

Osorio, S.L. (2015, Fall) ¿Qué es deportar?: Teaching from students' lives. *Rethinking Schools*, 30 (1).

“¿Qué es deportar?”: Teaching from students' lives
BY SANDRA L. OSORIO



Demonstration against immigration raids, ICE office, 2014.

I was sitting around a kidney-shaped table with Alejandra, Juliana, and Lucia, 2nd graders who had chosen to read *Del Norte al Sur* (*From North to South*) by René Colato Laínez. I read the book's introduction out loud, which included the word *deportado* (deported). I asked my students: “¿Qué es deportar? ¿Ustedes saben qué significa?” (What is deported? Do you know what it means?) Lucia looked straight at me and said, “Como a mi tío lo deportaron”. (Like my uncle, they deported him.)

Our class was part of a developmental bilingual program with all native Spanish speakers. I had introduced literature discussions the previous year when I had the same students in 1st grade, but now I was carefully choosing books with themes I thought would resonate with my students' lives, including the complexities of being bilingual and bicultural. In *Del Norte al Sur*, José desperately misses his mother, who has been deported to Tijuana because she doesn't have the right papers to be in the United States. I knew that some of my students were also missing members of their families. One student's father had been deported back to Mexico and he had not seen him in years. Another student's father had separated from her mother and moved to a city more than three hours away. I hoped these two students would connect with José's problems and begin to talk about their feelings. I soon learned that many other students shared similar feelings and experiences.

Although immigration is passionately debated in the media, it is an issue often ignored in schools, even though it's central to the lived experiences of Latina/o children—even those born in the United States. This was something I didn't realize until I created space for students' lives in the curriculum.

I originally decided to teach bilingual students because of the struggles I had faced as a bilingual child myself. I attended a bilingual (Spanish-English) preschool, but when my parents enrolled me in a private, English-only kindergarten, they were told to immediately stop speaking Spanish to me because it would “confuse me.” This was surprising to my parents—I had not even entered the classroom yet. My parents made the decision to continue to speak Spanish in our household; they wanted me to be able to communicate with our extended family in Colombia. I am grateful for this decision because it allowed me to grow up bilingual and maintain ties to my bicultural heritage.

At school, I don't remember ever reading a story with a main character who was bilingual or bicultural. Because Latina/o culture and people were invisible in the curriculum, I felt I had to keep my Spanish language knowledge at home and hidden from my teachers and classmates.

I did not want another generation of students to feel like I did. I wanted to help students build and nurture their cultural and linguistic pride. I wanted to make sure that bilingual students were held to the same high expectations as other students. And I wanted them to understand that they did not have to give up their home language to be successful.

So I fulfilled my dream and became a teacher. All of my students were emergent bilinguals who spoke Spanish as their home language and were born in the United States, many in the same town where our school is located. Of my 20 students, 16 were of Mexican descent, three were Guatemalan, and one child had one Guatemalan parent and one Mexican parent.

Bilingual Isn't Necessarily Bicultural

Our program was supposed to be one of academic enrichment, using both the students' native language and English for academic instruction. The primary goal was development of biliteracy. In 2nd grade, 70 percent of the school day was to be in Spanish and 30 percent in English. But since 3rd graders in the program were not "making benchmark" on state tests, I was pressured to introduce more English in my 2nd-grade classroom.

For the first couple of years I was a rule follower. I implemented the exact curriculum passed down from the administration without question, including the required language arts curriculum. It was a scripted basal reader program—the exact same one used by the non-bilingual classrooms—only it had been translated into Spanish. Each week we read a story from an anthology and worked on the particular reading skill dictated by the manual.

This was convenient for me as a beginning teacher because it is challenging to find quality texts in Spanish. According to the Cooperative Children's Book Center, of an estimated 5,000 children's books published in the United States in 2014, only 66 were about Latinas/os. At least, I told myself, my students were reading in their native language on a daily basis.

Yet I began noticing that my students were not seeing themselves in the stories we read. The basal reader had more than 20 different stories, but only one that included a Latina/o-looking individual, and nowhere in the story did it talk about any of the complexities of being a bilingual or bicultural child.

