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“We Treat Them Like Animals in a Cage”: A Dialogic Exploration of *Refugee*

Rachelle Kuehl, *Virginia Tech*

Abstract

Immersion in fiction narratives like Alan Gratz’s (2017) *Refugee* can help students recognize and acknowledge our common humanity when discussed in a dialogic classroom using a critical literacy pedagogy. Following the literature on using novel discussions to help students understand pressing societal issues (e.g., Boas, 2012; Hsieh, 2012; Thein et al., 2011) and guided by critical multicultural analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009), a dialogic (Bakhtin, 1981) and critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) was used to lead a small group of sixth-grade students in biweekly discussions of *Refugee*. Prior to each of 10 sessions, students wrote dialogue journal entries in response to prompts designed to elicit critical thinking about the events depicted in the novel, which illustrates harrowing ordeals endured by fictional families facing persecution during the Holocaust, in Castro’s Cuba, and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of students’ writing and researcher field notes revealed students’ inherent compassion toward refugees and limited background knowledge of refugees’ circumstances. Rich dialogic conversations resulted in demonstrations of empathy and newfound critical knowledge about the worldwide refugee crisis.

Keywords: *refugees, empathy, immigration, dialogic pedagogy, critical multicultural analysis*

Rhetoric against immigrants is heightened in the current political climate. While the United States once rallied around the symbolic Statue of Liberty welcoming “your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” (Lazurus, 1888), this sentiment has been challenged by other rallying cries (e.g., “Build the wall”). In the United Kingdom, too, anti-immigrant rhetoric on the part of the tabloid press was considered a major impetus for Brexit (Hibberd, 2018; Hope, 2018). This political discourse perpetuates fear of foreigners and jeopardizes safety for asylum seekers, refugees, and other immigrants. Irrespective of politics, educators must make every effort to ensure young newcomers feel a sense of belonging and safety in schools.

Scholars have recognized the need to support immigrant and refugee children in schools by teaching their non-immigrant peers about the circumstances that might neces-

sitate a family's relocation to another country. Without sufficient evidence to the contrary, students might be inclined to believe the hateful rhetoric circulating in the public arena, even insofar as to bully—or simply ignore—immigrant classmates (Hope, 2008) or think of them only through a pitying lens (Hope, 2018; Maloy, 2016). This orientation may threaten their new classmates' development of a positive identity and sense of belonging (Hibberd, 2018). According to Hibberd, schools "are ideally placed to create spaces where opinions and ideas can be shared, questions asked and discussed, and dialogue . . . can take place" (p. 95). On a widespread survey, however, teachers indicated that although they wanted to teach empathy for refugees, they often did not feel confident doing so, citing a lack of adequate resources to support prolonged engagement with immigration topics as a major barrier to meaningful instruction (Hibberd, 2018).

According to psychologists, affective empathy is "sharing the emotional experiences of others by having an appropriate affective response to the other person's situation" (Batchelder et al., 2017, p. 2). Research shows immersion in fiction narratives, particularly those that provide deep portrayals of characters' thoughts and feelings, can affect people's empathetic experiences (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Papen & Peach, 2021). While reading, we react with emotions such as fear and joy in ways that mirror what the characters feel, and when the characters are different from us in some way, the experience helps us recognize and acknowledge our common humanity (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

In a dialogic classroom (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007), teachers can take a critical stance to enhance students' awareness of the influence of power in social relationships while co-constructing knowledge about the impact of societal constructs on oppressive circumstances faced by individuals (Freire, 1970). Building on research supporting the use of literature discussions in helping students develop critical thinking about rural poverty (Thein et al., 2011), the Holocaust (Hsieh, 2012), immigration (Braden, 2019), and the worldwide refugee crisis (Boas, 2012), this article explores the use of critical discussions about fictional refugees' experiences in a shared text in conjunction with teacher/student dialogue journals.

Origin of the Study

After reading Alan Gratz's (2017) *Refugee* for the first time and being captivated by its revolving three-part narrative, I began to consider how it might serve as the type of resource teachers need to frame critical discussions about refugees in response to the amplified anti-immigrant rhetoric and punitive immigration policies meant to deter people from seeking asylum in the United States and other relatively wealthy countries. *Refugee* contains three separate stories, each featuring a 12- or 13-year-old protagonist: Josef, a Jewish boy escaping Nazi Germany; Isabel, a Cuban girl escaping Castro's regime; and Mahmoud, a Muslim boy escaping war-torn Syria. The novel and its author have earned a great deal of commercial success and critical acclaim.

After reviewing the literature to ascertain how other scholars had used dialogic practices (e.g., literature circles, book groups, dialogue journaling) to engage students in critical discussions of multicultural literature, I designed this study with the following guiding questions: How do sixth-grade participants in a literature discussion group with dedicated time for teacher/student dialogue journaling respond to a novel that depicts the experiences of refugees? In what ways can writing prompts and teacher-designed discussion questions aid and/or hinder the development of empathy toward refugees and a critical awareness of the underlying power structures affecting their circumstances?

Literature Review

In this section, I provide a review of the literature related to the three primary aspects of my study: sharing literature about the experiences of immigrants and/or refugees with students, using small-group discussions to discuss politicized topics, and incorporating writing into literature discussions.

Sharing Literature About Refugee/Immigrant Experiences

First, I discuss studies that involved sharing literature about the experiences of immigrants and refugees. Salient themes from these studies include (a) the powerful role of the teacher in literature discussions, (b) students' aesthetic responses to texts, and (c) challenges to preconceived notions about immigrants and refugees.

The Powerful Role of the Teacher

In one study (Hope, 2018), elementary teachers read and led discussions about Mary Hoffman's (2002) *The Colour of Home*, a picture book about a Somali boy whose family fled their home country after an eruption of violence to seek refuge in the United Kingdom. In her analysis of students' writing and drawing in response to the book, Hope noted the "immensely powerful" (p. 309) role of the teacher, who filtered the story by continually highlighting, explaining, or excluding certain parts of the book, "overlying the story with their own preconceptions and socio-political perspectives" (p. 319). Similarly, J. Y. Park (2016) noted the heavy influence of the teacher's decisions in her study involving critical literacy analyses of graphic novels with English learner students. Throughout the study, the teacher and researcher grappled with how much background information to provide, wondering "whether and to what extent we should have taught the facts assumed by the text" (p. 101).

