

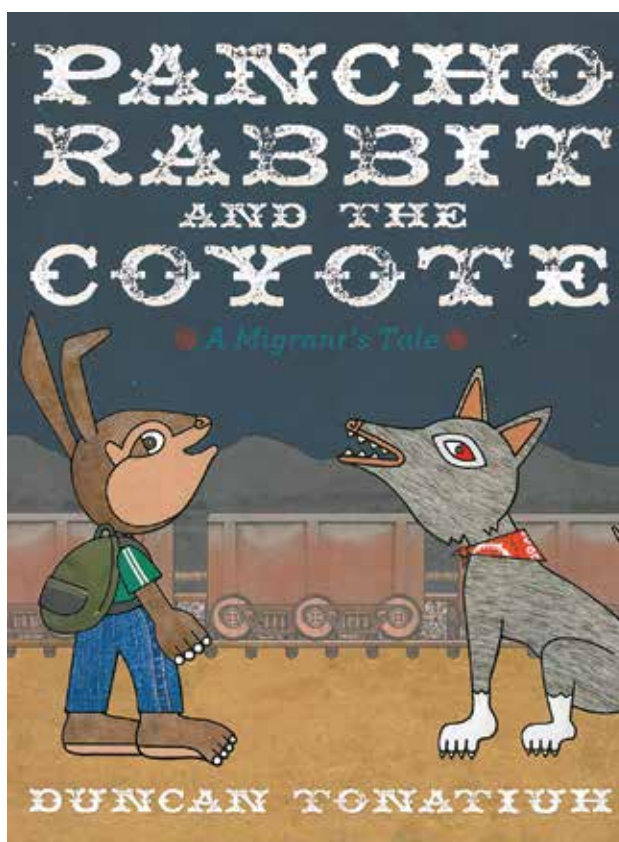
Reading *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*: An Allegory of Immigration Sparks Rich Discussions

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I love teaching fourth grade because nine- and ten-year-old students at that age are so adept at noticing challenges they see in the world around them, and they are eager to discuss what they see. Their observations about their Brooklyn neighborhood emerge during our “daily share” in the morning. For example, Sandra talked about a homeless person she saw for whom she felt bad; Lloyd retold an encounter between customers and a waiter in a local restaurant; and Abigail described an after-school scuffle that she witnessed at a nearby high school.

These observations about society often become the basis for class discussions. Chip Wood, an expert on child development, writes that the nine-year-old is “struggling with the cognitive task of understanding ethical behavior at a new level.”¹ This is a wonderful struggle for a teacher to facilitate. One of my goals is to help students observe and then “think deeply” as a first step in getting them to “act in ways that promote the common good.”²

With this in mind, I selected the picture book *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (a Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People in 2014),³ to read with my students to enhance our study of immigration, bringing a current



issue into our discussions. Author and illustrator Duncan Tonatiuh relates a rabbit family's struggle to find a better way of life. The story is an allegory of the migration of Mexicans seeking passage to the United States and the smugglers, or Coyotes, who prey upon them.

Immigration: The Long View

At the outset of a unit of study on 19th and early 20th century immigration to the United States, students interviewed family members and neighbors who had immigrated to this country. The next day, my students were bubbling with excitement. Adam told about his family's adjustment from life in Yemen, and Linnette mentioned how her great grandmother had gone through Ellis Island (which operated until 1954) as a child from Germany.

After these interviews, we studied eras of immigration and some of the laws that governed immigration, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Later, students worked in research groups to gain expertise about a particular ethnic group. With very few books at our disposal, the fourth grade teachers created collections on classroom computers that contained photos, videos, primary source documents, and articles about the people and



time period they were studying. Students took notes and synthesized their findings. Toward the end of the unit, students took on the point of view of an immigrant whom they had studied. Each student wrote a series of memories (“imagined oral histories”) and recorded one narrative on an iPad using the Adobe Voice app. In her final piece, Juliana recorded this story:

When I got to Angel Island, I was only 13. A family with two baby girls was being processed. One of the girls had a sharp utensil posed at her eye [by a medical examiner]. I remember her parents clutching her hands to make sure she wasn’t crying at the same time. The girl’s eye was pink. I knew what was coming. Someone traced a large x on her back. The person processing the family grabbed them and shoved them into a room. Before the door shut, I managed to get one last look at their faces, filled with despair. This was truly an island of tears.

