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### **La conciencia crítica empieza temprano: Young Transborder Children's Critical Consciousness y lo que implica para las escuelas primarias**

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#### **Abstract**

Drawing upon investigaciones etnográficas with two sets of young transborder children viviendo y aprendiendo in México and the United States, en este artículo we draw upon decolonizing approaches to theorize critical consciousness formation for and with young children. Through careful attention to how children recognize inequity, critique it, and engage in a range of actions to counteract it, argumentamos que los niños jóvenes ya están formando sus propios aspectos de la conciencia crítica. In our discussion, we highlight como esta forma auténtica de problem-posing education largely unfolds a través de dialogos con sus papas and call for pedagogies to engage and extend transborder students' critical consciousness in escuelas primarias.

*Keywords:* critical consciousness, transborder, immigration and education, elementary

## Necesito Papeles

As I sat with seven-year-old Abi and her father in the living room of their apartment in Pennsylvania, we discussed their potential relocation back to México. Abi lamented that she would never see me again if they returned, to which I responded I could visit her allá en México. She was surprised by this, and doubtful, and in a gentle voice her father explained that I was able to “ir y venir” across the border because I was born in the United States. Through a large sigh, Abi retorted, “Necesito papeles,” and her father jokingly handed her a piece of paper and said, “Aquí.” With an exaggerated eyeroll, Abi asked in Spanish what good that paper would do her, as it didn’t mean anything (Fieldnotes, 5 April, 2010).

En esta conversación con Abi, we can begin to see how she and other children growing up in physical and metaphorical contextos fronterizos have experiences that spark their critical consciousness, o la capacidad de reconocer, criticar, y actuar en contra de la desigualdad sistémica.<sup>1</sup> Abi, a member of a mixed-status family in which she and her parents did not have access to U.S. papeles, had intimate experiences related to inequity, including her growing awareness that, sin esos papeles, she could not physically cross the border from México to the U.S. Pero mas allá de fijarse en estas desigualdades, this elementary-schooler also became increasingly critical of them. For Abi, el hecho de que su hermano, nacido en EEUU, could spend summers in México with their beloved grandparents, a basic right to family unity that she could not access because of her estatus migratorio, was an aching inequity que marcó su vida. For Abi, esta injusticia was not something that caused resentimiento with her hermano, instead she believed everyone—no matter where they were born—deserved the fundamental right to move across borders. En el intercambio above, we can also understand that Abi’s assertion of “necesito papeles” and her knowledge that not any paper would do hinted at the possibilities of action. De hecho, when seven-year-old Abi first mentioned her need for papers in 2010, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) did not exist. But, when she was 16 and could qualify for DACA, Abi went on to lead her peers in the application process despite the precarity of the program during the Trump administration (Entrevista, 27 October, 2021; Gonzales et al., 2019). Esta acción tenía raíces in the understandings and critiques that Abi formed creciendo en un contexto shaped by systemic inequities around immigration status.

En este artículo, exploramos la conciencia crítica that forms from young transborder children’s experiences across borders usando datos from two long-term ethnographic studies en México y EEUU. Although there is robust research demonstrating the importance of critical consciousness to prepare folx to combat systems of inequity (e.g., Seider et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2011), to date this research has overwhelmingly focused on adolescents (e.g., Heberle et al., 2020) and adults (e.g., Palmer et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2023) in the U.S. and has not revealed the nuanced ways young children engage in critical consciousness formation. Con esa meta, investigamos la siguiente pregunta: What experiences do young transborder children have reconociendo, criticando, y actuando en contra de desigualdades sistémicas? We argue that young children, especialmente cuando han vivido desigualdades, are engaging in aspects of critical consciousness formation. Esta conciencia crítica la traen a sus escuelas, en donde se puede extender

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<sup>1</sup> Una nota on language: decidimos escribir con nuestras voces bilingües sin filtro, algo que se siente como un privilegio enorme (¿Qué? We can actually showcase nuestras voces in an academic venue?), aunque debe de existir como un derecho para todes. We recognize that not everyone shares in our fluid languaging resources, y esperamos que they will find meaning and joy as they flow with our corriente.

through collective efforts among diverse students and educators to more fully understand and plan to challenge desigualdades sistemáticas.

En lo que sigue, we share a bit about who we are y lo que nos trae a este trabajo, then we define our transborder critical consciousness framework, situándolo en la literatura relevante, y describiendo nuestra metodología. Luego, compartimos ejemplos que demuestran la formación de conciencia crítica among young children. We extend critical consciousness research by highlighting the following: 1) younger children's critical consciousness formation; 2) how it unfolds beyond a mononational context; and 3) how this learning largely unfolds outside of traditional schools. By explicitly focusing on young transborder children's experiences and perspectives related to their critical consciousness formation, this research contributes to la llamada urgente in bilingual education for pedagogies in elementary schools that welcome and extend younger children's ways of noticing, critiquing, and taking action to counteract inequities.

### **Transborder conciencia crítica: Positionality, Theoretical Framework, and Literature Review**

#### **Las Autoras**

Primeramente, como investigadoras y como personas, valoramos relaciones recíprocas, atendemos a dinámicas de poder y privilegio, y contestamos inequidades y el mito de la objetividad. We see this as key to maintaining a commitment to humanizing research approaches (Paris, 2011). Autora 1 creció pasando los años escolares en Miami y los veranos con familia en Tegucigalpa. These experiences meant that, aún de joven, se fijaba en desigualdades de poder, recursos, y acceso a movimiento entre países, y planeaba como actuar en contra de los sistemas injustos que observaba. For her, that has meant working as both a bilingual elementary teacher and a bilingual teacher educator who actively centers familias quienes viven entre fronteras. Autora 2 is a queer bilingual white woman nacida en EEUU quien forma parte de una familia transborder, where we live and learn, separades y juntas, a causa de differential access to papeles, cruzando la frontera de México-EEUU. Nuestras experiencias han formado un interés común en los conocimientos and the practices of transborder children, conocimientos and practices that we believe can support a fuller understanding of what critical consciousness looks like in elementary-school-aged children.

