

## The Relationship Between Teachers' Grade Level and Views on Immigration and Immigrant Students

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### Abstract

There is limited research on the variance in teachers' beliefs on social issues such as immigration, particularly related to the grade level they teach. This research is centered on a nationwide sample of K-12 teachers (N=5190) with an examination of their views on immigration and educational rights for immigrant students, particularly those students who are undocumented. Additionally, there is an analysis of the awareness of false immigration narratives. A series of ANOVA analyses indicates that teachers from the secondary level have the most inclusive views followed by middle grades and elementary teachers. Secondary teachers were also more likely to be aware of false immigration narratives. Consideration is given to the possible reasons for these disparities based on grade level as well as the implications for teachers and teacher educators, particularly because of the need for teachers with an inclusive positionality towards the immigrant population and a critical approach towards structural barriers these students face within the school system.

**Key words:** *Immigration, Teacher Attitudes, Critical Migration Theory, Critical Theory, Immigrant Students.*

### Introduction

The difference in the social perspectives of teachers is an area that has been analyzed to an extent in areas such as race and gender (Sas, 2009; Youngs & Youngs, 2001). However, there has been little research on the differences that teachers may have on social outlook based on grade level. This study examines a specific area of this social outlook: their awareness and views on immigration and immigrant students. More specifically, the paper analyzes four key constructs: awareness of false immigration narratives, beliefs about broader ideas of borders and migration, beliefs about current controversial immigration issues, and attitudes towards educational rights for immigrant students. Consideration is then given for the relevance of these results for both teachers and teacher educators.

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### Theoretical Framework

This paper is based on the framework of critical citizenship education (de Andreotti, 2014; Dejaeghere & Tudball, 2007; Johnson & Morris, 2010) that seeks to create students that are merely compliant with government wishes but informed and willing to examine the government in a more critical manner (Johnson & Morris, 2010; McDonough, & Cormier, 2013). One of the earliest proponents of this model is Horace Mann (1848) who argued that essential to the health of the republic is an educated populace. This is not just a population that knows how to read and write, but one that also knows how to think critically and serve as a type of check on destructive elements within the republic. As Horace Mann stated,

And hence it is, that the establishment of a republican government, without well-appointed and efficient means for the universal education of the people, is the most rash and fool-hardy experiment ever tried by man... It may be an easy thing to make a Republic; but it is a very laborious thing to make Republicans; and woe to the republic that rests upon no better foundations than ignorance, selfishness, and passion (p. 6)

His argument was that if the newly formed American government did not have a well-informed populous than its republican form of government would be a great folly. It could be argued that it would be better to have a traditional monarchy than a republic without a civically aware and critically-minded populous. Jefferson (1787) in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* makes a similar argument. He believed that all governments would eventually skew towards tyranny, and only an educated populace with a strong knowledge of history and of world events would be able to stop this natural authoritarianism from occurring.

There has been strong emphasis both at the elementary and secondary levels on areas like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). While this can be helpful, it has also been used as a way to lessen the focus on areas like civics and social studies (MaGuth, 2012). As Wise (2019) argues, we need to have a renewed focus on areas which he defines as MESH (Media Literacy, Ethics, Sociology, and History). He argues that this is necessary “because if these are not given equal attention, we could end up with incredibly bright and technically proficient people who lack all capacity for democratic citizenship.” This reduced focus on “MESH” areas is not only damaging for students, but can also leave teachers without the proper knowledge that they need to teach social studies. Without that knowledge, teachers may not be able to thoroughly examine modern issues and how they relate to the lives of students in their classrooms.

In this study, the central area of focus is immigration. More specifically, the lived experiences of migrant populations and the policies that affect the lives of the immigrants in the United States. Furthermore, this study is based on the desire to understand if our teachers are grasping the elements of critical citizenship that Mann and Jefferson argued are so essential. Are they truly realizing that educators should prepare students to not blindly serve their country, but rather to be active members in the nuanced realities of a democratic republic? Are they preparing students to think through modern, contentious issues and the relevance that these issues have on the lives of those in their communities?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review first covers the centrality and importance of teachers' attitudes towards students, by particularly examining the effect of implicit attitudes. There is a further examination of the relationship between broader social beliefs on controversial issues and the attitudes towards students. Finally, the literature review explores the reasons for the lack of research on difference in teachers' attitudes based on grade level as well as the relationship between attitudes and a more culturally relevant approach (Ladson-Billings, 2008).

