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## Portrayal of immigration in fiction for grades 4-6

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## Portrayal of immigration in fiction for grades 4-6

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#### Abstract

With an increasing awareness of immigrant students in American schools, this study sought to examine current upper elementary fiction portraying immigrant characters. The purpose of this research was to discover how immigrants are currently portrayed in upper elementary literature. Through engaging with high-quality literature, native-born students could gain a perspective on the experiences of their immigrant classmates and develop empathy for them. Nine upper elementary fiction books were examined and coded for initial and emerging themes. Four major themes emerged: Importance of Family, Language Conflict, Life After Immigration, and Identity Development. This research supports classroom teachers and teacher librarians in their quest to obtain high-quality literature to develop empathy for immigrant students.

PORTRAYAL OF IMMIGRATION IN FICTION FOR GRADES 4-6

A Graduate Research Paper  
Submitted to the  
Division of School Library Studies  
Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by  
Melissa N. Marwedel  
May 2020

This Research Paper by: Melissa N. Marwedel  
Titled: Portrayal of Immigration in Fiction For Grades 4-6

has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

With an increasing awareness of immigrant students in American schools, this study sought to examine current upper elementary fiction portraying immigrant characters. The purpose of this research was to discover how immigrants are currently portrayed in upper elementary literature. Through engaging with high-quality literature, native-born students could gain a perspective on the experiences of their immigrant classmates and develop empathy for them. Nine upper elementary fiction books were examined and coded for initial and emerging themes. Four major themes emerged: Importance of Family, Language Conflict, Life After Immigration, and Identity Development. This research supports classroom teachers and teacher librarians in their quest to obtain high-quality literature to develop empathy for immigrant students.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
Justification	1
Immigration in the United States	2
Diversity and Inclusion	2
The Power of Literature to Create Empathy	3
Rationale	3
Deficiencies in Past Research	4
Summary of the Problem Statement	4
Purpose Statement	4
Research Question	5
Assumptions and Limitations	5
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW	6
The Portrayal of Immigration in Juvenile Literature	6
Characters with Disabilities in Children’s Chapter Books	9
Using Literature to Create Empathy	12
Summary	15
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY	17
Research Design	17
Sample of Books	18
Procedures	18
Data Sources	18

Data Analysis	19
Limitations	20
CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS	21
Importance of Family	22
Language Conflict	24
Life After Immigration	26
Identity Development	28
Summary	30
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	31
Conclusions	31
Recommendations	34
REFERENCES	36
APPENDIX A: TITLES USED IN STUDY	38
APPENDIX B: BOOK EVALUATION CHART	39
APPENDIX C: CODING MANUAL	40

## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
1	Distribution of Themes in Novel Study	21
2	Location of Major Themes in Specific Works	22



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Teacher, someone needs to sit with Mateo. He only speaks Spanish and Juan is gone.” Juan and Mateo were elementary students who had immigrated from Mexico. They were both learning English and communication was difficult. When they spoke in their native language to each other, they laughed and joked rapidly and fluently. Unexpectedly one day, it was discovered that Juan had moved abruptly, with no forwarding address or even a chance to return his library books. Almost the entire class, including the teacher, were bewildered by this sudden turn of events as they had no frame of reference for or understanding of the immigrant experience. How could native-born students learn to understand and empathize with the challenges faced by their immigrant peers?

#### **Justification**

The number of immigrant students has increased dramatically in recent years. In 1980, 7% of the student body in public schools was from an immigrant household. By 2015, the number had climbed to 23% (Camarota et al., 2017). Native-born students have limited experience with immigration and thus cannot fully understand or empathize with immigrant students. Masko and Bloem (2017) posit that literature has the power to create that empathy and enable students to see what others experience. This paper will examine contemporary upper elementary fiction dealing with immigration and the immigrant experience so teacher librarians, English language teachers and classroom

teachers can use high-quality literature to create empathy and understanding in native-born students.

The topic of immigration in fiction chapter books appropriate for upper elementary and middle school students is informed by national statistics and scholarly research in the following three areas: the phenomenon of immigration to the United States, the need for diverse characters, including immigrants, in children's literature; and the role that literature plays in creating empathy in the reader.

### **Immigration in the United States**

Ascertaining the size of the immigrant population is difficult, especially determining the number of undocumented immigrants. According to the *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* prepared by the Department of Homeland Security in 2016, the number of immigrants who were granted lawful permanent resident status was 1,183,505. In addition, according to the Migration Policy Institute (2014), an estimated 11,000,000 individuals were living in the United States as undocumented immigrants, with just over 1,000,000 young people aged 3-12 enrolled in school. It is likely that any given school would have immigrant students as part of their population.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Another issue germane to this topic is the need for diversity of representation in children's literature, including the inclusion of characters who are immigrants. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL, 2018) in the National School Library Standards, states as part of the Include standard that school librarians should, "Demonstrate an understanding of and commitment to inclusiveness and respect for

diversity in the learning community” (p. 75). It is important that all voices are represented and valued. Immigrant voices are not in the majority and may be overlooked at times. It is also important that all people be accurately and authentically portrayed in ways that are not stereotyped or caricatured.

### **The Power of Literature to Create Empathy**

One last issue that informs the topic is that of the ability of literature to create empathy. Literature allows a reader to step into a character’s life and live that character’s experiences in a very personal way. Masko and Bloem (2017) state that “using children’s literature to build empathy in readers is not a new idea; it is a commonly accepted notion in the field of literature studies that literature builds empathy” (p. 59). Students who would have no exposure to the challenges and joys of immigration could, through reading, gain some measure of understanding.

