cruz, reported that only two teachers on her staff fully integrate social studies content and standards with their language arts instruction. As a consequence, she began promoting a further integration of social studies in early elementary and intermediate level grades. Ms. Cruz offered that social studies issues and concepts hold the potential to reinforce the K-6 curriculum throughout, as well as promote opportunities for engaging students who have been historically and culturally excluded.

Time/Emphasis Concerns

Educators at the two participating school site educators recommended the provision of more instructional time for social studies and issues-centered teaching and learning, which coincides with recent research (Cashman, 2013; Shear et al., 2018; Smets, 2019; Ward, 2018). Moreover, participants recommended that the local school district emphasize interdisciplinary social studies in the school curriculum prior to Grade Six. This change is currently viewed as oppositional to the local school district's current focus on improving language arts and mathematics state assessment test results. Two teachers asserted that the social studies curriculum could be further emphasized while simultaneously seeking to improve language arts and mathematics test scores. They reasoned that students' cognitive performance would improve. As such, they provided specific, necessary approaches for making social studies an essential component of interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches. Additionally, the two administrators expressed the need for more in-depth approaches to content in classroom teaching and learning.

Sixth-grade teachers at the two school sites contended that the current emphasis on language arts and mathematics leaves students lacking in their knowledge of social studies concepts by the time students reach their last year in the school district's K-6 elementary schools. Border Elementary teacher Mr. Avila noted, "Social studies and science alternate days so they only receive 45 minutes of social studies every other day; it meets 3 times one week and 2 times the next. It has a huge impact on how much social studies knowledge students have." The sixth-grade state curriculum follows the Common Core State Standards curriculum. Under Content Standard 1, 5-8 Benchmark 1-A, 6.1, students are expected to describe the relationships among ancient civilizations of the world. Furthermore, under Content

Standard 1, 5-8 Benchmarks 1-C, 6.1: 1-C, 6.4: and 1-C, 6.5 students are to describe and compare the characteristics of the ancient civilizations and explain the importance of their contributions to later civilizations; describe major religions of the world to include Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; and compare and contrast the geographic, political, economic, and social characteristics of ancient civilizations and their enduring impacts on later civilizations.

Overall interest and knowledge of ancient and world civilizations have been impacted by the lack of emphasis on social studies concepts in grades kindergarten through five according to Mr. Avila. He recommended providing additional supplemental readings and classroom resources to better facilitate social studies teaching and learning in early elementary and intermediate level (grades 3-5) classrooms. Mr. Avila reported that although the school district purchased one set of social studies textbooks for his sixth-grade classroom during the past school year, additional educational resources are needed for effective teaching and learning of the Common Core Social Studies State Standards.

As an educator for the past fifteen years, Mr. Diaz emphasized that social studies classes do not meet daily. As their language arts and social studies teacher, Mr. Diaz reported that he compensates for this shortcoming by incorporating historical fiction for his class assignments. He reflected on his teaching by noting, "In my class, we try to fit into discussions of issues whenever we can. I search for materials of interest that are age appropriate." Mr. Diaz asserted, "When we teach an understanding of issues, we teach empathy". He offered that teaching empathy should be an essential part of the curriculum given the violence and trauma surrounding our students. Mr. Diaz further stressed the need for student engagement when he stated, "Nobody remembers the handout on reptiles, but they remember those big discussions on colonization, culture, and economic situations. We need to have those deep-seated conversations. It's not happening anymore."

Mr. Diaz described how he specifically focused on the following Common Core Social Studies State Standards: Content Standard 1,5-8 Benchmark 2-E, 6.1, explain how human migration impacts places, societies and civilizations; Content Standard 1, 5-8 Benchmark 2-E, 6.2, describe, locate and compare different settlement patterns throughout the world; and Content Standard 1, 5-8 Benchmark 2-E, 6.3, explain how cultures create a cultural landscape locally and throughout the world and how these landscapes change over time. He seeks to draw correlations with other historical events, such as the Holocaust during World War II, when addressing current immigration and refugee issues.

