

FOSTERING TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF BORDER-CROSSING ISSUES: Socratic Seminars Using *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale*



Nancy J. Johnson, Miriam Martinez, and Melanie D. Koss

ABSTRACT

Many classroom teachers in the United States come from white, middle-class backgrounds, while an increasing number of their students are Latinx immigrant children, some of whom are undocumented. Given the gap between the lives of the teachers and the students in their classrooms, we engaged preservice and in-service teachers in a Socratic seminar focused on Duncan Tonatiuh's picturebook *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale*, an animal allegory about undocumented individuals attempting to cross the border into another country and their resulting emotional turmoil. These teachers viewed the author/illustrator's TEDx Talk about his inspiration for, and crafting of, the text and illustrations in this book. Teachers also responded in writing to both the book and the video, and then came together to share insights and learn from one another. Outcomes revealed the teachers' new understandings related to the complexity of picturebooks. In addition, this strategy heightened their personal beliefs and experiences, opened their eyes to worlds beyond their own, revealed both the challenges and potential of new pedagogy, and heightened their appreciation of the power of collaborative meaning-making. These outcomes reflected the potential of picturebooks to address border-crossing issues and their role in better preparing teachers to address similar issues with children. The experience also offered teachers a new strategy for engaging children in similar powerful discussions connecting literature and social justice issues.

KEYWORDS

Social justice, Socratic seminar, border crossing issues

I appreciate how we were able to communicate freely about the immigration issue.... This book is such an incredible doorway in a world full of walls.

PICTUREBOOKS HOLD rich potential to illuminate issues for children and help them address these issues in their lives (Evans, 2017). Too often, though, the lives of teachers are removed from the lives of the children they teach. To be successful in bringing books into the classroom that deal with children's lives and their worlds, teachers must understand the issues that children face and become familiar with picturebooks reflecting these concerns.

In the United States, most teachers come from white, middle-class backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), yet the children in their classrooms increasingly come from different backgrounds (Hussar & Bailey, 2016). This includes a rapidly growing Latinx population, many of whom are recent immigrants, both documented and undocumented (Gándara, 2017). There is a distinct mismatch between the cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds of many teachers and the students they serve. If teachers are going to support their students in dealing with the issues they confront, teachers must understand the obstacles that impact their students' lives.

Bishop (1990) offers a metaphor for thinking about the relationship between readers and books. She explains:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author.... [A] window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us...[and] we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. (p. ix)

Just as picturebooks can serve as windows to the world for children, they can also serve this purpose for teachers. This is especially important when teachers' lives differ greatly from those of their students. In addition, students' responses to a picturebook can provide teachers with an eye-opening window into their students' lives.

Nussbaum (1997) observed that literature helps readers develop "a capacity for sympathetic imagination that will enable us to comprehend the motives and choices of people different from ourselves, seeing them not as forbiddingly alien and other, but as sharing many problems and possibilities" (p. 85). Picturebooks can provide readers vicarious experiences that build empathy and challenge their thinking, emotions, and behaviors. This experience is amplified when readers come together to share their thinking about stories. When this happens, they are more likely to think critically about issues and gain insight into other's experiences (Johnson et al., 2016).

Given the conversations about immigration issues in our society, we wanted to engage and challenge the students in our university classes in these discussions in order to understand the complexity of border-crossing issues. As professors at three universities across the United States (one on the West Coast, one in the Southwest, and one in the Midwest), we teach children's literature courses, some undergraduate and some graduate, depending on the location. Many of our students are pre- or in-service teachers,

and one of our shared goals is to encourage critical thinking and response to contemporary societal issues through children's literature. To achieve this goal, we engage students in a range of discussion strategies in our classrooms. One such strategy is Socratic seminar.

Both preservice teachers and in-service teachers in our classes (referred to collectively as "teachers" in the remainder of this article) participated in these discussions. We used a Socratic seminar strategy to engage the teachers in reading, reflecting upon, and discussing Duncan Tonatiuh's *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (2013). This picturebook is an animal allegory that addresses the experience of undocumented individuals attempting to cross the border into another country.

Because many teachers in our schools are white, and increasing numbers of the children in their classrooms are Latinx, this experience was designed with multiple goals in mind. First, we sought to challenge the teachers in our classes to become aware of the potential of picturebooks to ignite powerful conversations about contemporary sociopolitical events that may impact the lives of their students. Second, we wanted to engage these teachers in collaborative meaning-making, with the dual goal of helping them understand the types of experiences that many of their students (in particular immigrant children) may

be living. And third, we aimed to involve these teachers with reflection and discussion strategies around picturebooks they could eventually use in their classrooms. Ultimately, we hoped this experience would help them develop a "questioning stance to work toward changing themselves and their worlds" (McDaniel, 2004, p. 476).