### **Rationale**

With a significant number of students experiencing immigration or being impacted by a classmate’s immigration status, the need to discover and study high-quality literature dealing with immigration continues to grow. Educators also need to include diverse perspectives in the library and classroom, which in turn will work to create empathy for immigrant students. There is a need for high-quality literature dealing with immigration to help students gain empathy and understanding for the experiences that some of their classmates have endured.

### **Deficiencies in Past Research**

A study by Yi (2014) examined the theme of Korean-American immigration in children's picture books. In addition, Cummins (2013) examined undocumented immigration in young adult novels. While these studies have examined picture books and young adult literature, there has been little or no examination of immigration in upper elementary fiction. Upper elementary fiction, for the purpose of this research, is fiction that is appropriate for and appeals to students in upper-elementary and middle school, particularly grades 4-6. Studies on immigration in juvenile literature have focused on literature targeted to either a younger or older audience. In order to further understand immigration in children's literature, this study will examine immigration in children's upper elementary fiction.

### **Summary of the Problem Statement**

As immigration continues to be an issue in schools, there is a need to include diverse voices by examining and selecting high-quality authentic literature featuring immigrant characters in order to help native-born students gain empathy and understanding for the experiences of their classmates.

### **Purpose Statement**

This paper will examine contemporary fiction books for grades 4-6 dealing with immigration and the immigrant experience so that teacher librarians, English language teachers and classroom teachers can use high-quality literature to create empathy and understanding in native-born students.

### **Research Question**

1. In what ways are immigrant characters and the immigration experience portrayed in children's upper elementary chapter books?

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

The study is limited to children's chapter books for students in grades 4-6, also known as upper elementary fiction. The study is also limited to books that focus on immigrants and the immigrant experience. The researcher assumes that teacher librarians will use this study to add appropriate books to their collections, and that teachers will desire to use these titles in their classrooms to teach about immigration and foster empathy and understanding for classmates.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This paper will examine contemporary fiction books for grades 4-6 dealing with immigration and the immigrant experience so that teacher librarians, English language teachers and classroom teachers can use high-quality literature to create empathy and understanding in native-born students. Since there is limited research in this area, similar studies in either topic or type of literature were examined. Studies that examined how characters with disabilities were portrayed in upper elementary fiction provided helpful guidance on how to approach similar examinations on the topic of immigration. This topic is informed by previous research in three areas: the examination of the portrayal of immigration in young adult fiction and picture books, the analysis of upper elementary chapter books through the lens of characters with disabilities, and the ability of immigration literature to create empathetic feelings in readers. These three areas will shed light on the current study by giving a framework to discuss immigration and empathy in upper elementary fiction.

#### **The Portrayal of Immigration in Juvenile Literature**

Immigration is portrayed in juvenile literature in many formats, including picture books, middle grade fiction, and young adult literature. Cummins (2013) systematically examined the portrayals of undocumented migration between Mexico and the United States in young adult literature. Cummins searched for all relevant texts containing undocumented immigrants from Mexico in middle grade and teen literature and was able to find and analyze eleven young adult novels written between 1981 and 2011. The

novels were examined to reveal if the narrator wrote in first or third person and if the protagonists in the stories chose willingly to cross the border or were taken by parents. In addition, Cummins wrote that she found characteristics common to all eleven stories, including poverty, both in the home country and in the United States, physical dangers involved in crossing the border, and dangers involving the enforcement of immigration laws. Cummins called for a “borderlands ethical stance” that admits the humanity of the immigrants and helps the reader sympathize with the characters, even as they cross the border illegally.

Another study examining immigrant narratives in young adult novels was conducted by Clifford and Kalyanpur (2011). These researchers also saw a significant gap in the literature surrounding immigrants and young adult literature and wanted to examine immigrant portrayals, particularly since young adulthood is a critical time for identity formation. Positive, truthful, and complex portrayals of immigrants would serve to solidify youthful immigrant identities, while offering native-born students a glimpse into another’s life. Clifford and Kalyanpur examined 20 twenty young adult novels written since 2000, selected based on popular sales, that contained an immigrant protagonist. They looked specifically for experiences prior to characters leaving their own country, the actual immigration experience of crossing the border, and the process of adjustment and assimilation once immigrants reached their destination. The pair found that two themes dominated: difference or deficit and the dynamics of power. Difference or deficit refers to the idea that characters find their differences as immigrants to be deficits that do not allow them to fully assimilate into the dominant culture, although eventually they

find a balance in valuing both cultures. Dynamics of power has to do with real or imagined differences in status and ability between immigrants and natives, and also between immigrants of varying ages and genders. Clifford and Kalyanpur conclude with the hope that “immigrant students will relate better to books that reflect something akin to what they have been through and that native students will better understand their immigrant peers through such reading” (p. 16).

A third study by Michael Boatright (2010) examined representations of immigrants in young adult literature, specifically in graphic novels. Boatright used critical literacy analysis to look closely at three graphic novels dealing explicitly with immigration that were published in the last ten years. He examined the three novels for “social mobility myths, issues of assimilation, and immigrant identities” (p. 470). Boatright found that the authors chose to portray immigration in various ways, privileging some while leaving others untold. These novels could prove to be a springboard into authentic discussion in the classroom for both immigrant and native-born students.