Sixth grade social studies and language arts teacher at Southwest Elementary, Ms. Estrella, revealed that her students lack the necessary background in social studies education. She asserted that her students should

possess knowledge from all the social studies disciplines by Grade Six. Throughout her 15 years of teaching social studies, she has observed an increasing emphasis on the rote memorization of social studies concepts. Nonetheless, Ms. Estrella makes it a point to focus on the following Common Core Social Studies State Standards: Content Standard 1, Grades 5-8 Benchmark 1-D, 6.1, organize information by sequencing, categorizing, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, comparing and contrasting, finding the main idea, summarizing, making generalizations and predictions, drawing inferences and conclusions; Content Standard 1, Grades 5-8 Benchmark 1-D.6.2, identify different points of view about an issue or topic; and Content Standard 1, Grades 5-8 Benchmark 1-D.6.3, use a decision-making process to identify a situation that requires a solution; gather information, identify options, predict consequences and take action to implement that solution. Her contention is the following: “I don’t want students to lose the *fun* of social studies.” Ms. Estrella emphasized the relevance of social studies in her students’ everyday lives. She noted that she stresses to her students, “If you cannot make informed decisions, others will make decisions for you.”

The principal at Border Elementary School, Mr. Bell, observed that Grade 6 is an extremely important transition year. He put forth that prior to Grade 6, social studies are blended with language arts instruction. By Grade 4, teachers should use an integrative approach for social studies in their classrooms. However, as the instruction ends up being test-driven, language arts skills often take priority in classrooms. The curriculum should be more comprehensive.

Mr. Bell lamented the lack of district-funded field experiences to better augment the social studies curriculum. Although educational class trips were once commonplace within the school district, most school-sponsored field experiences have been eliminated in recent years. Mr. Bell observed that there have been budget cuts that have eliminated educational trips once considered and experienced by students and their teachers as a school tradition. This situation occurs in a school district that is ranked as “high-poverty” with more than 75% of the students eligible for Free or Reduced Priced Lunch (FRLP) under the National School Lunch Program (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2018).

The principal at Southwest Elementary School, Ms. Cruz, put forth concerns for districtwide social studies education and observed that there has been a de-emphasis of social studies concepts in most elementary school classrooms. As a result, she asserted the following: “Students are not prepared for high school social studies. We need vertical and horizontal alignment for social studies education. Students are not tested until 8th grade, so social studies content is not emphasized earlier.” She sensed the potential for

efficacious pedagogy among her faculty, but most of the teachers at Southwest Elementary School did not fully integrate social studies with their language arts instruction. Accordingly, she felt students were not receiving the necessary social studies background knowledge and were being “set up for failure when they get to high school and beyond.”

Considerations for Local Issues

According to Gruenewald (2003), a critical pedagogy of place contributes to the educational discourses and practices that examine the place-specific connections among environment, culture, and education. It is a pedagogy linked to cultural and ecological politics. For students on the US/Mexico border, identities are deeply affected by a sense of place that involves border understandings and border crossings.

Ms. Estrella at Southwest Elementary reported that her students share binational, bilingual, and bicultural identities and are deeply affected by immigration rhetoric and policies. She offered the following: “My students are concerned over the closure of borders, as they cannot visit relatives. They bring those concerns to my classes. They cannot return to Mexico, and their families in Mexico cannot visit them.”

Both administrators, Mr. Bell and Ms. Cruz, noted interactions among cross-border migrants and US Border Patrol agents on school property. The two principals also expressed concerns about the security and safety of their students. According to Mr. Bell, “Immigration has always been part of the picture here locally.” Most recently, some classroom discussions have been afforded to the concerns of refugees and migrants from Central America, Cuba, Brazil, other Latin American countries, and Africa seeking to cross local borders into the US. However, Mr. Bell stated that discussions of immigration issues, including immigration and refugee status, are not observable in most teachers’ classes.

As principal of Southwest Elementary School, Ms. Cruz also revealed that there has been limited discussion of cultural diversity at her school site. She recommended the need for her teachers to facilitate discussions beyond superficial celebrations of holidays and food. Her goals include presiding over an educational setting that values diversity and emphasizes mutual respect. As the administrator of a school site in the same school district as Mr. Bell, she also lamented the cutbacks in funding for educational field trips. Ms. Cruz stressed the importance of additional funding for the facilitation of learning outside of traditional classroom settings and for the provision of experiential, community-based learning.

Discourses on Recent Immigration

Hess and McAvoy (2015) suggested various strategies for in-depth interdisciplinary teaching and learning on controversial issues. As such, they

recommended assessing the range of disagreement prior to discussion; establishing, teaching, and enforcing strong norms; conducting more sensitive discussions after developing classroom community; the selection of developmentally appropriate materials and pedagogy; and knowing content sufficiently to anticipate student reactions and correct misinformation.