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The Potential of Picturebooks

Many contemporary picturebooks explore social and political issues, making them appropriate for readers of all ages (Martinez, et al, 2009). They offer rich content that is developed through the interplay of words and illustrations. Often the illustrations extend and even carry the book's themes and issues. Illustrators of picturebooks consciously use style, color, line, texture, and composition to add layers of meaning to a book. All of these components played an

important role in our selection of *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale*.

We selected this picturebook not only because of its thoughtful crafting but also because it explored issues of border crossing. We knew it held potential as a response-rich text due to its complex layering as an allegory. Because allegories use symbolic rather than literal representation, they encourage critical thinking and provide opportunities for discussion. In an allegory, the literal meaning can entertain while the underlying meaning offers deeper insights, including social commentary, intended by the author.

On the surface, *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* is an animal tale. Young rabbit Pancho leaves home in search of his father, who has crossed the border to find work. Pancho meets a coyote who offers to guide him across the border in exchange for sharing his food. Soon, it becomes evident the coyote is up to no good.

Inspired by the Mixteco art of 14th-century Mexico, Tonatiuh's illustrations create a rich cultural context. For example, he includes cultural icons such as papel picado, cooking on a comal, and musicians playing traditional instruments. He places readers in a particular physical context through the inclusion in illustrations of nopal and saguaro cacti. Most important, through the illustrations, Tonatiuh builds tension and reveals many dangers associated with border crossing, including jumping on moving trains, traversing rivers, paying the coyote with everything of value, crossing the border through a tunnel, and traveling in the heat of the desert. His intentional selection of animals to play particular roles adds another layer of meaning. For example, rattlesnakes portray border guards and the coyote appears as a human smuggler. Both text and illustration work together to portray this multilayered allegory.

Implementing the Socratic Seminar

A Socratic seminar is a student-led discussion strategy based on Socrates's belief in the power of asking questions, listening actively, and sharing different interpretations. These discussions support critical thinking, inquiry, and the construction of shared meanings (Koss & Williams, 2018; Woolever, 1987). The goal is not to seek a "right" answer or "correct" interpretation. The classroom teacher sets up the experience, but the participants carry the responsibility for the content and quality of the discussion. This strategy

acknowledges the social nature of learning; we learn best when we work together.

In our classes, we began by reading aloud *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* while the teachers listened and followed along, holding shared copies. We were intentional in our decision to read the story aloud as a way to demonstrate pacing that does not rush a story, and to model a strategy that ensures readers "receive" a text fully. By giving the teachers copies to follow along, we provided access to both words and illustrations.

After listening to the story, and prior to the discussion, the teachers were asked to read *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* on their own, pausing to write notes about what caught their attention, what they wondered, or what stood out to them in relation to words and illustrations. Next, they were invited to write answers to the following prompts:

1. What were your initial thoughts after reading *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*?
2. What two questions or comments do you have about the book?

Then the teachers were asked to view *Life on the Other Side / La vida en el otro lado*, a TEDx Talk by the picturebook's author and illustrator, Duncan Tonatiuh (TEDx, 2013). In this video, Tonatiuh shares his personal experiences living in both Mexico and the United States, presents his inspiration for creating *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*, and offers insight into the artistic style for the illustrations. Following this, teachers wrote notes in response to the TEDx Talk and responded to the following questions:

1. How did your initial thoughts change after watching the TEDx Talk? Explain.
2. What two specific comments or questions do you have after viewing the TEDx Talk and reading the book?

The teachers then came together as a class to create discussion guidelines (e.g., be respectful, do not interrupt, value others' opinions) to emphasize the notion that a Socratic seminar is reader generated and reader run. Following this, they broke into small groups and used their written reflections, comments, and questions, along with copies of the book, to ignite conversation. At the conclusion of 15 minutes, each group created two open-ended questions to bring to the whole class for further discussion.

The whole-group discussion used the same reader-di-

rected philosophy that guided earlier small-group discussions. Teachers extended their own interpretations by sharing insights and experiences, asking questions, posing possible answers, and returning to the text to clarify and ask new questions. In this whole-class discussion, teachers continued to deepen their understanding of this picturebook and complicate what it *really* means.