### **Centrality of Teachers' Attitudes**

Of particular relevance to this study is the scholarship demonstrating that teachers' attitudes towards students have a strong relationship to self-esteem, retention rates, and student outcomes in the classroom (Alvidrez & Weinstein, 1999; Berktold, Geis, & Kaufman, 1999; Rist, 1970; Umaña-Taylor, Wong, & Dumka, 2012). However, it is often difficult to truly discern the attitudes of teachers especially when it pertains to a contentious and sensitive area like race or immigration. Teachers may not honestly relay what they think about their immigrant students. This is part of the reason why there has been a lack of research on teachers' attitudes towards immigrant students in particular. Van den Bergh et al. (2012) analyzed the attitudes of Dutch teachers towards refugee students from Morocco and Turkey and then compared it to student outcomes. The results showed that while there was no relationship between the explicitly stated attitudes of the teachers towards immigrants and student outcomes, there was a significant relationship between the implicit attitudes of teachers and student outcomes. The teachers that had the more inclusive implicit beliefs had students that were more likely to be successful in the

classroom. These results imply that many teachers are less than honest or perhaps unaware about their own implicit beliefs towards minoritized students, and thus directly questioning teachers about these attitudes may prove ineffective.

Due to the difficulties of obtaining straightforward answers from teachers on their attitudes towards students, this study focuses on more indirect questioning (Fisher, 1993) that centers around policy questions. In this area of immigration educational research there is little scholarship. Cruz (2012) in her study of high school teachers in the Midwest did ask questions regarding teachers' attitudes towards educational rights, and McCorkle (2018a) expanded upon this in his nationwide study of teachers. Sas (2009) looked at pre-service teachers' beliefs towards immigration (legal) and then explored the relationship with their views regarding teaching and accommodation of English Language Learners (ELL) learning. There has been more expansive research on teachers' attitudes towards ELL students (Karabenick & Noda, 2004; Youngs & Youngs, 2001) that show a range of results with more inclusive attitudes overall. There are some substantial differences between measuring attitudes towards immigrant rights and attitudes towards ELL students. For one, much of the research is looking at teachers' views of accommodations in the classroom for ELL students, so many of the issues that are being analyzed are quite different from broader issues of rights for immigrant students (McCorkle, 2018a).

### **Relationship Between Societal Beliefs and Attitudes Towards Students**

The purpose of this research is based on the contention that there is a strong link between broad attitudes on current social issues and attitudes towards individual students. This can be related to the ideas of culturally relevant teaching. We cannot expect teachers to be fully supportive of their students from different backgrounds without understanding and even embracing the backgrounds of the students (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2008). Likewise, if we would not expect a teacher with racist views to treat their students of different races in an equitable fashion, why would we then expect this when it comes to issues like immigration? (McCorkle, 2018a). Though this appears valid on a theoretical level, it has not been examined greatly before on an empirical level. The results from this research did show a strong correlation between beliefs about borders and migration in general and teachers' attitudes towards rights for immigrant students ( $r=.73$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Likewise, there was a strong negative correlation between

embrace of false narratives in the immigration debate and attitudes towards rights for immigrant students, ( $r=-.579$ ,  $p<.01$ ) as well as a strong correlation between beliefs about modern immigration issues and attitudes towards rights for immigrant students ( $r=.827$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Though the attitudes towards rights for immigrant students may seem like the area most directly relevant to teachers given the strong relationship between these attitudes and broader beliefs about immigration, this research explores teachers' attitudes and beliefs in all these areas as well as the differences based on grade level.

