

Healing Homes for Latinx School Communities through Critical Literacy Theory

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In this paper we detail a critical literacy unit designed to offer opportunities for conversation and healing within early elementary classrooms (pre-kindergarten through second grade), particularly within Latinx communities. These activities are inspired by a mentor text, *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales, and are designed to create a space for young students to contemplate and explore the concepts of home and safety, as well as to discuss and heal from the traumatic experiences caused by fear of home loss initiated by the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Introduction

Little Village is a predominantly Latinx neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, administrators in Little Village elementary schools were concerned ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) would secretly come to the buildings to arrest and deport undocumented persons. For teachers, these people were the parents of our students, coworkers in their education. Everyone's emotions were on high alert as administrators and families prepared for potential ICE raids. Primary school students were the unintentional recipients of adults' fear. Children may not have understood hushed parental conversations about deportation, but they could feel the fear of loss of home and security. This palpable fear affected school and classroom environments as students strove to make sense of what Donald Trump's election meant for their families, friends, and communities.

The fear and uncertainty felt in our classrooms in the wake of the 2016 election inspired us to design a healing-focused literacy unit for early childhood classrooms (specifically pre-kindergarten through second grade) called the Healing Homes for Latinx School Communities through Critical Literacy Theory. This literacy unit encourages young learners to explore and engage with concepts of safety, home, and identity in partnership with classmates and educators. Centered around the text *Dreamers* (*Soñadores* in Spanish), written and illustrated by Yuyi Morales, students will use their expert knowledge on language, culture, and traditions to discuss and create a framework in which their literacies and experiences have value within a classroom setting. This unit

includes opportunities to engage in creative writing, music exploration, and art activities, and culminates in a community-building activity in which students share their favorite projects from the unit with the larger group.

Though our curriculum was developed specifically in response to the challenges and concerns of Chicago's Latinx community, we feel these activities are widely applicable and could be used in diverse communities and educational settings. This curriculum was developed, in Garcia and Dutro's words, "to recognize the increased stakes for students and families who were already marginalized in the United States and to address the needs of all students in our English classrooms today" (2018, p. 376).

Relevant Theoretical Frameworks

The development of our unit was deeply influenced by critical literacy theory, which "involves raising awareness of and reflecting on systems of oppression in learners' lives and lived experiences and moving from there to transformative action" (Handsfield, 2016, p. 80). In this way of thinking, it is not teachers' responsibility to impart knowledge to their students, but rather to facilitate a classroom environment which values and expands the knowledge of all students, particularly as they relate to the outside world and with a lens focused on understanding and addressing societal systems.

Critical race theory also contributed significantly to the development of our project. CRT "is grounded largely on questioning of White, male, and heteronormative ways of knowing" (Handsfield, 2016, p. 92). Particularly within English classrooms, which have historically valued works by cis-

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gender white men, CRT seeks not only to decenter those texts while centering other voices, but also to question and explore why those texts have been deemed more valuable within our society. In their article “Even Cinderella is White,” authors Young, Foster, and Hines (2018) refer to critical race feminism as “a tool for understanding anti-Black female experiences in school and in particular in English education” (p. 104). They emphasize the importance of a wider representation in classrooms of stories and texts featuring Black girls specifically. Similarly, Reese (2018) writes of the need for classrooms to improve their study and representation of Indigenous peoples and communities. She mentions specifically the value of critical literacy even in early childhood to encourage “children to read between the lines and ask questions when engaging with literature: Whose story is this? Who benefits from this story? Whose voices are not being heard?” (2018, p. 390).

Literacy is often thought of as something developed and explored only within a classroom setting. If we instead conceive of literacy as a set of skills and knowledge used to navigate the world, this allows us to consider how our environments shape our literacies, and vice versa. As authors Vaughan, Woodard, Phillips, and Taylor (2018) argue, students should have opportunities “to make use of their knowledge about their own neighborhoods, positioning them as experts about the places they inhabit” (p. 27). If one of the goals of education is to enable students to be successful in the world, then we must acknowledge and seek to incorporate our students’ identities and experiences as they exist outside the classroom as well.

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Curriculum: A Healing Homes for Latinx School

Communities

With a focus on home as identity, and within the framework of critical literacy theory, we offer the following curriculum for early elementary (PK-2) classrooms. These activities are meant to be used as a framework within which educators can then further develop their own curriculum. These activities center around *Dreamers* by Yuyi Morales as a mentor text, but many activities could be adjusted to pair with other texts exploring similar themes. These activities are grounded in different subjects in order to allow for students to engage and develop multiple literacies. We also highly recommend that teachers participate in these activities and discussions alongside their students, as modeling our own vulnerabilities and literacies can encourage our students to feel more comfortable doing the same.