Participants in this study concurred that there should be more consideration, reflection, classroom discourse, and informed analyses of controversial border issues. At Border Elementary, both Mr. Avila and Mr. Diaz shared how they facilitate discourses on local issues and recent immigration patterns. Mr. Avila reported that he wanted students to “do their own thinking and come up with their own conclusions.” Mr. Diaz put forth that he feels social study issues must be effectively integrated with language arts instruction. To accomplish these goals, he addresses Core Curriculum Social Studies State Standards by teaching with historical fiction and film.

Ms. Estrella, Southwest Elementary teacher, noted her personal family connections with refugee and immigration concerns. As a Cuban immigrant whose family left her native country during the Cuban Revolution, her family moved to Spain and then emigrated to the US southwest. She stated the following:

We are increasingly hearing about undocumented migrants from Central America. I try to make connections within the curriculum, including when we're talking about ancient Greece or whatever unit we're on. I connect it with current issues. Some of these people are escaping horrific conditions, and they did not make their decisions on a whim, just as my family did not make the decision to leave Cuba on a whim.

At Border Elementary School, the school principal, Mr. Bell, offered the following perspectives: “Here locally we have people who are passing through our campus on foot that are either refugees or people who are seeking to be US residents.” However, he recounted that he rarely observes teacher-led discussions on the ramifications of recent immigration, including the more recent increase in those who seek refugee status from Central America, Cuba, Brazil, other Latin American countries, and Africa. According to Mr. Bell, the location of the school on the US/Mexico border translates to immigration issues as a daily reality for the educational community. However, there is currently little open discussion on how most immigrants are seeking economic opportunity and new conditions to improve their overall existence and standard of living. Mr. Bell added,

My concerns as a school side principal are for the safety of my students and my staff. I do not hear discussions about of most recent immigration including Central Immigration Central American immigration in most classes. The older students are perhaps most

impacted, and they are willing to discuss. On the other hand, I do have one teacher who poses questions to his students about what you would do if you lived in Honduras or Guatemala right now and you are facing violence and extortion.

Ms. Cruz, Southwest Elementary School principal, recommended more classroom discussion on immigration issues as a part of language arts readings. She stated, “Students can definitely relate to those readings.” Ms. Cruz also offered concerns for how policies for refugees from Central America and other regions may impact future student enrollment in the local school district.

The preoccupations of educators in this study coincide with recent reports of the abysmal living conditions and dangers facing the poor and disenfranchised in countries sending refugees to the US border (Kladzyk & Ramos Pacheco, 2021). Indigenous migrants from Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, or Mexico are not a uniform group and experience varying challenges based on local context and culture. Past U.S. foreign policy in other countries plays a role in the trajectory of migration. Genocidal violence against indigenous communities in the 1980s was linked to funds and military training from the US. The US continues to be significantly involved in Central American affairs, with a recent announcement that the US Department of Homeland Security will provide training for Guatemala’s border security task force (Kladzyk & Ramos Pacheco, 2021).

The Need for Additional Professional Development

Pace (2019) recommends that preservice teachers be prepared to manage risks before delving into risk-laden territory. Preservice teachers should engage in context-sensitive, practical, and developmentally appropriate approaches. In this manner, educators contemplate and learn how to teach controversial issues during times of conflict. Research at the two district elementary school sites in this study revealed that both teachers and administrators expressed the need for quality professional development. Two teachers were selected by their administrators for their pedagogy that engages students in local border issues and border pedagogical principles. The two teachers consciously promoted transborder awareness and understanding. As such, they sought to develop that consciousness in their students. However, the same two educators posited the need for continual professional development to promote more issues-centered, interdisciplinary, transborder teaching and learning in their classrooms, as well as schoolwide and districtwide in other classrooms. Ms. Cruz emphasized that knowledge and informed pedagogical approaches were needed to further develop confidence and expertise to facilitate border pedagogy. As such, border pedagogy

involves efficacious dialog on local, regional, and global concerns. Risk-taking is a challenge for both new and experienced educators.

