

We Came to Colorado: Third Graders Inquire into the Past to Honor their Present

Corey R. Sell, Jennie Schmaltz, and Stephanie Hartman

A typical social studies lesson for elementary students often includes the memorization of facts and dates, but lacks the inquiry-based instruction that could promote purposeful engagement with historical sources.¹ The first and third authors of this study worked as part of a statewide collaborative (set up by the Colorado Department of Education) that developed inquiry-based learning experiences involving primary sources for elementary teachers in Colorado (**Sidebar**, p. 30).

Colorado public schools have the sixth highest English Language Learner (ELL) participation rates in the country with the vast majority (77 percent) reporting Spanish as their native language.² Given this social context, the first and third authors reached out to Jennie—a third grade teacher and the second author—for support in creating and implementing an inquiry-based learning experience, setting the stage for bilingual students to employ their linguistic and cultural capital as active inquirers of the past.

Jennie teaches in a diverse, Title I elementary school that serves 636 students. Seventy-seven percent are identified as ELLs, the majority of whom speak Spanish (73 percent). Within Jennie’s third grade classroom, 20 out of 24 students are “Latinx”—a recent gender-neutral term referring to those whose native language is Spanish—and bilingual. We sought to harness the linguistic and cultural strengths of the Latinx-bilingual students (83 percent of her class) in order to promote their academic achievement. In fact, studies have shown that utilizing the native language of bilingual students improves academic achievement,³ builds the cultural capital of the students,⁴ and counters the dominant monolingual ideology that frames bilingual students as somehow “deficient”⁵—an ideology often cited as a cause of bilingual students’ underachievement.⁶

We drew upon the theory of “transcaring”⁷ and employed two strategies that elicited the linguistic and cultural strengths of the Latinx bilingual students, “translanguaging” and “culturally transforming pedagogies” (three terms which we define below). We also chose to frame our social studies learning experience using the inquiry-based tenets of the College, Career, and

Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards (C3 Framework). Doing so positioned the students as historical inquirers within the learning experience—elevating the active element so vital for powerful and purposeful social studies teaching and learning.⁸

Transcaring and Translanguaging

Rooted in the concept of care developed by Nel Noddings, “transcaring” refers to an ethic of care that places the development of Latinx bilingual children’s identity at the center of the schooling process.⁹ It requires teachers and educational leaders to not only recognize the power dynamic at play in English-dominant classroom spaces, but to create new spaces that encourage Latinx bilingual students to explore and develop their bilingual cultural identities—that is, not solely Latinx or American. Moreover, it describes ways that teachers and educational leaders support Latinx bilingual students in negotiating between “rigid borders of languages, cultures...in order to expand their abilities and gain greater understandings.”¹⁰ There are four pedagogical strategies associated with transcaring; we focused on two to develop this learning experience.

First, we created a space where Latinx bilingual students could access and make use of their native language; a practice referred to as translanguaging.¹¹ What better way to achieve this than through the study of the Hispanos people—Spanish-speaking descendants of settlers from Spain—who settled in the San Luis Valley of Colorado? For example, we drew explicit attention to the place names when studying the geography of the area—many of which are in Spanish. In addition, we used Spanish vocabulary to support the learning of the Hispanos’ history and culture.

Second, we deliberately chose historical content that more closely resembled the lives of Jennie’s students in order to use culturally transforming pedagogy—methods of teaching that connect to students’ culture and provide opportunities to acquire and develop new language and cultural practices.¹² Unfortunately, these stories are rarely found in history textbooks

used in Colorado schools. Thus, we had to extend beyond traditional resources. Consequently, we created a primary source set focusing on the Trujillo family—one of the first Spanish-speaking immigrant families who successfully settled in the San Luis Valley.