While the three studies above looked at immigration in young adult literature, Yi (2013) examined Korean immigration in children’s picture books through literary and content analysis. Yi wanted to find picture books that would authentically represent the uniquely Korean immigration experience. She selected 14 picture books dealing with Korean immigration, based on the Children’s Literature Comprehensive Database, the Lee and Low website and various booklists. In addition, she researched the authors of those titles to determine if they or their extended family were Korean immigrants and could speak with authenticity about the experience. After reading the books, Yi



determined several themes common to most of the titles, including language conflict, name selection, children's roles as language mediators, family values, and life after immigration. Yi concluded that the picture books she studied did accurately represent the Korean immigrant experience and held value for educators and librarians working to build connections with immigrant families. The four studies examined here give guidance in examining immigration in young adult literature and children's picture books and will provide a framework for the examination of those issues in upper elementary literature. This framework includes potential identification of elements noted by these researchers such as empathizing with characters' poverty, physical dangers, and legal issues (Cummins, 2013); perceptions of difference or deficit and the related dynamics of power (Clifford & Kalyanpur, 2011); portrayal of immigration through social mobility myths, assimilation, and identities (Boatright, 2010) and experiences with language conflict, name selection, children's roles as language mediators, family values, and life after immigration (Yi, 2013).

### **Characters with Disabilities in Children's Chapter Books**

Due to the lack of previous studies providing context for examining the relationship between self-identity, societal identity, and immigration status, in order to create a framework for analyzing upper elementary fiction, research was examined that showed how characters with disabilities were portrayed in middle grade fiction. Dyches, Prater, and Leininger (2009) examined picture and chapter books which portrayed characters with recognizable disabilities. Dyches and her fellow researchers used four main guidelines to determine inclusion in the study. The titles had to include a main or

supporting character with a disability and be a picture or chapter book written in story form. The books must also have been put in print between 2004 and 2007 and published by a commercial publisher. The researchers located the titles through relevant issues of *Children's Books in Print* and various book lists. This criteria yielded 41 children's books. Ten reviewers then examined the books according to the criteria for the Dolly Gray Children's Literature Award, which included specific guidelines about the portrayal of characters with disabilities, such as non-discriminatory language, positive social interactions, realistic sibling relationships, and promotion of self-determination. Their written evaluations in each of the categories were compiled and compared for accuracy and agreement. The researchers found that more disability-related fiction was available at the time of their study than in the past, that males with disabilities were underrepresented as characters in such works, and that the characters depicted were more multidimensional having increased positive social interactions and self-determinism than those included in earlier works.

While Dyches, Prater, and Leininger looked at all forms of disability, Randolph (2008) chose to focus specifically on the portrayal of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders in upper elementary and young adult literature. She looked closely at the relationships exhibited between the character with autism and other characters. She wanted to see with whom the characters interacted, what the nature of their communication was, the effects of autism on communication, and the balance of power between the autistic character and the other characters. After an extensive search for books with autistic characters, Randolph located eight upper elementary and young adult

books published after 2000. Using a grounded theory approach, she did a close reading of all eight novels, coding for all conversations and other encounters involving the autistic characters. This open coding did not have a specific structure to begin with, but the data began to align in various ways, by establishing broad categories for the characters involved and the various types of interactions, which could be tied to five main overarching themes. Randolph concluded that the largest number of conversations occurred with peers, while secondary conversations with parents, siblings, leaders, and other random characters helped move the plot along. She also concluded that autism could be a barrier to communication, with autistic characters engaging in off-putting behaviors. Finally, in her close reading, she found that the balance of power was often not in the autistic character's favor, and autistic characters were more likely to be acted upon, than to act.

Similar to Randolph's study, Urban (2014) examined intermediate fiction novels to explore the representation of characters with disabilities. Her three research questions revolved around the status of the character with a disability (major, minor, or simply mentioned), the relationship between the plot and the character with a disability, and the diversity of the aforementioned character. She selected thirty books published between 2000 and 2013 which included a character with a disability. She then randomly selected 10 of those books on which to focus her research. Urban read the books and coded them according to her pre-established criteria, looking specifically at data that would support her research question. Data was input into a spreadsheet that included specific page numbers and quotes to justify categorization and then analyzed both qualitatively and

quantitatively. She concluded that the majority of characters with disabilities were major characters in their story, that most of the books fell into her category of disability specific (which meant that the plot revolved around a specific disability), and that although gender diversity was found, she could find no racial diversity in the books, as all characters with disabilities were Caucasian. Examining previous researchers' work in studying disability in children's middle grade fiction books adds to a framework with which to examine immigration by offering numerous methodological models. These include specific categories to guide coding, which could be extended to include immigrant characters (Dyches, Prater, & Leininger, 2009), open coding techniques which could be used to show overarching themes within the immigrant narratives (Randolph, 2008) and a way to approach ranking the importance of immigrant characters to the plot, whether major or minor (Urban, 2014).

### **Using Literature to Create Empathy**

Several researchers have examined the ability of literature about immigration to create an empathetic response in young readers. One oft-cited examination of empathy concerning immigration in picture books is Baghban's study, "Immigration in Childhood: Using Picture Books to Cope," written in 2007. The purpose of Baghban's study was to search for picture books that accurately portrayed "the day-to-day experiences of immigrant children and discuss important issues of learning how to live in a new world" (p. 72). The researcher examined 20 children's picture books that featured protagonists who were immigrant children, looking for accurate and authentic portrayals of the psychological experiences of the children. She found themes addressing the challenges

of being different, coping with changes, responding to one's name, learning a new language, relating to previous generations and their traditions, maintaining ties with distant relatives, visiting the homeland, and finding their lives through reading and writing. She concluded with the ideas that immigrant children are empowered when they read stories that mirror their own experience and that teachers and students "can begin to understand each other and help with each others' struggles" (p. 75).