Students' Aesthetic Responses to Texts

Papen and Peach (2021) looked at students' embodied responses to a shared reading of *The Colour of Home*. An analysis of a videorecording of a class session demonstrated students' affective reactions to learning about what life can be like for refugees, which prompted them to ask questions and engage in critical analysis of the situation represented in the text. The authors noted incidences of "collisions" (p. 72) between the children's personal worldviews (i.e., that people generally aim to coexist peacefully) and their newfound understandings of war that were reflected in students' verbal and nonverbal expressions of emotions, demonstrating that "critical literacy includes and requires" (p. 72) an aesthetic engagement (Rosenblatt, 1995) with a text.

In another study, Maloy (2016) facilitated discussions of graphic novels featuring immigrant characters with students who had recently immigrated to the United States, aiming to discover their impressions of the depiction of immigrant characters. Students found resonance with many aspects of the text, such as feeling uncomfortable in a new school when people have difficulty pronouncing their names, struggling to adapt to a new culture, and seeking support from people who had immigrated before them. Because the students generally felt the graphic novels accurately represented their experiences and underscored the reality that "the immigrant experience" can be very different for different people, the study showed how the sharing of this type of literature can help immigrant students feel understood.

Similarly, Braden (2019) introduced picture books about immigration to support her fifth-grade students, almost all of whom were from Latinx immigrant families, follow-

ing the surge in hateful rhetoric against immigrants following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Braden found that her students seemed to feel a sense of relief at being able to read about and discuss issues that often hit close to home (e.g., threats of deportation, concerns for family members living in Mexico and elsewhere), and they understood from a very personal standpoint why someone would risk being caught crossing the border illegally to seek a better life for their families.

Challenges to Preconceived Notions

With a separate group of “non-ELL” students (those who did not receive support as English learners), Maloy (2016) found that discussions of the same graphic novel texts challenged students’ preconceived notions about immigrants, including an overarching belief that immigrants willingly leave their home countries to seek a better life and that immigrants’ lives were fundamentally better in their new places of residence. While gaining knowledge about the hardships often faced by immigrant families helped “disrupt the commonplace” (Lewison et al., 2002), Maloy found that discussions did not go far enough from a critical literacy standpoint in that they did not help students reach Lewison and colleagues’ other three dimensions of critical literacy: interrogating multiple viewpoints, focusing on the sociopolitical, and taking action.

Small-Group Literature Discussions

Discussing literature can guide students toward deeper awareness, understanding, and acceptance of people’s life experiences and culture (Wiesendanger & Tarpley, 2010). In this section, I look specifically at studies involving ongoing small-group discussions, sometimes referred to as literature circles, which are broadly defined as small, student-led groups who gather to discuss a common text (Daniels, 2002). Themes from this group of articles include (a) students’ increased understanding of social justice issues, (b) the need for teacher guidance, and (c) inspiring action among students.

Students’ Increased Understanding

In her study, Boas (2012) guided students through reading, viewing, and discussing nonfiction texts to build background knowledge about human rights issues related to refugees before assigning refugee-themed novels to be discussed in literature circles. In response to the texts, students demonstrated developing understanding, with one student writing, “I feel like I am getting a real picture (of) what life can be like for refugees. I am thinking of refugees as real people and wondering what I would want for my family in that situation” (p. 25). Likewise, a student in a study by Ruday et al. (2021) read, wrote about, and discussed a novel featuring a teenage girl who discovers she’s an undocumented immigrant and now fears deportation. The student wrote, “I learned so much about what that experience was like for her and how hard it must have been and [I] really felt like I was there with her, like she was my friend” (p. 7). In a study by Hsieh (2012), eighth graders read books in which the main characters experience oppression, then compared their situations with that of Anne Frank, the famous Dutch girl who lived in hiding during the Holocaust. Hsieh wrote, “By examining the ways in which young people in literature dealt with oppressive circumstances . . . my students responded with indignation, insight, and a sense of the importance of connecting characters’ experiences with their emergent identities” (p. 48).

Need for Teacher Guidance

In their study of literature circles about texts with themes surrounding social class and rurality, Thein and colleagues (2011) found that without direct teacher leadership, the students’ discussions focused on personal reactions and interpretations that often “reinforced

rather than challenged common storylines and myths about social class in the United States” (p. 19). If critical examination is the pedagogical goal, they concluded, students need more support in the form of active teacher participation to consider alternate stances and move beyond their initial, personal interpretations.

Inspiring Action

With her fifth-grade students in a predominately White suburban community, Mevissen (2017) formed book groups in which students read social justice-themed literature to help them understand “the social, political, and moral conditions under which people around the world live” (p. 27). She focused on two groups who each chose to read L. S. Park’s (2010) *A Long Walk to Water*, and her results suggest that book groups with a social justice focus can influence student empathy, but it depends on the individual students’ investment in the project, previous experiences, and interest in acting on their newfound understandings through civic engagement. Similarly, Soares (2010) investigated the use of literature discussion groups to provide differentiated instruction to gifted sixth-grade students, seeking to discover how collaborative reading about social issues could bring about critical awareness alongside enhanced literacy learning. Students read and discussed multiple middle grade novels, and Soares noted that “as the students engaged in texts heavily-laden with issues of democracy, freedom, equity, and social justice, critical conversations about silenced voices and marginalized groups grew into sharper focus” (p. 181), with students reflecting on ways they could take action to spur positive change.

Responding to Text in Writing

Writing to support literature discussions happened in multiple studies (e.g., Braden, 2019; Ruday et al., 2021) in various ways. For example, Braden (2019) used an online platform for students to respond in writing to the shared text. She created writing prompts based on previous discussions and students’ previous written responses, finding that the writing component of the project “offered avenues into discussion for students who were often reticent to share” (p. 478). Braden drew from Lewison et al. (2002) in noting that reading/hearing carefully selected stories and discussing them was not enough to ensure critical engagement: “Children need the opportunity to linger within a text . . . to reread, write, and transmediate what these texts mean” (Braden, 2019, p. 478). With that same thought in mind, Ruday and colleagues (2021) engaged students in an iterative process of reflection writing and small-group discussions to stimulate students’ thinking about books beyond what would have been achieved using either modality alone.

Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals provide a means for students and teachers to communicate in writing, generally about a topic of the student’s choosing. Stillman and colleagues (2014) viewed dialogue journaling, with “humility and open-mindedness among its cornerstones” (p. 146), as a means of disrupting power imbalances between teacher and students by validating students’ important role in co-constructing knowledge. Bode (1989) considered dialogue journal writing to be liberating because it breaks down the system that positions the teacher as imparter of knowledge (Freire, 1970). Instead, teacher and students are co-participants in the act of dialogue journaling, a process through which a trusting rapport between the two parties is often built and nurtured (Konishi & Park, 2017; Kuehl, 2018). In her study of dialogue journaling in a high school class for English learners, Linares (2019) found that “empathetic and humanizing relationships were established” (p. 528). Done well, “dialogue journals treat students as worthy and whole humans” and “frame them as capable, full of resources” (Stillman et al., 2014, p. 159). To encourage students’ willingness to take risks

in expressing themselves through dialogic writing, teachers must be prepared to make a substantial investment of time in crafting genuine, meaningful responses (Peyton & Reed, 1990; Staton, 1987), a commitment that requires the belief that students bring valuable insights into the dialogic exchange in which teachers and students are both positioned as learners (Bode, 1989; Konishi & Park, 2017; Stillman et al., 2014).

Dialogism and Critical Multicultural Analysis as Theoretical Framing

The overarching framework for this study relied on Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic pedagogy and Bothelo and colleagues' (Bothelo & Rudman, 2009; Bothelo et al., 2014) critical multicultural analysis.

Dialogic Pedagogy

Based on the writings of Russian literary theorist Bakhtin (1981) and influenced by Freire's (1970) critical literacy, a dialogic classroom involves questions asked and responded to by all participants, the encouragement of multiple perspectives, and the agreement that learning is an evolving, nonstatic process (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Stewart, 2019). In other words, dialogic teaching upturns the "banking model" of education that Freire described as one in which the teacher simply "deposits" knowledge into the minds of students and that has tended to dominate U.S. classrooms in recent years due to pressure from the overabundance of standardized testing (Stewart, 2010). In contrast, an attitude of inquiry pervades dialogic classrooms, where authentic questions—rather than questions with predetermined "correct" answers—are posed by both teachers and students (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Stewart, 2010). Moments of disequilibrium, or "wobble" (Fecho, 2011; Fecho et al., 2021), are embraced as "opportunities to learn from the tension that occurs when competing ideologies clash" (Stewart et al., 2020, p. 53). That is, in a dialogic classroom, discussions will likely challenge students' and teachers' existing ideas, causing both parties to feel uncertain at times (Fecho et al., 2021), requiring them to dig deeper, questioning what they thought they knew and stretching to incorporate new information.

Critical Multicultural Analysis

Critical multicultural analysis (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) defines multiculturalism as moving "beyond merely introducing affirmation and social difference" (i.e., differences in race, class, and gender) by examining the way power is exercised in a text (Botelho et al., 2014). In allowing readers to assess the representations of power in a work of literature, critical multicultural analysis can "unmask dominant ideologies so [readers] may connect textual messages with issues of social change and justice" (Malcolm & Lowery, 2011, p. 46).

One important component of critical multicultural analysis is critiquing the authorship of stories with the contention that "insider" authors and illustrators, or those who belong to the particular cultural group being depicted in the text, are "more versed or have more access to culturally specific discourses and histories" (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p. 104) and are thus more suited to tell those stories (Seto, 2003; Woodson, 2003). This study did not include such a critique of author Alan Gratz's relationship to the cultural groups portrayed in *Refugee*. Though I could find no indication as to whether Gratz identifies as Jewish, *Refugee* received the National Jewish Book Award and the Sydney Taylor Book Award, two prominent awards that honor "outstanding books for children and teens that authentically portray the Jewish experience" (Association of Jewish Libraries, 2020, para. 1) and "outstanding English-language books of Jewish interest" (Jewish Book Council, 2020, para. 1). Because the Jewish literary community endorsed Gratz's work, I felt it was likely he had done due diligence in providing an authentic representation of the Cuban and Syrian

characters' experiences as well, although nothing on his author website indicates he—a White American—is a part of either cultural group. Instead, I decided to devote more attention to the power imbalances among characters and historical figures in the book itself.

Methods

In this section, I detail methods used to conduct the study, including recruitment of participants, collection of data, and data analysis.

Participants

I first read *Refugee* in the spring of 2018 and was moved by its riveting portrayal of the refugee experience. As a former teacher (a White woman), I was interested in researching how discussions of this novel might counter the prevalent hateful rhetoric against immigrants to the United States, but while in pursuit of my doctorate, I had no students of my own with whom to examine these ideas. As such, to find participants for this project, I reached out to the superintendent of a nearby school district located in a small city in the southeastern United States, who expressed interest. I then met with two sixth-grade teachers who agreed to dismiss a small group of students from class twice per week for 5 weeks to participate in the study. Although I had not specified the traits of the students with whom I wanted to work, the teachers chose six students they described as avid readers, and we planned to have the students meet me in an unused classroom to hold our discussions.

Four of the students were girls and two were boys. Because every reader brings their own identity, cultural background, and previous experiences into their transaction with a text (Rosenblatt, 1995), and because *Refugee* is a novel about persecution faced by characters due to their religious, cultural, and national identities, I asked students' parents to identify their race or ethnicity on a permission form. Three students were Black, one was multiracial, one was of Mexican heritage, and one was White. Each student's self-selected pseudonym, gender, and race or ethnicity is listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Pseudonym, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity of Students

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/ethnicity
Katie	Female	Black
Jonae	Female	Black and Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, and Filipino)
David	Male	Latinx (Mexican)
Tanner	Female	White
Jabree	Female	Black
Asanti	Male	Black

Like Braden (2019), I was keenly aware of the highly charged political environment surrounding immigration and thus did not wish to pressure students or families to

¹ In later conversation, the students' English teacher told me she selected these particular students because she expected they would enjoy the project and be "good participants" (i.e., they would complete all assigned reading on time). Throughout the project, she continually told me—via email and in passing—that the students were very excited about the book and about our conversations.

reveal personal information. Accordingly, I did not ask about students' personal immigration status, but later learned that David's parents had immigrated from Mexico before he was born; none of the other students gave any indication of being first- or second-generation immigrants, and none of the students were refugees.

Data Generation

First meeting. After introducing ourselves at our first meeting, I asked students to write reflections about their views on immigration considering the following questions:

- Describe what you know about immigration. For example, why do people immigrate to the United States? What does it mean to be a refugee?
- What challenges do refugees face? How can they overcome these challenges?
- Do you think the U.S. government should provide a place of safety and services to refugee families? Why or why not?