Young Migrants: A Current Event

While students fully embraced researching and writing about immigrants from long ago, I also wanted them to consider the issues and challenges associated with modern-day immigra-

tion, especially from Mexico and Central America. About 30 percent of all United States residents born outside the country are from Mexico.⁴ Duncan Tonatiuh’s book provides students with the opportunity to step into a discussion of current events. Tonatiuh’s eye-catching drawings and captivating words help draw students into the story of illegal migrants and to discuss some of the issues in the news and in their own lives. (Tonatiuh’s use of pre-Columbian Mixtec code as inspiration for collages makes these illustrations unique.)⁵

According to the Common Core English Language Arts (CC/ELA) standards, by the end of fourth grade students should be able to “determine a theme of a story.” Over the course of the school year, we studied and worked on developing themes. The themes of *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* center on the dangers of crossing the U.S.—Mexico border illegally and strong family bonds.

Before reading the book, we looked at a map of Central and North America. Students looked at the map intently. I asked them to turn to their partners and describe the challenges that might be involved in emigrating from Mexico to the United States. I listened in:

“Look how far people have to go to get to the United States,”

Spencer said, pointing to southern Mexico. In his author's notes at the back of the book, Tonatiuh remarks, "Central Americans immigrants travel [about] 5,000 miles on tops of trains to cross Mexico [to reach the U.S.-Mexico border]."

"I'm Mexican and my parents did it," Manuel responded proudly.

Chris, who visits relatives overseas, said, "I bet you have to have your passport."

Asking children about the details of their experiences without prior knowledge about a family's situation could be troubling (e.g., "Manuel, did your parents cross the border legally?") Rather, teachers can explore the topic of border crossing through Duncan Tonatiuh's own life experience. The child of an American father and Mexican mother, Tonatiuh grew up in Mexico before coming to the United States for high school and college. He has dual Mexican-U.S. citizenship, but many of his Mexican friends attempted to cross the border illegally by the time they had reached eighteen. One friend died of dehydration while crossing the desert.

We turned our attention to Tonatiuh's book. I wondered if my students would connect the fable and its many animals to our study of human migration. Would they realize that the troubles Pancho Rabbit faced reflect those of undocumented immigrants today? Would students sympathize with the migrants, or be critical of their naiveté toward the dangers of illegal crossing? Tonatiuh's book would help give me insight into my students' thinking and provide us with the opportunity to discuss related issues.

A Useful (Fictional) Example

I presented the book as an interactive read aloud. Students sat on the rug, and turned to talk with their partner after every few pages.

In the first pages of the book, the Rabbit family says goodbye to their father, who is heading to el norte along with Señor Rooster and Señor Ram. After "many harvests" go by, the Rabbit family and their friends prepare a large fiesta for their father's return and discuss the money that he will bring home. But the father does not return. I asked students to share with their partner what they thought about this turn of events.

"It's kind of hard when the Rabbit family believes their dad is going to come home and he doesn't," said Brianna.

"I think they jinxed it," responded Cleo. "That always happens to me when I say something's definitely going to happen."

Natalie shared her idea with the whole class. "Remember when we went to the Tenement Museum and heard about the dad who left his family? Maybe that's what this rabbit did." Some students turned to Natalie and made our class' sign "we agree," shaking their fist back and forth, with their pinky and thumb protruding. I could see the connections starting to form.

I continued reading aloud. In hopes of finding his father, the eldest son, Pancho Rabbit, heads north with a backpack full of mole, rice and beans, tortillas, and aguamiel. Daniel, a student of Mexican descent, rubbed his stomach and said "Mmmmm."

TERMS ABOUT IMMIGRATION IN THE NEWS

See "The Language of the Immigration Debate" at *Teaching Tolerance* magazine,

www.tolerance.org/supplement/language-immigration-debate-middle-grades

Immigrant—A person who has moved away from the country of his or her birth and is living in a different country.

U.S. Citizen—A person who was born in the U.S. or has become a citizen through a naturalization process.

Undocumented immigrant—A person living in the United States who does not have official papers showing the right to reside in this country (for example, a "green card").

Illegal—Going against the law.

Illegal Alien—A harsh term for an undocumented immigrant. "Illegal" means that the person does not have the official papers. An "alien" is a person coming from another country, a foreigner.

Border Crossing—A checkpoint or a station at the border between two countries where officials check the documents of travelers.