Mabry and Bhavnagri (2012) built on Baghban's work in using literature to help students feel empathy for immigrants. They noted that contemporary scholarship surrounding the use of children's literature about immigration in the classroom had several limitations. This body of work lacked the conceptual framework of theory, failed to suggest supplemental activities to use with the literature, and did not provide specific teacher strategies that would encourage students to step into the perspective of the immigrant. Their study aimed to remedy this by examining students reading three middle grade novels with immigrant protagonists. Mabry and Bhavnagri used the conceptual frameworks of Selman (1980) and Vygotsky (1978) to view the novels. Selman's theory differentiated between different levels of development in the ability of children to place themselves in another's shoes and take another's perspective. Vygotsky's model of Socio-Cultural Theory described how students were able or unable to share different perspectives and how they could be scaffolded within their zone of proximal development to do so. A group of African-American 4th graders read the three novels and were observed in their discussions and follow-up activities with the teacher through the framework of Selman and Vygotsky. Many students showed a level 2, or advanced,

ability to take the perspective of another, while some students were shown to be at a level 1 or 0. Mabry and Bhavnagri concluded with recommended teacher strategies that would enhance student ability to step into the perspective of an immigrant.

While Mabry and Bhavnagri examined middle grade fiction books, Louie (2005) studied the development of empathy in high school students while reading multicultural literature. Was simply studying a culture in depth enough to produce empathetic feelings in students when they read literature of that culture? Louie was interested in how empathy developed and what the nature of that empathy was. She identified five different types of empathy, including cognitive empathy, historical empathy, parallel emotion empathy, reactive emotional empathy, and cross-cultural empathy. Using an observational case study approach, Louie partnered with a high school teacher to create a six-week unit centered on world issues and multicultural literature that featured communist China. During the unit, students first developed background knowledge about communist China, and then read a novella set in the same time period. Louie used field notes, videotaped lessons, portfolios of student work, teacher journals, and exit interviews with students to monitor student thoughts and feelings. Louie found that providing context and background information increased the empathetic response of students. While some students struggled to identify with the characters, some were able to partially or fully empathize with the characters in the book. Louie concluded that while empathy could not be forced, it could be encouraged by discussion, context, and literature. All these researchers examined to what extent literature could have an impact on readers of literature portraying immigrants and other cultures, finding that exposure to

such literature increased the empathetic response of children who read it (Baghban, 2007; Mabry & Bhavnagri, 2012; Louie, 2005). This provides a justification for the current study in attempting to increase empathy in native-born students who read about immigrant characters.

### **Summary**

Researching immigrant portrayals in children's chapter books requires an examination of various previously studied topics in order to inform the present study and create a theoretical framework. Cummins (2013) called for a borderlands ethical stance, advocating for an increased empathy toward undocumented immigrants from Mexico, arguing that there are times when it is ethically right to disregard immoral laws and rules surrounding immigration, while Clifford and Kalyanpur (2011) examined differences of power and studied how portrayals of immigrants characterized their status as a deficit. Boatright (2010) also examined immigration, though in graphic novels, and discovered common themes of social mobility myths, identities, and assimilation. Yi (2013) studied picture books for their inclusion of Korean experiences with language conflict, name selection, children's roles as language mediators, family values, and life after immigration. Since no previous studies could be found concerning immigrant characters in upper elementary fiction books, studies were examined in which characters with disabilities were portrayed. The research of Dyches, Prater, and Leininger (2009) and Urban (2014) both used predefined categories to analyze the depictions of characters, while Randolph (2008) used open coding to see how characters could be analyzed and how overarching themes developed. Finally, several studies showed how students

develop empathy for immigrants or other cultures through reading children's chapter books. Baghban (2007) looked at picture books, coding for various categories that correspond to the immigrant experience in order to create an empathetic response in students. Mabry and Bhavnagri (2012) and Urban (2005) analyzed children who read books about immigrants or other cultures, specifically looking for a change in empathy and perspective taking and finding that such literature did indeed change the outlook of students. These studies provide a foundation for the current study in examining immigration in fiction for grades 4-6.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

Prior research has revealed a need to study fiction for grades 4-6 dealing with immigration to reveal the themes present in it. The essential research question of this study seeks to discover how immigrants are currently portrayed in upper elementary literature. This paper examines contemporary upper elementary fiction books dealing with immigration and the immigrant experience so that teacher librarians, English language teachers and classroom teachers can use high-quality literature to create empathy and understanding in native-born students. This study examines the ways in which immigrant characters and the immigration experience are portrayed in children's chapter books for grades 4-6.

#### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative analysis of content method to analyze the selected books. Wildemuth (2017) describes qualitative analysis of content as an inductive method of content analysis which examines “meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text” (p. 318). In particular, the directed analysis of content was used, in which the initial study is guided by relevant research methods such as those employed by Yi (2014) and Cummins (2013). During the research process, themes emerged to “validate or extend a conceptual framework or theory” (pp. 319-320). This method was valuable because it allowed researchers to examine immigration in the context of literature for grades 4-6 in a directed way. Qualitative analysis of content was an appropriate method for this study because it allowed the researcher to examine the

portrayal of immigration in upper elementary fiction. Past research has identified criteria which was used to determine authentic and realistic immigration representations within the context of upper elementary fiction. This served as a starting point for the data and themes examined in the current research.

### **Sample of Books**

The sample of books (see Appendix A) included fiction titles published between 2011 and 2018. They were chosen from Wilson's Children's Core Collection Database, from the highly recommended, core, and supplementary list, suitable for 4th through 6th grade students. Using the keywords "immigrant" and "immigration" as well as "emigrate" and "emigration", titles were examined to determine if they were contemporary accounts, or of a historical nature. Taking the suggestion of Yi (2014) into consideration, the immigration status of the author was examined, with preference given to titles with authors who were immigrants themselves or the child of immigrant parents. Several authors were included who did not fit that category, in order to examine a variety of perspectives. This search yielded a total of 9 novels on which to base the current study.