Students used school-issued Chromebook computers to type their responses on Google Docs they shared with me electronically. I set a timer for 15 minutes and wrote field notes on my own laptop alongside the students. Afterward, for the remaining 30 minutes of our session, I invited students to share what they wrote, then I introduced *Refugee*, explained the project, and distributed a reading schedule. I invited students to jot down questions, circle unfamiliar words, and underline meaningful phrases as they read.

Immediately after the first meeting, I finished my field notes, then printed students' initial reflections and wrote reflective memos (Saldaña, 2016) about their demonstrations of empathy and critical thinking. I also responded to students' writing on their Google Docs, a practice I continued throughout the project.

Subsequent meetings. We proceeded to meet twice weekly as planned, discussing approximately 40 pages of text per meeting. Because other researchers (e.g., Thein et al., 2011) advised against using a traditional literature circle format when discussing sensitive, politically charged issues, I considered ours a "discussion group" and used my own active participation as a form of scaffolding. Prior to each session, I reread the assigned pages, chose three writing prompts from the list I had prepared in advance, and added them to students' Google Docs. Writing prompts and discussion questions aligned with recommendations for empathy building from *Doing Good Together* (2017), a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to help families raise compassionate, engaged children," and all questions were open-ended (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Stewart, 2010). Some questions presented a situation from the book and asked students if they had experienced something similar (e.g., What is happening when the explosion in Mahmoud's apartment occurs? Describe how Mahmoud and his family must have felt. Have you ever had a sudden, unexpected event change your day [or your life]? How did you cope?). Other questions asked students to put themselves in a character's shoes, imagining how they would feel in that circumstance (e.g., When Josef and the other children went below deck, they saw Nazi slogans posted and heard crew members singing "The Horst Weasel Song." If you were in Josef's position, how would you have felt hearing them refer to you as "Jewish rats"?). I provided corresponding page numbers with each question so students could refer to the text when answering, and although the writing prompts were offered, I repeatedly told students they were free to deviate from them if they wished, in accordance with Stillman and colleagues' (2014) advice about dialogue journals.

²In a previous article about this study that focused more on my own teaching decisions throughout the project (Kuehl, 2021), I described the moment in which David revealed this information.

After each session’s writing time (15 minutes), I offered students the opportunity to share their thoughts about what they had written, then I continued to guide a conversation about the text for the remainder of the session (30 minutes). I invited students’ questions and reflections, and I had with me the discussion points I had prepared previously in case I needed them to help move the conversation along. I also briefly defined unfamiliar words to enhance students’ comprehension of the text. Following each meeting, I recorded field notes, wrote memos about the discussion and about students’ writing, and wrote short responses on their Google Docs.

Final meeting. On our last day, I asked students to respond in writing to the following questions:

- What did you learn about refugees after reading this book?
- Did reading this novel help you feel more connected to the experiences of refugees? How?
- How does the U.S. government treat refugee families? Do you think U.S. policies should be changed? Why or why not?
- Is there anything that you can do to help refugees? What might you like to try?

Assessment of Empathy

To determine whether participating in the project would have an impact on students’ empathy, I created a rubric (Table 2) to use in assessing students’ dialogue journal entries.

Table 2

Dialogue Journal Rubric

	Minimal (0–1)	Moderate (2–3)	Strong (4–5)
Demonstration of empathy	Minimal expressions of empathy toward immigrants, refugees, and/or story characters are present, OR an overt lack of empathy is demonstrated.	Moderate expressions of empathy toward immigrants, refugees, and/or story characters are present.	Significant expressions of empathy toward immigrants, refugees, and/or story characters are present.
Critical thinking/critical literacy	Reflections demonstrate minimal critical thinking and/or critical literacy skills (e.g., viewing story events from a single perspective, demonstrated lack of understanding of power imbalances, no connections made between the story and real life).	Reflections demonstrate moderate critical thinking and/or critical literacy skills (e.g., beginning to view story events from two perspectives, awareness of power imbalances, making connections between the story and real life).	Reflections demonstrate strong critical thinking and/or critical literacy skills (e.g., viewing story events from multiple perspectives, unpacking power imbalances, making significant connections between the story and real life).

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of the project, I conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of students' writing and my own field notes to evaluate students' empathy and critical thinking with regard to immigration. In a previous article (Kuehl, 2021), I focused primarily on my own field notes and memos to better understand the "teacher moves" I made while attempting to enact a critical pedagogy. In this article, I focus more specifically on the students' dialogue journal entries, though some explication of our verbal discussions is included.

To determine whether students' expressions of empathy and critical thinking may have increased as a result of the project, I used the simple rubric I created (Table 2) to assess students' dialogue journal entries. Recognizing the need to establish reliability for the rubric, I asked a fellow teacher to rate 20% of the students' writing samples, and upon comparing our scores, I found that we came within one point (on a 5-point scale) 79% of the time, which was enough consistency to validate my rubric as an assessment instrument for the purposes of this project (Stemler, 2004). We resolved instances of disagreement through discussion (e.g., the other teacher had assigned lower scores for some elements if the student did not answer all of the questions, but then I explained that I had not required/expected students to address each question in their responses).

I next entered students' dialogue journal entries into a data table that included the writing prompts to which they responded. Having already read the responses, I had a general idea of what students had written, so I established six *a priori* codes (Saldaña, 2016; see Table 3) applicable to my inquiry.

Table 3

A Priori Codes and Abbreviations

Code	Abbreviation
Expressions of empathy: Showing compassion	E:C
Expressions of empathy: Comparisons to their own lives	E:OL
Story comprehension: Solid understanding of story events	SC:U
Story comprehension: Misunderstandings	SC:M
Real life: Solid understanding of historical/current events	RL:U
Real life: Misunderstandings	RL:M

I coded each line of each response, occasionally applying two codes to the same phrase (for example, in Session 4, Tanner wrote about the Nazis' desire to have only one race; I coded this line as both SC:U and RL:U because it reflected Tanner's understanding of both the story and of real-life historical events). Then, I copied and pasted the coded phrases into a new table, organized by code.

Next, I reread my field notes and excerpted passages that pertained to the established codes, looking especially for accounts of student utterances indicative of empathy and critical thinking. I organized them by code into a separate table, then I reread both tables,

jotting notes in the margins. From those notes, I discovered five salient themes, and my findings are organized accordingly.

