

# Representation of Latinx Immigrants and Immigration in Children's Literature: A Critical Content Analysis

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Using Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), the authors examine 13 children's picturebooks published from 2010 to 2016 that depict Latinx immigration experiences to the United States.

I dreamt that Mamá had the right papers and we crossed the border together. Above our house, the sky filled with fireworks and I knew that all the other children would see their parents soon, too. I was ready to eat Mamá's warm tortillas, to listen to her bedtime stories, and to hear her beautiful voice saying every single night, "Buenas noches, mi José."

From *North to South / Del Norte al Sur*  
(Laínez, 2010a, p. 32)

**THE 2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL** election put the country's immigration policies at the center of discussion in communities throughout the country, including in educational settings. The outcome of the election sent many immigrant communities into panic due to the anti-immigration and xenophobic rhetoric that was pervasive before, during, and after the election (Galvan & Taxin, 2016; Holpuch, 2016; Sacchetti & Wangsness, 2016). Since the election, the anti-immigration stance of the current U.S. leadership has permeated classrooms and after-school programs. Policies currently being implemented and under continued discussion directly—and negatively—impact the lives of children in U.S. schools.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimated that in the period from 2009 to 2013, there were approximately 5.1 million children under the age of 18 with at least one undocumented immigrant parent (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016). Families in which one parent is undocumented experience heightened levels of emotional distress, economic instability, and unpredictability in their daily routines (Dreby, 2012). These risk factors, plus generally lower incomes and lower English proficiencies, put children in these families at a disadvantage when compared to families without citizenship or resident status concerns (Capps et al., 2016). Moreover, families with undocumented loved ones live with the fear and stress of facing deportation and the resulting separation (Gándara, 2017).

The steady increase in hate crimes toward immigrants (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017) has heightened the focus on children's literature with immigration themes as a means for opening dialogue with students in school settings (Allen, 2013). In the wake of hate crimes, anti-immigrant policies, and the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States, it has become increasingly vital for teachers to consider the traumas immigrant children experience and to reflect on what schools can do to mitigate some students' fears and

other students' misconceptions. Children's picturebooks are important because they are "artifacts that convey cultural messages and values about society and help children learn about their world" (Koss, 2015, p. 32). Such books are important educational tools that can be used to affirm students' experiences and identities. Indeed, research indicates that picturebooks have the potential to help students understand issues around stereotyping and othering by individuals who are unfamiliar with immigration experiences (Crawley, 2017; Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007). Accurate and authentic picturebook stories focused on immigration can help children who are dealing with the emotional toll exacted by xenophobic policies (Allen, 2013) and the public expression of anti-immigration sentiments (Quintero, 2017) by accurately representing the realities of their experiences.

Since the 2016 presidential election, the urgency to provide humanizing stories about immigrant communities in classrooms has grown. Xenophobic rhetoric dehumanizes children of immigrants and their families, particularly when descriptors such as *animals* or *criminals* are used repeatedly by the U.S. president (Davis, 2018; Neuman, 2018) and others. Such language also encourages others to deny immigrants empathy. Because of these repeated portrayals of immigrant families with undocumented members as transgressors of boundaries, real or imagined, it is critical for educators to respond to their students' concerns through stories that offer multidimensional views of immigrants and their lives.

As teacher educators at two different universities in the U.S. South, we are not always sure how to respond when practicing teachers tell us, "My students are scared," "I do not know what to say back," or "I cannot believe they wrote 'Trump hates Mexicans.'" However, we contend that meaningful stories that reflect children's immigration experiences—and surrounding issues the children are dealing with in the current sociopolitical climate—must be central to literacy curricula.

The New Latinx Diaspora, a concept that originated in the 1990s, refers to the movement of Latinx peoples to regions of the United States where they previously had not been represented in large numbers (Clonan-Roy, Wortham, & Nichols, 2016), such as Georgia and South Carolina. In this New Latinx Diaspora, many people have come to hear the urgent cries of children and families in immigrant communities who have been villainized by politicians, media, and the public (Wortham, Murillo, & Hamann, 2002).

Working within such diasporic communities in the South, we find it necessary to respond to the outcries of teachers, families, and children by examining how recently published books by Latinx authors about Latinx immigration might serve as windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990)

in our schools. As teachers and teacher educators, we know well that children enter schools with a wide range of personal and family immigration experiences. Texts may serve as windows by helping teachers and children who do not belong to the ethnic and cultural groups depicted, or who do not have similar immigration experiences, to gain new perspectives. By serving as mirrors, texts may offer validating self-reflections. Both as mirrors and windows, texts can create spaces for humanizing insights—showing readers how their lives fit within a broader human experience (Bishop, 1992).

Bishop's (1990) concept behind windows and mirrors highlights the importance of exposing young readers to multiple representations of identities and experiences in order to develop their ability to participate compassionately in a multicultural society and to provide authentic reflections so children recognize themselves as valued members of society. Thus, the aim of this article is to examine the immigration experiences of Latinx child characters in picturebooks, analyzing the portrayals for their potential impact as mirrors and windows for students in today's schools. This study builds on research that explores Latinx representation in children's literature by specifically attending to how authors of picturebooks include complicated issues of Latinx immigration. Since Latinx children and families are still underrepresented in children's literature, analysis of how this topic is handled in the available texts is essential.

The study focused on the following research questions: (1) How is the immigration experience for Latinx immigrant children and children of immigrants represented in realistic fiction picturebooks with significant Latinx content? and (2) How are Latinx immigrant children and children of immigrants themselves represented within that text set?

### Theoretical Framework

Our analysis was informed by critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and, specifically, Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT is a conceptual tool for interrogating the constructs of race and racism. Its core assertion is that racism is institutional and systemic (Bell, 1987; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Solórzano (1998) noted that key tenets of CRT include "(1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) the interdisciplinary perspective" (p. 122).

