

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Popping the Bubble: Critically Analyzing the Refugee Crisis with Suburban Seventh Graders

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The town of Mountainview, New Jersey is an upper middle-class suburb located about 20 miles outside of New York City. The median household income and average price of a home in the town are both well above the state and national averages. It is a safe community and one where the children have many opportunities for success. It is the type of place that comes to mind when Coates (2015) describes "The Dream" as a way of characterizing the privileged life of some in contrast to those who are underserved in this country. Working in this type of community has very specific and important implications in the classroom.

I teach at Mountainview Middle School, part of the high-achieving Mountainview Public School District, which serves 675 students across grades 6-8. The demographic make-up of the school is 70% white, 13% Asian, 9% Hispanic, 4% two or more races, 3% Black, and 1% American Indian. The overwhelming majority of the students enjoy stable housing and consistent access to healthcare and food. They have had generally pleasant interactions with the police and don't have friends or family that have been incarcerated or subjected to an ICE raid. This privileged reality has functionally shielded the students from personally experiencing various forms of social injustice. Additionally, as 12 and 13-year-olds, they have not yet thoroughly explored such topics in school. The combination of their geography and age has left most unaware of how issues of injustice impact individuals and society at large.

In this setting and with this population, a critical approach to teaching and learning can create exposure to unfamiliar issues and enable students to analyze and understand these issues in the context of justice, equity, and power. Critical pedagogy has historically been an educational tool for empowering the marginalized and underserved (Freire, 1997). However, while different in its goals and application, this type of pedagogy is as necessary for students who are in a position of relative privilege. My overarching goal as a teacher is to help students develop a critical consciousness of the world to better understand the world and their role and position in it (Freire, 1997; hooks, 1994). This requires a rejection of neutrality in the classroom and instead an intentional approach to teaching for a more inclusive and equitable society (Apple, 1990; Zinn, 1994). I try to help students broaden and deepen their thinking about content by explicitly addressing social context, misconceptions, and injustices.

As part of this broader goal, I seek to help students recognize their relative privilege and develop empathy for those who are marginalized but in a way that avoids exoticizing or othering. It is worth noting that while the vast majority of my students are non-marginalized, that number is not 100%. There are some students who are members of racial, ethnic, and religious groups that are subjected to high levels of discrimination as well as those who are of a lower socioeconomic status than most of the population in town. It requires a careful balance to help students critically analyze examples of marginalization and injustice but not doing so at the expense of other students in the class or in a way that exacerbates existing societal divisions. Mirra (2018) describes a "critical civic empathy" that moves students beyond individual feelings of sympathy and

tolerance toward an empathy that recognizes social positioning and inequity of power combined with civic action for a more democratic and just society. An approach that combines justice and empathy has the potential to enable students to develop a critical understanding of the world while also building bonds with those of different backgrounds both inside the classroom and beyond it. Working toward this goal, I try to help students imagine and strive for a more equitable and inclusive community.

Complicating this work is, as Swalwell (2013) describes, the difficulty of finding the balance between engaging in critical pedagogy while avoiding the alienation of students and the accusations of indoctrination from administrators and parents. The latter point has become a more acute concern during remote instruction as the location of learning shifted from a physical classroom to the individual homes of students. (On most days, I had about a third of my students in person with the remainder joining through Zoom; however, the school shifted to a full remote schedule with all students on Zoom for half the time students were working on the project I will describe below.) The learning culture of the school is one where students are encouraged to think independently and creatively and engage in inquiry-based learning projects, reflective of what Anyon (1980) characterized as an "affluent professional school" in her work connecting school demographics with instructional philosophy. This environment creates space for in-depth student-centered exploration, but being situated in the broader community requires a careful navigation of politically charged topics, especially those that bring attention to the relative privilege of the student population. I mitigate the risks associated with this type of teaching by being mindful of how I frame information and strategically using texts and questions to drive instruction. Downey and Long (2016) detail an approach to teaching history that I have embraced in which student-centered inquiry is the instructional foundation for building conceptual knowledge and understanding.