### **Procedures**

#### **Data Sources**

Each book was read and examined according to the Book Evaluation Chart (see Appendix B). Textual evidence and relevant quotes were included to substantiate the determinations of the researcher. The Coding Manual (see Appendix C) lists the definitions of the terms for the various categories. The categories are based on several

studies, including Yi (2014), Cummins (2013), and Clifford and Kalyanpur (2011), which examined the portrayal of immigration in young adult literature and picture books. This method of examination, according to Wildemuth (2017), does not miss “syntactical and semantic information embedded in the text” (p. 319) as well as specific and obvious elements, and this allows for dominant themes to emerge from the data. Wildemuth further states that themes “might be expressed in a single word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, or an entire document” (p. 320).

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analyzed and coded using constant comparison. Once the data was collected, the researcher used inductive reasoning to make inferences and reconstruct meaning from the texts. Wildemuth (2017) suggests that activities with data may involve “exploring the properties and dimensions of categories, identifying relationships between categories, uncovering patterns, and testing categories against the full range of data” (p. 322). With qualitative analysis of content, Wildemuth identifies 8 steps for the data collection and analysis. Steps 1 and 2 were to prepare the data and define the unit of analysis. This involved the initial selection of books and the creation of the Book Evaluation Chart to record textual evidence. In step 3, the researcher determined initial coding categories based on past research studies analyzing immigration in children’s literature, particularly those themes suggested in the analysis of Yi (2014) of Korean picture books, listed below as Initial Themes. Steps 4 and 5 involved coding a sample of the material and then coding all the books. To this end, the researcher noted specific quotes from the books and other textual evidence for those categories defined in the Book

Evaluation Chart. Each book was coded in accordance with the note-taking protocol found in Appendix B using the six Initial Themes and the Additional Themes found. In addition, a number of other themes emerged during a close reading of each book, and those themes were added as they emerged, as shown below. Coding consistency was addressed as prescribed in Wildemuth's step 6. In step 7, the researcher drew conclusions from the data and in step 8, reported on methods and findings.

#### Initial Themes

- Language Conflict
- Social Mobility
- Legal Issues with Immigration
- Physical Dangers
- Description of Actual Border Crossing
- Life After Immigration

#### Additional Themes

- Transformation from Childhood to Adolescence
- Identity Development
- Importance of Family
- Danger and Choices
- Courage

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study was the presence of only one coder. Another limitation was the use of Wilson's Children's Core Database, which limited the titles to be examined, and excluded the very newest titles.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The researcher read nine children’s fiction books for grades 4-6 dealing with immigration, selected from Wilson’s Children’s Core Collection Database. The titles were examined to elucidate the six Initial Themes and to discover Additional Themes, as identified in Chapter 3. The presence of each specific theme in the books was tallied and is presented in Table 1 in the order of prevalence. The purpose of the initial tallying was to identify the most frequently occurring themes, which could then be examined in greater detail. The four most common themes, originating from both the Initial Themes and the Additional Themes, are listed first in Table 1.

Table 1

*Distribution of themes in novel study*

Theme	Number of books dealing with theme
Importance of Family	7
Language Conflict	6
Life After Immigration	6
Identity Development	6
Transformation from Childhood to Adolescence	5
Courage	5
Danger and Choices	4
Social Mobility	4
Legal issues with immigration	4
Physical Dangers	3

Actual Border Crossing	3
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In order to examine relevant themes more closely, the most prevalent themes were determined by examination. Themes discovered in at least 6 of the 9 books, or  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the sample, were selected for further examination. Those themes included: Importance of Family, Language Conflict, Life after Immigration, and Identity Development. The chosen themes and associated books are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Inclusion of major themes in specific works*

Theme	Books which focus on theme
Importance of Family	<i>Inside Out and Back Again, Lucky Broken Girl, Save Me a Seat, The Only Road, The Sky At Our Feet, The Turtle of Oman, Until I Find Julian</i>
Language Conflict	<i>Inside Out and Back Again, Lucky Broken Girl, Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy, Save Me a Seat, The Only Road, Until I Find Julian</i>
Life After Immigration	<i>Inside Out and Back Again, Lucky Broken Girl, Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy, Save Me a Seat, The Sky At Our Feet, The Unforgotten Coat</i>
Identity Development	<i>Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy, Save Me a Seat, The Only Road, The Sky At Our Feet, The Unforgotten Coat, Until I Find Julian</i>

### **Importance of Family**

In a majority of the books studied, the importance of family was a major theme as characters left one country and moved to another. Whether leaving family members

behind, joining family members in a new place, or traveling with family, familial ties played a major role not only in the mechanics of immigration in these novels, but also as the impetus for immigration in the first place.

Leaving family members behind in these stories caused great sadness for the characters involved, mimicking the actual lived experiences of immigrants. *The Turtle of Oman* takes place solely in Oman, as the main character, Aref, anticipates leaving behind both Oman and his grandfather, Sidi, to travel to the United States with his parents. The pair share adventures together, knowing that it will be years before they see each other again. Aref, who is in third grade, is concerned about life in the United States and worries about leaving Sidi behind. Sidi tries to calm his fears and help him focus on the happy and exciting aspects of the move. The depths of his feelings, however, are revealed near the end of the book when he finally says, “Aref, I’m going to miss you terribly, you do know that?” (Nye, 2014, p. 273). Aref is both saddened and warmed by his grandfather’s words.

