Banning refugees. Building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. Separating children from their parents. Detaining and deporting immigrants at higher rates. Immigration is front-page news. While immigration has historically been a divisive issue in the United States, debates surrounding immigrants—particularly those from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Muslim-majority countries—have intensified. Moreover, presidential policy decisions that have momentous consequences for minoritized groups and, more broadly, for U.S. society are currently being implemented.

As the U.S. and other nations grapple with the boundaries of inclusion at a time of increasing political polarization, teachers face quandaries about how to address immigration in classrooms. Although some educators may avoid immigration as a discussion topic, others enthusiastically choose it precisely because of its relevance. Further complicating decisions about whether and how to teach about immigration is the question of who is in the classroom.

Under the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in Plyler v. Doe (1982), undocumented students have the right to attend pub-
In addition to the estimated 11.4 million undocumented people currently in the United States, an estimated 5.1 million youth have at least one undocumented parent. This means that undocumented youth, and citizen children of undocumented parents (who are also directly affected by immigration policies), are part of U.S. school systems. Discussions about immigration become more complex at a time when the topic is hyper-present in societal discourse—yet these conversations can be silenced in school settings where students’ and families’ immigration status may be unknown, assumed, or ambiguous. In what follows, we highlight our research study that investigated social studies teaching in such settings. We then critique the teaching of immigration from the framework of a political controversy, and we conclude by drawing from Elliot Eisner’s work to suggest humanizing, contextualizing, and agentive approaches to teaching about immigration. By “agentive,” we mean approaches that create space for immigrant-origin youth to imagine and act instead of being subjects of conversation.

**The Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth Study**

Through the Civic Lessons and Immigrant Youth (CLAIY) study, we sought to learn from skilled and experienced civics teachers in immigrant settings. Specifically, we wanted to know how they taught about elections in mixed-citizenship settings where some youth had formal citizenship rights and others did not. Over six years, we gathered (2012–2013) and analyzed (2012–2018) data from the classrooms of four U.S. government teachers who were selected from a pool of 39 nominated secondary social studies teachers. From this research, we were able to better understand skilled teachers’ practices when working with immigrant youth and to consider the broader implications of these practices for creating a more inclusive society. Although space constraints prevent us from elaborating on this study here, we draw from this work and connect it to larger questions about immigration discussions in schools, including whether to frame immigration as a controversial issue.

**Immigration as a Controversy**

Prior scholarship on teaching controversial public issues (CPIs) reveals its many benefits and significance for democratic education. This work simultaneously highlights considerations surrounding what should be considered an “open” versus “closed” controversy. Open controversies are those that are framed as legitimately controversial; closed controversies are those that are no longer legitimately controversial (i.e., women’s suffrage in the U.S.), while others are in a limbo that Diana Hess describes as “tipping.” Specific topics are not inherently open or closed, but shift over time and across contexts. Hess further notes that “the decision about whether to construct an issue as open or closed is, by definition, a form of position-taking on the part of the school and teacher, and therefore, controversial.” Planning for such discussions is nuanced and involves professional judgment.

**Classroom Dynamics, Immigration, and Controversy**

While discussing controversial public issues can serve democratic ideals, there are cautions in framing particular issues as open controversies. As Lisa Sibbett insightfully notes, some dominant voices become easily empowered during discussions of controversial issues, while non-dominant voices often remain unheard. Teachers have to deal with the reality that unequal societal relations underlie what is said—and what may be left unsaid—in classroom discussions. The unevenness of underrepresented perspectives is likely to be amplified on the topic of immigration, especially because undocumented students often remain silent regarding their status. In other situations, the epistemologies (that is, the systems, frameworks, and ways of knowing) that emerge in discussions are limited in scope such that even if students speak, they may make assertions that repeat common discourses that objectify, essentialize, and marginalize immigrant populations—even when the speakers are from immigrant communities themselves. Teachers may also focus on particular topics (e.g., immigration and the economy) rather than tackle broader social and moral questions that transcend utilitarian functions; for example, should families be separated at the border? If the terms of the debate are set up in narrow ways or ways that merely repeat common ideas, students miss learning opportunities that shape their understanding and wider construction of the issue of immigration.