We also used LatCrit (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), which extends

CRT to focus on the experiences of the Latinx community. LatCrit can be used to “reveal the ways Latinas/os experience race, class, gender, and sexuality, while also acknowledging the Latina/o experience with issues of immigration status, language, ethnicity and culture” (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 79). Believing that history informs current realities of people of color, LatCrit theorists have also used *racist nativism* as a conceptual framework to help understand how historical, racialized experiences shape contemporary experiences of Latinx undocumented immigrants (Pérez Huber, Benavides Lopez, Malagón, Velez, & Solórzano, 2008). Specifically, racist nativism “explains how perceived racial differences construct false perceptions of People of Color as ‘nonnative’ and as not belonging to the monolithic ‘American’ identity” (Pérez Huber, 2011, p. 382). This definition is particularly important for our study because we specifically focus on the experiences of Latinx immigrant children in children’s literature.

### Literature Review

The history of Latinx children’s literature as a whole in the United States has not been well documented due to the diversity of experiences represented by this multifaceted group of people (i.e., peoples with different nationalities, languages, and histories) (Reimer, 1992) and because of the multiplicity of terms that have been used (e.g., *Latinos*, *Hispanic*) (Nilsson, 2005). As Nilsson noted, early research on issues of representation in Latinx children’s literature often focused on the amount and type of literature by featuring specific subgroups, such as literature featuring Mexican or Puerto Rican people or literature written by authors from those and other specific Latinx groups (e.g., Nieto, 1982a, 1982b). This early research focused on representations of specific groups in literature, while our current study focuses on a specific issue. In this article, we attend to representations of children’s immigration experiences within the particular subset of Latinx children’s literature.

### ANALYZING REPRESENTATION

Some more recent studies have documented ways in which specific Latinx peoples, or concepts related to Latinx peoples overall, are represented (Acevedo, 2017; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Chappell & Faltis, 2007; Dávila, 2012; Martínez-Roldán, 2013). In her study of Puerto Rican children’s literature, Acevedo (2017) found that the literature failed to problematize the economic issues the island and its people face. Instead, such children’s literature has often portrayed Puerto Rico as a magical place. Chappell and Faltis (2007) studied language and cultural practices in Latinx literature and found that Latinx children’s literature portrayed children as “largely unaware of their parents’

home cultures and disconnected from extended family members” (p. 259). Both of these studies are examples of problematic representations of Latinx people in literature.

Although researchers have examined themes of immigration and stories of border crossing in children’s literature (López-Robertson, 2010, 2011, 2012; Martínez-Roldán & Newcomer, 2011), few studies have examined immigration in children’s literature with a focus on the analysis of the texts (e.g., Bousalis, 2016; Chappell & Faltis, 2007; Cummins, 2013; Sung, Fahrenbruck, & López-Robertson, 2017). Cummins (2013) identified patterns among 11 young adult novels on the topic of border crossing between Mexico and the United States. Central to Cummins’s analysis was the use of “empathetic outreach” and “borderlands ethical stance” (Anzaldúa, 1987/2007). Cummins (2013) used Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of “empathetic outreach” to describe how books have the potential to foster empathy for those living in different situations. He also used Pablo Ramirez’s concept of a *borderlands ethical stance* to describe how “individuals justifiably violate laws due to a personal way of knowing” (p. 60). Thus, one is not to be considered a criminal when the conditions surrounding migration are immediate and necessary for the migrant to stay alive. Using these two frames, Cummins described fundamental characteristics of selected border-crossing texts and discussed how the literary works he examined offered ways for all readers to have sympathetic connections to undocumented children and families.

Sung et al. (2017) analyzed the representations of female characters’ immigration experiences to the United States in four award-winning novels for middle-grade readers (usually aged 8 to 12). Drawing on postcolonial and colonial frameworks and using intertextuality as a tool for critical analysis, the authors found that “tensions, conflicts, abuse, sadness, and despair were common characteristics” displayed in texts about immigrant families (p. 56). They revealed that the novels, published between 2000 and 2006, provided an awareness of immigrants’ familial and historical backgrounds but generally failed to provide a postcolonial critique of stereotypes and biases imposed on immigrants by the global community. This failure to critique biases demonstrated a lack of effort to cast doubt on the trustworthiness of accepted ideas held by the majority or to provide what Delgado and Stefancic (2001) referred to as a *counter-narrative*. Counter-narratives are central to CRT and to literature that takes up critical issues, providing alternative stories that serve to expose and delegitimize historically privileged narratives.

Bousalis’s (2016) study of 98 trade books across two peak immigration eras (1880–1930s and 1980–2010s) revealed that little had changed in the portrayal of immigrants. With the harshest stereotypical storylines

given to Mexicans, authors often portrayed Mexicans as “migrant workers, living in run-down neighborhoods, loitering in parks, participating as gang members, and being undocumented” (p. 24). In a related study, Chappell and Faltis (2007) examined the ways Latinx children’s literature portrayed cultural models of being bilingual in the United States. Their analyses of seven children’s books with bilingual and cultural themes made a number of assertions regarding immigration, including that the texts made immigrant assimilation to American culture the norm. Notably, Chappell and Faltis found that the message portrayed in the stories suggested that in order to become successful Americans, immigrants needed to relinquish their languages and cultures. Altogether, these studies demonstrate that a large body of Latinx children’s literature has failed to represent complex tensions associated with identifying as Latinx today. These tensions include the stresses of being falsely labeled as criminals, having one’s home language vilified, and being considered a burden to society rather than being viewed as an asset.

#### PROMOTING DISCUSSION

Immigration-themed texts can be used with young children to open up spaces where young children can share their knowledge and experiences (Allen, 2013; Martínez-Roldán & López-Robertson, 1999/2000; Martínez-Roldán & Newcomer, 2011; Osorio, 2016). In Osorio’s (2016) study, second-grade students connected to immigration-themed texts selected by their teacher, reflecting on their experiences of border-crossing events and of being treated differently based on race. Through discussion and digital writing activities in response to reading literature grounded in Latinx immigration, Allen’s (2013) third-grade Latinx students in the U.S. state of Georgia linked recent immigration policy shifts in their state with the national rhetoric about immigration. The children shared intimate knowledge about the sociopolitical forces of policy and social attitudes around immigration that were impacting their families. In a study about immigrant students’ interpretations of Shaun Tan’s *The Arrival*, a wordless graphic novel that blends realistic and fantastical immigration motifs, Martínez-Roldán and Newcomer (2011) found that students drew on personal experiences to make sense of the book and to co-construct meaning of the text with other students. Overall, these studies demonstrate the possibilities for young children’s engagement with the complex topic of immigration in classrooms when they have access to literature that is connected to their lives and opportunities for discussion.