Educators offered several recommendations for the ongoing professional development of efficacious social studies education at their school sites. First, they stressed the need for more reflective practice among the faculty members. Second, educators at the two school sites noted the need for teachers with stronger backgrounds and expertise in social studies content. For example, they contended that most teachers do not teach and promote understandings of controversial issues. They also reasoned that professional development for social studies education should be ongoing, as teachers must be prepared to constantly revise and incorporate new social issues as a part of their teaching and learning. The participants in this study suggested that many teachers lack the necessary academic and pedagogical knowledge to effectively teach the varied and dynamic aspects of social studies.

According to these educators, interdisciplinary approaches for the curriculum must be integrated. To accomplish these goals, there must be an allowance for and an incorporation of reflective practices. Mr. Diaz recommended that all teachers be continually well informed on current issues. He also maintained, “We are bound ethically to teach history,” regardless of time constraints in the curriculum. According to Mr. Diaz, when educators guide students in deliberations on essential questions, those same educators become more effective change agents.

At Southwest Elementary, Ms. Estrella expressed the need for teachers to become more knowledgeable in various disciplines. Accordingly, geography, government, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and economics, as well as history, should be addressed in interdisciplinary courses. Ms. Estrella recommended critical discourses within integrated social studies and language arts courses.

The two school administrators provided recommendations for teacher education programs. Mr. Bell put forth that newer preservice educators and recent university education program graduates “seem more attuned to interdisciplinary approaches”. He also stated that there is a need for both internal and external funding for place-based learning, and professional development should allow for teachers and students alike to learn through educational field experiences.

Ms. Cruz, Southwest Elementary principal, put forth the exigency for stronger content and content knowledge among teachers, additional pedagogical approaches within teacher preparation programs, and continuing professional development for teaching and learning. Classroom teaching and learning observations provided her with insight into what precipitates better student performance. She noticed that students better engage with all subject content readings when interdisciplinary connections are included as a part of classroom pedagogies such as transborder pedagogy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous research (Cashman, 2013; Shear et al., 2018; Smets, 2019; Ward, 2018) has recommended more instructional time for social studies, effective integration of interdisciplinary concepts, in-depth explorations of culture, engaging culturally relevant pedagogies, better professional preparation and ongoing professional development for social studies education, and incorporating local issues in teaching and learning.

Students engage in controversial immigration issues such as amnesty policies and border policing when they provide a nonjudgmental and safe environment in social studies classrooms. Inquiries emerge from contentious issues, and those open-ended essential questions allow for the discussion of controversial subject matter. Smets (2019) puts forth the importance of educating teachers and children on how to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for immigrant and refugee students. Smets notes, “Teachers and schools also need our support to make sure teachers enjoy adequate training, and we ensure that psycho-social and language learning support is provided where needed, and we need to involve parents in the school community” (pp. 314-315).

Transborder pedagogy is a process that incorporates discourses, including opposing viewpoints, on the roles of refugees and immigrants throughout US history. For example, *New American Economy* (2019) provides data to assist teachers and their students in discussing the impact of immigration and refugees on US communities. Accordingly, common misperceptions can be effectively addressed, and important contributions of immigrants and refugees to US society are noted. *New American Economy* (2019) lists realities that run contrary to misconceptions and media portrayals, including but not limited to the following: the high rates of entrepreneurship among refugees and immigrants, contributions as wage earners and taxpayers, the willingness to build lives in the US, and how refugees and immigrants are revitalizing locations that have experienced population declines (p. 330).

A focus upon interdisciplinary issues-centered and project-based teaching and learning is key to students’ abilities to contemplate and formulate responses to essential questions. A key component of these approaches is the understanding of social studies concepts. Alleman and Brophy (2010) reason that social studies should retain a position central to the elementary curriculum. They warn against inadequate approaches and ineffective social studies integration. Shear et al. (2018) assert that children benefit from the promotion and support of anti-oppressive education. They maintain that social studies for children have been discounted during an age of standardization. More than ever, there is a need for educators and their students to listen to those with differing opinions of their own as they consider the most pressing issues of our times.

Overall, educators in this study put forth the following recommendations for more effective elementary social studies pedagogy and reflective practice:

- 1) The necessity of more instructional time for social studies;
- 2) a conscious and deliberate integration of more social studies content and concepts as part of interdisciplinary teaching and learning;
- 3) less superficial representation of cultures, including Central American, within classroom discussions;
- 4) an avoidance of the heroes, holidays, and favorite food approaches;
- 5) more active teaching and learning approaches, including project-based learning for students;
- 6) emphasizing better professional preparation in social studies pedagogy for preservice teachers;
- 7) requiring current teachers to engage in professional development and workshops for the overall improvement of interdisciplinary social studies education;
- 8) and, moreover, modeling and incorporating pedagogical approaches that promote empathy and compassion.