Findings

This study was an examination of sixth-grade students' responses to *Refugee*, a novel about three fictional teens—Mahmoud, Isabel, and Josef—who are each seeking refuge in a new place due to conflicts in their countries of origin (Syria, Cuba, and Germany, respectively). I hoped to discover whether the use of writing prompts and discussion questions would aid and/or hinder students' development of empathy and critical awareness. In doing so, I found that students (a) gained critical knowledge about historical and present-day events, (b) showed compassion for refugees and believed the U.S. government should provide them with more assistance, (c) empathized with story characters but realized they could never fully understand their plight, (d) demonstrated partial understanding of complex problems, and (e) thought critically about authorial choices when faced with disruptions in their assumptions about story structure.

Gaining Critical Knowledge

Though current U.S. policy on immigration was not addressed in this book, I wanted students to consider how their own government treated immigrants and refugees with the hope that reading about Josef, Isabel, and Mahmoud might help them develop empathy and a compassionate stance toward people in crisis. On the first day, however, I realized that although the students had heard of immigration, they had no schema for the word *refugee* despite there being a fairly large refugee population in their community. Consequently, I offered a brief definition during our first session as they began writing their responses, and each student wrote something very similar to what I had told them, illustrating the power I had in conveying information (Hope, 2018; Kuehl, 2021).

Concurrent with this study, the students were learning about the Holocaust in their history class, thus gaining knowledge from other sources (Botelho & Rudman, 2009) about the historical context of Josef's story alongside their reading of *Refugee*. As a result, they came to each discussion session reporting new, devastating information about Hitler's treatment of the Jews. Students' developing background knowledge helped them comprehend events occurring in the novel; simultaneously, reading Josef's fictional story helped them better understand the real-life historical events. Our discussions clarified certain facts, like the way non-Jewish German youth were compelled to serve in Hitler's Youth Army, and the novel's descriptions of Josef's bar mitzvah and a Jewish funeral at sea provided more information about Jewish culture and traditions. And seeing how Josef's father became consumed with paranoia after returning from Dachau helped the students appreciate just how horrifically Holocaust victims had been treated.

With the other two storylines, students had virtually no background knowledge from which to draw when discussing why Isabel's family needed to flee Castro's Cuba and why Mahmoud's family had to escape Syria and the terror caused by President Bashar al-Assad; they had simply never heard of either situation. Therefore, I needed to explain enough for the students to follow along with the story, and I was acutely aware of the power my words held as essentially the sole source of information about both events (Hope, 2018; Kuehl, 2021; J. Y. Park, 2016). Had time allowed, it would certainly have been preferable to engage the students in further research, per the critical multicultural analysis framework (Botelho & Rudman, 2009).

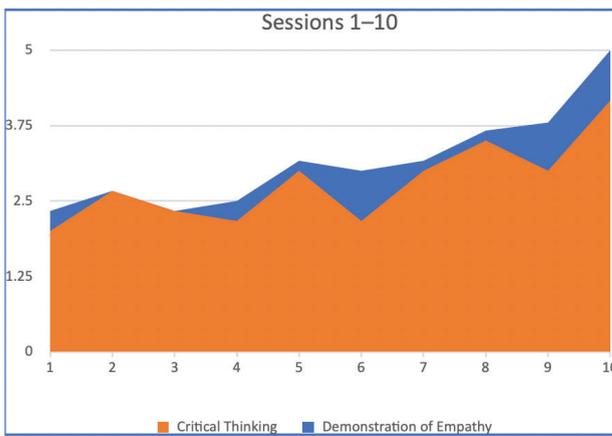
Showing Compassion for Refugees and Desiring Change

Throughout the project, students exhibited abundant compassion toward refugees. In their initial responses, for example, Jabree wrote that refugees are “people just like us,” and Asanti wrote that “refugees are facing so much and need support.” Similarly, David wrote during Session 8, “refugees should not be treated like prisoners. [They] should be treated nice and fair like any other person living on this planet we call earth.” In fact, no student said or wrote anything during the project that could be construed as having any animosity toward immigrants or any lack of caring or compassion.

Across the project, I found that the students’ average empathy and critical thinking scores stayed relatively steady, each with a general upward slope (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Average Scores on Dialogue Journal Rubric



However, I realized that the content of students’ writing depended largely on the writing prompts I presented to them. Students would have had more of a chance to show empathy, for example, on a question about how the characters must have felt when they had to leave all their belongings behind when fleeing their homelands (Session 3) than on a question that asked them to describe the tent city Mahmoud and his family came across when entering Turkey (Session 4).

In light of the upward slope with regard to critical thinking, I reviewed the writing prompts I offered for each session, and I do not necessarily think the prompts given toward the end were more suited to elicit critical thinking in the way I described it on the rubric (i.e., viewing story events from multiple perspectives, unpacking power imbalances, and/or making significant connections between the story and real life). Instead, I believe the increase in scores may be attributed to the students’ evolving knowledge of the situations depicted in the book as the project proceeded. For example, in Session 2, I asked students to consider why Mahmoud didn’t help a boy he saw being robbed on the streets of his hometown, Aleppo. At this point, the students likely did not understand enough of the unfamiliar situation to see multiple perspectives (e.g., that the boy being robbed needed help, but that Mahmoud’s interference—because of the power imbalance between himself and the older boys—would likely not have helped at all and only caused more suffering). After having

been engaged in the story for several weeks, however, students' increased familiarity with the complex situation Mahmoud faced may have positioned them to respond more critically to a question posed in Session 8 about whether refugees like Mahmoud, who broke the law by crossing national borders illegally, should be treated the same as other prisoners. Whereas they responded from a singular perspective to a similar question near the beginning of the project (e.g., that all people who break the law should face the same consequences), they considered the question from multiple perspectives later in the project (e.g., that the laws may have been unfair to the refugees, or that they were forced to break the law to try to save their families' lives and thus should not be severely punished).

Regarding a desire for change in U.S. policies, students were aware of the then-current president's desire to "build the wall" to keep out immigrants, and none of them seemed to agree with his position (as evidenced, at times, by students shaking their heads and rolling their eyes when his policies were mentioned). Though a few students acknowledged that some Americans felt threatened by the perceived danger immigrants might bring, all six students, when asked, said they believed the government should do more to help refugees. Tanner, for example, wrote in her initial reflections that the United States

should provide safety, homes, and food to the refugees because you never know what happened to them. They could be terrified because of what happened back in their country, so the government should give them what they need to stay here while this madness is happening in their country.