In the final step in these Socratic seminars, the teachers wrote a post-seminar reflection in response to the following:

Reflect on your experience participating in the discussion.

1. What are you taking away from this experience?
2. What new insights did you learn about yourself and/or the book?
3. What else do you want to explore?

Discussion

The outcomes to this entire experience with *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* and the Socratic seminar strategy were multiple. Teachers explored and discovered a variety of subjects:

- the complex nature of picturebooks,
- their personal beliefs and connections,
- worlds beyond their own,
- the power of collaborative meaning-making, and
- pedagogical potential and challenges.

The Complex Nature of Picturebooks

Over the years, many of our students have dismissed picturebooks as simplistic and targeted for young children. Yet picturebooks can be so much more. The multifaceted nature of this format relies on the interplay of pictures and text, intentional stylistic decisions, and the thoughtful use of book components ranging from title and endpapers all the way through to author and illustrator notes.

Awareness of this complexity arose in the teachers' discussions. As they wrote about and discussed *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*, multiple layers of Tonatiuh's craft emerged. For example, Alana (all names are pseudonyms) mentioned:

The first thing that strikes me about this book is [that]...Tonatiuh's style is simple, yet captivating; no word is wasted. While the language is simple enough for young students to understand, there

are many layers and themes packed into this book.

In this way, it reminds me of an ancient fable.

In a similar response, TJ noted: "The author (to me) wanted to portray migration and immigration, but it was almost like a secret. You had to dig through the text, illustrations, and characters to make those inferences."

Some of the teachers in our study also recognized the particular contribution of the art. Becky wrote:

Art is a powerful tool politically.... This is a brilliant way to build empathy in readers (young and old). How else could kids really begin to understand the troubles of immigrant families than with a thoughtful picturebook?

This appreciation of the art was also evident when teachers like Sara explained their interpretation of specific illustrations:

One part of the book that stood out to me was the opening with the snakes as border guards and Pancho and Coyote in the tunnel. As we have discussed in many of our class sessions, the visual images are just (if not more) important in creating the meaning in this scene.... Pancho's fear as he crawls through the tunnel is visible through his expression. It made me think of my own nerves driving through an immigration checkpoint, despite the lack of any real threat it posed for me as a White U.S. citizen.

Upon reflecting on our teachers' comments, we realized they used different facets of Tonatiuh's craft as portals to deeper meanings. They went beyond the surface-level nature of a simple animal story to uncover the underlying sociopolitical themes of border crossing in this picturebook.

Personal Beliefs and Connections

The teachers in this project came from diverse backgrounds and different geographical areas of the United States. Some grew up close to the U.S.–Mexico border. Others grew up in rural farmlands with a conservative, white population. And still others came from cities far from the border.

Some teachers came to this project with deep personal knowledge about immigration linked to relatives and people they knew who struggled to come to the United States. In many instances, this background evoked deep empathy. Such was the case for Tara:

This subject is really close to my heart. My grandmother came from Mexico in hopes for a better life here in America. I have seen her dream come to life and how she was able to give a much better life to her family.... This project was such an incredible way to open up the conversation about immigration.

Teachers like Yolanda, who grew up along the border, often brought personal knowledge to reading and discussing the picturebook:

Being from the border city of Laredo, Texas, this story took on a deep and powerful connection for me. Throughout my childhood I always heard stories of *coyotes* (ruthless smugglers).... These *coyotes* are known as evil men and women whom desperate people pay unreasonable amounts of money in an attempt to allow the *coyotes* to take them across the US-Mexican border.... I often heard discussions of *la migra*, customs and immigration officials that were as common as police officers in my hometown. Many people ran scared of *la migra*, both citizens and non-citizens. Everyone knew at least one person that was working toward a better life, but always had to be looking over their shoulder. I grew to think of border patrol agents as dream stealers.

Yet, growing up along the border did not necessarily mean shared experiences. One teacher, Dave, grew up with parents who were border patrol agents on the U.S.–Mexico border. Dave’s experiences and beliefs contrasted with Yolanda’s and resulted in a complicated and conflicted response. Dave explained:

During the TED talk, I found myself uneasy at Duncan Tonatiuh’s depictions of the border patrol.... [He] explicitly draws them as aggressive and violent. This led me to further believe the rattlesnakes in the story are the border patrol. Why are they specifically antagonized? From what I see, they’re just doing their jobs. As someone who grew up on the border, I see both sides of the story. Many of my friends were immigrants from Mexico and I knew of the hardships and struggles they faced. However, I also knew the work of

my parents was to protect and guard the border, specifically from having drugs get across. I saw the awful things that were done to the people being deported, being separated from their families, but my problem with the book is how it’s addressed. I am all for people coming to America legally, but coming under illegal terms is different.