**Larger Societal Framing: Tendency toward Dehumanization**

The larger historical and contemporary framing of immigration also poses challenges for discussions of controversial public issues. Normative immigration debates can have a tendency toward dehumanization, with immigrant “others” characterized as fundamentally different from existing “mainstream” populations. One of many historical examples is *Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism, Which Shall Survive?* The authors of this 1902 work, Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt, argued that Asian immigrants were so profoundly different from White men that they could subsist on rice, while White men could not and needed meat. This book became part of U.S. Senate records, forming part of what was a legitimate debate at the time. This is an example of the process by which non-White immigrant groups become framed as ontologically different. The trope becomes: they are different from
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us. And they are a threat to us, whether it be an economic, military, cultural, or other societal threat.19

Dehumanization also occurs through the language used to describe minoritized immigrant groups. Sometimes this language is easily recognizable as inflammatory. For example, recent remarks by President Trump linked immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador, and Africa to fecal matter, while he simultaneously described Norwegian immigrants positively.20 However, there are also subtler aspects of language that frame particular groups of immigrants as problems. Linguist Otto Santa Ana analyzed years of immigration coverage by the *Los Angeles Times*, a publication that prides itself on journalistic integrity and balanced reporting; he found that the metaphors journalists used subtly linked Latino immigrants to natural disasters. He argues that even when coverage is seen as “neutral,” metaphors frame immigrants as dangerous. The most common dominant metaphor he found was “immigration as dangerous waters,” reflected in language such as “flood” and “drowning,” as well as phrases such as “awash under a brown tide” and “relentless flows of immigrants.” Associating “dangerous waters” with “immigration” metaphorically “transform[s] aggregates of individuals into an undifferentiated mass quantity.” Santa Ana further notes:

Since the power of metaphor increases with repetition of such implicit, but unnatural associations, it is important to point them out…. Treating immigration as dangerous waters conceals the individuality of the immigrants’ lives and their humanity. In their place a frightening scenario of uncontrolled movements of water can be played out with devastating floods and inundating surges of brown faces.21

Santa Ana also found metaphors of disease and intrusion. When immigrants are semantically linked to natural disasters, viruses, or literally termed “aliens,” this undermines their humanity. Dehumanization easily becomes a feature of how immigration is discussed. When immigrants are dehumanized, their legitimacy is simultaneously undermined. And when their legitimacy is undermined, this makes it harder to have debates that occur on an equal footing. One must ask: What is the starting point for debates surrounding immigration, both in classrooms and in societies at large? And how are immigrants framed, either implicitly or explicitly?

**Considerations and Alternatives to Teaching Immigration as Controversial**

Through our research, it became clear that skilled and experienced educators who were knowledgeable about their students’ immigration status had practices that were important inside and outside their classrooms. First, teachers developed norms that enhanced students’ safety and that countered common constructions of immigrants as “others.” One of these norms concerns language for referring to undocumented people. As one of our teacher participants noted: “I don’t use the word ‘illegal’ in my classroom and I don’t let the kids use the word ‘illegal’ in my classroom.”22 Another teacher, who had a similar practice, also encouraged the safety of undocumented students by acknowledging their presence in the classroom without naming specific students. One way she did this was through what we describe as a signaling practice, in which she addressed the whole class with statements such as, “If you are undocumented, please see the scholarship information on the door.” She had posted this information in a highly visible spot so that “any kid walking in the classroom … [could] see this.” She further noted the importance of normalizing undocumented status through language use:

[D]on’t whisper about [undocumented status], you say it out loud. I mean, don’t ever name a kid in terms of documentation but … openly talk about [it] in a natural way, [recognizing] the fact that not everybody has documentation and that’s a pretty normal thing.23

Normalizing the presence of undocumented students through signaling practices helps provide a sense of safety and avoids the perception that undocumented people are outsiders and “others” who were not in the room, particularly when issues about immigration are discussed.