Illegal Border Crossing—An attempt to enter another country not at a checkpoint, but at another place along the border. Illegal border crossings can be dangerous for many reasons. Often, the travelers do not have official papers. Synonym: **Unauthorized** border crossing.

UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

In June 1982, the Supreme Court issued *Plyler v. Doe*, a landmark decision holding that states cannot constitutionally deny students a free public education on account of their immigration status. By a 5–4 vote, the Court found that any resources which might be saved from excluding undocumented children from public schools were far outweighed by the harms imposed on society at large from denying them an education.

For 32 years, *Plyler* has ensured equal access to education for children regardless of status, but anti-immigrant sentiment continues to threaten that right. States and localities have passed measures and adopted unofficial policies that violate the spirit—if not the letter—of the Court's decision. These policies are then, in turn, challenged in the courts, and debated in the media.

www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/public-education-immigrant-students-states-challenge-supreme-court-s-decision-plyler-v-do

Soon, Pancho rabbit meets a coyote. “Don’t coyotes eat rabbits?” interrupted Ray. His words were prescient. The coyote offers to help the rabbit reach his father—for a price. The coyote shows Pancho a shortcut north in exchange for his mole, and helps him cross the river for the rice and beans. At each obstacle, Pancho justifies the expense: “As long as it gets me closer to Papá,” Pancho explains. At this point, my students caught on to the “fable structure” of the narrative.⁶

“This is like Little Red Riding Hood,” said Chris, to vigorous agreement from the class.

“I think it’s like The Gingerbread Man,” said Alexis.

I smiled. The Common Core asks students to be able to identify the structure of a text, and notice how an author’s craft contributes to that structure.

A Partly Happy Ending

After the Coyote pays off snakes with the tortillas and drinks the aguamiel to help the rabbit cross the desert, students realized that the Coyote had taken all of Pancho’s belongings. I asked them if Pancho needed the Coyote.

“Pancho should think of his choices first,” said Kayla. “He has nothing for himself and his father. He should go alone.” She called on other students to respond. “What do you think?”

Alexis disagreed. “The coyote is helping him get close to his father. Imagine if you were stuck out in the desert! You could be there for years.”

“The problem is that the coyote is getting all of what he wants, and Pancho is only getting half of what he wants,” said Alonso.

These comments demonstrated that students were making connections between the cartoon-like animals and the complex issues alluded to in the book. Tonatiuh’s tale provided

for natural differentiation; some students connected the fable to current events along the U.S.-Mexican border, while more concrete thinkers contemplated Pancho Rabbit’s struggles just within the fictional story.

Eventually, Señor Rabbit arrives on the scene to save his son, just as the Coyote sets his sights on a roasted rabbit dinner. Students cheered when Pancho returns home with Papá for a long overdue fiesta. Yet the book ends without a clear conclusion: if the rains do not come and crops do not grow in their village, Papá must leave once again. There is an enduring allure of migration to el norte. When I invited partners to turn and talk, Natalie stuck out her bottom lip. “It’s like they can never be happy.” Lloyd nodded in agreement. “It’s like the dad just has to try to help his family over and over again.

Tentative Conclusions

After we finished the book, I asked students, “What is this book trying to say about immigration today?” They jotted their ideas in their notebooks for a few minutes, and then we shared.

“I have two themes,” said Jonas, a student who emigrated at the start of the school year. “Everything’s not going to be easy, and immigrants usually get separated from their family.”

“In life, when you have a dream, you can always get there, but it won’t always go so perfectly,” chimed in Linnette.

Other students tailored their comments more specifically to the book. Juliana said “It was sad about the money, but lots of immigrants wished for money, and not a lot of people got that. Really, their family was more important.”

Abigail closed our discussion. “I think the book is trying to say that many Mexicans who try to immigrate lose their sense of self and lose their hopes.”

Extensions

After reading Tonatiuh’s book, I read aloud *Paper Son: Lee’s Journey to America*, a story of a Chinese immigrant who arrived on false papers.⁷ The ruse works, and Lee is permitted to live in America. Alonso immediately connected the two books, comparing their craft and structure.

“This is like Pancho Rabbit!” he exclaimed. “But, in Pancho Rabbit, the author was showing us about what could have happened if someone immigrated. In this book, it’s more like you are immigrating yourself.”

In both books, immigrants disobey laws in order to enter the United States. I present these books to help my students consider the challenges faced by the thousands of undocumented immigrants living in the United States today. Perhaps some of my students are undocumented immigrants themselves. I don’t know for sure.