The inquiry-based project I will describe below is an attempt to achieve these critical learning goals through the lens of the current refugee crisis. At its core, the refugee crisis is a collective failure to ensure basic human rights for all people; this is a key concept for young people to understand as they are beginning to learn about the world. There are nearly 80 million people, roughly 1% of the world's population, who are forcibly displaced (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, 2020). Included in those tens of millions of forcibly displaced people are refugees who are fleeing violence caused by authoritarian regimes, gangs, paramilitary organizations, and endless wars. These numbers have increased each of the last few years, creating the worst refugee crisis since World War II (Trilling, 2018). However, these numbers don't even tell the whole story as there are also people who have lost access to a reliable water source or fertile land due to climate change, and others with no prospect for economic survival unless they voluntarily migrate elsewhere. In response to this multilayered crisis, we have witnessed a president spend four years rhetorically demonizing refugees and migrants and their home countries, and use the power of the federal government to drastically reduce the number of refugees allowed into the

country while enacting cruel and inhumane practices such as family separation at the border (Packer, 2020). Despite its far-reaching implications, this is not an issue that personally or directly affects most of my students and, as a result, most have lived unaware of the current hardship of tens of millions of people. The modern refugee crisis incorporates the effects of war, the widespread restrictions on human movement, the ways in which discrimination is multifaceted, and the pervasive disregard of the most marginalized in our global community. As such, this topic is uniquely important for students to explore in order to critically understand the world today and begin to imagine a better one.

Learning Goals and Structure of the Inquiry Project

I aimed to create a series of learning activities that would enable students to understand the complexities of the refugee crisis on a macro and micro level; in other words, from the perspective of the single individual experiencing the myriad hardships of becoming and being a refugee, and by considering the role of countries in creating and exacerbating this problem. This project was guided by several specific learning goals:

- To help students understand the challenges faced by refugees, including the unique and intersectional forms of discrimination;
- To help students understand the causes of the refugee crisis and the connection between war and displacement;
- To help students move beyond feelings of individual sympathy for refugees toward an empathy rooted in justice and equity;
- To help students critically examine the actions of the US in the context of the refugee crisis;
- To help students generate solutions for this issue that would lead to a more peaceful and equitable world.

I structured the project as an inquiry into the topic guided by a combination of my questions and students' questions. This model served to focus students' learning while also increasing their ownership over the process. Students began their inquiry by sharing their own prior knowledge about refugees and the refugee crisis and then generating questions they had and would need to answer to thoroughly understand the topic. I then organized the project into three sequential components: 1) reading part of a fictional book about refugees, 2) conducting targeted research about the refugee crisis, and 3) engaging in a Socratic discussion focused on the students' own ideas and solutions for this issue. At the end of the project, students reflected on their own initial questions and what they had learned.

The book the students read is called *Refugee*, written by Alan Gratz in 2017. It is broken into three separate but related fictional stories about refugees in different times and

places. One follows a Jewish boy and his family in late 1930s Germany, another focuses on a Cuban girl and her family escaping their country in the early 1990s, and the other is about a Muslim boy and his family fleeing the war in Syria in 2015. Partially because I situated this project in a unit about the Middle East and partially because of time constraints, students only read the story about refugees from Syria. The book is written at a slightly lower reading level than the typical seventh grader, which makes it a very accessible text for the students. Because the story is fictionalized, students find it more interesting and enjoyable to read than a historical text or contemporary news articles. While students were reading, they annotated the text with their own reactions, questions, and ideas and answered guiding questions that I posed. This type of reflective notetaking is designed to help students engage with the text and make meaning of the content (Downey & Long, 2016).

The research part of this project was designed to help students deepen their understanding beyond what they learned from the book. I structured the research around guiding questions that were grouped into three categories: 1) overview of refugees and the refugee crisis, 2) causes of the refugee crisis, and 3) challenges and treatment of refugees. Within each part, I included specific questions based on the students' original questions as well as those reflective of my goals for the project. Students also had several choices about where they wanted to focus their research. I provided links to a range of different sources including videos, charts, and news articles, which students used to answer the guiding questions. As students were building their knowledge, we continuously circled back to the questions that would be the basis for our class discussion. The inquiry-based structure helped students as they conducted an "evidence-based investigation into what happened and why it's important to us" (Downey & Long, 2016, p. 29).