Especially since I was a guest in the school and not the students' own teacher, I took care not to present my own political opinions as facts (Kuehl, 2021); however, I felt it was appropriate to report immigration-related news that happened during the course of our project. For example, when Mahmoud's family tried to cross through Hungary on their journey to seek asylum in Germany, they encountered Hungarian soldiers installing razor-wire fencing to block Syrians from crossing their borders. During the discussion of this section (Session 8), I told students about a news report I saw that morning featuring Donald Trump touring a newly installed barrier at the U.S.-Mexico border that included razor-wire deterrents (CBS News, 2019). In it, Mr. Trump declared that the United States was "full" and that many of the people claiming to be refugees were "gang members" trying to enter the United States as part of a "scam." Just days earlier, he had threatened to close the entire southern border (Tankersly & Swanson, 2019), and I relayed this information as well. Just before the project's end, Attorney General William Barr announced anyone entering the United States outside of designated checkpoints "must" (not "may," as was indicated by previous policy) be detained until a decision was made about their legal status (Romo & Rose, 2019). Since Mahmoud and his family were likewise detained in a facility that seemed very much like a prison, I felt it was prudent to inform students that similar events were happening in our own country in real time.

When I asked on the last day, "How does the U.S. government treat refugee families?" students gave definitive answers. Tanner wrote, "They treat them awfully and people should stand up for what is right." Katie wrote, "People in the government don't know their struggles. They think refugees are here . . . to cause conflict when that really isn't the case at all." Though I had not mentioned the events of the previous summer (when families were separated at the border and children were kept in cages), David wrote, "It is unfair that [refugees] go through struggles and we still treat them like animals in a cage." He was likely referring to a scene in *Refugee* when soldiers at the Hungarian detainment facility threw rations to asylum seekers as if they were dogs, but the similarities between David's

response to this fictional account and news reports from the summer of 2018 in the United States (Desjardins et al., 2018) were nonetheless striking. Jabree's response was most blunt: "I think the government treats refugees like trash."

Realizing Understanding Has Limits

Throughout this project, students showed compassion toward refugees and an understanding of the common humanity between themselves and both real and fictional refugees. They acknowledged the hardships endured by refugees and recognized refugees would not choose to make dangerous journeys like those described in the novel if they had any other options. Students also demonstrated empathy by relating to the story characters on a personal level—by putting themselves in characters' shoes and describing how they would feel in similar situations. For example, when I asked students if they had any big dreams for their lives, like Isabel's friend Ivàn, who wanted to become a professional baseball player, they shared their dreams of becoming a math expert, a cosmetologist, and a student at the University of North Carolina. When I asked what special possession they would hate leaving behind if they had to vacate their home suddenly (like Isabel had to leave her beloved trumpet), they mentioned a bicycle, a piano, a stuffed bear, and a locket necklace. After we read the section where Mahmoud and his family were reunited after having lost one another (Session 6), Tanner wrote, "I felt relieved because if my family was separated, I would be freaking out because you like love them and stuff, so you would miss them."

In the novel, there were times when each of the main characters wished to remain invisible, yet other times when they longed to be seen. When I asked students if they could relate to these feelings (Session 2), David wrote, "Sometimes I want to be invisible because I feel shy most of the time," a shyness that was evident throughout the project. In his final reflections (Session 10), Asanti shared how he, too, felt "like Mahmoud at the beginning of the story—I'm under the radar." In describing himself as "just a sixth grader who can't even speak loud enough for others to hear me," Asanti revealed a sense of powerlessness in the face of refugee suffering, a sentiment shared by each of the novel's main characters.

Students expressed a desire for people in power to think about how they would feel in situations experienced by refugees. For example, in her response for Session 9, when I asked whether students thought U.S. citizens should help refugees the way Austrians did in the novel, Jabree wrote,

If you were in need of food, water, and other supplies and places to sleep, I'm pretty sure you would try to go to another country where you [would be] in good hands and people [could] care for you and your needs, especially if you had toddlers and children with you.

Similarly, when I asked students what they thought of the smugglers who provided items to the Syrian refugees at exorbitant costs, Jonae wrote, "People who help others that are desperately in need shouldn't expect so much from them in return. [They] should be more concerned about their safety instead of the profit."

Overall, although students empathized with characters in the novel, they showed maturity in expressing an inability to ever truly understand what victims of great suffering had experienced and an acknowledgment of the privilege they had as Americans. In her final reflections, for example, Jonae wrote,

I will never be able to fully understand it, how bad they felt and how hard it was to let someone go they really loved, trying to make their way to freedom. I will never be able to feel that type of way because I live in a society where I don't

have to worry about those type of situations. I am so lucky I live in the type of environment I do live in.

Partially Understanding Complex Problems

Throughout the study, students seemed to understand, for the most part, the complex decisions characters in the story faced. For example, during a scene where an inspector was coming through to ensure all the Jewish passengers aboard the *St. Louis* were healthy enough to disembark in Cuba, Josef's father started to panic. Realizing his father's demonstration of mental illness could cause him to (eventually) be sent back to a concentration camp, Josef slapped his father and told him, untruthfully, that the inspector was a Nazi soldier and he must remain perfectly calm or face immediate arrest. In her response (Session 5), Jonae wrote, "I don't think it's right to smack an adult in the face, out of respect. But, in that situation, Josef knew he had to get his father back in shape." Katie agreed: "It was the only thing he could do in the moment." Jabree, too, felt it was the right choice in the moment, but she also recognized the hurt Josef had caused when, later, his father realized Josef had lied: "Josef felt like he had broken a very, very bad promise and lost his dad's trust. Josef felt disappointed he had let his father down." Perhaps with more age and experience, students would have been able to articulate the impossible position Josef had been in when both his mother and father were unable to fulfill their parental duties while the threat (and real, unimaginable danger) of the Nazis was ever present. Though Josef did feel incredibly guilty for misleading his father after he had suffered such trauma, the power differential between a 13-year-old Jewish boy and the enormity of Hitler's influence was far too much to overcome, and I was not certain the students fully comprehended that dynamic.

Another time, when Isabel's family chose to board a makeshift boat with their neighbors to begin a 90-mile journey across the ocean (Session 4), I asked students what factors were at play and whether they would have made the same choice. Tanner responded with a pro/con list: "Pros: her dad would be safe . . . they would have a better life . . . they would be able to get more food. Cons: you could die on the trip . . . all of their family [would be] in danger and not just her dad." Katie wrote, "I think I would've risked everything to try for a better life because I wouldn't want to live somewhere where I don't have food or where I can't do anything I want because of a dictator." Only Asanti said he would have stayed in Cuba to avoid the risk, but he did not address the likelihood of Isabel's father being imprisoned for having spoken out against Castro.

