



Understanding and Connecting Our Ways of Being in the World:

Promoting Sensitivity and Understanding in Classrooms with Undocumented Latinx Students

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“When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you . . . when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.”

—Adrienne Rich (1996)

Coming to America

Millions of undocumented Latinx¹ people, the majority of whom emigrated from Mexico and Central America, currently live, work, and attend schools in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, 11.7 million immigrants (28%) living in the United States in 2014 came from Mexico, and almost half entered without documentation (Barrera & Krogstad, 2017). The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that from 2004–2014, the percentage of Latinx stu-

dents enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States increased from 19 to 25. It is estimated that by 2026, this number will increase to almost 30% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017).

Poor living conditions and desperate circumstances in their home countries, as well as the apparent promise of better pay and a higher standard of living in the United States, motivate many Latinx people to cross the border. For most, entering the country without documentation is perceived as the only viable option. First, such immigrants may not possess the knowledge or resources to pursue legal channels, such as hiring an immigration service or obtaining an immigration visa (not that either of these options guarantees legal entry). Perhaps more significant is the number of US border patrol agents who work on or near the Mexican–US borders compared to the vastness of those borders. These wide open, unpatrolled spaces create the illusion of ease of entry. This hope for a better life causes many Latinx people to hire human smugglers, or coyotes, who promise to get them into the United States safely—for a hefty fee, of course. Coyotes are always on the lookout for new customers, some even advertising that for one fee, their clients will be allowed three attempts. Recently, coyotes in some Central American countries began telling potential customers that the United States would grant them amnesty upon entry (Lovelace, 2014).

Teaching in America

Prior to becoming a university professor, I spent 23 years living and teaching in a school district of 15,000 students in Phoenix, Arizona, that was predominantly (70%) Latinx. My sons attended the schools where I taught, our family often attended classmates' family functions and birthday parties, and we invited my sons' friends into our home. I still keep in touch with a great number of my former middle and high school students, many of whom were, and shockingly still are, classified by the United States government and referred to in public circles as illegal immigrants.² One example of such a student is chronicled in a short documentary entitled *The Life of an Undocumented High-School Senior* (<https://www.theatlantic.com/video/index/516900/the-life-of-an-undocumented-high-school-senior/>). This is the story of Ilse Cruz, a high school senior who was brought to the United States by her mother when she was four years old. The film portrays Ilse's struggles as she tries to navigate the process of becoming a US citizen.

My family is not Latinx, and therefore I am not qualified to speak on a personal level as to how it feels to be viewed by others as an *illegal*. However, it is clear from what my former students share with me, what I observed for 23 years in that school district, and what I currently witness as a teacher of future teachers that these students often feel isolated and disenfranchised. Many lived and still live in fear that they will be arrested and forced to leave the United States. This was especially true in Arizona, where, for decades before his arrest and conviction, a Maricopa County sheriff named Joe Arpaio practiced calculated acts of racial profiling, sending out patrols whose sole purpose was to target undocumented Latinx people.³ This fear continues to be felt today, given the Trump administration's September 2017 announcement that the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy will be phased out. Established by the Obama administration in June 2012, DACA allowed many young people who entered the United States as undocumented, often referred to as Dreamers, to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation and to be eligible for a work permit. As of 2017, approximately 800,000 Dreamers were enrolled in the program created by DACA (Glum, 2017).

All of this is important context, but this is not

an article about politics, despite the fact that education is undeniably political. Common Core Standards, mandatory state testing, teacher evaluations, school funding, and yes, undocumented immigration are issues that have been initiated, are magnified, and/or are controlled in some way through political processes. The purpose of this article is to promote sensitivity and understanding in classrooms with Latinx students, specifically classrooms that are nurturing undocumented students. All educators share a responsibility to create school social environments and provide educational curricula that serve to treat all students fairly and equitably regardless of race, social class, socioeconomic circumstances, gender, sexuality, religion, belief, disability, or any other characteristic of background or group membership. We have no control over when or how students come to our classrooms, but we do have an obligation to make our classrooms safe and productive.