The culminating activity of this project was the Socratic discussion. This class discussion structure is almost entirely learner-centered with the students sharing their ideas, posing their own questions to others, and monitoring their contributions as well as those of others. In preparation for the discussion, students used their notes to consider the rights they believe refugees should have, the responsibilities countries should have, and their own ideas for solving this crisis. I set up the discussion into two, 10-minute segments. In the first block, half of the students participated in the discussion while the other half listened and took notes. In the second block, the groups of students switched. The smaller groups created more opportunity for each student to participate and therefore allowed all students to hear more perspectives on the topic. This type of discussion is an example of the "engaged pedagogy" described by hooks (1994, p. 20) where the voice and ideas of students become centered rather than just the teacher. Through the preparation for the discussion, the discussion itself, and the reflection that followed, students were able to sharpen their own thinking on the topic.

Inquiry Project in Action: Instructional Activities and Student Voices

Generating Questions

The students began by examining a collage of pictures illustrating different aspects of the refugee crisis. They wrote words that reflected what they saw. Some of the most common responses included: unwanted, war, prisoners, forced/pushed/kicked out, seeking help/shelter, crowds, homeless, scared, rebellion, immigrants, outcasts, struggle, pain, poverty, and sadness. The students hadn't learned about this topic before and very few had much prior knowledge, but most seemed to express that this was an undesirable situation for a person to be experiencing.

From there, I introduced the project and asked the students to shift from word associations to generating questions for our inquiry. I framed this topic through the problem-posing model described by Freire as the "posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world" (1997, p. 60). This approach invites students to view this topic as a problem that needs to be better understood and addressed and requires their active engagement in the process. I showed students an infographic from the United Nations Refugee Agency followed by a series of pictures depicting refugees through different stages of their struggle: leaving a place of conflict, traveling to a new place, and attempting resettlement. I carefully selected images that show the hardship faced by individual refugees (e.g., a parent holding a child escaping a dangerous situation) and the mistreatment of refugees at borders (e.g., police with batons treating refugees like they are criminals). For each part, students wrote questions they had about the pictures or questions they felt like they needed to answer to understand the topic.

Most of the students' questions fell into three distinct categories: causes of the refugee crisis, countries accepting or rejecting refugees, and the challenges of refugees. These questions included: Why is this happening? What do the countries that create refugees have in common? Why would people who are displaced go to countries that are struggling to provide care for their people? How do people treat refugees that come to their country? How are refugees going to know where it is safe? How would they recover? These categories of questions would shape the research part of this inquiry.

There were several other types of noteworthy questions generated by the students. Many were focused on the specific experience of refugee children (e.g., Is it safe for children to be refugees?), an encouraging sign of the students potentially relating to this topic. Some, however, shared questions that reflected xenophobic views of refugees (e.g., How many of these refugees will grow to become terrorist groups?). Others raised questions about the unique forms of discrimination and hardship faced by refugees (e.g., Why are people treated differently cuz their (sic) from different countries? How can they start a new life with no money and a new language as well?) This last thread of questions is particularly useful in a critical analysis of the

refugee crisis. The concept of intersectionality was first developed by Crenshaw (1989) to explain the unique and overlapping forms of discrimination faced by Black women. Effectively understanding the plight of refugees requires a similar intersectional lens. It is not just poverty, or national status, or country of origin, or language barriers that lead to mistreatment of refugees but the combination of all these factors that create greater challenges for refugees.

Making Connections through Reading Fiction

The next day students began reading *Refugee*. I have used this book for the past few years but structured the reading differently this year due to the pandemic. Instead of students reading hardcopies of the book in class and writing their reflections by hand, students read a PDF of the book and digitally annotated the text and responded to guiding questions posted within the writable PDF. The questions were designed to help students put themselves in the situation that the characters were experiencing but also consider the wider implications of the refugee crisis. Barksdale (2013) described a practice undertaken by readers and historians seeking evidence that he called "zooming in and zooming out to make meaning" (p. 233). I wanted to create the opportunity for students to engage in this practice throughout their reading by continuously zooming in on the experience of the individual refugee and then zooming out to the broader refugee crisis.

Throughout the book, I asked students to describe how they imagine they would have felt if they were experiencing what Mahmoud, the fictional main character, and his family were experiencing. Kristen wrote: "It would be horrible to be in the same position as Mahmoud and his family are in. I would be scared to death if that happened to me." Mahmoud's character is the same age as the students, and I think that helps the students better relate to the challenges he faces and connect on a personal level. Mark commented: "I think going through what he has gone through would be traumatizing for life. I think this because he has lost almost everything." Mark touched on two important ideas here--trauma and loss. Both are key in understanding the refugee experience on a human level.