#### **Critical Consciousness Cruzando Fronteras**

Our understanding of critical consciousness is fundamentally shaped by a transborder perspective, which requires certain key shifts in conceptualizations of immigration. For one, a transborder perspective understands that it is normal and common for families to make multiple moves across borders en ambas direcciones: this means that if we want to understand families' experiences and perspectivas, we cannot center processes of assimilation nor make assumptions about the time-scales involved in families' movimientos (Dyrness & El-Haj, 2019; Mignolo, 2000). Our work explicitly focuses on the experiences of transborder children whose lives and schooling unfold on both sides of the México-U.S. border, and these experiencias en los dos lados shape a perspective comfortable with multiple maneras correctas (Anzaldúa, 1987; Dyrness & Sepúlveda, 2020; Mignolo, 2000). A transborder perspective allows us to embrace el entre medio, or the space

between aquí y allá, where new maneras de pensar y actuar can take shape and provide valuable perspectives for life on either side of the frontera (Anzaldúa, 1987). This means that it is not just about doing things ‘the U.S. way’ o ‘la manera Mexicana,’ instead people’s subaltern experiences from moving within and across national systems and norms that often exclude them offer new logics (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016; Mignolo, 2000). When transborder families seek to build their lives across fronteras, they often confront institutions that were meant to limit, exclude, or suppress them and their ways of knowing. Traditional approaches to immigration fail to account for how families build navigational knowledge, conocimientos que pueden apoyarlos en interrumpir sistemas inequitativas. Fundamentalmente, una perspectiva transfronteriza entiende que las fronteras son aparatos coloniales, y que, si queremos enfrentar las desigualdades que resultan de esos aparatos, tendremos que buscar nuevas orientaciones, y formas de ser, pensar y actuar, para navegar las instituciones nacionales y herarquías resulting from the imposition of borders (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016; Mignolo 2000).

In our scholarship, we center niñes transborder as agentic social actors who shape sus alrededores locales, and in our approach to understanding transborder children’s critical consciousness, we recognize that conceptions of childhood no son universales—they shift dynamically across contextos y timescales (Coe et al., 2011; Orellana, 2009; Pavez-Soto, 2017). Critical consciousness from this approach invita posibilidades for understanding young children’s critical consciousness, and the ways children hope to challenge injusticias. Listening to and learning from young transborder children’s perspectives nos invita a deshacer las ideas coloniales of what counts as normal that have been imprinted in us over our adult lives.

Nuestro entendimiento de conciencia crítica empieza con la teoría de Paolo Freire (1970) que intenta entender como grupos pueden trabajar juntos para concientizarse to (1) better understand how power functions in society by leyendo el mundo; (2) formulating critiques of those power functions, including coming to recognize the role we all play in facilitating ongoing systemic oppression; and (3) planning to act (through praxis) to first disrupt our own participation in oppression and then to counter and dismantle oppressive hierarchies and systemic inequities. Estas ideas surgieron de la lucha para una educación liberadora para adultos en Brazil, y como parte de su teorización, Freire (1970) nos ofrece estrategias para una pedagogía emancipatoria. Estas sugerencias incluyen diseñando la educación alrededor de las preocupaciones de los estudiantes, organizando diálogos reflexivos que se orientan a la acción y reimaginando los papeles de maestre y estudiante para enfatizar relaciones de aprendizaje mutuo.

### **Como Conceptualizamos Critical Consciousness**

Nosotras empezamos con reconocer la conciencia crítica inherent in a transborder perspective—the recognizing of different ways the world works dependiendo de donde te encuentras and how someone is positioned in those spaces, the ability to name when those differences result in injusticias, and the practice of building ways to navigate injusticias without ceding the right to build a life in defiance of fronteras. As such, también reconocemos that creating an emancipatory pedagogy for transborder students requires recognizing the conciencias críticas que traen a sus classrooms. In previous work, exploramos la conciencia crítica that was formed among transborder adolescents (Gallo & Adams Corral, 2023), written in part as a clapback to developmental approaches that tend to overlook the unique ways transborder students engage with critical consciousness within and across borders.

Here, continuamos forwarding a decolonizing approach of Freire's (1970) original theorizing of critical consciousness, which we operationalize into three parts. Exploramos (1) como los niños jóvenes leen el mundo, or their awareness of experiences and systems of inequity; (2) how children offer critiques based on this awareness; and (3) como planean tomar acción en contra de estas desigualdades. Importantly, mantenemos una definición amplia para acción, which means we intentionally include actions that may take place within the family, among peers, and in communities, as well as more explicitly political actions, as we recognize that young people's actions may need to take place within the spaces where they are best able to participate and exercise their voices (Gallo & Adams Corral, 2023). Además, reconocemos que las acciones políticas that may be available to communities can often be shaped by legal status (McWhirter et al., 2019). For transborder children in mixed-status families, this can mean that their acciones are shaped by their own documentation status and by their decisions to protect familiares of varying immigration statuses.

## **Lo Que Dice la Literatura**

### ***Prioritizing Jóvenes.***

The Freireian teoría of critical consciousness (1970) seeks to understand how gente collectively raise their awareness de como funciona el poder, como critican las inequidades and their own role in maintaining them, and how they envision and engage en acción para combatir condiciones oprimientes. Freire himself did not offer a conceptual model of how critical consciousness operates, and scholars from a wide range of fields have refashioned this theory in alignment with their favored research methodologies and metas (Jemel, 2016; Heberle et al., 2020). En los Estados Unidos, much of the research on critical consciousness has privileged quantitative analyses from large-scale survey data with Black, Latinx, and White adolescents with the goal of understanding how critical consciousness is optimally fostered across discreet developmental stages (Heberle et al., 2020; Seider et al., 2021; Watts et al., 2011). Como demostramos en nuestra investigación con transborder jóvenes in high school, this scholarship rarely focuses on students' immigration status or experiences, often fails to account for diverse forms of action to counter oppressive forces that may be engaged in by students from undocumented or mixed-status families, and neglects to attend to the critical consciousness teens formed in their childhood (Gallo & Adams Corral, 2023). To date, there remains a lack of investigación into the conciencias críticas desarrolladas por niños jóvenes (Gallo & Adams Corral, 2023).