Mentor Text

Dreamers by Yuyi Morales tells the story of the author’s journey with her son to the United States. The text’s art and language make it clear that as an immigrant, she brings her gifts, talents, and ways of knowing in her journey to the United States. Yet the language and customs are unfamiliar, and she “made lots of mistakes.” The author and her son become *caminantes* (walkers) until they find a home within the confines of the library, an “unimaginable, unbelievable” place where books became their language and their home. It is this feeling of trust and safety that we hope to encourage and inspire in our students.

Vocabulary: immigrant, *caminantes*, *amor*, *soñadores*/
dreamers

Discussion questions:

- What are the woman’s dreams in this story?
- What does a “home” need to be safe? How does your family make home safe for you?
- What are some motifs in this book that represent home to you? (i.e., sugar skulls, heart/*corazon*, butterfly) What images/motifs would you use to represent your home?
- What does it mean to be a dreamer?
- How does the author learn the value of her voice? What does it mean to make our voices heard?
- What is the message in the text?

Supporting Activities

Letter Writing Activity

Objective: Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to teach the components of letter writing.

Students will write a letter to Yuyi Morales or an author of a comparable text. Students will write their reaction to the text and/or what the text means to them. Students may include images and visual motifs that represent their home lives. The teacher will then mail the letters to the author. (Alternatively, letters could be exchanged with another classroom at the same or a different school.)

Writing and Art Exploration

Objective: Actively engage in group reading and comprehension activities.

Centered around the question “What does home

mean to you?” students will use various art supplies to draw and label a representation of their home, including who lives there. This can mean their house, neighborhood, community, or other location signifying “home.” Students will share their illustrations with classmates. These artworks can be displayed in the classroom or bound into an anthology for all students to “check out.”

Show and Tell: Classroom Museum

Objective: Summarize and write informative non-fiction.

Students will bring culturally representative items from their home to school. Students will write a museum label to describe their artifact(s). The teacher will display these items in a classroom museum. Students will have the opportunity to explore their classmates’ artifacts.

Geography Exploration

Objective: Develop map literacy skills.

Students will explore maps of different communities, including their own, and learn about the different parts of a map (e.g., key, scale.) They will engage in small group dis-

cussions about what they see in their own communities on a daily basis. Students will then draw and label their neighborhood and/or communities. All maps will then be posted on the wall; students will discuss commonalities and recognizable landmarks as well as what is different about the maps.

Music Exploration

Objective: Develop musical literacy and relate central themes across media.

The teacher will share 2-3 examples of songs with themes related to home, identity, and/or belonging. Students will discuss common themes and what songs bring to mind the image of home for them. How does music relate to our sense of home and belonging? Students will bring in recordings of songs to share with the group that speak to these themes. In a large group the class will discuss common themes and differences and compare these themes to those discussed previously.

Language Exploration

Objective: Familiarize students with acrostic poems.

Students will read examples of acrostic poems and discuss differences and similarities to other types of poems. Students will then write their own acrostic poems using words

related to home such as family, *amor* /love, and safety. Students are encouraged to use words in any language(s) they speak. Students will share their poems with the class and discuss common themes.

Culminating Activity: Inside/Outside Circle

Objective: Build a classroom community around reading.

As a culminating activity, the use of this discussion technique allows young students to engage with several of their peers to share information gathered during this unit. Students create two concentric circles. The students in the inside circle are given the opportunity to share the Healing Homes activity of which they are most proud with a student in the outside circle. On the teacher’s signal, the outer circle moves in one direction, enabling students to engage with a new student. Students’ choice of song, art, writing, or simply a family story or tradition can be a powerful way to connect with peers and strengthen a sense of healing in their school community. (Possible extension: students will interact with 1-3 peers and then share one thing they remember from each interaction with the larger group at the conclusion of the activity.)

By highlighting and exploring texts which center Latinx experiences, and through various curricular activities to support this exploration, educators can foster spaces which value and center the identities of otherwise marginalized students.

Conclusion

Our understandings of home, safety, and belonging, as well as our ability to access them, are central to our experiences and identities. This sense of security within Chicago’s Latinx community has been repeatedly threatened since the 2016 U.S. election. The uncertainty and trauma associated with this has real and devastating impacts on students, families, and school communities. The Healing Homes curriculum seeks to increase the representation and visibility of the diverse student experiences in English classrooms, as well as to provide students with language and tools to speak about and explore their literacies and identities. By highlighting and exploring texts which center Latinx experiences, and through various curricular activities to support this exploration, educators can foster spaces which value and center the identities of otherwise marginalized students.

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