Other students, however, like Kiara and Carson, distanced themselves from the issue in their annotations. Kiara claimed: "I can't imagine something like what happened in the story happening in Mountainview." And Carson wrote: "I cannot believe this is what people had to go through." Both comments reflect a degree of sympathy and sadness for refugees, but both also make clear that this is not an issue that directly affects them. For Kiara, this is a geographically distant issue, and not something that could possibly happen where she lives. And for Carson, this is something that happened in the past but is no longer of concern. Both comments illustrate the difficulty of helping students develop a critical understanding of an issue that does not personally and directly affect them.

To help students understand the broader refugee crisis, I focused their attention on the reactions to and treatment of refugees in different countries. When Mahmoud and his family are put in an immigration detention facility, I asked

students to consider what this says about how refugees are treated in some places. Joseph wrote:

This shows that refugees are viewed almost as bad people. If they weren't viewed that way, why wouldn't they be allowed in the country? But in the end, refugees are just like us, except they were just unfortunate to have there (sic) hometown become unsafe. They're not terrorists, bombers, or anything bad like that. But the countries view them as just bad people.

Joseph makes an astute observation here by recognizing the connection between how refugees are viewed as a threat, despite all evidence to the contrary, and their mistreatment in certain countries. Annie made a similar observation but went further in condemning those who mistreat refugees:

It's crazy the way that they all think refugees are the monsters when it's really them. They may treat the refugees horribly but what they probably won't know is that somewhere down their family tree their family was a refugee. All the refugees just want to live a new life, start off fresh, and it bugs me how people don't let them be, their (sic) doing no harm.

Both Joseph and Annie noted the unfair and inaccurate perceptions of refugees in some countries as part of the larger problem and, equally significant, viewed refugees as fellow people who deserve basic rights and dignity.

As the students finished the book, I asked them to share what they learned overall about the life and challenges of refugees. The students' responses reflected a much more positive view of refugees than where they started. For instance, Georgia, concluded that "People who have to go through this have to be the strongest people ever." Others went further by connecting their understanding of refugees with their own privileged social positioning but only insofar as being appreciative of that privilege. For example, Sam realized that "people all around the world are like this so you just have to be grateful that you aren't in their shoes." Vihan shared a similar point but also noted the power imbalance, stating, "Refugees have to deal with people bullying them, but they cannot do anything, because others are a lot stronger, and they have power. Living a refugee life looks very hard, and I realize how lucky I am to be a non-refugee." Still others like Sarah went even further by connecting their privilege to action, asserting that "we have a duty to people in need, that it's in us as humans to help whenever we can to help others survive...if we ignore those in need we're only escalating the problem." Sarah's response reflects the critical civic empathy Mirra (2018) described by connecting feelings of empathy with a recognition of social positioning, justice, and action.

Deepening Understanding through Research

As the students finished the book and began the transition to research, I introduced the questions that would structure our culminating discussion: What rights should

people have as refugees? What responsibilities should countries have as it relates to refugees and the refugee crisis? How can we solve the refugee crisis? These questions created a purpose to the research and reinforced the point that we were learning for conceptual understanding rather than to simply collect a series of discrete facts (Downey & Long, 2016). Since most of the students were working primarily remotely and some were working entirely remotely, I created a digital three-column graphic organizer for them that featured specific research questions, corresponding links to charts, videos and articles, and space for their notes.

This is something I've noticed frequently with past students: they are more than willing to criticize past and present groups and countries around the world but are generally unwilling to apply a similar standard to the modern United States.

The first section featured basic questions about the refugee crisis including numbers of displaced people, the countries where most refugees are coming from, the countries where most refugees are going, and the historic rights of refugees as originally outlined under the 1951 Refugee Convention. This part was intended to provide a quick primer on the topic by offering contemporary data alongside the historic definition and framing of refugees. The next section was designed to help students understand the causes of the crisis and provide them with choices about what they wanted to explore. First, students were tasked with learning about what is happening in a specific country (e.g., Syria, Venezuela, Myanmar, South Sudan) that is leading to the mass displacement of people from that country. The situation is different in each place ranging from oppressive authoritarian regimes to civil wars to ethnic cleansing, but each also shares parallels including a lack of sufficient safety and humanitarian aid for the people. Second, I asked students to explore the actions and involvement of a more powerful country in one of the places where people are becoming refugees on a large scale (e.g., the United States or Russia in Syria or the United States in Venezuela). I wanted students to recognize the culpability of countries like the US in exacerbating the refugee crisis. Some students, like Aditya, grasped this point clearly, writing: "The United States/Obama had dropped many bombs on Syria and other countries. This made it so that Syria was not a safe place to live and so many citizens became refugees." However, many more were resistant to critiquing the US, and sought to justify the actions of the country. For example, here is how Charlie characterized the role of the US: "The US' attempts to bring freedom to the people of Syria may actually be a majority factor as to why there are so many refugees." This is something I've noticed frequently with past students: they are more than willing to criticize past and present groups and countries around the