### ***Pedagogical Posibilidades Para los Jóvenes***

Ethnographic research across a range of contexts have also demonstrated the pedagogical possibilities of critical consciousness building in high school classrooms with Black and Latinx adolescentes en los EEUU (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kelly, 2016) or as border crossers (Cervantes-Soon, 2017; Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016; Dyrness & El-Haj, 2019). This scholarship offers ejemplos of effective pedagogies that build from youth's experiences with inequity to work towards a recalibration of power structures and hierarchies. Los investigadores razonan que incorporar el desarrollo de la conciencia crítica en las escuelas es particularmente importante para los jóvenes de comunidades marginalizadas porque contribuyen a esfuerzos antirracistas que contestan las narrativas dominantes en traditional schooling con las historias,

activismo, y posibilidad colectiva que existen para estos estudiantes (Dyrness & El-Haj, 2019; Ginwright, 2010; Seider et al., 2021). At the high school level, scholars have advocated for pedagogies that can engage and develop students' critical consciousness such as youth participatory action research, critical literacy pedagogies, critical media literacy, and problem-posing curricula developed from the inequities students navigate in their lives (Cammarota, 2007; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Kelly, 2013; Mirra, 2018; Seider et al., 2021).

### *Niños en las Primarias*

Recently a range of impressive scholarship in bilingual education han empezado a iluminar la importancia de un enfoque en la conciencia crítica en la educación primaria, offering an important pivot in critical consciousness research to extend beyond adults and adolescents to how critical consciousness is taken up in schooling spaces with young children. Much of this scholarship has argued for la necesidad de añadir la conciencia crítica como un fourth key pillar for two-way immersion bilingual education, en parte para asegurar que las decisiones sobre estructuras, políticas, y pedagogías en estos programas centran las realidades educacionales de Latinx working-class Spanish-speaking families instead of prioritizing los gustos de white middle-class, English-speaking families (Cervantes-Soon et al., 2017; Heinman & Yanes, 2018; Palmer et al. 2019; Palmer et al., 2023). Estas investigaciones han, en mayor parte, ocurrido in specific contexts of gentrification, en referencia a modelos de educación bilingüe diseñados para desarrollar el bilingüismo en niños labeled Spanish-speakers y English-speakers, that in practice end up benefitting English-speaking children at the expense of their Spanish-speaking peers (Adams Corral, 2022). In response, Palmer y sus colegas (2019) argue,

critical consciousness enables educators and other members of school communities to develop political and ideological clarity about the purpose of schooling, interrogate the status quo, disrupt deficit thinking about minoritized groups, and consider alternative explanations for student underachievement. Then they are better equipped to critically analyze curriculum, instruction, policies, relationships, and school practices to foster social justice. (p. 123)

Como nosotras, these scholars take up decolonizing approaches, cuestionando los legados coloniales in the hegemonic knowledges celebrated, normalized, and perpetuated in most schools and instead seek to center the subaltern knowledges developed by those who have been historically marginalized (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016; Mignolo, 2000). Revelan como gente (students, educators, parents) in relationship and interaction with one another in classrooms pueden refutar dominant Eurocentric curriculum, thought, and norms to offer new logics that “reposition people on the margins as creators, thinkers, and knowers” (Cervantes-Soon & Carrillo, 2016, p. 286). Palmer y sus colegas (2019; 2023) provide examples of this, such as teachers silencing white students' interruptions proactively, abriendo lugar para los conocimientos de niños Latinx, y recalibrando power, language, and spatial dynamics among caretakers; and teachers engaging as policy makers to open spaces for literacy curriculum that welcomes and extends younger children's critical consciousness (Herrera & España, 2023; López & Kleyn, 2023; Palmer et al., 2019; Valdez & Harvey-Torres, 2023). En general, estas investigaciones se han enfocado en los espacios y políticas de las escuelas primarias, y en las pedagogías diseñadas por adultos y las interacciones que toman lugar a través de esta enseñanza (Palmer et al., 2019; Palmer et al., 2023). Pero seguimos con poco conocimiento sobre como los niños jóvenes desarrollan conciencia crítica, especialmente en los múltiples países que forman su hogar. We build upon this research by exploring children's existing

critical consciousness y las posibilidades de abrir espacio para estos conocimientos in the classroom.

Our approach, which learns from children's lives in their schools and homes, also builds upon legacies of family-based learning and action about inequities. Transborder scholars han demostrado que los niños, a través de prácticas y experiencias con sus familias, en donde se comparten y desarrollan oportunidades to recognize and critique the inequities impacting their lives, learn about and engage in acciones que incluyen la migración, testimonios, community organizing, manifestaciones, and self-determination to navigate the world as a member of an undocumented family (Gallo, 2016; Mangual Figueroa, 2013; Rusoja, 2022; Salazar Pérez & Saavedra, 2017). This scholarship reveals how family members powerfully prepare their children to navigate inequities related to undocumentedness, a topic that is rarely broached and built upon in schools (Gallo, 2017; Mangual Figueroa, 2013; Nuñez & Urrieta, 2021; Rusoja 2022). Aquí nos enfocamos en ejemplos de como identificar y entender la conciencia crítica que existe en young transborder children, in the hopes that schools can learn from and build upon the ways these students are already making sense of the inequities shaping their lives and seeking ways to take action.