#### DUALITY OF LATINX CHILDREN’S LIVES

Critical multicultural texts are “children’s literature that highlights diversity and social justice issues

relevant to diverse learners” (Braden, 2017, p. 482). Critical multicultural literature about immigration has the potential to afford first- and second-generation immigrant children the space to draw on their experiences as they make sense of text as part of an interpretive community (Allen, 2013; López-Robertson, 2011; Martínez-Roldán & Newcomer, 2011; Osorio, 2016). Some examples of texts used by Osorio (2016) include the books *Waiting for Papá / Esperando a Mi Papá* by Rene Colato Laínez (2004), *Super Cilantro Girl / La Superniña del Cilantro* by Juan Felipe Herrera (2003), and *From North to South / Del Norte al Sur* by Rene Colato Laínez (2010a). As a group, these texts address issues about borders and immigration status and how these issues impact children.

What appears to be missing from children’s literature are narratives that speak to the duality of students’ lives—that is, those that reflect the legality and process of immigration and also recognize the burdens created for children in the process. Additionally, although the United States has seen an influx of unaccompanied minors, the majority of Latinx students in U.S. classrooms were born in the United States (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). Finally, recently under Trump’s “zero-tolerance” immigration policy, thousands of young Latinx immigrant children have been separated forcibly from their families at the United States / Mexico border and have been dispersed across the nation to be placed in foster care (Dickerson, 2018). Thus, researchers and teachers need to account for the ways mixed-status families—that is, families of one or more undocumented parents whose children were born in the United States—are portrayed in stories. And, there must also be an account of accompanied and unaccompanied minors as well as of minors removed involuntarily from their parents’ care.

Importantly, although the reported studies discussed earlier highlight children’s literature discussions with peers and their teachers around this topic, the actual literature described in the studies has not touched fully and deeply on the multifaceted nature of being Latinx in America during the turbulent debates around immigration and mixed-status origin that occurred leading up to, during, and after the 2016 presidential election. For example, the complex transnational identities of children of immigrants are often unexplored. These youth may maintain significant ties to two or more nations (Skerrett, 2015). This knowledge and perspective are often left out of classrooms and children’s literature; however, “these repertoires provide a powerful potential resource for literacy education” (p. 18). These repertoires refer to students’ experiences and wealth of knowledge that they acquire in living a transnational lifestyle (Skerrett, 2015).

## Methodology

This study is a critical content analysis (Johnson, Mathis, & Short, 2016) of picturebooks that include Latinx immigration content. The data sources included 13 picturebooks published between 2010 and 2016. We used a LatCrit lens to analyze the picturebooks. The analysis methods, including the data coding and analysis, and the questions that guided our analysis are described below.

### DATA SOURCES AND SAMPLING

This study developed from a larger project involving critical content analysis of fiction picturebooks with significant Latinx content (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). That research prompted us to think about immigration in picturebooks. We began this study by revisiting the subset of those books, all published in 2013, that pertained specifically to immigration. By limiting this study to picturebooks, we were able to focus our analysis on content in books designed to be read by young children.

To expand our pool, we conducted searches for books that included the content of Latinx immigration. Because this study focused on books with Latinx content, we reviewed the award-winning book lists for the Pura Belpré Award and Tomás Rivera award and conducted an online search of a community library online catalogue using keywords such as *immigration* and *Latino*. We also searched

the Amazon website in order to find books that were widely accessible and that included the topic of Latinx immigration. Additionally, conducting broad Google searches—using terms such as *immigration picture books*, *Latinx immigration picture books*, and *picture books about immigration*—helped us find books that were missed initially. We also used worldcat.org and searched for the terms *emigration and immigration juvenile fiction* and *separation of persons juvenile fiction* to ensure that no books were overlooked.

We began the study with a focus on picturebooks published in the last five years (2013–2017, at the time of the study) because we wanted to examine books situated in the current sociopolitical context. However, since that search yielded only eight books, we expanded our time frame to include picturebooks published after 2010. This time period coincided with two statewide immigration policies that impacted the nature of classrooms in the New Latinx Diaspora. Alabama's HB 56 (2011) and Georgia's HB 87 (2011), both of which were based on Arizona's SB 1070 (2010), created some of the harshest immigration policies in the United States. For example, police officers were authorized to check the immigration status of anyone with whom they came into contact, which created a fear that permeated communities.

This extended publication time frame yielded 16 picturebooks. Of these 16, we chose not to include three.

TABLE 1  
Book Titles, Storyline Summaries, and Additional Information

Book	Summary of the Book	Point of View	Immigration Status of Protagonist	Border Crossings	Country of Origin
<b>Argueta, J. (2016).</b> <i>Somos como las nubes / We are like the clouds.</i> (A. Ruano, Illus.)	This book, written in verse, details the journey and hardships that young people embark on when they leave their home country in search of a better life in the United States.	First person (multiple children)	Immigrant child	Multiple border crossings (Guatemala and Mexico)	El Salvador
<b>Buitrago, J. (2015).</b> <i>Two white rabbits.</i> (E. Amado, Trans.) (R. Yockteng, Illus.)	This story details the experiences of a little girl and her father as they embark on their journey to the United States. Throughout their travels, the little girl counts everything that she sees.	First person (child)	Immigrant child	Multiple border crossings	Unknown (paratext identifies as Central American country)
<b>Danticat, E. (2015).</b> <i>Mama's nightingale: A story of immigration and separation.</i> (L. Staub, Illus.)	A little girl's mother is sent to an immigration detention center. After Saya visits her mother in the detention center, her mother begins to record bedtime stories for her to listen to. After talking to her father about his frustration over not receiving answers about his wife's detention, Saya writes a letter to the newspaper. This letter receives media attention, which leads to her mother's case being heard in court.	First person (child)	Child of immigrants	None	Haiti
<b>Dismondy, M. (2015).</b> <i>Chocolate milk, por favor!</i> (D. Farrell, Illus.)	A little boy named Gabe begins his first day of school in the United States. Johnny thinks that he is a crybaby for crying on the first day of school. He does not like that Gabe does not speak English. In the end, Gabe and Johnny find that they have common ground in their love for soccer.	Third person	Immigrant child	None	Unknown