world but are generally unwilling to apply a similar standard to the modern United States.

The final part of the research was about the various challenges faced by refugees. Some of the options for students to explore in this part included: refugee children, those in refugee camps, refugees settling in developing countries, refugees settling in developed countries, and the ways in which refugees are more at risk than non-refugees to discrimination, poverty, and disease. My hope was that students in each class would select different combinations of these challenges so that each could inform the class discussion. However, it was the last option that I was most interested in students exploring as it best reflected the intersectional challenges faced by refugees (Crenshaw, 1989). Several students were able to make connections between relocation and poverty, living in refugee camps and the spread of diseases, and the discrimination that extends from speaking a different language or practicing a different religion than the majority of people in a new country. Arun best articulated the intersection of these challenges:

Refugees are more at risk than non-refugees to disease because the crowded, packed refugee camps get very little medical services. The COVID-19 pandemic has made three-quarters of refugees lose income. They are more at risk of poverty because they have PTSD. Because they have PTSD, it is hard for them to learn in school. Because it is hard for them to learn in school, they can't get jobs. Because they can't get jobs, they are broke. They are also prone to discrimination because people look at refugees as a class lower than them, even though everyone is human and deserve to be treated equally. This discrimination has led to many refugees being sent back to their homes of war and persecution. Discrimination is essentially killing refugees.

By recognizing the multiple layers of discrimination and hardship faced by refugees, students can better understand the depths of this problem and generate more informed solutions.

Developing Solutions through Student-led Discussion

The goal of the discussion was to help students synthesize what they had learned through reading and research, hear the perspectives of others, and formulate their own informed ideas about the issue and how it can be solved. I opened each of my classes by explaining the structure of the two 10-minute discussions, announcing the discussion groups and sharing my expectations for all to participate. I then stopped talking and turned it over to the students. Almost every student shared at least one comment or question, and across the classes several fascinating exchanges took place. hooks (1994) emphasized the importance of students hearing and listening to one another to ensure that all are recognized, and no student is invisible. This is an important aspect of any classroom devoted to centering students and engaging in critical learning but even more so when the classroom is in a virtual, not physical, space.

Through these discussions, students developed and articulated a range of views about the rights of refugees and the extent to which they should be supported. Students across classes generally agreed that refugees should be entitled to basic human rights, but it was revealing to hear what they envisioned as basic human rights. One student, Billy, claimed that "refugees are people and we shouldn't be treating them like they're not human. Just give them a t-shirt and a bottle of water; I mean, we shouldn't have to give adults everything." Clearly, Billy rejects the dehumanizing treatment of refugees but equates humanity with simple survival. Through this line of thinking refugees shouldn't be harmed but they shouldn't really be helped either. Other students made similar qualified statements indicating support but not too much. For instance, Neha was initially in favor of refugees being allowed entry into a country and provided with support but then clarified that the support she meant was help finding a job and not being given money because "refugees might get lazy and not get a job if they are just given money." These quotes illustrate just how deeply ingrained certain misconceptions have become about marginalized people in this country, particularly in the minds of those who are far-removed and in positions of relative privilege.

Going slightly further, Annie, who was quoted above condemning the mistreatment of refugees, spoke about refugees being entitled to sanitary conditions and educational opportunities at refugee camps. But when speaking about resettlement, she said, "Refugees should have the same opportunities as others, like to work as a cashier at Walmart." Annie believes refugees should have more rights and opportunities but limited to only those of the working class. The implicit point here is that refugees should not have the same opportunities as others in the middle and upper classes. However, some, like Ashley, combined an argument for equality with a willingness to help those in need: "I think refugees should have just as many rights as we have. At the end of the day, we are all human and they are the ones fighting for their survival...We need to allow them into countries and even our homes if we can."