In Isabel's story, there was continuous conflict between her father, who would have faced prison in Cuba, and her grandfather, Lito, who did not think leaving Cuba was worth the risk. Once they started out on the journey, there was a harrowing moment when Lito yelled for the travelers to turn on a light so an approaching tanker vessel would see them and avoid smashing into their tiny boat. Papi, Isabel's father, refused to do so because of the certainty that the sailors aboard the ship, if they saw the travelers, would capture them and send them back to Cuba. During our discussion (Session 4), Jonae wondered why they didn't turn on the light and hope the other boat would see them and let them continue on their way, so I had to clarify that under maritime law, the sailors would have been compelled to take them aboard their ship if they were seen. Later (Session 8), when the group had almost reached the Miami coast but the U.S. Coast Guard threatened to capture them, Lito jumped into the water, knowing the sailors would have to save him from drowning, giving the others just enough time to swim to shore and land in the United States with "dry feet." When discussing this section, some of the students said this was a good choice, in part because the family could always reunite with Lito later on. Realizing they did not grasp the full extent of the

grandfather's sacrifice, I had to clarify that due to his advanced age and the restrictions against travel between the United States and Cuba in the 1990s, there was almost no chance Isabel and Lito would ever see one another again.

In our final session, when I asked students if there was anything they could do to help refugees, most of them mentioned donating food and blankets and helping them find shelter. Tanner mentioned writing letters and starting a protest, and Jonae wrote of her intention to grow up and schedule "a one-on-one conversation" with the future president of the United States to ask him or her to support refugees. In an impassioned final plea, Jonae pointed out that eventually, America's "cup" will be full "and reached its point where you can't fill it up anymore, then there [would be] no other way we could take in refugees," at which point the president could sign an "agreement paper" with another world leader to purchase more land to house them. Her words made me realize she had likely been picturing all along that the reason some Americans did not want to welcome refugees was purely a matter of a space deficit.

Thinking Critically About Authorial Choices

During our discussions, I often asked students to predict what would happen next in the novel. Specifically, did they think the characters would reach their destinations? Though the descriptions of crossing the ocean in both Isabel's and Mahmoud's stories were quite terrifying, the students reported not feeling too concerned about the protagonists' survival. When we finished one section of text (Session 5) with a cliffhanger that left Mahmoud in serious peril at sea, Asanti, with his book held open and pointing to the second half, said that he knew Mahmoud would be OK because, as we could see, there was a lot of story left to tell. When Mahmoud's baby sister, Hana, was separated from the family during that experience, most of the students, like Jabree, predicted that "the family will reunite with Hana and they will all be back together again." David, in fact, wrote, "I think she survived because most books end with a happy ending."

Much to the students' surprise, the book ended without revealing what had happened to Hana, but the students held out hope that the family would reunite one day. According to Botelho et al. (2014), such an "open closure" to a story aligns with critical multiculturalism in that it "creates a space to question the ideologies embedded in the story" (p. 45). A bit earlier in the novel, however, the students' assumptions about the way stories should work were completely disrupted when Isabel's best friend, Ivàn, was killed by a shark shortly before the group would have reached the United States. "I was surprised," wrote Jabree, "because I thought the Castillos and Isabel's family were going to be surviving refugees . . . instead of a sad ending where Ivàn dies and [does] not live with his best friend." Tanner expressed feeling as though the author had violated an unwritten agreement not to include a major character's death in a children's novel. "I was scared," she wrote, because "you never know who could die next." When I asked students why the author chose to include this incredibly tragic event rather than providing the happy ending they had expected, Asanti wrote, insightfully, "I think they included this to show you how hard, serious, and devastating this actually is, and to show you this isn't a joke."

Perhaps even more shocking to students was the fact that one of the protagonists, Josef, also did not survive to the end of the book. Though he made it to France with his mother and sister, Hitler invaded that country shortly thereafter and Josef was captured by Nazi soldiers and sent to a concentration camp, where he died. Josef's narrative leaves off at his capture, but we learned through his sister, Ruth, speaking to Mahmoud decades later (Session 9), that Josef sacrificed his life to spare hers. When I asked students what they

thought of this ending, they were sad Josef had died, but they expressed satisfaction at the concession that, as Asanti put it, “at least Ruthie did make it and is still alive.” Jabree went a step further: “Ruthie was OK and lived a happy life with her husband knowing she made it . . . because of her family . . . they all sacrificed everything for [her]. From all of this long journey, she was the one who had made it to the freedom land.”

The students were unanimously pleased with Refugee’s ending, when Mahmoud’s family makes it to Germany and ends up meeting Ruth, Josef’s now-elderly younger sister. It was true that Ruth showed Mahmoud photos of her children and grandchildren, and she did seem to have lived a fulfilling life despite having lost her parents and brother, devastatingly, in the Holocaust. Still, it occurred to me that in pointing out Ruth’s “happy” ending, the students might not have appreciated the long-term effects of the trauma endured by the story characters. Isabel’s story ends on a similarly positive note, with her family building a new life together in the United States. The students felt pleased with this conclusion, though Katie, Jabree, and Jonae mentioned their continued sadness at the loss of Lito and Ivàn. David, who also approved of the ending, wrote that Isabel would become “confident” in the United States, and she would be more prepared “to handle a journey called life.”

Discussion

With this project, I aimed to discover how students would respond to a novel depicting the experiences of refugees and how writing prompts and teacher-designed questions might help (or possibly hinder) students’ development of empathy toward refugees and a critical awareness of the underlying power structures affecting their circumstances. I found that students engaged in rich, meaningful discussions centering around the situations presented in the novel. By considering the power imbalances at play in each of the three storylines (Bothelo & Rudman, 2009; Bothelo et al., 2014) and by viewing story events from multiple vantage points (Lewison et al., 2002), students demonstrated their ability to think critically about immigration, especially with regard to refugees, a discovery that aligns with other scholarship about sharing literature about immigrant and refugee experiences (e.g., Braden, 2019; Hope, 2018; Maloy, 2016; Papan & Peach, 2021). However, there were a number of lessons learned that I want to share with other teachers.