TABLE 1 CONT.  
 Book Titles, Storyline Summaries, and Additional Information

Book	Summary of the Book	Point of View	Immigration Status of Protagonist	Border Crossings	
<b>Kingsley, L. (2015).</b> <i>Blue skies for Lupe.</i>	A little girl named Lupe is born with a disability in Mexico. Her mother decides to immigrate to the United States because she had heard there is better health care there than in Mexico. The book details the experiences of Lupe as she starts school and learns to speak English and move around in her wheelchair.	First person (child)	Immigrant child	Border crossing detailed in illustrations and the text; text discusses how Lupe and her mother crossed the Mexican desert	Mexico
<b>Láinez, R. C. (2010a).</b> <i>From North to South / Del norte al sur.</i> (J. Cepeda, Illus.)	Jose's mother is deported: She was at work and did not have "papers." Jose and his father travel to Tijuana to see his mother. His mother is in a shelter for deported mothers.	First person (child)	Immigrant child	Crossing the border from United States to Mexico to see the mother	Mexico (parents)
<b>Láinez, R. C. (2010b).</b> <i>My shoes and I.</i> (F. Vanden Broeck, Illus.)	A mother sends a little boy a pair of shoes. He uses these shoes as he travels from El Salvador to meet his mother in the United States. The little boy details his treacherous journey by detailing what has happened to his shoes.	First person (child)	Immigrant child	Multiple border crossings—text discusses Mario and his father crossing the borders in Guatemala and Mexico	El Salvador
<b>Láinez, R. C. (2016).</b> <i>Mamá the alien / Mama la extraterrestre.</i> (L. Laucamara, Illus.)	A little girl named Sofia finds her mother's permanent alien card and believes that her mother is an actual alien. In the end, she finds out why her mother has the card when she goes with her mom to her citizenship ceremony.	First person (child)	Child of immigrant	None	Unknown
<b>Mateo, J. (2014).</b> <i>Migrant: The journey of a Mexican worker.</i> (J. Martínez Pedro, Illus.)	A young immigrant boy and his family make the dangerous journey from Mexico to the United States. The illustrations in this book are presented in codex.	First person (child)	Immigrant child		Mexico
<b>Medina, M. (2015).</b> <i>Mango, abuela, and me.</i> (A. Dominguez, Illus.)	Mia's abuela comes to live with Mia and her parents in the city. Mia is not able to speak Spanish. She soon discovers that her abuela is not able to speak English. Mia has an idea to buy a parrot. This helps them to have something to talk about and to bond.	First person (child)	Child of immigrants	None	Unknown
<b>Mora, P., &amp; Martinez, L. (2014).</b> <i>I pledge allegiance.</i> (P. Barton, Illus.)	Libby's great-aunt Lobo passes her citizenship test and is practicing the Pledge of Allegiance so she does not forget it for her ceremony. Libby is also going to lead the class saying the pledge. They practice together for the big day, and Libby learns about her great-aunt's story.	First person (child)	Immigrant child	None	Unknown
<b>Stewart, S. (2012).</b> <i>The quiet place.</i> (D. Small, Illus.)	This book begins as a little girl named Isabel writes a letter to her aunt as she crosses the border with her family. Isabel arrives in the United States and continues to tell about her adjustment to living in a new country by writing letters. She details how she uses cardboard boxes that she gets from homes when her mother cooks for parties. These boxes become her quiet place as she adjusts to life in the United States.	First person (child) through the writing of letters	Immigrant child	Border crossing from Mexico to United States shown in illustrations and briefly discussed in the text	Mexico
<b>Tonatiuh, D. (2013).</b> <i>Pancho Rabbit and the coyote: A migrant's tale.</i>	This story is an allegory that details how Pancho Rabbit goes north to look for his father, who does not return. On his way, he meets a coyote who offers to help him in exchange for his food. They travel together and then the coyote decides that he will eat Pancho when he runs out of food.	Third person	Immigrant child	Border crossing is main content of the book	Mexico (identified in paratext)

*I'm New Here* (O'Brien, 2015) was excluded because it included children from multiple countries outside Latin America and our focus was on immigration from Latin American countries. Although *Good-bye Havana! Hola, New York* (Colón, 2011) did deal with immigration from a Latin American country, this book was set in 1959 and our study was concerned with current immigration issues. *Let's Go See Papá!* (Schimel, 2010) was excluded because it dealt not with the immigration journey, but with a child's reflection on how she missed her father who had already immigrated and what she would miss once she has left to join him. Table 1 includes the book titles and storyline summaries of the 13 books included.

#### DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

We used critical content analysis (Beach et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2016) to analyze the data. Critical content analysis entails

a close reading of small amounts of text that are interpreted by the analyst and then contextualized in new narratives....What makes the study "critical" is not the methodology, but the framework used to think within, through, and beyond the text. (Beach et al., p. 130)

A LatCrit lens was overlaid as a theoretical framework and an analytical guide in order to allow a focused exploration of the ways Latinx immigration experiences were portrayed. This lens allowed us to place race at the center of the analysis, thus focusing specifically on the Latinx immigration experience, while still considering the intersectionality of race and racism with gender, class, and language (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Central to CRT overall and to the more specific LatCrit approach we took is the notion of counter-narratives. Counter-narratives are "a method of telling a story that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 144). Our analysis sought to understand the narratives and counter-narratives that were presented by the texts about the immigration experience. Our analysis also explored issues of race and racism in the ways Latinx immigrant protagonists were represented in the text. Finally, we also decided to engage in emotion coding (Saldaña, 2012). Emotion coding allowed us to label the emotions and feelings that the characters in picturebooks were experiencing. We were particularly interested in the range of emotions displayed by the child characters in the picturebooks.