While still leaving loved ones behind, several stories focused on the hope and possibility of rejoining family members in a new country. In *Until I Find Julian*, the main character Mateo, a young teenager, decides to cross the Mexico/United States border to discover what has happened to his older brother, Julian, who has been living illegally in the United States and has stopped sending money home. Fearing the worst, Mateo braves many dangers and overcomes many obstacles to find his brother. Before he leaves, his grandmother gives him some advice and suggests that were she younger, she would also attempt the same trip. “We have great love for our family; it makes us strong”

(Giff, 2012, p. 11). The love of family members both strengthened immigrants and helped them push past adversity to be united with their loved ones.

The immigration experience is often a family experience, and all but one of the books examined portrayed characters traveling with all or some part of their family. In *The Only Road*, Jamie and Angela are cousins in Guatemala. After the local gang kills Angela's brother Miguel, Jamie and Angela are given a choice to either join the local drug gang or be killed themselves. They decide to make the difficult journey to the United States to find Jamie's older brother. Julian, who is 14, takes great comfort in Angela as an older presence and knows they have each other to trust and protect, even if they disagree and argue at times. In a similar way, Hà travels with her family in *Inside Out and Back Again*. Her father has disappeared in the civil war in Vietnam, and her mother and three brothers escape with Hà, finding their way through two refugee camps to their final destination in Alabama, United States. Traveling with her family is both difficult and helpful, as her family experiences the same disorientation as she does, and offers targeted support and understanding through their shared experiences. Family looms large in these narratives and the importance of family cannot be overstated.

### **Language Conflict**

Moving to a new country often involves learning a new language. Even if the new language has been previously studied, it is a different experience to be immersed in that language on a daily basis. In addition, lack of fluency in the new language is often perceived as a lack of intelligence by native speakers, and many of the characters feel the discrepancy of being smart, but unable to communicate their intelligence. Although most



of the books examined contained mentions of language barriers and difficulties, the theme of language conflict ran particularly strongly through several: *Save Me a Seat*, *Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy*, and *Inside Out and Back Again*.

In *Save Me a Seat*, Ravi is a 5th grade student who recently immigrated from India when his father accepted a job in America. Ravi feels that he speaks English very well and was top of his class in India, but his classmates and teacher struggle to understand his accent and pronunciation. His teacher suggests that he visit with the Resource teacher to help with his English skills. Ravi is personally affronted by this suggestion and feels that his English skills are more than adequate. He tells the Resource teacher, "I speak perfect English. I was at the top of my class in India. My IQ is 135. I don't need special help." (Weeks & Varadarajan, 2016, pp. 71-72). Ravi fails to see that his native-born companions have a hard time understanding him, which causes a great deal of upset and confusion.

Oppositely, in *Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy*, the main character Maya keenly feels her lack of language facility with English. Having immigrated to the United States from Kazakhstan a few years previously, Maya has been sheltered in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for the past two years, but is now attending a 7th grade mainstream classroom. She occasionally uses the wrong words, especially for idioms and expressions. When her friends point out her mistakes, she is grateful and ashamed at the same time. ". . . there were still so many things she confused. But Shannon was always kind when she corrected her, which helped Maya to not feel so stupid." (Okimoto, 2011, p. 13). Maya's parents also struggled with language conflict and due to their

inability to speak English were forced to take low-paying menial jobs instead of the more prestigious jobs they had held previously.

Language conflict can be both negative and positive, as Hà learned in *Inside Out and Back Again*. Ten-year old Hà and her family had no plans to emigrate from Vietnam until a civil war forced her family to flee. She struggles to learn English in the refugee camps she lives in, and then in Alabama. She feels frustrated by the many complexities of the English language: “Whoever invented English should be bitten by a snake!” (Lai, 2011, p. 128). However, as she and her brothers learn English, they become more competent in society, finding jobs, applying for college, and navigating social situations like shopping. This helps them become more accepting of their situation and opens more doors of opportunity. Like Maya and Ravi, Hà finds language to be a source of great conflict in the immigration experience. Native-born speakers often wrongly equated language ability with intelligence, which frustrated characters who knew themselves to be intelligent.

### **Life After Immigration**

Six of the nine books studied dealt with the major theme of life after immigration, what it was like for characters to experience a new culture, language, foods, and social customs. Often, characters compared their current reality with remembered experiences of their homeland which were often bittersweet and full of longing. They found both good and bad in the new culture they were experiencing, appreciating some things and wishing for others.

In *Lucky Broken Girl*, 5th grader Ruthie and her family have left Cuba and

immigrated to the United States. Ruthie finds herself in New York City, with a diverse group of classmates and extended family, some of whom immigrated from Cuba with her nuclear family. She is placed in the lowest class because of her lack of English skills and meets a friend named Ramu from India. Together they commiserate about how much they miss their respective cultures and how different life used to be. Ramu says, “Yes, here everything is different” (Behar, 2017, p.4). Ruthie finds her family divided about living in America; her mother cries every day as she misses Cuba, but her father revels in his freedom and the ability to make money and acquire things in the United States. The disparity of her parents’ feelings causes tension in the family. Ruthie herself is torn between missing her tropical island and wanting to assimilate into the current culture. A car accident leaves her bedridden, healing for an entire year. During that time, a teacher comes to her home to help her keep up with her schoolwork. She gives Ruthie an assignment to read the poems of José Martí in both English and Spanish. Ruthie rejoices, “That will be fun homework. They put me in the dumb class because I couldn’t speak English. But now I can speak both English and Spanish!” (Behar, 2017, p. 145). Ruthie finds that she can navigate the current culture and find joy in her life.