My students were learning to read in Spanish that had been translated from the English, with texts that were Latina/o-culture free. The basal reader conveyed a clear message: Diverse experiences don't matter. Every student was treated the same, given the same story to read, and taught the same skills. There was no differentiation. There was no mirror. There was no joy.

I began to question whether what I was doing was in the best interests of my students. I realized that I had to be the one to advocate for them.

I decided to bring in more literature written by Latina/o authors about Latina/o children. I began to compile a list of books by award-winning authors on such lists as the Pura Belpré, the Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children's Book Award, and the Américas Award. I also looked for additional books by authors I already knew: Alma Flor Ada, Gloria Anzaldúa, and René Colato Laínez. In addition to *Del Norte al Sur*, the books I chose included *La superniña del cilantro*, by Juan Felipe Herrera; *Esperando a Papá*, by René Colato Laínez; *Prietita y la llorona*, by Gloria Anzaldúa; and *Pepita habla dos veces*, by Ofelia Dumas Lachtman.

The greatest challenge I faced was getting multiple copies of the books I wanted my students to read in small groups. To clear this roadblock, I applied for and received a grant to purchase books. I also borrowed copies from colleagues and scoured the shelves of multiple public libraries around the area. One way or the other, I was able to get four to five copies of each book.

I centered the literature discussion groups around four themes: Family, Cultural Stories, Language, and English. For each theme, I gave students four or five titles to choose from. I started each unit by giving a book talk in

which I shared a few passages from each of the book choices. Then I gave students time to browse through the books and fill out a ballot ranking their top choices. Each group of literature discussions was five days long, including two days of preparation and three days of group discussion that I facilitated. Students prepared for discussions by reading the story and marking the book with sticky notes. They used the sticky notes so they would remember what they wanted to say in the discussion group. To help with that process, I gave them a sheet with sentence starters.

When our classroom shifted from basal-based reading instruction to literature-based discussions, I noticed an immediate change in my students. They were more engaged in the stories. Through the personal connections they shared, I learned new things about them and their families. Our literature discussion groups became a place where we came together and shared our joys and the difficulties we were going through. It became a place where we learned that we were not alone, and that the curriculum could be a space for reflecting and holding our own experiences. Students who had been labeled with “low proficiency” in reading on the benchmark test at the beginning of the school year were often the ones talking the most during the discussions. Our conversations helped them feel more comfortable, see themselves in the curriculum, and explore their multiple identities. They were acquiring the tools and space to unpack complex issues in their lives.

Making Space for Students’ Fears

In *Del Norte al Sur*, one of the books in our Family theme, we read about José going with his father to Tijuana to visit his mother, who is staying in a women’s shelter while she tries to assemble the documents to return to the United States. José, who lives in San Diego, is able to go visit his mother on the weekends and help her with the garden at the shelter; his father pays for a lawyer to process the paperwork. Although the situation is challenging for José and his parents, it is far milder than the reality of most individuals who are deported. Most children are not able to see members of their families who have been deported for extended periods of time. Many who are deported are never able to return to the United States.

Even though the story wasn’t a perfect match to my students’ own experiences, they started making personal connections to the text. When Lucia shared that her uncle had been deported, I asked her to explain what that meant. “Es cuando la policía para a una persona y les toman los fingerpintes y después se fija en una máquina si los deportan o no, pero deportar significa que los van a mandar a México”. (It’s when the police stop someone, take their fingerprints, and look on a machine to see if they will deport them or not, but deporting means they send them to Mexico.)

Although I was excited that my students were discussing this topic and I asked questions to further the conversation, I wanted to make sure I didn’t push them into an uncomfortable or upsetting space. I paid close attention to everyone, looking for cues about how they were feeling. My ultimate goal in the introduction of these literature discussions was to get my students to develop their critical thinking skills, but first I had to make sure they felt safe enough to share their stories. Before we began the literature discussions, we had developed community norms. Two of our norms were “we feel safe” and “we respect and listen to others.” When we created and reviewed the norms, my students and I talked about not making fun of each other, not laughing at individuals who were sharing, and not interrupting.