### **Variance in Attitudes based on Grade Level**

Though areas such as teacher beliefs about immigration and ELL students have been explored in relation to race and gender (Sas, 2009; Youngs & Youngs, 2001), there is a scarcity of research on the differences in attitudes between elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers on social issues. There are several possible reasons for this lack of research. For one, much scholarship that centers on these crucial social issues does so in the context of a particular instructional level of teachers. In the cases of Cruz (2012), the research was from teachers at the high school level, and Van den Bergh et al (2010) work was based on teachers at the elementary level. Another issue is that much of the research regarding teachers' attitudes towards crucial social issues is done with more qualitative than quantitative methods (Rodriguez, Monreal, & Howard, 2018; Soutullo, Smith-Bonahue, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016). In this context, it is not necessarily possible to delineate any differences in attitudes between different grade levels.

### **Attitudes and a Culturally Relevant Approach**

There has been significant scholarship that shows the inherent dangers of teachers from largely white middle-class backgrounds teaching in poor and more minority schools without a proper understanding of the cultural background (Aronson, 2017; Ladson-Billings 2008). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2008) argues that it is essential for teachers to not only learn how to teach students from diverse backgrounds but to intentionally engage themselves within the culture and the issues that students are facing. Howard (2001) found that there is greater comfortability with teachers who take on this more culturally relevant approach.

### Research Question

This study has two research questions. (1) *What are the differences between elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers on beliefs about immigration (awareness of false immigration narratives, beliefs about borders and migration, and beliefs about current immigration issues) ?* (2) *What are the differences between elementary, middle, and secondary school teachers on specific attitudes towards educational restrictions for immigrant students?*

### Methods

This study is based on a quantitative correlational design (Braun, 2002). The analysis does not seek to claim cause-and-effect relationships, but rather seek to understand the broader relationships between variables. For example, in this study the analysis may show that teachers of certain grade levels may be more inclusive or exclusive towards immigrant students, but it cannot be proven that teaching at a certain grade level caused those changes. This study employed a survey design (Rossi & Wright, 2013). This type of survey research is appropriate for this type of study as it allowed for the inclusion of a large group of teachers from various backgrounds, types of schools, and different grade levels. This type of survey research was also appropriate given the quantitative nature of the study. A more ethnographic or case study qualitative-based research may be more effective in understanding the reasons behind these broader differences. However, a survey base quantitative design is the most effective in seeking to understand the initial statistical differences between these groups. The large N of this study was also instrumental in helping to understand the variance between factors that could not be identified with a smaller sample.

### Sample

This sample originally came from another study that the author was involved with. It is based on a sampling plan by Wright et al. (2015) based on a sampling plan of congressional districts. All the congressional districts were lined up according to population density and then the second district and every fourth district were chosen for a total of 109 districts. Within these districts the school districts were arranged alphabetically and the second, fourth, and fifth districts were chosen for approximately 60% of the school districts. For the congressional districts with only one school district present, that district was selected. A similar pattern was

used with the individual schools within the district. Once these schools were selected the researchers gathered the teacher emails from those schools. Teachers from all grade levels were selected. However, the sample did not include administrators, counselors, or specialists like speech therapists. This led to a large sample of emails that could be used for the study. Wright et al (2015) highlights that this model of using congressional districts is especially helpful because it draws on a large population from both rural and urban districts. It is also geographically diverse, so there was an opportunity to see the difference based on region of the country. The initial email was sent out in October 2017 and then two additional emails were sent out for those who did not respond to the initial request. This led to a final N of 5190.

### **Instrument**

All of the constructs measured in this research were self-generated by the author though the inspiration for certain items came from previous research (Cruz, 2014; Sas 2009) as well as from talking to experts in the field. The items were validated through a previous pilot study conducted among South Carolina educators in the summer of 2017. The reason for the original elements was due to specific items related to immigration, particularly those related to attitudes towards educational rights and the broader abstract beliefs about borders and migration, which were unique and not readily available. There were a few individual items taken from other surveys such as Cruz (2014) and Sas (2009) that were modified for this survey. For this research, there were four main areas that were observed. The first was the embrace of false immigration narratives. This area examined how much teachers accepted the false narratives around refugee involvement in terrorism, undocumented immigrants' eligibility to obtain federal benefits, higher crime rates for immigrants, and the ease of undocumented immigrants obtaining citizenship. These false narratives are not necessarily new, but they have become more mainstream particularly during the Trump administration as they are often presented by the President himself (Ojeda, Wynn, & Chen, 2016.). The Cronbach Alpha of this area was .688.