## **Métodos**

### **Estudios en Ambos Lados**

We draw upon two long-term ethnographic studies that Gallo conducted with transborder elementary school students (ages 5-12) from mixed-status families. El primer estudio ocurrió del 2008-2011 en Pennsylvania as a cohort of Mexican-heritage students moved from kindergarten through second grade. Ese estudio se enfocaba en entender como los padres mexicanos participaban in their children's educational lives in contexts of heightened deportations during the Obama administration (Gallo, 2017). El segundo estudio creció del primero, as many families approached Gallo after a loved one's deportation, pidiendo consejos regarding their US-born children's educational trajectories if they were to move back to their parents' hometowns in México. Para mejor entender esas realidades, the second ethnography centered on the educational experiences of ten students from mixed-status families in rural escuelas mexicanas who had recently arrived due to U.S. immigration policies. Ese estudio tomó lugar en 2016-2017, el año que eligieron a Trump como presidente, y exploró las intersecciones entre las políticas de inmigración y de educación en las vidas de niños transborder viviendo ahora en México (Gallo, 2021). The actual participants in these studies differed, yet together they capture a range of young transborder students' experiences crossing geopolitical, linguistic and cultural borders, and highlight children's potential to push against hegemonizing legacies, ways of knowing and being that are often absent from their classrooms.

### **Recolectando y Analizando Datos**

Ambos estudios etnográficas utilizaron métodos similares para recolectar datos. Gallo conducted weekly participant observations in students' classrooms over the academic year and video-recorded students' routine educational practices during half of those observations in which focal students wore lavalier microphones to capture the nuances of how they contributed to and engaged in schooling. En el estudio en Pennsylvania, monthly participant observation and recording

of routine family-based learning occurred within seven focal families' homes or community spaces. En el estudio en Puebla, México, Gallo engaged in bimonthly family-based observations in homes and community spaces with a subset (three) of families. Across both studies, in-depth interviews were conducted with focal students, their caregivers, and their teachers; in the México-based study, transborder siblings and peers were also interviewed. On-going, long-term engagement in transborder children's mundos escolares y caseros provided insights into the family-based and school-based maneras en que los jóvenes enfrentan desigualdades, such as migration status, that deeply shaped their lives and learning across borders.

En orden de analizar estos datos etnográficos, iterativamente trazamos patrones en los datos to identify meaningful themes in transborder children's and families' lives. Durante observaciones Gallo anotaba lo pertinente para luego escribir fieldnotes detallados, separating observations from evaluations and questions (Kirkland, 2014). She engaged in similar practices as she logged video-recorded data and artifacts. Participants escogian la hora, el lugar, y el idioma de sus audio-recorded interviews, que duraban entre 35 y 120 minutos. Cada mes durante los estudios, Autora 2 escribía in-process memos que le daban dirección a su trabajo en campo, examinando a temas como "deportación," "imagining life in México," y "Trump en la escuela."

Al terminar la recolección de datos en cada estudio, entrevistas were transcribed by a local bilingual transcriber and pertinent excerpts from video recordings were transcribed by Gallo. Each study was coded using online qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.TI) and using separate code books. Los datos que reanalizamos aquí come from codes como "documentation" "deportación," and "niñez," from the Pennsylvania study y "papeles," "children's diasporic relocations," "critique," y "subaltern knowledges" from the México study (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Ejemplos from each code book*

<b>Códigos claves reanalyzed from Estudio #1 (Pennsylvania, USA)</b>	<b>Códigos claves reanalyzed from Estudio #2 (Puebla, Mexico)</b>
Documentation Immigration Niñez Police Riesgo Sacrifice Separation Travel	(Un)Authorized Migration Citizen Civics Discrimination Mixed-Status Families Niñez Papeles Politicized Funds of Knowledge (PFOK) Return Migration Separation

### **Resultados:**

#### **Identificando Critical Consciousness en Jóvenes Transborder**

Aquí analizamos las experiencias que young transborder children tienen con inequidades related to migration status en ambos lados de la frontera y las críticas que estos jóvenes in Pennsylvania and Puebla have levied against those inequities, learning dialogically con sus padres, afuera de las escuelas. We then demonstrate a range of types of action que usan estos jóvenes,



including shaping los movimientos diaspóricos de sus familias, interrumpiendo descriminación with peers, and working entre y/o en contra de políticas migratorias actuales to address inequities related to the right to movement across national and institutional fronteras. We highlight the more subtle forms of embodied critique and action que forman parte de la conciencia crítica en niños jóvenes.

## Experiencias with Inequity

Como Abi in the opening vignette, children en ambos lados of the frontera were particularly aware of desigualdades related to documentation status and the complex maneras in which these inequities shaped posibilidades to cross borders, gain access to institutions such as schooling, and possibilities de unificar o separar familias. Overall, children had few experiences to learn about or name these inequities en sus escuelas, instead aprendieron how to examine critically, strategically resist, and re-shape narratives of their humanity and mobility a través de dialogos con sus padres.

Second grader Julián, quien, como bebé, had moved from New York City al pueblo natal de sus padres in Puebla, desarrolló his awareness about inequities related to papeles one afternoon when he came across separate carpetas for his and his hermana's US and Mexican papers. Su papá tomó la oportunidad to show him los documentos en cada carpeta, explaining passports, social security cards, Clave Unicas de Registración Pública (CURP), vaccination records, apostillados, official translations, careful archiving of calificaciones, and many of the other nuances in the texts that shaped their differential access to mobility across fronteras e insituciones etadounidenses y mexicanos. Julian notó que su papá no tenía dos carpetas—one for México y uno etadounidense like he did—and asked him about it. His father explained, “No, yo no tengo papeles americanos, hijo. Yo no tengo, yo no nací allá, yo no pude tramitar un estatus legal... Pero ustedes sí... Si ustedes quieren pueden ir a EEUU” (Entrevista, 6/21/17). Physically seeing who in their family lacked a U.S. folder provided a concrete entryway into the abstract reality of a systemic inequity that deeply shaped their family's transborder lives: the presence and absence of papeles required understanding diferencias in accessing movements across la frontera.