Teofilo Trujillo—the patriarch of the family—became a U.S. citizen in 1848 when the United States claimed the land he lived on following the Mexican-American War. In 1865, he moved with his wife, Andrellito, to the San Luis Valley of Colorado. They spoke little English and strove to maintain their cultural heritage by, for example, building an adobe home, herding sheep, and speaking Spanish. Their son, Pedro Trujillo, was a first-generation U.S.-born citizen who struggled with his bilingual identity. Ultimately, he demonstrated signs of acculturation to the Anglo-American culture by speaking English, referring to himself as “Pete,” building a log cabin, and raising cattle. Though the family experienced conflicts with Anglo-American settlers, some of its members persisted and established themselves in the valley.

Through both primary and secondary sources students investigated the life of the Trujillo family and the history of the San Luis Valley in Colorado—all of which will be discussed in further detail below. The choice of such historical content positioned Jennie’s students to validate and reflect upon their own bilingual identity development—ultimately providing a “mirror” to see themselves and a “window” to view their place in the broader scope of Colorado’s history.¹³ We went beyond content, though, and developed a family history project where the students told their own family stories based on several sources of information, such as interviews and family photos. This project prompted students to grapple with and claim their bilingual identities in hopes that they would develop a sense of pride in their heritage and a sense of belonging here in Colorado and the United States—a clear example of culturally transforming pedagogy.

Inquiry-based Social Studies Instruction

The C3 Framework has brought inquiry to the forefront of social studies instruction, promoting active engagement with historical content.¹⁴ Active engagement requires students to move from being passive recipients to creators of historical



(Photo by Maggie Thulson)

Metropolitan State University of Denver elementary education alumnus with public school students in Colorado, 2016.

knowledge through the historical method. The four dimensions of the C3 Framework promote this type of active engagement (sidebar), providing students opportunities to build background

C3 Framework

Dimensions of the C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

The quotes at the right are from page 17 of NCSS, “The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards: Guidance for Enhancing the Rigor of K-12 Civics, Economics, Geography, and History” (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), free at www.socialstudies.org/c3.



Compelling and Supporting Questions

A “**compelling**” question like ‘Was the American Revolution revolutionary?’ is both intriguing to students and intellectually honest. Such a question can be vigorously explored through the disciplines of civics, economics, geography, and history....

Supporting questions assist students in addressing their compelling questions. For example, questions like “What were the regulations imposed on the colonists under the Townshend Acts?” will help students understand the many dimensions of the war as they form their conclusions...”

knowledge, employ and corroborate sources, determine results, and communicate a historical claim. We utilized indicators within all four dimensions of the C3 Framework to design the six components of this inquiry. (Please contact Dr. Sell for a detailed table.)

The first component was to present a description of a lunchroom conflict, followed by two supporting questions and a compelling question:

- (a) “What happened?”
- (b) “Whose story is being told?”
- (c) “How do we know we have the whole story?”

By presenting evidence and questions without interpretation, we initiated the learning experience with an emphasis on the students’ role in disciplinary inquiry—a goal of Dimension 1.

The next three components of the learning experience provided opportunities for students to employ disciplinary concepts and tools described within Dimension 2. Specifically, all three components were designed to teach the tools and habits of mind distinctive to geographers and historians—setting the stage for the upcoming investigation. The last two components engaged students in the complete inquiry process. We have provided a detailed description of each component in the following sections, which are written from the perspective of Jennie, the classroom teacher.

The Conflict Scenario: “A Fight in the Lunchroom”

I presented students with a fictitious scenario, a “lunchroom fight” between two boys at school: Justin, who is new to town, and Max, a student popular with his peers (posted at the Stanford history Education Group website).¹⁵ Within their usual table groups of four, the students were presented with ten statements — one each from Max and Justin as well as from eight other students, all concerning what happened in the lunchroom fight. The sources of these statements were Max’s best friend, girlfriend, and mother; Justin’s father; a bystander; a cafeteria worker; a student who knew both; and their English teacher. My students wrote a “suspension report” that included their opinion about which character (Max or Justin) was at fault for the fight.