We began our analysis of the picturebooks by reading several of the texts together, working to establish the

framework based on LatCrit that we would use to code the books. In particular, we developed the following questions that guided our initial coding:

1. *How are Latinx immigrants portrayed in picturebooks that include immigration content?*
2. *How is the immigrant experience of Latinx characters portrayed through the images and text? (Do the experiences challenge the dominant ideologies about immigration?)*
3. *Are there any intersections between gender and immigration?*
4. *How are children's voices and experiences represented?*
5. *What emotional toll is described as related to the children, and how is it represented?*
6. *What family structures are portrayed in the books?*
7. *What assumptions are made about the immigrants and their reasons for immigrating?*

We began by reading the picturebooks together to familiarize ourselves with the books while keeping the questions in mind and making notes about our initial thoughts in a spreadsheet. We then scanned the books and converted the scanned images to PDFs. We uploaded the PDF files of the books to the online qualitative software Dedoose (Version 8.0.35; 2018), which allowed us to apply codes to both text and pictures. We also chose to use this software because it allows multiple researchers to code in the same document. In reading the texts, we considered both the words and the pictures as vehicles for representations and ideologies related to immigrants and immigration. Collaboratively, we engaged in open coding (Saldaña, 2012) of the pictures and words while considering the questions above.

The initial collaborative coding of the texts allowed us to have discussions as we created and modified the codes. It also allowed us to build consensus about how and when to apply the codes. Next, we individually reviewed each of the texts a second and third time, constantly comparing the data with the codes we had created. The second and third readings of the texts ensured that any codes created during the first reading were verified. Additionally, we used the second and third readings of the texts to engage in emotion coding. In total, we coded 185 excerpts (including texts and pictures) and applied 92 codes. We then collapsed these codes to form categories, grouping across commonalities and relationships. The codes that were created during the emotion coding were incorporated into the larger themes. Below we present these categories along with illustrative data from the picturebooks analyzed.

Table 2 includes an example of the two coding systems used.

TABLE 2  
Examples of Emotion Coding

Emotion Coding		
CODE	CATEGORY	TEXT EXCERPT
Sad Optimistic Crying	Children exhibiting independent agency	<i>Somos Como Las Nubes / We Are Like the Clouds</i> (Argueta, 2016)  “The coyote tells us that we are almost there. I feel like going home to see my dad. He stayed behind crying. Stop crying, Dad. When I get to my mother we will send you a kiss.” (n.p.)
Critical Content Analysis		
CODE	CATEGORY	TEXT EXCERPT
“He’s Not Like Us” “Language Barrier” “Learning a New Language”	Adjusting to everyday life	<i>Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!</i> (Dismondy, 2015)  “Look, he’s not like us. He can’t even order lunch.” (p. 8)

## Findings

In this study, we sought to investigate representations of immigration experiences for Latinx immigrant children and children of immigrants as depicted in realistic fiction with significant Latinx content (research question 1). We focused also on how the child characters in these books were themselves represented (research question 2). We were particularly interested in seeing if the experiences of the characters in the texts represented the current lived realities of Latinx immigrant children. Guided by the tenets of LatCrit, we identified two main themes that stood out in our analysis of our text set: (a) children’s levels of awareness of the immigration journey and (b) children’s difficulties with adjustment to life in the United States. The first theme—with its subthemes (1) children as unaware, (2) children exhibiting independent agency, and (3) children as aware and engaged—speaks more to our second question. The second theme—with its subthemes (1) adjusting to everyday life in the United States, (2) missing the home country, and (3) experiencing difficulties learning a new language—responds more to our first question in addressing how the immigration experience was represented through portrayals of the child characters’ experiences. For both themes, we discuss how well these representations reflect current lived realities of Latinx immigrant children.

## CHILDREN’S LEVEL OF AWARENESS OF THE IMMIGRATION JOURNEY

Even young children can demonstrate an awareness of the immigration experience, and they possess the ability to discuss past and present immigration experiences (Allen, 2013). Despite this ability, our analysis revealed that the texts reflected different levels of character awareness, including several instances in which the protagonists were positioned as having no awareness of the immigration journey. Three subcategories were determined in our analysis of the books: children as unaware, children exhibiting independent agency, and children as aware and engaged. Saldaña’s (2012) emotion coding helped us describe these distinctions.

**CHILDREN AS UNAWARE.** Although strong emotions of fear or worry were described in all of the picturebooks, child characters in some of the texts showed few overt emotions in reaction to the events surrounding the immigration journey. This lack of awareness was revealed in part through our coding of how emotions were or were not displayed during the journey. For example, in *Two White Rabbits* (Buitrago, 2015), a little girl traveled with her father from an unspecified country in Latin America to the United States. In this story, the father was always by his daughter’s side, informing her about what she noticed along the journey. Throughout the book, as her father negotiated their travel (e.g., bargaining with others to cross a river on a raft, traveling by train), the little girl seemed oblivious to these larger circumstances, nonchalantly counting random things (a single donkey, clouds) instead of demonstrating a consciousness of their experiences on a deeper level. Another example from this picturebook was a later scene where the little girl’s father took her hand to lead her away from law enforcement officers. Lacking awareness of their situation, the daughter again seemed clueless, saying: “Where are we going? I ask sometimes, but no one answers” (p. 25); this same line was repeated several times in the text. Although the storyline and visual text captured the realities of traveling toward the border (i.e., working odd jobs, encountering dangerous coyotes or smugglers, traveling atop trains, sleeping in the open), the text did not demonstrate that children were aware of the difficulties associated with immigration.

Another example of a book that showed children as unaware of the immigration journey was *My Shoes and I* (Laínez, 2010b). In this story, Mario traveled with his father from El Salvador to the United States wearing shoes that his mother had sent him for the journey. During the journey, Mario focused his attention on the shoes while he faced different hardships, such as when his father lost his wallet and had to live with Mario in



an abandoned trailer for a number of days. During this experience, Mario focused on his shoes; he sang, smiled, and talked to them.