Second, teachers built deep, trusting relationships with students. If tense topics emerged, there was a broader relationship of trust between teachers and students. Knowing students deeply meant that teachers had a better sense of students’ actual circumstances; this afforded greater insight into their situations and allowed educators to be more sensitive to students, rather than making assumptions. In essence, the ways teachers interacted with students (in a variety of formats, including one-on-one interactions) mattered just as much as instructional decisions about content and controversies. For example, Daniel, an undocumented student in one of our teachers’ classrooms, was able to develop trust and disclose his status to his teacher, even while keeping his status private from his classmates. When asked privately about whether he would feel comfortable sharing his immigration status in a classroom discussion, he said, “I don’t share like that.”24 This again highlights the significance of who is in the classroom and who shares what during such discussions, even when the outcome of public debates directly affects students. Although Daniel did not disclose his status to his classmates, his teachers’ knowledge of his situation provided a better educational experience than he had in prior classrooms.
Broadening the Frame of Curricular Choices

In this section, we present ideas that broaden the frame of immigration beyond common debates, using Eisner’s curriculum framework. Eisner argues that there are three kinds of curricula: explicit, implicit, and null. The explicit curriculum is the curriculum communicated directly to students, whereas the implicit curriculum describes messages that are communicated indirectly to students, yet that are nevertheless significant. The null curriculum is what is not taught.

Trust, Relationship-Building, and Implicit Curriculum

We begin with the implicit curriculum of trust and relationship-building because in our research this was foundational. First, we suggest that teachers establish norms and practices around the importance of safe space. We also suggest that teachers cultivate more knowledge of students through one-on-one interactions. It may be important to examine the stakes of whole-class activities, and even small-group activities, in which students might feel forced to reveal things that they would rather keep private (even through common practices like “Stand up if you think ‘x,’” which may have unintended consequences).

Furthermore, teachers may wish to think about what kinds of implicit messages might be communicated in the absence of boundaries around the use of humanizing language, especially when referring to populations affected by policies under discussion, or what kinds of messages are communicated when students remain silent during debates about policies that have a direct effect on them and their families.

Suggestions for Teaching about Immigration

Immigration has been a perennially divisive issue in the United States and in other nation-states, particularly as nations grapple with the boundaries of inclusion. In an age of increasing political polarization, where the reality of mainstream political discourse often relies on dehumanizing and facile rhetoric, educators are tasked with the paradoxical ideal of preparing students for an inclusive democratic society. We offer the following suggestions for teachers who aim to teach about immigration through a lens of humanization.

Safety not Silence: Do prioritize safety in the classroom, but do not avoid important topics like immigration. Instead, consider how to reframe different questions surrounding immigration.

This Isn’t New: Contextualize immigration policy—and even anti-immigrant rhetoric—within a historical context, while also paying attention to how rhetoric has been used over time as a political strategy. When students are able to see that anti-immigration sentiment and policies are not a new phenomenon, students may raise critical questions about the utility of alarmist xenophobic discourses. Seeing these patterns over time can help students understand the ways that rhetoric has been used as a tool of oppression.

Build Relationships with Students: One of the most effective ways you can broker difficult conversations with students around controversial public issues is by building relationships with the students. When topics are difficult and tense, teachers are able to leverage relationships and goodwill with their students as they present ideas that might be new and challenging. Additionally, good relationships allow teachers to be classroom advocates for students who may feel vulnerable in class discussions where their identities are in question.

Immigrants are More than their Status: Be careful of language and pay attention to specifics. It is important to remember that undocumented individuals are not simply nameless and faceless beings defined by their immigration status. The more you can provide texture to the diverse lives of immigrants, the more you work to undo dehumanizing stereotypes.

Immigrants Have Power and Agency: Show examples of immigrant communities, including undocumented individuals, organizing and holding power. Portraying immigrants simply as victims of dispassionate policy does not allow the resilience and work of communities to speak. While we urge you to highlight contributions of immigrants to shifting policy, it is equally important to highlight the ways in which communities work through civil society, apart from governmental institutions, to organize towards an improved quality of life. Broadening the frame in this way, will allow you to bring forward art and culture as forms of expression of humanity, power and resilience.