We found that some teachers with limited personal knowledge of the U.S.–Mexico immigration experience defaulted to stereotypes. Their knowledge of immigration often came from what they heard and saw in the media and heard from family, friends, and community. One teacher revealed her own stereotypes by defining Mexican immigrants as “poor, [people who work] farming jobs, smugglers.” Not surprisingly, these beliefs were challenged by other teachers, which led to spirited discussions.

Worlds Beyond Their Own

Many of the teachers valued the Socratic seminar because it extended their understanding of immigration issues. Alex noted: “As a participant in the Socratic seminar, I felt that many of my inquiries on the story have been clarified. [This] has broadened and opened my eyes to what is going on in the world, especially in regards to Mexican immigrants.” In addition, this experience motivated some of the teachers to learn more. Crystal observed: “This entire project has shed such a light on immigration for me, by the book, TED talk, and the discussion. I am a lot more uneducated on the subject than I realized and now I am extremely inspired to learn more.”

Some teachers recognized their lack of knowledge impacted their understanding of the issues raised in the picturebook. This was addressed by McKenzie, who responded: “The Socratic seminar has made me realize how uneducated I am about this topic.... I think what would have further engaged my Socratic experience is if I had more background knowledge about migration and immigration.”

More than knowledge emerged from the conversations. Many teachers gained empathy. Following a peer’s emotional response during the whole-group discussion, Maggie responded directly to her classmate the next day:

It is a humbling feeling to be reminded of the dangerous paths so many within my culture have taken, all for the sake of a better life for their families. I can’t even begin to imagine what it must

be like to have no other choice but to leave your loved ones behind. It is ironic, really, many people put their children through the biggest emotional pain in their lives by leaving them back home, only to be able to provide some sort of happiness in some way. Thank you, Margarita, for sharing.

This sentiment was affirmed by others in the class.

Power of Collaborative Meaning-Making

Without exception, the teachers in our classes valued the opportunity to participate in the Socratic seminar. They recognized how it ensured that multiple voices were heard. Hailey observed that the Socratic seminar “helped me gain new perspectives from my group members and gave me a chance to process my own thoughts better.” Others noted how the strategy gave them the opportunity to hear from others whose voices are not frequently heard. And, it allowed them to take ownership of the discussion, something they felt typically does not happen in instructor-led discussions. Jonathan voiced this perspective in his reflection:

The experience we had was really interesting. I think that the set-up gave a chance for more voices to be heard. I think we get to know a bit of each other in a way that “normal” class discussions don’t allow for. We start by talking about the reading, but naturally move into deeper conversations about stances about life issues, some sharing some intimate experiences or insights into their beliefs/value systems.

In some instances, participation in the Socratic seminar led to the recognition that when you disagree, it is important to listen closely to understand the experiences that shape different perspectives. Maria wrote:

It was very eye-opening to hear how other people in class interpreted this same book and what they thought about the social issues surrounding it... especially Cindy’s connection because the culture down here in Texas is somewhat new to her. It was interesting to hear her childhood background and how she connected it to what migrants crossing the border must be like. Her thoughts and ideas made me aware of the way people not from border states might think about this migrant worker

issue. If I want to be an agent of change and bring light to the dangers our students may have experienced, I need to know how to speak about it to people that aren’t as familiar with it as people living in border states who hear about it in the news and might not have close connections with migrants and their family members.

It became evident that opportunities to work collaboratively were incredibly powerful. Teachers were changed because of each other. They grew in their knowledge, empathy, and awareness of the importance of talking and listening to one another. Although it was not always easy, respect was always present.

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Pedagogical Potential and Challenges

Upon reviewing what these teachers said about the possibilities of using *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* in their classrooms, we recognized that two factors shaped their perspectives. The first was experience in classrooms working with children. The second was their own life experiences and connections to Latinx culture and the issues raised in this picturebook.

Since some of our students were in-service teachers and others were preservice teachers, we noted a difference in their comfort level and their confidence in bringing this picturebook into their classrooms. Various challenges were raised. Samantha, a preservice teacher, was honest in revealing how one’s biases can impact pedagogical decision making:

I knew right when I began watching the video what it was about. I know I could be called racist for my opinion. I believe that we have too many immigrants coming into America. We are a melting pot, but we are not a pit stop for everyone to live at. On the other hand, I know that I will have

children in my classroom who have this background. I will have to overlook my beliefs and put their needs first.