Within these discussions students also shared their ideas for solving this crisis. Avalos (2019), in her description of decolonial pedagogies, emphasized the importance for students to shift from social critique to imagining solutions, stating: "We need alternative visions for living and being. And we need to remind ourselves it is possible to live in a different kind of world. To remind ourselves of the possibilities beyond all those oppressive structures shaping our lives..." (p. 147). This is particularly instructive when working with younger students. Students need to be exposed to the realities of our unjust world but in a way that doesn't demoralize them and instead instills a sense of hope and reveals the possibilities for a better world.

Students' solutions addressed both the needs of current refugees and the conflicts that are constantly creating new refugees. Several were focused on improving the structural supports for current refugees through measures such as setting up more camps for temporary settlement that are clean and safe, building free and permanent housing, and

creating safe routes for refugees to eliminate arrests. Others were focused on the well-being of individual refugees. For example, Alice noted that any solution must focus on mental health and specifically “address the trauma inflicted on those who have experienced being a refugee.” Some students argued for a nuanced and multi-pronged approach to the crisis. For example, Kirk noted that the challenges for refugees are different depending on whether they are resettling in a developed or developing country and suggested an increase in funding for camps in developing countries and the passage of anti-discrimination laws to protect refugees in developed countries. Several others were focused on addressing the causes of the conflicts creating refugees, with a particular emphasis on the role of the United States. In one discussion, Daniel said, “We should focus less on refugee entry and more on stopping the wars.” His classmate, Adon, put a finer point on the culpability of the US, stating, “We need to stop causing refugees rather than stop refugees.” These ideas reflect a recognition of the unique challenges of refugees, the root causes of the crisis, and the role of the United States and other countries in creating, and potentially solving, this crisis.

Of course, not all students embraced this perspective. Some students were resistant to recognizing this issue as a legitimate problem worth solving and downplayed the severity of the crisis. For instance, Tim pushed back on the need for the US to do more, claiming, “The US is doing the most for a lot of minorities and we are lucky to be living in the US.” Later in the discussion, he took an even more aggressive (and factually-baseless) position by arguing that if we allow more refugees into the country, then “We’re going to get poorer, stocks are going to go down, and it’s going to be dangerous.” These comments reflected the same type of xenophobic American exceptionalism rhetoric that came from the White House the last four years. Despite well-reasoned and evidence-based arguments challenging his worldview, Tim could not conceive of a situation in which the US is at fault or could be improved.

Conversely, the most encouraging moments of these discussions occurred when students included themselves as part of the solution. In one discussion, as students were suggesting how countries can solve this crisis, Kevin posed the question to the group: “How can you help?” Several students in that class (as well as others) said they could spread awareness to those who don’t know about this issue. This is a very thoughtful and age-appropriate response. Students began this inquiry generally unaware of this topic and this suggestion recognizes and responds to that lack of familiarity and understanding.

Lessons Learned

Student Reflections

On the final day of this inquiry project the students reflected on what they had learned. They wrote and shared responses to the following questions: What was a question you had about this topic that you now can answer and what is a question you still have? How did your view of this topic

change or deepen as a result of our book reading, research, and discussion? How does understanding the refugee crisis help you better understand the world? Several noteworthy trends emerged in the students’ reflections. Some students indicated how this inquiry process helped them answer their own original questions and better understand an unfamiliar topic. For example, Claire wrote, “My question was why they would leave their home and have to walk miles and miles as a refugee. But when I did my research, I realized the war in some of these countries is so bad that I would rather leave.” For others, like Jane and Gavin, this process has now led to more questions. Jane acknowledged, “I didn’t even know what a refugee was before this, so I had a lot of questions but now my only question is why this happens to people.” Similarly, Gavin wrote, “I never paid attention to this topic really but now I sort of get it and now have more questions about it. A question I still have is why don’t other people help them if we are all the same?” There is a lot to take away from these two comments: the self-recognition of not previously knowing or caring about this topic, the fact that inquiry is an ongoing process of asking and answering questions, and a frustrated idealism about the world not working as it should.