Finally, in *Mamá the Alien / Mamá la Extraterrestre*, a little girl, Sofia, found her mother's resident alien card and began imagining her mother as an extraterrestrial alien and herself as half-alien. Sofia's mother explained the purpose of the card to Sofia, and the book ended with the family attending the mother's citizenship ceremony. However, the mother's experiences from the immigration journey through to the citizenship ceremony were not included in the story. Instead, the immigration journey and naturalization process were simplified, and the child in the text was unaware of the difficulties involved in the lengthy and complex process.

Though the children in each of these examples were depicted as part of the immigration story, they were not described as being aware of the dangers of the life-threatening journey of immigrating to the United States.

**CHILDREN EXHIBITING INDEPENDENT AGENCY.** The books *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* (Tonatiuh, 2013), *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* (Mateo, 2014), and *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (Danticat, 2015) offered exceptions to the lack of awareness described above. Our emotion coding of these texts revealed child characters who exhibited agency based on their awareness of and engagement in the journey. Awareness was revealed through characters' emotions associated with the immigration experience, including fear, worry, optimism, and happiness. For example, Tonatiuh's (2013) text reflected a young child's agency during his border-crossing experience, including times when he dealt with the associated dangers. The child rabbit character, Pancho, took the initiative to look for his father, who had left to find work in the North. After the family became concerned over his delayed return, Pancho packed his father's favorite foods and began the journey to find him. The young rabbit made the journey on a train, through tunnels, by passing snakes that represented corrupt police, and in the heat of the desert. He met a coyote who pretended to aid Pancho's journey, but the coyote actually was plotting to steal from and hurt Pancho. Throughout the story, Pancho's character displayed a range of emotions (scared, surprised, sad) that showed how aware he was of the dangers of the journey. These expressions of emotions can open the door for significant discussions with children about the psychological toll of immigration.

In *Somos Como Las Nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* (Argueta, 2016), children were depicted traveling alone in their journey from El Salvador to the United States. On one of the pages, a young man described the soft sand of the desert

while thinking about his father and stated, "The coyote tells us that we are almost there. I feel like going home to see my dad. He stayed behind crying. Stop crying, Dad. When I get to my mother we will send you a kiss" (n.p.). In this text, the child took on the role of someone offering comfort to an adult. He told his father to stop crying and offered comfort by telling his father that he would send him a kiss. This section displayed the strength that children show in the face of adversity and also how their role can shift from a child who needs comfort to a child who offers reassurance.

The main character—a young girl named Saya—also exhibits agency in *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* (Danticat, 2015). In this book, Saya's mother was being held in a detention center—a "prison for women without papers" (n.p.). Saya's father attempted to get his wife released by writing to officials who might have been able to help, but he was unsuccessful. Saya decided to write her own letters, but sent them to a reporter. When the reporter arrived to interview Saya, she told her mother's story. The ensuing press led the judge to see her mother in court, which resulted in Saya's mother being released as she waited for a decision in her case. The text included the difficult emotions a child experiences when separated from a parent. In this story, Saya took action by writing the letter about her mother's story—an action that ultimately led to her mother's release from the detention center.

**CHILDREN AS AWARE AND ENGAGED.** Contrary to the child character in *Two White Rabbits* (Buitrago, 2015), the child narrator in *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* (Mateo, 2014) demonstrated his depth of awareness through the strong emotions he expressed as he and his family made the journey to the United States. For example, as his family members crossed the border, the young boy said:

I was afraid that they would  
Catch us, because if they capture  
You, then you disappear. "You  
Disappear"—that's what a  
Woman told my mom. We began  
To walk. Later we came to a  
Very high wall. We had to jump  
Over it. Suddenly, some police  
Arrived and let their dogs  
Loose....I was very scared. But  
Then they called the dogs back.  
Who knows why. (p. 6)

The strong emotional language and rich description of the perils of the journey in immigrating to the United States in selected picturebooks demonstrates children can be aware of the dangers of that journey.

In *Somos Como Las Nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* (Argueta, 2016), young characters also offer readers another window into children's awareness of the dangers inherent in immigration journeys. Children are shown expressing strong emotions of sadness, heartbreak in being separated from parents, and distress in dangerous situations. This display of emotions in the text opens a door for children to have discussions about the difficulties of immigration. These emotions also allow the reader to gain sympathy for the challenges that the children in the text are experiencing. The text demonstrated the struggles of families who decided to send their children alone and the difficulties in making these decisions. One poem captured the essence of those thousands of children traveling alone on this treacherous journey:

#### *Las Chinamas\**

Cuando pasamos por  
la frontera en Las Chinamas  
vi el río Paz.  
Sus aguas corren  
sonriendo entre las piedras.  
Aquí los cenizales\*\*  
no paran de cantar.

Yo recordé  
el patio de mi escuela,  
las gualcalchillas\*\*\*  
y a mi maestra,  
la señorita Celia.

Recordé a mi mamá  
a mis hermanos,  
a mis hermanas.  
Quién sabe cuándo  
vamos a volver.  
Yo miro hacia el cielo  
y pienso:  
Somos como las nubes.

\*frontera entre El Salvador y Guatemala

\*\*pájaros conocidos por su canto

\*\*\* pequeños pájaros (n.p.)

#### *Las Chinamas\**

When we crossed  
The border at Las Chinamas,  
I saw the river Paz.  
Its water runs smiling  
Between the rocks.  
Here the cenizales\*\*  
never stop singing.

I remembered

our schoolyard,  
the gualcalchillas,\*\*\*  
and my teacher  
Miss Celia.

I remembered my mother,  
my brothers,  
my sisters.  
Who knows  
when I will see them again.  
I look at the sky  
and think,  
We are like the clouds.

\*the border between El Salvador and Guatemala

\*\*mockingbirds

\*\*\*small songbirds (n.p.)