Indeed, many of the characters in these books are bewildered by how different life is after immigration. Maya, in *Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy*, is constantly amazed at the rudeness of her classmates, their loudness and lack of respect to teachers. She often contrasts her current class situation to the quiet which prevailed in a classroom in Kazakhstan. Ravi, too, betrays a lack of understanding of the current culture in *Save Me a Seat*. His attempts to impress his classmates and teacher with neatly pressed clothes,

shiny gym shoes, and organized school supplies backfire when he realizes that those things are not as important in America as they were in India. In *Inside Out and Back Again*, Hà finds some customs baffling as well and makes mistakes, such as wearing a nightgown to school thinking it was a dress. She longs for papaya, and tells a friend, Miss Washington, who gives her dried papaya as a Christmas present. This dried papaya is disgusting to her and she rejects it. Her mother takes the dried papaya and soaks it in hot water to remove the sugar and rehydrate the fruit. Later, Hà tries the papaya and says, “Hummm . . . Not the same, but not bad at all.” (Lai, 2011, p. 234). The same could be said of the evolution of many of the characters’ feelings toward their new country: not the same, but not bad at all.

### **Identity Development**

The years between eight and sixteen are most often a time when young people discover who they truly are and find a way to settle into themselves. They develop an identity for themselves. Identity development in these books not only includes traditional identity development, in terms of gender, physical development, personality, talents and abilities, and family; but also reveals identity development through the lens of immigration. They incorporate the confusion many characters feel about being part of two different cultures. Do they need to reject their birth culture, reject the new culture they have immigrated to, or can they find a way to accommodate and celebrate both as part of their personal identity?

*The Unforgotten Coat* gives a portrait of two Mongolian immigrants to England, Chingis and Nergui, through the eyes of Julie. Julie and Chingis are in Year Six, while

Nergui is Chingis' younger brother. Chingis asks Julie to be their Good Guide. "In Mongolia, we are nomads. When we come to a new country, we need to find a Good Guide. You will be our Good Guide in this place. Agree?" (Boyce, 2011, p. 10). In accepting this assignment, Julie is changed and finds a new identity in researching Mongolia and helping Chingis and Nergui navigate this new place. Chingis seems fearless and very sure of himself as a Mongolian nomad, showing Polaroid photographs of places in Mongolia, wearing a fur coat and hat, and talking about outwitting the demon following his brother. In reality, he cleverly staged his photos so that they would appear to be from Mongolia and his coat was given to him after he arrived in England, probably from a refugee group. He has a strong need to identify as Mongolian, as different and distinct from his English classmates.

On the other hand, in *Maya and the Cotton Candy Boy*, Maya finds herself greatly desiring to assimilate into her new culture, and chafing against the restrictions and rules put in place by her parents, who prefer to adhere to traditional Kazakhstani norms. Maya wants to attend school parties and field trips and participate in extracurricular activities such as gymnastics. Her parents prefer she come right home from school and take care of her younger brother. Maya struggles with having to be different from her classmates. "What Maya really hated was that her parents were so different but she didn't say that. It would make her feel bad and she already felt as though she'd betrayed them." (Okimoto, 2011, pp. 122-123). Maya was ready to accept the new culture wholeheartedly, but was unable to do so because of her love and loyalty to her traditionally-minded family.

Jason in *The Sky at Our Feet* struggles with his identity but eventually comes to

peace with being part of two cultures. Jason's mother came to the United States from Afghanistan when she was pregnant with Jason. His father was an interpreter for the United States military in Afghanistan and was killed as part of his service. This left Jason's mom alone in the United States with an expired visa and a premature baby. She decided to stay in the United States while raising Jason and hiding from the authorities. Jason loves his mother and appreciates her culture, although he doesn't fully consider himself to be Afghan. He knows very little Dari (his mother's native language) and appreciates both traditional Afghan and American cuisine. He also doesn't consider himself to be fully American; he is torn between the two. He meets a girl named Max in the hospital where he is recovering from a blow to the head. She finds his heritage and culture interesting and insists that he is not just "plain old American" (Hashimi, 2018, p. 79). Jason is puzzled. "I never thought any of that made me more interesting. I always thought that's what made me strange compared to other American families." (Hashimi, 2018, p. 78). Seeing his culture through Max's eyes helps Jason to understand the value of what he has. In the end, he realizes that he doesn't have to choose; he can be both American and Afghani.

### **Summary**

Examination of nine upper elementary grade fiction novels centering on immigration led to the discovery of several major themes. The most common theme was the importance of family: leaving family behind, desiring to unite with family in the new country, or travelling with family. In addition, three other major themes emerged: language conflict, life after immigration, and identity development. These major themes

all helped to create authentic portrayals of immigration in the lives of young people.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With an increasing awareness of immigrant students in American schools, this study sought to examine current upper elementary fiction portraying immigrant characters. The purpose of this research was to discover how immigrants are currently portrayed in upper elementary literature. Through engaging with high-quality literature, native-born students could gain a perspective on the experiences of their immigrant classmates and develop empathy for them. Nine upper elementary fiction books were examined and coded for initial and emerging themes. Four major themes emerged: Importance of Family, Language Conflict, Life After Immigration, and Identity Development. This research supports classroom teachers and teacher librarians in their quest to obtain high-quality literature to develop empathy for immigrant students.

#### Conclusions

In examining nine current upper elementary novels dealing with immigration, several themes were anticipated based on previous research, while several more emerged through a close reading of the text. Themes that were anticipated were Language Conflict and Life After Immigration. Two additional themes emerged in close analysis: the Importance of Family and Identity Development.

As Yi (2014) found in her study of Korean picture books dealing with immigration, Language Conflict was a significant theme for immigrant characters. Many of the main characters had trouble learning or communicating in a new language. Because of the miscommunication, their motivations and desires were unclear to the



native speakers around them, and as a result, often went unmet. In addition, many characters were misinterpreted as less than intelligent due to their lack of language skills. This created additional stress and frustration on the part of the main characters.