One of Abi's classmates in Pennsylvania, a second grader from a mixed-status family, offered similar understandings of inequities. Un día, mientras trabajaba en grupo, Gregorio told his peers a story about his tío crossing the border from México sin papeles and trying to help a badly beaten man they found in el camino. In his re-telling, seven-year-old Gregorio explicó que border-crossing es muy peligroso and people can die. He also related how people get arrested and sent back to México (Fieldnotes, 2 May, 2011). Although never broached in the curriculum, les niños en primaria compartieron lo que sabían de estas desigualdades entre ellos.

Alejandra, a fifth grader from Julian's rural school in Puebla who had recently moved to México from Carolina del Norte, also shared her understandings of inequities and subaltern knowledges to contest those inequities for people without access to papeles etadounidenses. Ella explicó que “an immigrant is a person that...is not from the United States. It's not American; it's Mexican. And they cross la frontera... And they get caught from the policemen and they got sent back here. But they can—like if you're in the United States—some won't get noticed cause you can make your fake papers” (Interview, 26 May 2017). For her, and many children with intimate experiences with undocumented status, the term immigrant was often conflated with undocumentedness, y Alejandra entendía que su pasaporte etadounidense granted freedom of movement across the border in ways that her parents and many of her peers could not access.

Alejandra also discussed nuanced readings of the world in the shifting political climate as a member of an undocumented family, describing her awareness of how an overtly anti-immigrant

administration caused new inequities and peligros for her familia. Explicó, “if Donald Trump is gonna like be the president, we would move cause we don't want to get moved. Cause then we're not gonna have our clothes, our toys, our money. We're gonna have to get out quickly, and all of our stuff will be over there [in the US]... and then we were not gonna have these stuff” (Interview, 26 May 2017). Aquí, Alejandra enseñó su conocimiento de las posibles consecuencias materiales for her undocumented family when Trump was elected to US office, and how this shaped her family's relocation to México on their own terms, en vez que vivir con la posibilidad de ser deportados. Julian's noticing and questioning una diferencia, Gregorios' sharing of stories of violencia, and Alejandra's explicación of her family's navigational planning all demonstrate maneras that young children become and express their awareness of inequities.

### **Naming Injusticias: Children Critique Desigualdades**

Young transborder children no solo conocían desigualdades related to documentation status; they also often took stances in a range of embodied ways to offer a critique of them. Abi, from the opening vignette, nació en Puebla and since the age of four had lived sin papeles in Pennsylvania, where many experiences taught her how systems of power shaped people's lives. One key incident ocurrió en segundo grado, when she served as an interpreter entre policías who had illegally forced entry into her home without a warrant. Through this experience aprendió en diálogo con su papá how to delicately navigate interacciones con policías while also learning about their own derechos as undocumented community members, Abi described asking the policia—“Why you didn't show our papers?” They said, “I'm the police. Open the door.” I said: “My dad said that where's the papers, and where's everything?” (Video Log, 1/6/11). In this high-stakes interaction, Abi learned about, and demanded, an additional set of papeles importantes, the warrants U.S. police officers are supposed to possess to enter your home sin tu permiso explícito, while witnessing firsthand the way power inequities meant policías could enter their home without their papeles and without consequence.

In her re-telling of this interaction, Abi embodied her critique of the police officers' actions, rolling her eyes in annoyed disbelief mientras explicaba how they made her open the door and then questioned her about what she and her family were doing in their own home, as if they were the ones engaging in illicit behaviors rather than the policías without a warrant (see Gallo, 2016). Young Abi's critiques of this inequity were not verbose—instead, her embodied expressions questioned this systemic oppression. Abi's experiencias subalternas required that she know como navegar and critically examine rather than internalize the oppressive realities created by inequitable power relations, y su papá la apoyó en desarrollar this asset-based understanding as a Latinx immigrant without papers. Regardless of typical rules of fairness and her young age, Abi tenía que saber como navegar su vida diaria en EEUU and began to critique las operaciones de los sistemas de poder que la limitaban.

Alejandra, the fifth grader en Puebla que recién llegó de North Carolina, also engaged in a critique of inequities through a tarea in which students were asked to bring in imagenes relacionados con la inmigración. She brought in fotos de madres Latinx cargando sus hijos, and adolescent males carrying large handwritten carteles that read “Ser migrante no es un delito” (Fieldnotes, 13 January, 2016). En escoger estas imagenes, she demonstrated her awareness and critique of the oppressive ways immigrants were positioned in the world, as well as her critique of unfair systems of movement across borders that affected su familia y muchas más.

In a separate conversation about ‘La Bestia,’ the trains that perilously transport migrantes de varios países across México to la frontera with the U.S., Alejandra critiqued this inequitable reality, explaining, “Like a bunch of persons get on top of ‘The Beast’ and then they get driven, and then they get off. And a bunch of them get die” (Interview, 26 May 2017). Compartió que aunque no pensaba que fuera buena idea for people to ride la bestia because of the risks, entendía la decisión: “in the United States, they can have a better job than here. They’re risking theirselves” (Interview, 26 May 2017). Con diez años, she offered an awareness and critique de la realidad for those willing to risk death for a chance to live with basic dignity.

Like Dyrness and El-Haj (2019) demonstrated with adolescents and adults, experiences such as these provide oportunidades for young children to develop a critical awareness of the contradictions of Western democracy: the failed promises of inclusion and equality in their new state; and the ways that economic, political, and military policies of their host countries are often imbricated in the perpetuation of unjust, inequitable, and dangerous conditions in the countries from which they or their families emigrated.” (2019, p. 5)

Para todos estos niños, these personal experiences with differential access to documentedness fostered the first two aspects of conciencia crítica: a growing awareness of systems of inequity within—and across—los países they called home and a critique of how these inequities operate en sus vidas. These critiques often occurred in subtle ways—with looks that expressed their disbelief of how policías treated their family or the inclusion of a political statement en una tarea to counteract deficit myths about immigrants, offering critiques that counteract sistemas que los criminalizan. En la siguiente sección, examinamos como niños toman acción to address these inequities within their familias, among their peers, and in efforts to shape políticas migratorias.