I also read Tonatiuh’s author’s note to my students. Tonatiuh reveals the double meaning of the word coyote (which also denotes a smuggler of humans), and he describes some of the issues around the immigration of undocumented workers to the United States. As a person with dual citizenship and

SOME NUMBERS ABOUT U.S. IMMIGRATION^(a)

Undocumented Immigrant Children^(b)	1 million
Children with U.S. Citizenship with Undocumented Parents	4 million
Total Immigrant Population (All ages, Citizen, Documented, Undocumented)	40 million
Total U.S. Population^(c)	310 million

Notes

(a) The main source is “The Facts on Immigration Today” by Ann Garcia, who used data from 2011, at www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/report/2013/04/03/59040/the-facts-on-immigration-today-3

(b) With the recent migration of minors from Central and South America, this number is an estimate. The Pew Research Center reported that there were 775,000 unauthorized children younger than age 18 living in the United States in 2012. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2014/09/03/as-growth-stalls-unauthorized-immigrant-population-becomes-more-settled/>. See also <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/02/01/unauthorized-immigrant-population-national-and-state-trends-2010/>.

(c) A findings from the American Progress report: U.S.-born children of immigrants are more likely to go to college, less likely to be living in poverty, and equally likely to be homeowners, compared with the average American.

Sculpture in César Chávez Plaza in downtown Sacramento, California's capital city, on the site of the old city plaza. (Detail, Library of Congress)



friends on both sides of the border, Tonatiuh perceives the dilemma from several perspectives. The mature language of the author's note was difficult for my class to comprehend, but some students had an opinion. Yes, Joey said seriously, we need to help people who want to come to this country.

Reviewing basic vocabulary about immigration helps children make sense of adult conversations and reports in the media (See Sidebar, p. 11). While the complexity of our current U.S. immigration laws is astounding (and by all accounts, this complexity adds to their dysfunction), the basic concepts of migration, national boundaries, and citizenship status can be clarified for our young students. For example, it can be reassuring to know that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that public schools must accommodate all children, whether they are citizens, or legal immigrants, or undocumented immigrants (See Sidebar, p. 11).

A Useful Allegory

I used Tonatiuh's allegory as a way to connect our study of 19th and 20th century immigration to the present day and, also, as an inquiry into young students' ability to grapple with the challenges of modern day immigration. Students cared about the topic, grappled with some of the complexities, and had much to say. Tonatiuh's fable also changed the way many students viewed the immigrant groups whom they were studying; the father rabbit's need for work helped one group think about why Irish laborers came to the United States in the nineteenth century, and another group used the term coyote while talking about the vulnerability of immigrants. In his author notes, Tonatiuh states his opinion that the United States "needs to admit its dependency on undocumented workers to do much of its manual and domestic labor, and to provide legal and safe opportunities for those seeking employment. Undocumented immigrants are a huge and important part of the U.S. workforce."

Next year, I plan to support the book by having students read age-appropriate nonfiction articles from *NewsELA*⁸ about children's journeys across the U.S.-Mexico border and the desire of U.S. farmers to hire migrant workers the moment their crops are ready for harvest. I also want to help students consider a broader array of issues, from our refugee admissions policy to the potential for immigration law reform.

Immigration will continue to be a prominent issue over the course of my students' lives (See Sidebar, p. 12). Reading and discussing *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* and *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* may provide students with one of their first opportunities to examine this challenging topic. Our multicultural democracy can only benefit. 🌍

Notes

1. Chip Wood, *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom Ages 4-14*, 3rd ed. (Turner Falls, MA: Northeast Foundation for Children, 2007), 108.
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment* (Silver Springs, MD: NCSS, 2010).
3. Duncan Tonatiuh, *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote: A Migrant's Tale* (New York, NY: Abrams Books for Young Readers, 2013).
4. "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states.
5. "Life on the Other Side," TEDx talk by Duncan Tonatiuh, www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8AY4CC76M#t=17.
6. *Common Core State Standards and Initiatives: Preparing America's Students for College and Career: English Language Arts Standards, Reading, Grade 4* (2012).
7. Virginia Shin-Mui Loh, *Paper Son: Lee's Journey to America* (Ann Arbor, MI: Sleeping Bear Press, 2013).
8. *NewsELA: Nonfiction Literacy and Current Events*, newsela.com/?needle=immigration&grade_levels=4.0 (2014).

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