Yi (2014) also identified Life After Immigration as a theme in Korean picture books, and the researcher discovered the same theme in a majority of the upper elementary works studied. Several of the books ended before or at the point of crossing the border, but those books in which the plot line continued after the border crossing dealt with many of the challenges and difficulties faced by the main characters in adjusting to the new culture. Foreign foods, customs, ideas, and social mores brought confusion and distress as characters tried to figure out the unwritten rules of the new country. When they unwittingly blundered, they faced embarrassment and shame, although most of the time, the people around them were understanding and helpful. Unfortunately, they also faced people who delighted in making fun of them and tormenting them for their lack of ability to navigate the new culture. Unsurprisingly, in spite of the stress and confusion, many of the immigrant characters also found aspects of the new culture desirable and delightful.

Another theme that emerged with great significance was the Importance of Family. Family members played an important role in the immigrant experience in these books, providing help and support. Family ties, to family members in both the old and new country, were important in motivating characters along their difficult journeys. Many, if not all, immigrated with their parents and siblings and were given little choice in the matter, with major decisions made by the parents. However, a few characters were on

their own, but family continued to exert a significant influence on them in their decision-making and motivation to continue.

In addition, the theme of Identity Development emerged. Immigrant children not only needed to figure out who they were, but they also dealt with an additional layer of complication in defining themselves based on two cultures, instead of just one.

Characters felt loyalties and ties to both cultures, with some rejecting the old and some rejecting the new. Some characters were able to find a happy balance and embrace both cultures as part of themselves.

In terms of empathy development, the themes in these books would allow native-born students to glimpse some of the difficulties and challenges faced by their immigrant peers, while also seeing themselves reflected in some of the challenges faced by all children.

Students who have never had to move to a new country may not understand how difficult it is to learn a new language and culture. Reading stories about other children's experiences gives them a window into that experience. As Louie (2005) and Mabry and Bhavnagri (2012) discovered through their studies, providing a context for students to understand the experiences of others increases empathy and perspective-taking. It is a safe way to think about not only these characters' experiences, but also to question their own beliefs and assumptions, ultimately leading to increased understanding.

Native-born students also can develop empathy with immigrant classmates when they see some of their own struggles reflected in the lives of these characters. Almost all students have some sort of family, and family is of prime importance in students' lives.

Although nonimmigrant students may not be adjusting to a new culture, they also face conflict with their parents and siblings, disagree over rules and expectations, and need the love and belonging that the family structure provides, just like immigrant students. As suggested by Baghban (2007), it is powerful to learn that others have felt the same emotions and experienced the same situations as those of the characters depicted, even if in a different context.

In addition, native-born students are also in the process of developing their own identities, in relation or opposition to their own family, culture, gender, etc. Viewing immigrant characters through the lens of identity development may help native-born students appreciate and find common cause with those characters as they all struggle to define themselves. Native-born students may be able to appreciate the added level of complexity a new culture brings and have increased empathy for students who are dealing with immigration in addition to the demands of growing up and discovering their identity.

These nine novels furnish classroom teachers and teacher librarians with accurate portrayals of the immigrant experience that can be offered to students, in the hope of increasing empathy for immigrant students among those previously unfamiliar with their experiences.

### **Recommendations**

New books are being written about the immigrant experience, as more and more people leave their homes and travel to new countries, either by force or choice. The books chosen for this study were published between 2009 and 2018 in the United States.

For future researchers, this study could be broadened to include the most recently published books. In addition, books published in other countries about the immigrant experience may be added. Researchers may also wish to shift their focus from upper elementary students to those in the middle grades, grades 6-9, who are not yet reading young adult literature.

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## APPENDIX A

## TITLES USED IN STUDY

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## APPENDIX B

## BOOK EVALUATION CHART

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Pages: \_\_\_\_\_

Author: \_\_\_\_\_

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Summary:

<b>Theme/Occurrence</b>	<b>Found in Text?</b>	<b>Quotes and Text Evidence</b>
Language conflict		
Social mobility		
Legal issues with immigration		
Physical dangers		
Actual border crossing		
Life after immigration		



## APPENDIX C

## CODING MANUAL

The following themes are defined below. The novels will be examined to see if they contain these themes and to what extent they affect the characters.

**Language conflict:** Yi (2013) describes how Korean immigrant children experience distress and fear by the phenomenon of learning another language. While some immigrants already know how to speak English, many do not. Even if an immigrant has some English language training, they may not be culturally fluent in the language. The theme of language conflict or barrier will be sought out.

**Social mobility:** Boatwright (2010) discussed how immigration affects social mobility. Is there a change in social standing among the immigrant characters? Is it positive or negative?

**Legal issues with immigration:** Cummins (2013) examined how legal issues affect immigrants. In particular, she examined the status of illegal immigrants and how the law and the enforcement of the law made a difference to the characters. Green card status, legal citizenship, illegal entry, and deportation will be explored.

**Physical Dangers:** Cummins (2013) also studied the physical danger of illegal border crossings. This will be broadened to include all physical dangers associated with immigration, including disease, accidents, and the rigors of the journey, as well as physical dangers from border guards, fences, and animals.

**Actual Border Crossing:** Clifford and Kalyanpur (2011) looked at the actual experience of crossing the border, and as a result, becoming an immigrant. Do the characters describe this experience?

**Life After Immigration:** Yi (2013) used the theme of life after immigration to examine Korean characters who had immigrated. Is life after immigration described in the novel? How is life different than in the home country? Do the characters assimilate, try to retain their cultural identity and reject the majority one, or is there some combination of both?