## **Children Tomando Acción**

### ***Influyendo Family Migration***

Transborder family members do not experience or perceive movement across borders uniformly, and children’s perspectives differ from those of their parents as they navigate institutions like schools (Pavez-Soto, 2017; Roman et al., 2016). Una de las formas que young transborder children toman acción is through shaping their own and their family members’ diasporic relocations (Gallo et al., 2017; Pavez-Soto, 2017). Estas no son acciones o decisiones solamente de adultos, but also de niños, y pueden tomar forma that may challenge adult preferences. Here, we extend this broader research on children’s deseos e influencia on familial migration para resaltar how children’s influences are, at times, tied to their understandings and critiques of desigualdades sociales related to estatus migratorio.

Princess nació en the U.S., y en el segundo grado vivía en Pennsylvania cuando su papá fue deportado a México. Por años, she and her mother held daily negotiations about their potential futures remaining in the U.S. or reuniting with her father en Puebla. Immediately following her father’s deportation, Princess was clear—no quería vivir en México. When her mother, who was undocumented, tried to convince Princess a por lo menos visitar a su papá en México durante vacaciones, Princess still refused her mother’s plans, telling her “Not right now. We’ll go when you [mom] are ready” (Interview, 6 June, 2011). Eight-year-old Princess realized that her mother’s visit to México would likely be long-term, ya que no podía volver a cruzar a EEUU facilmente. Princess had life experiences related to inequity: she witnessed her father’s deportation and was aware there

were differences in how she could cross the border compared with her parents. She was also critical of these inequities y no aceptaba planes de adultos that pushed her to go to México sin su mamá. Her discursive contributions to her family migration decisions—to move or not move to México—son una forma de acción—not just based on her deseos, but directly tied to the inequities of how her undocumented mother could not freely move across the border (Pavez-Soto, 2017). Her subaltern experiences con separación familiar across borders led her to action on a local scale—podía influir the rest of her family’s diasporic relocations.

En un pueblito en México, media-hora from where Princess’ father now lived, fourth grader Dinora also navigated and contested movement across borders. Her family had moved from New York City when Dinora was a toddler, y ahora que se acercaba a la graduación de sexto grado, sus papás planeaban su mudanza back to New York to live with extended family, believing this would offer her superior educational opportunities. Dinora understood inequities around U.S. papeles, explicando que ella y su hermano podían usar sus pasaportes estadounidenses to travel anywhere in the world whereas her parents tendrían que cruzar la frontera con EEUU a escondidas through the desert or hiding beneath a cargo truck (Interview, 27 June, 2017). Dinora, like many transborder children, prefería su vida en México, pushing against assumptions of superiority of the global north (Dyrness & El-Haj, 2019). As she reflected on the plan for her move to the U.S. for school, she teared up pensando en como extrañaría sus padres y sus amigos, “como que tengo miedo... Es que yo quiero estudiar aquí” (Interview, 27 June, 2017). She was critical of multiple forms of what she experienced as inequity—her parents’ limited access to U.S. papeles, as well as their planning mudanzas because of her access to papeles that would result in family separation.

Abi, the second grader in Pennsylvania, also critiqued and shaped her family’s migration decisions. Cuando Gallo entrevistaba al papá de Abi about potential plans to return to México without his children, a regular tema in their family that Gallo was carefully broaching usando el humor típico de las pláticas sobre migración en esta casa, Abi creatively intervened to critique her father’s migratory decisions (see Gallo, 2016). Agentively stepping into the interviewer position, Abi preguntó, “Ahora me lo vas a explicar, Pa. ¿Por qué no fuiste a México por mi?” naming como había dejado a Abi in the care of her grandparents when he moved to the U.S. When Gallo revoiced Abi’s pregunta poderosa y difícil de contestar, her father playfully evaded it, noting how “Ella (Abi) hizo esa pregunta, ahí no viene escrita” (in the interview protocol), and that Gallo couldn’t ask it because she shouldn’t “robar ideas” (Entrevista, 22 June, 2011). A los ocho años, Abi demonstrated critical consciousness in this brief interaction: entendía claramente—y criticaba—las inequidades relacionadas con el estatus migratorio, and she engaged in a form of action by taking on el papel de entrevistadora to press her father on this topic and share her perspectives about family migration. Her naming and critiquing estas experiencias showed how she intended to play a role in how she and her family navigated movements without papers across borders.

Princess, Dinora, y Abi expressed their critiques through attempted action to have a say in their movements across geopolitical borders. Estos esfuerzos can help us to understand how the cycle of reconocimiento (experiencing inequity), reflexión critiquing the inequity, and acción (attempting to counteract the inequity) are reflective of young children’s critical consciousness. Being told where to move as a result of oppressive immigration policies led children to critique those plans and discursively attempt to enact otras posibilidades. While these examples take place within the family, demuestran como la conciencia crítica that young children develop looks towards new possibilities that could grow towards una búsqueda por cambios aún más grandes.

## *Acción Among Peers*

Another way that children took acción included interruptions among peers, como cuando second grader Julian jugaba futbol with classmates en México and asked to be on “equipo México.” He was told, “No, tú vas a ser de Estados Unidos porque tú naciste allá.” Rather than accepting this, he challenged the inequity proposed by his peers, telling them that como cualquiera and could choose his equipo (Interview, 27 June, 2017). Here, Julian was not only asserting himself among his peers, he was also pushing back against ascriptions of mononational belonging.