In the picturebooks discussed in this section, characters' awareness of their immigration journeys was expressed through both actions and emotions. Our findings revealed a variety of levels of awareness—from young characters who seemed passively unaware (in *Two White Rabbits* [Buitrago, 2015], *My Shoes and I* [Laínez, 2010], and *Mamá the Alien/Mamá la Extraterrestre* [Laínez, 2016]) to those whose strong emotions revealed deep awareness (in *Migrant: The Journey of a Mexican Worker* [Mateo, 2014], *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* [Danticat, 2015], and some characters in *Somos Como Las Nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* [Argueta, 2016]). Other books demonstrated even more complexity in terms of child agency on the journey North (e.g., *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote* [Tonatiuh, 2013]) and some characters in *Somos Como Las Nubes / We Are Like the Clouds* [Argueta, 2016]). Picturebooks in the latter two subcategories depicted children as sensitive to the dangers and the emotional toll of immigration. These demonstrations of agency and awareness by child characters can open spaces for discussions that may increase young readers' understandings of the perils immigrant youth face on their journeys.

#### CHILDREN'S DIFFICULTIES WITH ADJUSTMENT TO LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

Our analysis indicated that immigration children's literature reflects some of the hardships and complexities that come with adjusting to life in a new country. Five of the 13 books focused on a character's life after moving from his or her home country to the United States: *The Quiet Place* (Stewart & Small, 2012); *I Pledge Allegiance* (Mora & Martinez, 2014); *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* (Dismondy, 2015); *Mango, Abuela, and Me* (Medina, 2015); and *Blue*

*Skies for Lupe* (Kingsley, 2015). In our analysis, we found that the hardships that were detailed in the texts included adjusting to everyday life in the United States, missing the home country, and experiencing difficulties learning a new language.

**ADJUSTING TO EVERYDAY LIFE.** The texts described above detailed the hardships associated with adjusting to everyday life in the United States. For example, the book *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* (Dismondy, 2015) portrayed some of the difficulties experienced when arriving in a new country. Gabe, a young Latinx boy and the story's protagonist, moved to the United States from a non-specified country, and Johnny, a young White boy, saw that Gabe spoke Spanish to his mother as he cried anxious tears on the first day of school. Johnny called Gabe a crybaby. Later, readers learned that Gabe and Johnny were in the same class. Johnny chose to ignore Gabe and thought that his classmates should do the same. When Johnny's friend translated for Gabe during lunchtime, Johnny got upset and stated, "Look, he's not like us. He can't even order lunch" (p. 8).

LatCrit scholar Pérez Huber (2010) defined "the assigning of values to real or imagined differences in order to justify the superiority of the native" (p. 81) as racist nativism. Events in *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* (Dismondy, 2015) offered young readers an example of this concept through the depiction of microaggressions experienced by Latinx immigrant children when White figures believed their right to dominance was at stake. Through the actions and words of Johnny, the grand narrative that immigrants should assimilate into U.S. culture was displayed. *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* depicted some of the intricate relationships that children form when adjusting to life in a new country as well as aspects of oppression that may be associated with living in the United States as Latinx immigrant children or children of immigrants.

**MISSING THE HOME COUNTRY.** The books analyzed for this study also included characters remembering life in their home country. Some of the texts demonstrated how the characters began to miss home as soon as they were leaving or crossing the border into the United States. This distress was vividly displayed in *The Quiet Place* (Stewart & Small, 2012), in which a little girl moved to the United States with her family and wrote letters about her experiences and emotions of missing home and family. Throughout her journey, the little girl wrote to her aunt about all the things she missed. In one letter written in English, the girl noted: "Writing these letters is still hard work, but Chavo says it's good work. The spots on this letter are from my tears" (p. 18). Through these letters, Isabel detailed how much she missed being home and how

much she missed hearing Spanish being spoken around her. Tears depicted on the letter signified the emotional toll that leaving a home country had on the child. Other books in the text set (*Blue Skies for Lupe* [Kingsley, 2015]; *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* [Dismondy, 2015]; *Mango, Abuela, and Me* [Medina, 2015]) also included a wide range of emotions in relation to adjusting to life in the United States. The books displayed both the sadness of missing family back at home and the excitement of getting used to life in the United States.

One of the issues we noted as we analyzed the texts for the ways characters missed their home countries was the lack of specificity about the home countries. Table 1 includes information about the countries of origin that were included in the texts. Seven of the picturebooks included the country of origin in the text, one of the books included the country of origin in the paratext, and all the other picturebooks used language as a signifier without exclusively noting the country of origin. For example, most of the texts included characters that spoke Spanish, leaving the reader to assume that the characters were from a Latin American country. We find this ambiguity in detail about the home countries troublesome because it has the potential to contribute to the essentializing of immigrants instead of to the recognition of the varied experiences that immigrants from different countries face. Additionally, the use of language as the only signifier is particularly problematic. Cultural identity is complex; therefore, language should not be the defining characteristic because this reductive practice often leads to simplistic views of Latinx people. The lack of specificity around country of origin in Latinx children's literature contributes to an essentialist view of immigrants as an undifferentiated group that fails to acknowledge the multiple human experiences that exist within diverse communities (Ayala & Chalupa, 2016).

**EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE.**

Another hardship described in the books was the difficulty of learning a new language. The book *Mango, Abuela, and Me* (Medina, 2015) told an intergenerational story of a grandmother and a young girl named Mia who had difficulty communicating when the grandmother moved in with Mia's family. When Mia showed her grandmother a book, she noted that her grandmother "can't unlock the English words. We can only look at the pictures and watch Edmund [the hamster] race on his wheel" (p. 3). In *Blue Skies for Lupe* (Kingsley, 2015), Lupe began school in the United States and experienced navigating school without speaking English. The little girl described her aide: "She pushed my chair. And she whispered Spanish to help me understand the English they spoke in class" (n.p.). In the

end, Lupe reflected on the hardships and how far she had come: “Every year I learn more. I speak now. I have an electric wheelchair and a computer. I know how to swim. But the most important thing I’ve learned in school is how to be me” (n.p.).

The hardships experienced by Latinx immigrant children were included in the texts analyzed as a part of this study. Books reflected hardships related to adjusting to a new life, missing the home country, and learning a different language. This finding shows the complexities in the immigration experience and challenges the single story (Adichie, 2009) of what it means to be immigrant. This finding is a counter-narrative to the magical and utopian experiences found in studies that have examined Latinx children’s literature (Acevedo, 2017; Braden & Rodriguez, 2016; Chappel & Faltis, 2007). For example, in our previous study (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016), we found that picturebooks that included difficult topics almost always had a happy ending and failed to showcase the difficulties in children’s lives. We also found that Latinx children’s books reinforced false assumptions about the roles of mothers and fathers and failed to showcase the complexity of life around social justice topics (i.e., immigrant life) (Braden & Rodriguez, 2016). The reflection of true-to-life storylines for Latinx children and children of immigrants demonstrates a desire by authors to move beyond simplistic views of adjusting to new life in a new country through an Anglicized lens.