The scenario sparked lively conversation regarding different perspectives about what had occurred, and what it meant. For example, one student claimed, “Justin’s dad says that he’d never start a fight,” while another pointed out, “Of course he did, that’s his dad.” As the students conversed they grappled with whom to believe. One posited, “We shouldn’t pay attention to the other people. This is between Justin and Max. The other people are just trying to stick up for their friend.” After a half hour, I halted the conversation, even though most groups had not come up with a definitive answer as to who was at fault. This was intentional; I wanted students to continue to experience the cognitive dissonance associated with determining whose perspective was “correct” as they wrote up their suspension reports.

Next, students in the various groups shared their thinking. Many students noted that while everyone had a chance to tell their story, they didn’t really know what happened because the stories differed so dramatically. Several students went even deeper with their analysis, explaining that because Max (who was punched in the story) was popular and Justin was a new kid, Max had the power in the situation, and would likely be believed by more people. This gave me the window I was waiting for, and I introduced the concept of historical interpretation, i.e., how historians build stories of the past. I explained that during the next two weeks we would be looking at the history of the Hispanos settlers of the San Luis Valley through a variety of lenses and sources, both primary and secondary, in order to create an account of what happened. I posed the inquiry questions (a, b, and c, above) that would guide this two-week learning experience.

Exploration 1: The Geography of the San Luis Valley

I presented students with current political maps of Colorado and the San Luis Valley to establish a geographical perspective. When I presented students with a map of Colorado, they were able to read the county names such as Conejos, Rio Grande, and Costilla (where the valley is located). However, not one of the bilingual students identified these words, as well as others prominently displayed on the map, as Spanish. With a bit of prodding, one student exclaimed, “Oh, *Conejos* means bunny. It is Spanish for bunny!” Following this student’s lead and with my encouragement, other students began to access and draw upon their native language by reading out loud and defining other Spanish words on the map, e.g., Rio Grande, Mosca, Sangro de Cristo, Pueblo, and Las Animas.

Recognizing the bilingual students’ reluctance to access and use their native language in reading the maps, which was critical to understanding the people and history of this area, I provided a current political map of the San Luis Valley the following day. Without modeling or much direction, students worked in pairs to search for and highlight the Spanish words. Though hesitant at first, students were delighted at just how many words they were able to highlight. We assembled as a whole group and marked up a large map. While highlighting Spanish words, I asked the students what each meant. One town in the valley is named “Mosca”, which means “fly.” One student exclaimed, “There must be a lot of flies there!” Though this part of the lesson was uncomplicated, it marked an important turning point. Students were faced head-on with the significance of Spanish-speaking people in this area by the fact that most of the names of geographical features on the map were of Spanish origin. The connection they now had with this area, through their own language, had meaning beyond the history they had previously experienced in school.

The following day, I introduced Google Earth, which sparked high interest among the students. I began with a bird’s eye view of the school. When asked what they were looking at, all the

students immediately yelled, “our school!” From here, the Google Earth journey took them into the San Luis Valley. Along the way, students saw pictures of the wide valley, rivers, the surrounding mountains, the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, crop circles, farms, and ranches. With each image, we asked students questions such as, “What do you see?”, or “Why might that be important to people who live here?”

Exploration 2: Development of the Valley in the 1800s

To build a historical perspective of the valley, I presented a slideshow that illustrated cultural and environmental changes the valley experienced from 1803 to 1878, a period of less than a century. These changes were brought on by various land claims from Spain, Mexico, and finally the United States; the movement of people into the area; and the advent of the railroad. Next, students used visuals and text from the slideshow to create timelines. The timeline work underscored the bilingual identities of the people who settled here and prompted one bilingual student to realize that the Hispanos were in Colorado before the Anglo-Americans settled this area during westward expansion: “Wait a minute, this land used to be Spanish? And Mexican? We were here first!” Following this statement, the students and I discussed the inhabitants of the valley from the Native Americans who settled the area first to the modern-day Hispanos inhabitants whose descendants were once Spanish and then Mexican citizens before being forced to become U.S. citizens.