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Disconnected School and Home Communities

Creating a safe, nurturing environment for every student can be a daunting task, especially when we consider the chasm that often exists between the funds of knowledge of the employees of school communities and those of the inhabitants of the school's surrounding home communities. School communities tend to be relatively homogenous groups—predominately white and female—which creates an ethnic gap between teachers and many of the students they serve (Hogg, 2011). Teachers in these environments tend to recall and draw on knowledge and experiences of white middle class children much more frequently. Due to these conflicting funds of knowledge, which

do not fit the traditional context of the school system (Irvine, 2003; Rosebery, McIntyre, & Gonzalez, 2001; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992), Latinx students are marginalized and held to lower expectations. When a teacher's life experiences do not match those of a student's, or when students' experiences do not match those of other students within a given population, underlying differences or misunderstandings about "our ways of being in the world" (Gee, 1996, p. viii)

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surface, creating learning and relationship problems. Thus, success for marginalized students often comes at the expense of their cultural identity (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

These differences are exacerbated when school districts engage in the politicization of education through the inclusion and/or exclusion of specific academic curriculum. As Miller, Beliveau, Rice, Destigter, and Kirkland point out in *Narratives of Social Justice Teaching* (2008), "Teachers teach in pre-assigned classroom

spaces, social spaces which are highly politicized (albeit mostly unseen) as competing national and local agendas vie for ownership over curriculum and textbooks" (p. 2). One large-scale example of this occurred in 2012, when acting Arizona Superintendent Tom Horne ordered and was successful in imposing a ban on a Latinx Ethnic Studies Program in the Tucson Unified School District (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/08/us/08ethnic.html>). Parents, community members, educators, and many others protested the ban, and it wasn't until five years later, in August 2017, that a federal judge overturned the ban, stating that it was motivated by racial discrimination and violated pupils' constitutional rights (Harris, 2017).

Connecting School and Home Communities

As John Dewey observed, an effective school "is realized to the degree in which individuals form a group" (1958, p. 65). An inclusive school-home commu-

nity connection is established and maintained when cultural awareness, empathy, and understanding for everyone are valued. In order to create this type of community, several key factors must be considered. The administration's leadership style, the school's goals and values, the faculty's teaching and classroom management methods, and the extent of participation of students and parents or guardians in the planning and decision-making processes all contribute to the creation of a school community (Schaps, 2005). Each of these factors has a major impact on students' learning and ethical, social, and emotional development.

The quality of teacher-student relationships is critical. When teachers connect with their students on meaningful levels through understanding, awareness, and sensitivity for feelings and experiences, they become positive role models, thus enhancing students' self-esteem and providing greater contextual and interactional opportunities (Walker, 1987, p. 11). This "dynamic cultural match between teacher and student" has the potential to enhance students' academic and socio-emotional growth (Genzok, 1999, p.10).

Students' interpersonal relationships—personal connections that allow them to learn more about each other—are equally important. For example, within my school community, a lack of understanding and sensitivity existed not only between Latinx and non-Latinx students, but also within the Latinx community itself, primarily due to differences in family histories. Consider the following combinations of family origin stories: a) Parent/s and student were born in the United States, b) Parent/s and student were born outside the United States, c) Parent/s were born outside the United States and student was born in the United States. My Latinx students were cognizant of these family history differences and typically treated each other with varying degrees of respect based on an individual's origin story. Students who were born in the United States often demonstrated exclusionary behaviors toward undocumented students.

Young Adult Literature as a Means to Promote Understanding

Young adult literature (YAL) that portrays the undocumented Latinx experience is a powerful tool that has the potential to move teachers and students toward a better understanding of each other's ways of be-

ing in the world. The literature that adolescents are exposed to in middle and high school provides them with opportunities to process the complexities of lived experiences that differ from their own in the safety of their own hearts and minds. YAL not only motivates teens to read, it also enhances their comprehension skills and allows for critical text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections.

The two novels featured in this column are unique and particularly powerful. The protagonists in both stories are teens who were born and live in Juárez, Mexico. In each story, the teens try to help loved ones leave Mexico in order to gain entry into the United States. *Saint Death* (Sedgewick, 2016) and *Disappeared* (Stork, 2017) are excellent fictional, yet realistic, portrayals of the lives of empathetic characters who seek better lives in the United States.

***Saint Death* by Marcus Sedgewick (2016)**
(<http://www.marcussedgewick.com>)

Arturo lives in a small shack in Anapra (<https://www.bing.com/images/search?q=anapra+juarez&qv=anapra+juarez&FORM=IGRE>), one of the poorest neighborhoods on the outskirts of Juárez, Mexico (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciudad_Ju%C3%A1rez). Just outside of Arturo's neighborhood lies a fence, and when he looks through that fence, he can see the United States, *El Norte*. But for Arturo, *El Norte* seems like an impossible destination when he considers how difficult it is to make an honest living in Juárez. His life consists of working at the auto shop while trying to steer clear of gang members and the cartel, who have claimed Juárez for their own. As the novel begins, readers are immediately thrust into Arturo's world when he witnesses a neighbor being kidnapped from his home by a local gang. Soon after, Arturo's childhood friend, Faustino, whom Arturo hasn't seen in a year, shows up at his shack asking for Arturo's help. Arturo is shocked to learn that Faustino now has a gun and sports a tattoo on his arm that represents his allegiance to a local gang.