Signaling Support and Safety: While words are incredibly important, so too are the implicit messages your students get from curriculum and pedagogical choices. Something as simple as a sign you put up in your classroom which signals resources for undocumented students can demonstrate that you are a safe person for undocumented students. The ways in which you group students together and the time/coverage you give to topics are all messages that you send to your students about what content is worthy of time and careful attention.
Reframing Immigration through Explicit Curriculum

Contextualizing Migration

One shortcoming of many immigration debates is a lack of context. This contributes to the null curriculum on immigration, producing limited understandings of migration. We suggest contextualizing immigration historically and geographically, including:

- Analyzing the role of globalization, conflict, and increasing natural disasters and the role they play in contributing to the causes of migration.  
- Contextualizing immigration policy beyond the United States to include human rights and international migration and refugee policies geographically and historically.

Contextualizing U.S. immigration policy over time by examining the history of nativism, historical rationales for immigration exclusion and restriction, and connections to larger systems of oppression such as race. (The PBS documentary Race: The Power of An Illusion, Episode 3 offers tools for doing this.)

Basic Humanization

Because of longstanding patterns of dehumanization in immigration debates (combined with asymmetrical power relationships when those in different positions interact around the topic), it becomes important to humanize immigrants. Sources have become increasingly plentiful, including those that feature the voices of undocumented people, such as the Living Undocumented series (https://livingundocumented.com) and media from journalist Jose Antonio Vargas (e.g., www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmz9cCF0KNE and his memoir, published in September 2018, Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen). There is also the Undocumented and Awkward series on YouTube, produced by undocumented people; it breaks down norms of invisibility by describing common situations that undocumented people encounter in daily life. In addition, migration can be humanized by building deeper understandings of migrant-sending regions and the larger forces that shape migration. The Reimagining Migration Project (https://reimaginingmigration.org) also features immigrant stories and provides further contextualization of migration.

The Power of Social Movements and Political Action

Analyzing social movements, especially those led by immigrants, can provide a window into the power of political action. Fascinating developments in the study of social movements, including analyses of “social movement spillover,” also offer compelling theories about social change. Depictions of youth in the contemporary “Dreamer” movement counter images of youth as apathetic or apolitical. These examples of political action challenge the idea that one’s formal citizenship status determines political participation.

Conclusion

Tensions over who should be allowed into nation-states in these times of increased conflict, globalization, and natural disasters are intensifying. While the topic of immigration is important to teach, approaches to addressing this subject are of equal consequence. Immigration need not be taught as a controversial topic. In fact, it is a normal process that has occurred for millennia. In light of the historical and contemporary dehumanization of immigrants, we argue for reframing typical approaches to immigration debates, especially by examining what is implicitly or explicitly taught about migration and immigrant populations, as well as what is not taught. This is significant, not only because an increasing share of the K-12 student population is either undocumented, from mixed-status families, or otherwise affected by current discourse and policies on immigration and refugees, but also for the sake of knowledge construction that builds broader, deeper, and more contextualized understandings of migration, both past and present.

Notes


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17. This is not to say that immigration and economics are separate from moral questions. However, a typical framing of economic questions surrounds whether immigrants take U.S. workers’ jobs. There has long been a broad consensus of immigrants’ positive impact on the U.S. economy (see Aviva Chomsky, “They Take Our Jobs!” and 20 Other Myths About Immigration [Boston: Beacon Press, 2007] and Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Children of Immigration [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001]). Yet this does not prevent the issue from coming up repeatedly, and being given more attention than a focus on broader questions of globalization and economic marginalization and the histories of systems that create the necessity of migration for many populations that otherwise would not migrate.


19. Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) is an example of work that positions immigrants as dangerous threats. The scholarship of Leo R. Chávez, including The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation (Redwood City, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), is important in analyzing and debunking these threats.


22. Dabach et al., “Teachers Navigating Civic Education When Students Are Undocumented: Building Case Knowledge,” 342. Alongside our teacher participants and many others, we take the position that humans cannot be “illegal”—even though actions may be adjudicated as “illegal.” We also note that what is legal in a society is different from what is moral or just (see Martin Luther King, Jr., Why We Can’t Wait [New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1964]) and often reflects unequal societal power. For more on the emergence of systems of “illegality,” see M. M. Nagi’s Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.


27. See, for example, Manguel Figueroa, “Speech or Silence: Undocumented Students’ Decisions to Disclose or Disguise Their Citizenship Status in School.”


References


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