CONCLUSION

Issues of immigration and the mistreatment of refugees have often been overlooked in elementary social studies and interdisciplinary classes. At a time when anti-immigration sentiments of the dominant society are further fueling deficit rhetoric and thinking (Valencia, 2010) and doing less to rectify subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 2017) among border students, attention should be shifted to educators who are successful despite obstacles.

According to Gruenewald (2003), we fail when our educational institutions only focus on teacher skills and student performances. In this manner, the legitimacy of a standards-based paradigm of accountability is taken for granted. In contrast, border pedagogy allows the student to learn how borders have served to perpetuate power and difference (Kasanjian, 2011). Giroux (2005) maintains that students must not only learn to cross borders but also redefine the borders and otherness with which they felt they were familiar. Through understandings of the historical and social apparatuses of borders, students better understand limitations and qualifications. Border pedagogy also teaches students to question how their own personal experiences are defined. Interdisciplinary approaches that include transborder pedagogy can serve to revitalize educators and to promote efficacious learning communities. Colucci (2011) noted how a unit won a Governor's Award from the Florida Council on Economic Education. The unit emerged as the award-winning teacher reflected on the difficulties in finding time to teach the curriculum in both language arts and social studies. Through

interdisciplinary approaches, geographic concepts were taught. Students also engaged in research processes and learned the principles of writing expository, narrative, and creative pieces. Students also explored careers, calculated loan amounts and salaries after taxes, developed budgets, and used technology to gather information and present a product. In this manner, students acquired knowledge from both the language arts and social studies curricula. According to Colucci (2011), the students also developed life skills.

Rosenberg (2020) suggests that there is a need to contemplate, challenge, and rethink policies regarding refugees and immigration. Although noteworthy exceptions were explicated in this case study, most classrooms were not spaces where immigration issues were openly discussed. This situation existed prior to the outbreak of the global pandemic in March 2020. The switch to remote learning environments further shifted attention away from other local and binational concerns. Nonetheless, the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus makes the teaching and learning of crucial issues, at times controversial, more necessary.

Hess and McAvoy (2015) recommend in-depth interdisciplinary teaching and learning of controversial issues. Transborder pedagogy provides spaces for the focused discussion of controversial, current issues. In this context, students are allowed opportunities to confront issues as part of their journey toward becoming enlightened contributors whose voices are heard. Ultimately, provisions are needed for the reimagining of current notions on standardized education. There must be a reconsideration of the devaluing of social studies content. In this manner, educators and students will be able to engage in healthy discourses on constantly changing issues. In essence, the pandemic era has been a time of uncertainty for humanity, but transborder pedagogy provides pragmatic hope within our predicament. When transborder pedagogy becomes praxis, as noted in this study, it is an effective interdisciplinary approach.

Although this case study is limited in its scope and findings from two elementary school sites on the US/Mexico border, it exposes shortcomings in school curricula that, in many cases, existed prior to a global pandemic and were only exacerbated by the lack of face-to-face instructional approaches and pedagogies. Nonetheless, the findings of this study offer possibilities for more effective caring, interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate the basic tenets of border and transborder pedagogies. Discussions of the complexities of immigration, including refugee statuses, were found to engage students in the living, everyday issues that surround them and their border communities. Thus, this research exposes the need for further studies that promote both students' and educators' transborder knowledge and understandings of both local and global conditions. Time must be allotted for the pondering of larger issues affecting students' daily lives now that students are again attending

class face-to-face. As their own administrators noted, the educators who participated in this study stood out for their conscious efforts to address key questions and salient issues facing students in their community. Thus, the Latinx teachers who were selected by their administrators demonstrated how in-depth student contemplation and problem solving can become praxis. Their pedagogical approaches, based on negotiated spaces among well-informed societies across geographic borders, provide hope for those who have survived a pandemic. Through transborder pedagogy educators and their students may learn that, according to Ms. Estrella, there are those who “did not make their decisions on a whim.” By developing such knowledge, interdisciplinary educators begin to uncover possibilities for the future.

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