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Borders in Play

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Eduardo Vargas Reflection 3

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Reflection 3: Articulate Learning

The CEL experience allowed me to apply the theoretical framework and critical thinking skills from the classroom at Kenyon and put it into practice in the classroom at Columbia Elementary. The very concrete skill I learned was how to translate these theoretical frameworks dealing with borders and border experiences of all kinds into lesson plans meant for ten- or eleven-year olds. I also learned what were the capacities and limitations of myself as the teacher and of the kids as students. I found that the kids were very capable of applying critical thinking skills - ideas of being hyphenated, of in betweenness, and of invisible borders were some of the most compelling ideas they were able to internalize. I learned this when the kids themselves began drawing conclusions about the stories, voicing to us their understanding of the themes since we created an atmosphere where they could think out loud.

Designing activities and lesson plans was a skill that I was able to refine over time. Some activities we designed in the lesson plans were limited and may not have reached every student, but they still mattered for the kids that they did reach. It was important because over time the pieces within the stories cultivated their academic interest in literature, but it also gave them a base from which they could orient their experiences. This is directly connected to Saldivar's articulation of an ethnopoetics, and I believe that even a majority non-latino group of students is able to find a poetics within the mostly latino poetics of the stories we read. What mattered here was that the students could form their own understanding of the stories so that they could then

approach the literature themselves, and hopefully this will create a lasting impact on how they deal with literature in the future.

Seeing the profound impact of culturally relevant literature, or literature that is relevant to the students especially those living in between borders, was one of the most profound aspects of the project for myself as well. This experience and similar ones I have had in the past have been very relevant to my development as a scholar interested in how bilingual and cultural education are important to minoritized populations. When I saw that one of the girls had found a way to connect the feeling of being in between two worlds (from the poem *Legal Alien*) to her being interested in both dance and football (heavily gendered activities) in her drawings, I could directly observe the connections she was forming with the literature. This experience was valuable because in schools across the country, there is always a need for stories and experiences that extend beyond the baseline canon that is taught. There is value in studying the voices of minoritized peoples since it creates a space for the counter-narratives, much like the student's I described above.

This learning also matters because in educational spaces there is opportunity for tangible activism, and exposing students to other cultures different than theirs is one form of this. As I wrote in a previous reflection, it allows us to subvert the borders in place that attempt to create negative images of different cultures beginning even in early education. As members of our community, we developed ways to directly impact student's educational experience with activities that considered difference and learning new cultures, something exemplified by our Spanish Phrasebook dictionary that the kids made as a group. As scholars of Chicana/o literature and as members of the communities we will inhabit in the future, we should be bringing these types of perspective into spaces where we have influence.

In light of this experience, I see the vocational value that I am able to apply to my career goals of obtaining either a master's in public health or education. Moving forward, I know that the skills I developed in the classroom will have value in that I now have a marketable skill of developing lesson plans, and I have classroom experience so I have clearer expectations and know what is possible and what is not. Our main goal with the CEL project was to develop pedagogical skills to have a positive impact in our surrounding community, and I believe we have accomplished that. At the same time, my personal and professional character has been built upon, and I have been able to take my strong interest and dedication to studying Latinx literature and put it forward in community activism.