Arturo understands the monetary temptation of working for a gang, but he is hesitant to get involved in any plan that involves gangs or the cartel. However, when Faustino tells Arturo that he "borrowed" 1,000 dollars from a gang boss in order to purchase safe passage to the United States for his pregnant girlfriend Eva, Arturo reluctantly agrees. The money must

be replaced within 36 hours, or Faustino, and most likely Arturo, are as good as dead. Faustino's plan is to take advantage of Arturo's card-playing skills. Arturo will go to the place in Juárez where the men play Calavera (<https://marcussedgewick.me/2016/09/22/calavera/>) for money and use his card-counting skills to win the thousand dollars for his friend.

Throughout the story, Arturo and Faustino are observed by Saint Death (Santa Muerte), the holy patron and folk saint to rich and poor, prostitute and cartel boss, criminal and police chief (Woody, 2016).

Santa Muerte watches impassively as corruption, the drug trade, human trafficking, and the effects of social class inequalities engulf the people of Juárez. Will Santa Muerte come to Arturo's rescue if he prays hard enough, or should he just rely on good luck? Will she simply watch as Arturo heads toward an unhappy ending, or will she save him?

Saint Death is not a novel for the faint of heart. The story contains strong political and social themes as well as a fair amount of violence. The adolescent characters are trying to survive in an environment in which most adults in the United States could not. The urgency and panic that Sedgewick creates are palpable, largely through his brilliant use of language that feels simultaneously lyrical and harsh. *Saint Death* paints a crystal-clear picture of why so many Latinx people sacrifice so much to cross the border into the United States.

***Disappeared* by Francisco X. Stork (2017)**
(<http://www.franciscostork.com/index.php>)

Sara is a newspaper reporter in her native Juárez, Mexico. After her best friend is abducted by a local gang, Sara begins writing a column that features stories of young girls who have been abducted. One day, she receives an encrypted email in which the sender threatens to kill Sara and her family unless she stops writing about the abductions. Instead, bolstered by the hope that she may find her best friend, Sara decides to begin an investigation into who sent the email.

Sara's brother, Emiliano, is a star soccer player

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on his school's team. He is also an entrepreneur who runs his own folk-art business. Emiliano uses his bicycle to transport works created by neighborhood artisans to local shopkeepers to sell. The shopkeepers pay Emiliano a commission on each sale, which he shares with the artisans. His dream is to earn enough money to take his mother and sister to the United States, away from the dangers that surround them in Juárez. Emiliano's determination to achieve this goal is evident, but one distraction has the potential to derail his dreams. Her name is Perla Rubi, and Emiliano has a huge crush on her.

Perla Rubi seems to like Emiliano as well, and to his surprise, she invites him to a party at her ostentatious home. During the party, Perla Rubi's father asks to meet with Emiliano à la the opening scene in *The Godfather* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmX2VzsB25s>) and offers to help him with his business—an offer that promises to make Emiliano four times the amount of money he is making currently. This is an offer Emiliano can't refuse. It is then that Emiliano learns that Perla Rubi's father is an attorney for the cartel.

Sara's and Emiliano's alternating points of view provide readers with tremendous insight into their motivations. Sara's journey reads like a mystery/thriller with new secrets hiding around every corner. Emiliano's story is a sociological study that focuses on his emotional and moral struggles. *Disappeared*, like *Saint Death*, evolves into a story about sacrifice in the name of helping a loved one. Emiliano helps Sara flee to the United States in order to save her from the cartel that she is trying to expose. Once there, the two are separated, and Sara's story line disappears. Will she find safe haven in America? Will Emiliano survive in the desert, return to Juárez, be captured, or follow Sara? *Disappeared* addresses the themes of poverty, power, political corruption, greed, and love with both realism and sensitivity. Most important, the story immerses readers in Sara and Emiliano's worlds, allowing them to experience the plight of those who cross borders with the hope of a brighter future.

I asked the author, Francisco X. Stork, what inspired him to write *Disappeared*:

I started with the idea of writing a survival story about a brother and a sister crossing from Mexico into the desert of the American Southwest, but I soon became interested in the characters, in their sadness about leaving the culture they loved and the world they were leaving behind. This was

happening around the time when the presidential elections incited and revealed a surprising amount of hostility toward the undocumented Mexican immigrant. I always knew the hostility was there, but the force of it and the extent of it were a shock to me. The falsehoods and partial truths with which Mexicans were being portrayed saddened and angered me and pushed me to write a story that portrayed the complexity of Mexican society in a way that reflected my own experience. The “disappearance” of thousands of women from the streets of Ciudad Juárez is like a microcosm of the love and sadness that I feel for Mexico.