Building Background Knowledge

While the students entered the project with abundant compassion for others, true empathy can come only with understanding (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008). Having begun with little to no background knowledge about Cuban and Syrian refugees, the students certainly learned a great deal about these groups of people and their circumstances, and their empathy seemed to increase correspondingly. Though there was much the students did not yet understand about the plight of refugees, reading this novel and participating in dialogic conversations gave them a strong foundation upon which to build. In one salient example from Session 3, Tanner asked why Mahmoud’s family was trying to get to Germany from Syria when Germany was clearly such a bad place. I was very glad she asked because I had not otherwise thought to clarify that political situations change over time and that Germany was a “nice” country now.

Because I had not realized how much the students would need me to explain about the historical circumstances grounding each storyline and the unfamiliar words used, I did most of this teaching “on the fly.” But as Mevissen (2017) warned, “getting too caught up in the teaching of ‘vocabulary’ may prevent students from focusing on the bigger ideas of empathy and social justice” (p. 65). Throughout the study, I wondered whether the need to “transmit” (Freire, 1970) information to students in this way detracted from this project’s

salience as a true enactment of dialogic pedagogy, a tension I explored more thoroughly in a previous article (Kuehl, 2021) and that other scholars have discussed as well. For example, Hope (2018) wondered if the teachers in her study were filtering the information provided in the books they read aloud to children to a degree that may have limited students' access to the text itself. Conversely, J. Y. Park (2016) and the teacher with whom she was working wondered if they may have limited their students' access to the text by not providing enough background information.

While finding the “just right” amount of support to provide may continue to be a challenge for literacy teachers attempting to enact a dialogic pedagogy, I suggest other teachers develop a strategic plan for building background knowledge before, or alongside, the reading of this and other books about social justice issues. Botelho et al. (2014) recommended sharing alternate texts pertaining to historical events being depicted in stories so students can juxtapose and analyze their respective representations in order to “generate intertextual ties, connections, disconnections, and questions” (p. 43). Students could work together in small groups or as a class to research and present information about the culture and economies of the various groups represented, highlighting why people belonging to each eventually became refugees.

Acknowledging Power

Malcolm and Lowery (2011) wrote that in allowing readers to assess the representations of power in a work of literature, critical multicultural analysis can “unmask dominant ideologies so [readers] may connect textual messages with issues of social change and justice” (p. 46). Throughout the project, I avoided directly connecting the actions of Donald Trump and the “fascist dictators” (as Jonae repeatedly called them in her writing) featured in the novel because (a) it would not have been appropriate in light of my role as a guest in the school and (b) in line with critical literacy pedagogy, I wanted to allow students the opportunity to make those connections for themselves. During our discussions, students showed that they readily picked up on the similarities in behavior among Castro, al-Assad, and Hitler. They noticed each leader in the novel lacked a sense of humanity when they let people starve (Castro), allowed bombs to destroy their homes (al-Assad), and placed them in concentration camps (Hitler). In one discussion (Session 9), after I had described the latest immigration policies rolled out by the Trump administration, Jonae said, “I guess it really just depends on who’s in charge,” indicating what seemed to be a newfound awareness of the powerful influence political leaders have in the lives of everyday people like the young characters in *Refugee*, even in the present-day United States.

Among the many lessons I learned throughout this study, I came to understand the project was somewhat hindered by my unusual positionality as researcher and temporary teacher (Kuehl, 2021). I felt passionately about the promise I saw in the book and hoped I could share positive results that might help other teachers use it to combat the pervasive negative rhetoric about refugees. However, I failed to fully consider the level of trust that should have been established with the students and their school leaders before embarking on such a project. Even though their teacher reported that the students enjoyed working with me and the discussions we had were productive, my role as an “outsider” to the school—a guest—made it difficult for me to guide students in conversations that would have been truer representations of critical literacy and dialogic pedagogy (i.e., the discussions would have been more open-ended with less reliance on teacher-designed writing prompts and discussion questions; Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Papen & Peach, 2021; Stewart, 2010). For example, as a guest teacher, it was necessary to refrain from delving too deep into students' personal lives, and this may have prevented more meaningful dialogic conversations that

could have provided insight into how their cultural backgrounds may have influenced their interpretations of the text (see Braden, 2019, for an example of guiding students to view texts about immigration through the lens of their own experience).

Further, although I had carefully crafted the writing prompts and potential discussion questions with neutrality in mind, there was a tension in trying to elicit empathetic responses while remaining true to Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy. In other words, because of the power imbalance between myself as (guest) teacher and the students, they may have felt the need to reply to my queries in the way they perceived to be expected and/or pleasing. My suggestion for other teachers is to plan this type of critical novel discussion after more trust with students has been established and to invite more questions from students (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007; Stewart, 2010), allowing them to respond to each other with less teacher input.

Conclusion

Throughout the project, Jonae proved herself a very intelligent, thoughtful student and talented writer, yet the innocence with which she approached solving the immigration crisis was quite revealing. In her final reflections, she argued, "America should be able to sign an agreement paper with another country to give us more land so we [could let] more refugees into America." It truly surprised me to realize that she had been thinking all along that the reason some Americans did not want to welcome refugees was purely because of a lack of space, and several other incidences reminded me just how much sixth graders are still learning about the world and the way people interact within it.

The innocent way students responded during the project made me think all the more about how we as a society can possibly expect children to process complicated social and political issues when they are still so early in their cognitive development. The nuances of the immigration debate, I believe, are just outside sixth graders' grasp, though they can hear the "build the wall" rhetoric every time they turn on the TV (or in the case of the students in this study, open their Chromebooks). Clearly, it is more important than ever for teachers to take advantage of the discussion opportunities provided by sharing high-quality novels such as *Refugee* to help scaffold students' understanding. Then, perhaps, they will remain ready as adults to greet newcomers to the United States with empathy, compassion, and generosity.

In their essay on multicultural literacy education, Fang and colleagues (2003) wrote,

Increasingly, children need to develop critical thinking and analytical skills beyond the "basics" and to acquire a more tolerant disposition toward the complexity of our pluralistic world. . . . We believe that a literature-based curriculum—with its emphasis on multicultural literature—is a pedagogy that can achieve today's educational goals. (p. 284)

Stewart (2010), however, described the conflict teachers often feel between their philosophical orientation toward a dialogic pedagogy and the pressure to use instructional time to prepare students for standardized tests using "skill and drill" methods that do not allow space for critically exploring topics of societal importance, like the refugee crisis. He suggested that teachers support their pedagogical decisions with theory and research, and it is my hope that this study, with its illustrations of powerful critical thinking engaged in by middle school students, can support the use of classroom time in this way.

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