Exploration 3: The Hispanos Culture

After exploring the geography and history of the valley, I focused students’ attention on the culture of the Hispanos settlers. Using a graphic organizer, students became experts on a particular cultural element, e.g., clothing, homes, food, and jobs. Questions on the organizer focused on four types of thinking: (a) gathering information, (b) comparing and contrasting information from the text with their lives, (c) identifying new words, and (d) making a claim about how their cultural element reflected the history of the Hispanos settlers. Learning the cultural context for the Hispanos people set the stage for the following inquiry.

Inquiry: The Trujillo Family Story

Using the Primary Source (PS) Collaborative’s online primary source set, students constructed a story about the past regarding the experiences of the Trujillo family. Students began by analyzing six photos using visual literacy skills, i.e., making connections, determining importance, synthesizing, and critiquing the information presented within an image.¹⁶ To scaffold students’ use of visual literacy skills, I presented an analysis sheet (from the PS Collaborative website) and conducted a think-aloud discussion using one of the photos to model the type of skills I expected them to employ. Afterwards, the students analyzed

five photos in small groups. Not only was it beneficial to begin with images, which reduced the cognitive load for struggling readers, but the analysis sheet provided an accessible yet rigorous means of developing visual literacy skills through a kid-friendly layout.

The following day, I repeated this process with written accounts of the Trujillo’s past from newspaper clippings and interview transcripts. To scaffold the historical thinking skills asked of students, i.e., the interpreting, sourcing, and corroborating, I utilized both a newspaper and text analysis sheet (again, from the PS collaborative webpage) by first modeling those skills and then having students employ them in small groups.

Next, the students constructed a story of the Trujillo family’s past by answering the inquiry questions: (a) What happened? (b) Whose story is being told? and (c) How do we know we have the whole truth? When students shared their stories, they had gleaned some important and accurate information about the Trujillo’s past from their analysis. They realized, “this is the story of how they lived and survived ranching with sheep and cattle,” and that, “the family survived on their own.” Moreover, they realized that Anglo-American settlers migrated to the San Luis Valley for similar reasons to the Hispanos and these two cultures often clashed.

The students concluded that the Trujillo story reflected the history of the San Luis Valley—“They represent the other families in the area, the other Hispanos people”—and the history of the state—“Their family tells the history of Colorado.” Recognizing that the story of one family holds traces of the past was a powerful realization for the students, enabling them to conceptualize history as not just one story, but a combination of multiple perspectives. One student even claimed, “If we didn’t know about them, there would be a blank spot in history.” The students also realized the power of primary sources in telling stories of the past: “We know we have the right story because primary sources happened when the history was happening.” Last, the students recognized that history includes their stories, which I asked the students to tell in the final component of this learning experience.

Taking Action: Telling Their Own Story

I had the students watch “Trujillo Descendants - In Their Own Words,” a nine-minute video produced in celebration of the renovation of Pedro Trujillo’s home at the Trujillo Homesteads National Historic Landmark.¹⁷ Students were intrigued as they watched the present-day members of the Trujillo family, especially in the ways that they told stories the students had just constructed from primary sources. After watching the video, we brainstormed a list of questions that students could ask their own family members to illuminate their family histories. Due to the sensitive nature of this inquiry, I suggest preparing parents for this assignment with a letter home in Spanish and English, iterating the purpose and how we would use the collected stories in the classroom, as well as providing an explanation

that relatives may share as little or as much personal family history as they would like with their child.

After the students interviewed a family member and collected family photographs, each student produced a Google Slides presentation to be shown at Family Engagement Night. Each student, regardless of level or ability, was able to build a coherent story of his or her family's past, connecting to our inquiry's central idea that historians build the stories of the past. So much pride in their history and significance to their community shined through! Finally, each student used their slides and research to write short histories about their families, answering once and for all whose story was being told and why that story was important.