I was born in Mexico. My mother was a single mother. My adoptive father, Charles Stork, married my mother and brought me to El Paso, Texas, when I was nine years old. We lived in Ciudad Juárez for six months while my mother's visa was approved. And then growing up in El Paso, my life always included Ciudad Juárez. At that time, Ciudad Juárez and El Paso were like one big city; people traveled back and forth to shop, to get haircuts, go to the doctor. When I was in high school, many of my Friday nights were spent in the bars of Juárez. I think all of these different elements came together and coalesced inside of me when I was writing *Disappeared*. The story of Sara and Emiliano is personal in the sense that it comes out of emotions that are deeply felt and concerns that are existentially meaningful to me. But the story is not about me. *Disappeared* is the story of Sara, a young journalist who believes the truth matters, and about Emiliano, a young man who discovers a world that is a mixture of good and evil and who must choose to live in this confusing mix in a way that makes sense. (Stork, personal communication, November 26, 2017)

Connection and Understanding through Critical Reflection

“some people,
when they hear
your story,
contract.
others,
upon hearing
your story,
expand.
and
this is how
you
know.”

—nayyirah waheed

The social context within classroom settings that discussions of young adult literature create has the potential to engage students in the academic content, thus allowing them to more easily transfer and utilize new academic information (Genzuk, 1999). This

social context also makes them feel more welcomed, affirmed, respected, and valued. The following critical discussion activity is adapted from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) document, “Social Justice Teacher Education Activities/Assignments” (NCTE Conference on English Education, 2009). The activity consists of several thought and discussion prompts designed to create opportunities for students to connect with the lived experiences of characters in each story once that story has been read.

DIRECTIONS

Each prompt should be treated as an extended journal entry or extemporaneous writing exercise. Once students have completed a prompt response, they orally share their responses in groups of two to four while the teacher facilitates, moving from group to group. These small-group discussions can then grow into large-group discussions. Each time a prompt is completed, small-group discussions should take place before the next prompt is given. Note: If students choose not to respond to one of the personal connection portions of any prompt (for reasons other than lack of background or experience), allow this, as refusal is a student’s right. However, do give them the opportunity to explain why they refused.

SMALL-GROUP THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Select a character from the novel and describe his/her background, belief system, and principles. How do you think that character arrived at these belief systems and principles? Do any of your selected character’s values compare to yours? Explain.
2. Describe an episode in the novel when your character feels helpless, oppressed, desperate, or when they oppress or make someone else feel helpless. Has this ever happened to you?
3. Place yourself in your chosen character’s environment. Select two to three specific situations in the novel (student or teacher may select) and describe how you might have responded differently than your character in each situation. Provide reasons for your responses.
4. Connect two to three situations from the novel with real-world issues and events. If you have experienced or witnessed similar situations to those portrayed in the novel, feel free to share.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Encourage discussion about current perceived injustices, and give students space to voice them. Ask students to role-play scenes that involve an unjust act against someone (e.g., discrimination or bullying based on social class, national origin, language, ethnicity), and then discuss possible solutions to each situation.

Final Thoughts

In order to create safe classroom spaces, educators must take the time to foster empathy among their students. Promoting and nurturing understanding, awareness, and sensitivity to others who have had vastly different life experiences are paramount to this effort. Young adult literature that respectfully portrays the experiences of undocumented Latinx adolescents in ways that enable readers to experience verisimilitude and create opportunities for text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections is a powerful tool toward that goal.

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Notes

1. *Latinx* is a gender-neutral term that refers to individuals with cultural ties to Latin America and individuals of Latin American descent. The “x” replaces the standard male “o” and female “a” endings used in the Spanish language and is intended to be more gender inclusive. The term is being used more frequently in the United States and is “part of a linguistic revolution that aims to move beyond gender binaries and is inclusive of the intersecting identities of Latin American descendants. In addition to men and women from all racial backgrounds, Latinx also makes room for people who are trans, queer, agender, non-binary, gender non-conforming, or gender fluid” (Ramirez & Blay, 2016).
2. The term *illegal immigrant* is considered insensitive by many. Several news organizations, including the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Associated Press*, have banned the use of the term, saying that it “lacked precision and broadly labeled a large group” (Guskin, 2013). I choose to use the term *undocumented people*, which both the *Times* and *AP* have used for several

years. Some news organizations are now using the term *unauthorized* in place of *undocumented*.

- Arpaio was recently pardoned by President Donald Trump.

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