Discussing *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* using the Socratic seminar strategy was an introduction for this teacher. We hope this experience will inform pedagogical decisions that respect all of her students.

Other challenges became apparent in the teachers' reflections. These included fear of possible parental and administrative objections, current political tensions, fear of not being able to answer questions raised by students, and concerns about the book's appropriateness for young children. Erik, a preservice teacher, echoed this when he wrote: "One of the main things I brought up...was the age group this is targeting. Young children cannot begin to understand the content within this book. Immigration is too serious and harsh a topic for young children."

In contrast, many practicing teachers in this project, particularly those with experience working with children, saw the potential of bringing *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* into their classrooms. Those with connections to issues raised in the story saw the value of this picturebook as an opener to discussing these difficult issues. Miguel seemed to embrace these possibilities:

As a teacher in a bilingual and very culturally diverse classroom, I was excited to see the migrant experience portrayed for a young audience.... I know that the story reflects many of my students' personal experiences or histories. I often find myself at a loss when my students ask each other about the migrant experience or when they repeat what they hear on the news or from their parents. Some of my students ask questions like "why did you even come from Mexico?" or "why don't you just go back to where you came from?" My initial reaction is to confront these statements with my own experiences or opinions, but this text provides a great medium through which to start a great classroom dialogue about migration.

Miguel was clearly aware of the potential of *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*. The Socratic seminar experience inspired him to design a unit around this picturebook for his second graders.

In Maria's case, we saw the potential realized when she adapted the Socratic seminar strategy using a different pic-

turebook with her third graders:

During our Socratic seminar, my principal conducted a walk-through observation...and was very impressed with the conversations my students were having about Thurgood Marshall and his role in civil rights issues. The conversations going on in the small groups of four students were steady, and I realized third graders have a lot to say about their experiences and social studies. I walked around taking notes and sprinkled in a few questions as needed to facilitate things to ponder and to converse about. When my students transitioned to one large group circle, the conversation was rich and I feel they gained deeper understanding about civil rights, made solid connections to their lives, and began thinking about additional social issues still needing to be addressed today. I look forward to continuing facilitating Socratic seminars with my students and encouraging them to become active agents of change in our society.

Implications

Teachers' participation in a Socratic seminar around *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* developed new awareness of the issue of border crossing, empathy for individuals experiencing similar struggles, and appreciation for the levels of complexity of this issue. Some of these teachers started to change their minds from snapshot opinions to thoughtful consideration about an issue that is not black and white.

The Socratic seminar strategy is a process. Our experiences were successful because they included student-established guidelines for discussion; opportunities for students to pose their own questions; time to read and reread the text—including the visual text and the author's note—in its entirety; small-group and whole-class interactions; and numerous response opportunities, including a final reflection. The student-led nature of the discussions honored students' own knowledge and experiences. For some, it challenged their assumptions and values. For all, it extended their understandings of the world portrayed in the picturebook and the lives of some of their classmates.

Perhaps more than anything, the teachers who participated in these Socratic seminars recognized the potential

value of bringing picturebooks into their classes as vehicles to initiate powerful conversations about important social issues. For those working with older students, the experience demystified picturebooks and opened their eyes to the possibilities of partnering with this literary format to explore big topics like immigration and border crossings. For those working with younger children, the experience illuminated possibilities for engaging their students in discussions of important social issues, as noted by Miguel's and Maria's adaptations of the strategy in their classrooms.

Bishop (1990) reminded us that "literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us" (p. ix). This was evident in all three of our classrooms, regardless of where in the United States the students lived or whether they were preservice or in-service teachers. Socratic seminars using picturebooks not only foster readers' awareness of social issues (i.e., border crossing), they also honor the role of the reader and the importance of the text. •

Dr. Nancy J. Johnson is Professor Emeritus at Western Washington University. Her professional writing focuses on literature circles and reader response as well as children's and young adult literature. She is the founder/director of Western's annual Children's/Young Adult Literature Conference.

Dr. Miriam Martinez is a Professor of Literacy at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Her research focuses on children's responses to different literary genres and formats of literature and also includes textual analyses of children's books. She is co-author of a children's literature textbook in its sixth edition.

Dr. Melanie Koss is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Northern Illinois University. Her research interests include examining representations of diversity and inclusion in children's and young adult literature, and ways culturally relevant pedagogy can be utilized to inspire diverse forms of reader response.

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