When Lucia shared her uncle’s story, it opened up a group discussion. Alejandra told us about a time her father was stopped by the police while they were driving to a nearby city. She also told us about a time her family was driving and her mother spotted a police officer. Her mother said, “Bájense porque ahí está la policía y qué tal si nos detiene”. (Get down because the police are there and what if they stop us.) Alejandra demonstrated how she slouched down in her chair. Her mother told Alejandra and her sisters, “No escuchen lo que está diciendo el policía”. (Don’t listen to what the police officer says.) Alejandra said, “Entonces no escuchamos”. (So we didn’t listen.) As Alejandra talked, we just listened. I made sure not to ask questions because I wanted to allow Alejandra the opportunity to share just as much as she wanted to.

Staying silent took lots of practice. I was so accustomed to jumping in and guiding my students in a particular

direction. The pressures I felt to cover the curriculum and raise test scores made me want to push my students along at a faster pace. I had to change that mentality. I wanted my students to do most of the talking because I wanted to open up space for their lives. I didn't want them to feel judged. I wanted our discussions to be a place where they felt safe discussing any topic. Too often, I found my students waiting for me to speak so they could agree and repeat what I said. I wanted to move away from the idea that teachers were the only ones with answers. My students had important things to share. I wanted them to realize that their experiences could help us understand each other and the book.

Alejandra finished her story by saying that the police officer followed them home and talked again to her father when they arrived. She explained that she and her younger sister were born in the United States, so they are allowed to stay, but her parents and older sister don't have this advantage. If they are stopped again by the police or ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement), her family might be split apart. I had never seen her so vulnerable.

I turned to Juliana and asked if she had anything she wanted to share, or if she knew anyone who had been deported. She fidgeted with her hands, staring at the table, before looking up and saying "Sí, mi papá". (Yes, my dad.) Lucia nodded. "Oh, sí, ella ya nos contó la historia". (Oh, yes, she already told us the story.)

Taking Time to Listen

At one point in our discussions Lucia announced, "No me gustan los Estados Unidos para nada." (I don't like the United States at all.)

This caught me off guard. "¿Por qué?" (Why?)

Lucia said that here in the United States she felt enclosed, but in Mexico she was free to go outside every day.

Alejandra added, "Mi mamá dice que no le gusta aquí". (My mom says she doesn't like it here.) She told us about a lady who helped her mother fill out some paperwork and told her mom to call her if she ever got stopped by the police. The lady told Alejandra's mom that the police had gotten harder and that they didn't want people from Mexico. They wanted to deport everyone.

Lucia jumped in. "Sí, están mostrando mucho de eso en *Primer Impacto*, que tratan de sacar a los mexicanos". (Yes, on *First Impact*, they are showing lots of that, that they are trying to get rid of the Mexicans.) *Primer Impacto* is a popular Spanish-language, daily news program. My students were watching the media alongside their parents. This is where they were getting a lot of their information about the current political context in the United States, including hostility toward immigrants, harsh deportation policies, and family separations.

Although I felt pressure to keep the students reading and to move things along so that they could answer specific questions about the text, I resisted the temptation and asked, "¿Cómo se sienten ustedes con eso, ustedes siendo mexicanos y americanos?" (How do you feel about this, being both Mexican and American?)

Alejandra answered: "Yo me siento mal ser mexicana y americana porque mi mamá dice que si la van a deportar que no sabe a quién llevarse, porque le toca llevarse a Perla pero puede dejar a mi hermana y a mí. Y dice mi mamá que si llegan a pararla, que puede que ya nunca la veamos". (I feel bad being Mexican and American because my mom says that if they are going to deport her, she won't know who to take because she'll have to take Perla, but can leave my sister and me. And my mom says if they stop her, we might never see her again.)