En otra primaria mexicana, fourth grader Veronica recounted how her compañera Diana had tried to pressure everyone to exclude Jocelyn, who had just arrived from New York City, y como Veronica told classmates que era injusto and reported it to the teacher. Veronica explicó that Diana “Nos dijo que, ‘No nos juntemos con Jocelyn’ porque... ‘no es de nuestra clase’... Jocelyn nace en Estados Unidos. Y nosotras pues acá. Como hemos estado toda nuestra vida... Diana dice que, ‘No nos juntemos con ella porque no es de nuestra clase’— ‘No es igual que nosotros’” (Fieldnotes 11, January 2017). En los dos casos, vemos niños that were able to name their awareness and critique of intergroup difference—in this case naciendo en otro país—and take action against it al nivel interpersonal, by interrupting peers’ discrimination (Killen & Rutland, 2022).

## *Within Políticas Migratorias Actuales*

Transborder children also began to take the concrete realities of their loved ones’ access to papeles, apply it to others, and imagine future actions they could take to challenge injusticias. After second grader Julian in México entendió que su papá could not access papeles estadounidenses, he asked about how his hermanito, who was about to be born en México, podría ir a EEUU. Su hermana, Dinora, crítico esta realidad, “Pero mi hermanito no va a poder ir (a EEUU),” y su papá le respondió con consejos, “Mija, tú cuando estés grande lo puedes ayudar a él, para que él vaya legalmente” (Interview, 27 June, 2017). Both Dinora y Julian demonstrate la formación de conciencia crítica: they were aware of and critical of the impact of the injusticias que enfretaban como familia. Then, alongside their parents, they began to experience the possibility of acciones they would be able to take to transform these inequities. Estas acciones siguen locales—entre familia yet show planning toward action to counteract this inequity.

Second grader Abi in Pennsylvania, quien había cruzado la frontera a los cuatro años, also critiqued the inequitable treatment of immigrants during clandestine crossings and recounted how she herself sought to take action to protect her mother. She explained,

And then we all gathered together. Aww, here comes the saddest part. Well, la migra was there, and he said that if people or kids misbehaved, they were going to hit their moms with a stick. That’s not fair. I was already going to—since I didn’t know English—I was going to pull him by the hair, but my mom told me, ‘No, he’s like a police.’ And I don’t care. As long as they don’t touch my mom, everything is good.” (Fieldnotes 22, April, 2011).

Over the years, Abi’s skill at reading the daily possibility of her family’s removal or separation—her awareness and critique of these realities—also prepared her to take action if her parents were deported. As a teenager, Abi explained, “My parents and I have a plan, and we talked about it for many, many years and as I grew up, I knew exactly what to do. And if [their deportation] were ever to happen, I am not necessarily scared. My mom always told me to sell all our stuff, buy the tickets, and then just go with your brother, you know? And it was just, ‘Go to México’” (Interview, 13 January, 2021). Through personal, familial, and community experiences about the inequities of

undocumentedness, Abi was critical del tratamiento hacia migrantes and imagined potential actions para que se pudieran proteger.

Abi's compañera in Pennsylvania, fourth-grader Brittany, also demonstrated experiences with and critiques of inequities and engaged en acción colectiva to address them when her father was detained and violently arrested in front of her. Rather than remaining silent, se juntó con otros familiares to bring visibility to immigration abuses in their town, leading to her participation in intergenerational critical literacy events (Rusoja, 2022). Con el apoyo de una organización comunitaria, Brittany y su familia joined together con otras familias to give public testimonios of local police and immigration officer abuses through an event que llamaron the Truth Commission. During the event that children referred to as 'la protesta,' Brittany's mother publically read their family's story, which was later published in collective white papers and in two local newspaper articles, mientras Brittany and her siblings distributed pamphlets from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) que explicaban los derechos de los inmigrantes en inglés y español. Brittany recognized and critiqued the injustice her family experienced y trabajó con su comunidad to ensure this critique could be heard by others con menos conocimiento. La protesta occurred entirely outside of the school setting, furthering Brittany's critical consciousness through an experience con el poder de acción colectiva as a response to the inequities experienced by undocumented community members.

Varios meses después, Brittany trajo estas experiencias a un afterschool learning group with transborder Latinx and non-transborder Black peers, an established space of collective trust. Trajo los articulos que habían publicado about her father's mistaken arrest which had led to their family's multi-year court case to stop her father's deportation. Brittany compartió con el grupo and discussed how all of them could be impacted si Romney fuera a ganar la presidencia en la elección 2012, warning them that officials would come knocking on their doors looking to send people back to their paises natales if they were not "born here." Brittany again oriented to potential political action, preguntando sobre las posibilidades que darían el poder del voto a la comunidad indocumentada, aún sugiriendo la posibilidad de votar usando documentos falsos. Although they did not actually do this, demuestra el enfoque de Brittany en acciones with the potential to extend rights—como el derecho al voto y la representación política—derechos negados a inmigrantes indocumentados. Brittany drew upon a range of experiences of inequity para proponer una acción radical that could offer her family and community a say in the place they considered their home. A close look into transborder children's worlds outside of typical classroom learning provides a window to the varias maneras that young children regularly experience, notice, and critique inequity y buscan una variedad de potential responses within their family y en el mundo. In the final sections we imagine the need for critical consciousness pedagogy in elementary schools que reconoce la conciencia de estudiantes transborder.

### **Entendiendo Young Children's Conciencia Crítica**

This article represents our theorizing acerca de las realidades y posibilidades of recognizing young transborder children's critical consciousness formation, algo que nos motiva a imaginar early schooling built from these important ways of experiencing, noticing, critiquing, and planning in response to inequities. Here, we uniquely extend critical consciousness research by highlighting 1) la formación de conciencia crítica en niños jóvenes; 2) how it unfolds beyond un contexto mononacional by documenting children's subaltern experiences across the nation-states they call

home; y 3) como este aprendizaje largely toma lugar outside of traditional schools. We found children engage in authentic dialogic problem-posing education alongside their parents en maneras that foster oportunidades for understanding, critiquing, and taking action against the very inequities que marcan sus vidas (Freire, 1970, 1973). Moreover, demostramos la importancia en reconocer las maneras that children can move from experiencing inequities, to noticing, questioning, and critiquing those inequities and then begin to imagine and enact their contestations within their families, peer groups, and communities.