### Discussion and Implications

Using critical content analysis, we examined depictions of Latinx immigration in 13 children’s picturebooks published between 2010 and 2016. Our investigation revealed that though representations of Latinx child characters’ experiences are still limited, a handful of newer books addressed some of the hardships of moving to a new place in honest ways. The picturebooks showcased a range of awareness of the immigration experience on the part of child characters as well as tangible difficulties they faced on the journey and while adjusting to life in the United States. Some books contained themes alluding to the racist nativism (Pérez Huber et al., 2008) that many children unfortunately experience living in the United States (e.g., *Mama’s Nightingale* [Danticat, 2015]; *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* [Dismondy, 2015]; *From North to South / Del Norte Al Sur* [Laínez, 2010a]), but there were also books that included characters that offered a counter-voice (e.g., *Chocolate Milk, Por Favor!* [Dismondy, 2015]). Although these books included some negative elements, we believe that each of the books contributes to the conversation about the experiences of children and immigration. Additionally, though we found it problematic that the characters in some of the

texts were portrayed as not being aware of the reasons for moving to a new country and/or not aware of the immigration journey, such books as part of a larger text set can offer a range of portrayals of the ways families handle the immigration journey.

For readers of Latinx children’s literature, the characters in this text set offer a window into the lives of undocumented families and children who make and have made the dangerous and difficult journey to the United States. Similar to Cummins’s (2013) examination of border stories in young adult literature, we found that stories of immigration and characters’ consequent struggles offer readers an opportunity to experience the state of mind of an immigrant child, “thereby engendering sympathy for the struggle” (p. 61). In that sense, these books can be used as windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990, 1992) to the immigrant experiences of children. These books did present accounts of the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States. However, we found that some aspects of immigration experiences were missing, such as issues related to childhood depression and to the separation of undocumented parents from children who are citizens. Children, both young and adolescent, need opportunities to see and critique reflections of all aspects of immigration in children’s literature.

Over time, educators will encounter children who have immigration experiences or who have family members or friends who have immigration experiences. As former classroom teachers, we have witnessed the agony that children experience when they learn a parent might be deported and the worry that they feel for a family member who stayed behind when the children came to the United States alone. We have watched their reactions to news reports of border walls and deportations and to generalizations of a single Latinx experience to the experiences of all.

Therefore, we argue that it is imperative that educators and children continue to discuss the issue of immigration in schools, especially due to the discriminatory rhetoric used by the current president of the United States, Donald Trump. Words such as *criminals*, *rapists*, *illegals*, and other demeaning terms (“Full Text,” 2015) have been freely used to antagonize an entire group of people, and the marginalization of Latinx people has not stopped at words. Detrimental policies have been implemented that specifically target Latinx immigrant communities. This marginalization of immigrants is rooted in racism and privileges the experiences of Whites in the United States (Peréz Huber, 2010). For example, the Department of Homeland Security recently issued new enforcement policies widening the definition of those who will be prioritized for deportation (Shear & Nixon, 2017). Most recently, “zero-tolerance” immigration policies at the United States border have led

to the separation of children from their parents (Dickerson, 2018). Not only are children being removed involuntarily, but the enactment of these policies has created conditions in which children are being held in cages and in facilities with reported poor conditions (Domonoske & Gonzalez, 2018). These actions impact families.

We offer suggestions of texts educators can use to foster inclusivity in their classrooms. Children, both immigrant and nonimmigrant, need opportunities to engage with authentic texts that invite discussions of issues with their peers. Students should be provided with opportunities to voice their concerns and opinions, but they also need a space to consider others' perspectives and origins (Groenke, Maples, Henderson, Frey, & Fink, 2010). We believe that it is important for educators to ask critical questions to examine issues in texts such as assumptions and ideologies related to race and racism (Gardner, 2017). The books discussed here are great starting points for discussions about people's efforts to enter the United States, fragmented or separated families, local immigration contexts, and deportation fears. Although many educators believe there is little they can do to address these challenges, we argue that the narratives discussed in this article offer starting points for engaging children who are both familiar and unfamiliar with the current immigration debate. For the texts that we view as questionable in terms of some of the portrayals of child characters as unaware (e.g., *Two White Rabbits* [Buitrago, 2015]; *My Shoes and I* [Láinez, 2010b]), we suggest that educators provide opportunities for children to share contemporary experiences that are not accounted for in the picturebooks.

Teachers and librarians can begin by making the picturebooks in this study accessible to children. When we began the study, we were surprised by the lack of books that represent the immigrant experience. Naturally, educators also need to know how to incorporate these texts into classrooms in ways that respond to the social realities of children and that encourage discussion. For example, educators can prompt students to critically examine these texts for assumptions and ideologies that are represented.

We believe that the following questions can be useful for educators to ask when examining these texts: What does it mean to be an immigrant? How are immigrants portrayed? How are children's voices represented in the texts? What realities are shown in the texts (e.g., hardships, emotional toll)? These questions can help teachers begin to have conversations around the issue of immigration and can expand the ideas that children may have about immigrants and immigration.

Despite the critique offered above of some of the books, it is critical for educators to understand the importance of including a range of texts that detail aspects of Latinx immigration experiences in schools and classrooms. Immigration is a controversial issue, but for many students the immigration experience reflects their lived reality. Cummins (2013) suggested that "even people who hold mixed feelings about undocumented migration may choose to help individuals, especially children" (p. 61). These books can serve as tools to help children understand immigration as a human experience and to create a more humane discussion around immigration in classrooms, between teachers and families, and in the United States as a whole. Such literature—and space to talk about it in classrooms—can serve as a partial antidote to the negativity surrounding current immigration debates in the United States and can help disperse the clouds of fear that many of our students experience. ■

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