Hearing Alejandra talk this way made me extremely sad. Why did a child this young have to deal with issues normally reserved for adults? When I was growing up, I didn't realize my parents were undocumented. They had overstayed the tourist visas they used to enter the United States, but I only learned about it when I was 10 years old and my parents became U.S. citizens. Both of my parents were given amnesty under the Immigrant Reform and Control Act of 1986 signed by President Reagan. I can't even imagine what it would have been like

to worry about my parents possibly not coming home.

My students' narratives shed light on the complex lived experiences they navigate on a daily basis. On the one hand, they want to be in Mexico or Guatemala with their extended families; on the other hand, they know how hard their parents are working to stay here. As a child, I had many of the same contradictory feelings. My entire family, other than my parents and brother, were in Colombia. I felt like I didn't belong here in the United States. At the end of one trip to Colombia, I cried and begged my father to leave me there to continue school. He said no, that there were more opportunities for me in the United States, but I'm not sure he realized the impact of the fact that none of my teachers or classmates acknowledged the difficulty of being in a learning environment that ignored and devalued my language and culture.

Embracing Complexity

While Lucia, Juliana, and Alejandra were reading *Del Norte al Sur*, the other literature groups were reading *La superniña del cilantro* and *Esperando a Papá*. (So many students wanted to read *La superniña del cilantro*, we ended up with two groups working with that book.) Both of these books also raised issues of family separation and the border.

Students in the group reading *Esperando a Papá* told personal stories about family members crossing the border. One day, I explained that, according to the U.S. government, it's against the law to cross the border without the right documents. I asked them what they thought about that—was it a fair law? Was it OK to break that law? Camila said, “Mi mamá y mi papá nomás cruzaron, porque querían a lo mejor ver lo que estaba aquí, pero si tú matas a alguien y te vas entonces eso es como no seguir la ley”. (My mom and dad only crossed because maybe they wanted to see what was over here, but if you kill someone and then you leave, then that's not following the law.) Camila was talking back to the dominant discourse that says it is “wrong” to cross the border without papers and expressing a more complex view of the moral issues involved.

When I brought up the same question to the whole class, the children saw both positive and negative aspects to crossing the border illegally. In terms of positive aspects, they knew and retold stories about family members coming over to find a better life or get a better job. But many of them experienced the constant fear of family members being deported, and they had heard stories about hardships in crossing the border. For example, one child said her female cousin had to cut her hair like a boy for fear of being hurt as she tried to cross over. When Eduardo talked about how hard it was for his dad to climb over the fence, Carlos looked confused. I pulled out my iPad and showed the class pictures of the fence along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Together, we read stories about immigrants to the United States from other parts of the world and the difficulties they faced, including *In English, of Course*, by Josephine Nobisso; *I Hate English!*, by Ellen Levine; and *No English*, by Jacqueline Jules. I wanted my students to understand that they shared experiences with people from other cultures, places, and times. I wanted them to see the injustices and prejudice they faced as part of a bigger pattern of power and marginalization. I tried to help them better understand these aspects by connecting them directly to the stories they shared.

For example, one day Camila told us about a conflict she and Lucia had during recess with English-speaking students from another class. Camila and Lucia were playing on top of the play structure when two girls started pushing them and calling them names. Camila said she told them “That's not right,” but they continued. Then, Camila told us, “Yo le dije a Lucia en español que mejor nos vayamos de ahí y nos fuimos.” (I told Lucia, in Spanish, that it would be better if we left and we did.) After we gave Lucia and Camila support, we talked about the lack of integration between the bilingual students and non-bilingual students at the school. We discussed what they could do to make friends from other classrooms.

Soon these conversations influenced my planning across content areas. I realized I had to make space for students' stories beyond literature discussions—in writing, math, and social studies. In social studies, for example, students and their parents became experts as we studied their home countries.

My students' stories were different from my own. Lucia's, Juliana's, Alejandra's, Eduardo's, and Camila's stories have similarities, but also differences. I realized the importance of not grouping all Latina/o narratives into one stereotypical box. Giving my students voice and exposing them to a range of multicultural literature gave us the opportunity to dig deeper and see broader vistas.

Sandra L. Osorio was an elementary bilingual teacher for eight years. She is now an assistant professor at Illinois State University.