Student Writing: My Family Story

Do you want to learn about my family? My family has a good history! My family came to Colorado in June 2008. To begin with, my family loves to eat eggs with my grandma's beans especially me. We also love to eat tacos de barbacoa. And most of all my family LOVES milk with bread/conchas.

Additionally, my parents work hard at home. My dad practices his drums because at night he works. My mom cooks. Sometimes my dad helps her to do the food, while Mom cooks. My brother will just be outside playing soccer. Me and my sister would play outside with my brother or barbies inside and my big sister will help my mom cook for us.

Furthermore, we came to Colorado because my parents thought it will be better to live here, which it is. And we also moved here because my dad wanted to see his family more often because we were in Mexico and the other part of my family was in Colorado, so that is why we came to Colorado.

We love it here in Colorado! We are a Mexican family who came to Colorado nine years ago

Conclusion

In this social studies learning experience, framed in the tenets of transcaring and the C3 Framework, students actively and meaningfully engaged with historical content to create accounts of the past. They became historians who told stories of Colorado's history—including their own. Doing so empowered the students to recognize their connections to and roles in Colorado's past—championing them to become engaged citizens in Colorado's future. A worthy pursuit, considering Latinx students participate in elections, attend public meetings, and volunteer in the community at significantly lower rates than Whites in Colorado.¹⁸

In addition, it became clear to us that, for many of these students, this was the first time they had been given a space to both grapple with and develop their Latinx bilingual identities in connection to Colorado's history. Providing such a space positioned these students to use the skills of a historian to affirm themselves as legitimate and active players within both Colorado's past and future. Now, more than ever, we need to create safe spaces for bilingual students to examine their bilingual identities free of fear and anxiety, which has become prevalent among many elementary students due to the current political climate.¹⁹

Though this work pertained to the history of Colorado, it is replicable to any context with a concerted effort to move beyond the textbook. In our case, we chose to work with local historians and librarians—who are widely available to support the history curriculum of elementary teachers—to locate sources and stories of diverse people in Colorado. We also accessed the cultural capital of the local area by collaborating with museum educators. Additional online options could be the Library of Congress website, the National Park Service's Teaching with Historic Places website, and the Digital Public Library of America website—all of which provide sources of counter narratives often excluded from a textbook.²⁰ Responding to our students' needs culturally and contextually through these

The Colorado Primary Sources for Elementary School Collaborative

www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/pssets

As a result of requests from the field, a group of Colorado educators and education partners created online primary source sets for grades K-6 that aligned with the Colorado Academic Standards. Each set comprised of three parts: (a) Lesson Overview, (b) Primary Source Set and Lesson Ideas, and (c) Resource Set. In addition, nine Primary Source Analysis Worksheets were created for supporting elementary students in the analysis of different types of primary sources such as photographs, newspapers, oral histories, artwork and artifacts. All these materials can be found by scrolling down to the 3rd grade lesson "A History of the San Luis Valley," at www.cde.state.co.us/cosocialstudies/pssets. Coauthors C. R. Sell and S. Hartman are among the 15 members of the Elementary Primary Sources Work Group, as listed at the website.



creative venues provided opportunities for students to be provoked, engaged, and empowered to think critically about the past in ways that directly connected to their immediate lives. Given that critical thought is highly prized in a democratic society, this work demonstrates the crucial importance elementary social studies education can have in U.S. public schools. ●

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Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

Exploring Inquiry-Based Instruction in Social Studies

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Edited by Kathy Swan and John Lee, with Rebecca Mueller and Stephen Day

This book is an indispensable guide for teachers implementing the C3 Framework. The book consists of model lessons contributed by 15 of the best social studies curricular organizations. Each lesson encompasses the whole of the C3 Inquiry Arc from questioning to action, engages students in a meaningful content experience that fits a typical curriculum, and needs between 2 and 5 days of instruction. Students collaborate, practice disciplinary literacy skills, and present their findings creatively. There are lessons for all grade bands from K-2 to 9-12.

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