Several students admitted that they were personally moved by this project. For instance, Roena explained: “As I started getting more into research and learning new things I got more interested but also I felt more sad. I feel so bad that these refugees have to go through all these things because their home country went into war in the first place and they had to flee.” Ashley and Courtney went further connecting similar feelings of personal sympathy with a need for action. Ashley noted the need for political and national action: “My view of this topic changed because at first I didn’t really care to learn about this or research it but as I read the book I realized how hard it is for refugees to survive and everything they’ve gone through. I feel bad for them and think that our government and country needs to do more to help them.” Courtney focused on the need for individual action: “My view of this topic has deepened as a result of our book reading, research and discussion because now that I know more about refugees and what they go through, I feel more empathy for them and I want to help them. Before, I didn’t know much about refugees or what they were so I didn’t realize how we have to try and help them.”

Most importantly, many students connected their new understanding of the world with their own privileged and sheltered upbringing. For example, Jenna wrote: “Understanding the refugee crisis helps me better understand the world because it shows me that not everyone has a good life. Not everyone has a house or even resources to survive. It shows me not to be greedy because some people don’t have the stuff we have. It is not their choice to have to flee their home and country...we have to learn that we are all humans and our differences should not be something to discriminate against.” Here again we see the type of empathy Mirra (2018) described that connects personal empathy with social positioning, power, and inequity. Charlie, whose research notes I highlighted above

as an example of students being resistant to critiquing the US, wrote the following in his reflection: "It better helps me understand the world because it kind of pops our little, safe bubble here in Mountainview." Lucas made a similar point: "Understanding the refugee crisis helps me see the world clearly because where I am growing up I am shielded from seeing this type of violence." These statements are reflective of the critical consciousness described by Freire (1997) and hooks (1994) and the possibilities of critical teaching with this population of students.

Conclusion

It's easy for students from relatively privileged backgrounds living in middle-upper class suburban communities to stay shielded from issues of social, economic, and political injustice. Most are not personally confronted with the hardships faced by those who are marginalized in our society and, in fact, often benefit from the structural inequities in place. Therefore, a neutral approach in education does not work (Apple, 1990; Zinn, 1994). Either we choose to be complicit in perpetuating the capitalist, imperialist, Eurocentric norms embedded in our history and society or we choose to offer an alternative rooted in justice, equity, and inclusivity. Through this latter approach, students can develop a broader, deeper, and more accurate understanding of our past and present in order to imagine and work toward a better future.

Successfully engaging young students in a critical learning process requires an inquiry-based approach. It would be thoroughly ineffective to follow the banking model described by Freire (1997) where students are treated as empty vessels ready to be filled with knowledge. This would not create the ownership over the learning process necessary for students to develop a connection to the information and would open teachers up to the criticism of indoctrination noted by Swalwell (2013). Rather, through an inquiry process in which students are seeking the answers to questions together, they become a "community of learners" (Downey & Long, 2016, p. 30). The primary role of the teacher in this process is to ground the activities in critical learning goals and frame the questions and select resources that guide and support the students toward those goals. This approach helps students develop their critical lens as individual learners but also helps create a more inclusive community in which all are working toward the goal of a more just and equitable society, regardless of individual background and identity.

As demonstrated above, this kind of teaching and learning is possible and necessary with this population of students. That said, there are several areas where this project could be expanded. For instance, this crisis involves more than just those who are refugees but also migrants who choose to leave an unsustainable situation for any number of reasons. A broader examination of this topic could specifically include an analysis of how climate change is exacerbating the refugee and migrant crisis. Additionally, students could look more closely at the most recent compacts from the United Nations as well as country-specific

laws and policies about refugee and migrant entry to better support their development of policy-based solutions. Incorporating these aspects of the topic would provide students with an even more in-depth understanding of the crisis and its far-reaching impact. Another approach would be to have students explore their own family histories of immigration. This has the potential to help students connect more personally to this topic and develop a greater sense of empathy for the migrants and refugees of today.

Ultimately, through this inquiry project, students gained a clear understanding of the causes and effects of the refugee crisis and the intersectional challenges of refugees, developed a sense of critical empathy for refugees, and generated thoughtful solutions to this problem. Many, but not all, of the students saw the world through a clear-eyed and critical lens, contextualized their new understanding with their own privilege, and imagined a more just, equitable, and inclusive world. This project demonstrates the potential to foster a critical, empathic, and justice-oriented disposition among students as they begin to meaningfully think about the world and their role in it.

Notes

¹ The town data is from the United States Census Bureau and the school data is from the New Jersey School Performance Report. The name of the town and school district are pseudonyms. All student names used have also been changed to ensure privacy.

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