By learning from children's critical consciousness, escuchamos el conocimiento de transborder children en sus comentarios, cuentos, y preguntas sobre injusticias. We also witness embodied critiques that look and sound diferentes de los que expresan adolescentes y adultos, with young children's critiques often expressed through declarations that something is unfair or dangerous, or through embodiments in gestures and expressions.

Similarly, young children engage in a range of actions that could be easily overlooked, especialmente si overt political action is the metric que mide conciencia crítica. As suggested by scholars researching critical consciousness with Latinx students from immigrant families of all ages, undocumented families' explicit exclusion from U.S political systems means we must expand the possibilities of what counts as acción política (e.g., Diemer & Rapa, 2016; McWhirter et al., 2019). Como Aldana and colleague's (2019) research on acción anti-racista, sugerimos que sometimes action occurs through talk, with children speaking up to influence family migration decisions or interrumpiendo discriminación among peers. At other times, children draw from their conocimientos sobre como funcionan oppressive systems of power to plan for acción y ayudar a otros—such as applying for siblings' rights for US papeles or advocating for ways to radically include undocumented community members in electoral systems. In other moments, children's actions are more easily recognized as evidence of critical consciousness—participating in manifestaciones or informing community members of their derechos. Yet, all of these actions build on one another y son formas en que niños jóvenes pueden mostrar la conciencia crítica que formaron afuera del contexto escolar.

A decolonizing approach requires pensamiento cuidadoso about the ways that young transborder children's experiences shape how they enact critical consciousness enfrente de adultos, and how sus formas de conocer y expresarlo may be marginalized by well-meaning adults. Children's awareness of how undocumentedness affects their loved ones, contestations of peers' exclusions based on nationality, or pulling of immigration officers' pelos may offer preparation for protestas and the planning of more overt political acciones. Yet, currently, oportunidades to build upon young children's critical consciousness formation, including opportunities for collective and political action, are largely absent from primarias on either side of the border. This article is a call for problem-posing pedagogies—based on young children's authentic experiences with inequities—como el enfoque central of elementary schooling.

### **Ahora en Adelante...**

Mientras escribimos este artículo en 2023—over 15 years since we began this research in Pennsylvania y 8 años en México—we have the gift of time to reflect on these young transborder children's vidas and can see the ways that their critical consciousness has continued to take shape a través de los años. Abi, Brittany, Gregorio, y Princess ya se graduaron de high-school: they were a cohort of students who navigated mass deportation of queridos under the Obama administration durante primaria, la elección de Trump and his anti-immigrant rhetoric al empezar la secundaria,

and una pandemia during their senior year, where they and their families were disproportionately exposed and affected. In conversations with Abi during her senior year and transition into higher education, she was very critical de como su escuela, where she was de las unicas estudiantes Latinx in honors and AP classes, refused to acknowledge the impact of undocumentedness and racismo. Como joven indocumentada, she also gracefully navigated access to college across México and the U.S., as DACA access fluctuated during her college application and enrollment process under the Trump and Biden Administrations (Interview, 13 January, 2021).

Recent conversations with Brittany highlight how her excluded access from U.S. papeles is particularly salient because it precludes her from accessing seguro médico that would support gender-affirming surgeries. Brittany explicó, “I don't have a Social Security number. I wasn't born here. Because, for surgery, I need a Social Security number so I can get insurance from the state, but I don't have one. So, I have to wait until I apply to DACA, before I can put my papers in and get the insurance” (Interview, 13 January, 2021). Princess ultimately remained in Pennsylvania for schooling, pero de adolescente empezó a pasar los veranos en México con su papá. There, she experienced firsthand the rural Mexican upbringing her parents always talked about, and she has developed her transborder knowledges within and across the institutions of her life, including how to navigate these spaces as a queer young woman. Dinora y Julian are living new transborder schooling experiences—ambos relocated to the U.S. for schooling, donde viven con sus tíos. Por la pandemia, they could not return to visit their parents and siblings in Puebla por varios años. After seven years in Puebla, elementary-schooler Alejandra también regresó a EEUU with her parents and siblings, demonstrating how our approach to critical consciousness in schools must move away from presumed mononational pasts or futures and should instead reflect los movimientos and critical understandings of inequity that shape children's lives across the countries they consider home. These young people offer a range of expertise about how to navigate, critique, and shape realities within and across borders based on a range of their lived experiences that extend beyond documentation status.

Our findings demuestran que aún cuando estaban muy joven, these transborder children were already experienced in navigating and critiquing injusticias and often engaged in or planning for action to create change on various scales. Este artículo pushes us to recognize how their critical consciousness was being expressed when they were much younger, y como los espacios oficiales suelen no reconocer—or even discount—their ways of knowing and being. While it can be easy to overlook the ways children notice, express, question, and challenge inequities, we urge scholars to attend to young children's expressions of critical consciousness and then plan for them pedagogically (Palmer et al., 2023). What young children experience, question, imagine, and do, has the potential to lead to transformative actions. Yet, if adults overlook the critique in students' rolling eyes, the expressions in tareas, and the power in simplemente decir que no, we perpetuate another series of inequities, ones in which only our ways of being critical and our levels of consciousness count. Freire (1970) understood critical consciousness as being grown by all participants in a learning community. As scholars working in transborder communities and in classrooms with young children, sabemos que nuestras propias ideas sobre las inequidades y las posibilidades para contestarlas cambiaron by listening to, being challenged by, and imaginando with young transborder students. We urge scholars to consider how young children's conciencia crítica might challenge them to expand their own entendimientos of inequities y de las posibilidades que existen para actuar.



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