The second category was broad beliefs about borders and migration. This is an area that has not been as extensively studied either in education or in the broader scholarship. There has been more research on specific issues of immigration related to individual countries (ISSP, 1995, Wilson, 2001), but less related to the broader concepts of the rights of migration and the role of borders in the modern world. This construct looked at the ideas regarding the rights of migration, how much power countries should have in restricting migration at their borders, the morality of

breaking immigration laws to provide for one's family, and the whole concept of having an open border. The Cronbach Alpha of this construct was .904.

The third construct was teachers' views towards relevant modern immigration issues. Since this survey was developed in 2017, the items that were chosen reflect the issues that were occurring in the context of immigration during that year. More specifically, it examined the areas of Trump's travel ban, the move to deport most of the country's undocumented immigrants, the rights of those who would qualify as Dreamers, and a pathway to citizenship for those who are undocumented. This construct had a Cronbach Alpha level of .851.

The final construct, and arguably the most central in this study, was attitudes towards educational restrictions for immigrant students. This construct centered primarily on the issue of access to higher education for immigrant students as this is an area that is not protected by the case of *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which prohibited discrimination based on immigration status at the K-12 levels. Some states have used this gap to not only restrict in-state tuition and state licensure, but also to prohibit undocumented immigrants from even studying at state colleges and universities as is the case in South Carolina and Alabama (McCorkle & Bailey, 2015). Questions from the study regarding immigrant educational restrictions centered on the right of undocumented students to study at state colleges and universities, obtain in-state tuition, and be eligible for state scholarships and grants. There were also questions related to rights of US citizens with undocumented parents and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients receiving in-state tuition. Finally, there was a question related to undocumented students having to pay additional fees to attend public school at the K to 12 level. This question essentially asked if teachers agreed with the case of *Plyler v Doe*. All these questions are based on the model of indirect questioning that Fisher (1993) argues can be more effective. This area had a Cronbach alpha of .925 (See Appendix for the survey items).

### **Statistical Analyses**

In order to understand the variance in teachers' attitudes based on grade level, a one-way ANOVA analysis was employed to measure the differences between elementary (K-5), middle school (6-8), and high school (9-12). The grouping was determined based on the lowest grade that the teacher taught. For example, if a teacher taught at a small school and taught seventh through ninth grades, they would be marked as a middle school teacher in the analysis. These analyses were run for all four areas: awareness of false immigration narratives, attitudes towards



rights for immigrant students, beliefs about borders and migration more broadly, and beliefs about current immigration issues. In addition to the broader ANOVA analysis of the constructs, there were also descriptive analyses of individual items within the constructs.

### Results

The first surveys were sent out in October 2017 using the Qualtrics online program. Then, two additional surveys were sent out for those who did not respond to the initial one. This led to a final N of 5190.<sup>2</sup> After the data was collected, the survey was closed, and the initial cleaning and analysis of the data began. The demographic results for gender and race were compared to similar NCES (2016) data. Though these numbers were not identical to the numbers from NCES, they were relatively close. 72.4% of respondents were female compared to 24.4% who were male. When examined by grade level, 88.4% percent of elementary teachers were female compared to 69.8% percentage at the middle grades and 59.4% at the high school level. Overall, 84% identified as white non-Hispanic, 7.2% identified as Hispanic, 3.7% identified as African-American, and 2.3% identified as Asian.

**Table 1**

#### *Teacher Demographics*

Column Head	Study	NCES Data
Male	27.4	23.4
Female	72.4*	76.6
Hispanic/Latino	7.2	8.8
non-Hispanic White	84	80.1
non-Hispanic African American	3.7	6.7
Asian	1.1	2.3
Native American	.4	.4
More than 1 race	3.7	1.4

\* .2% identified as transgender<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This research was part of McCorkle (2018a) Ph.D. dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> This demographic data is the same as an article that is in press from Rodriguez & McCorkle.

### Research Question 1

For the first research question the areas of awareness of false immigration narratives, beliefs on borders and migration more broadly, and beliefs on current controversial immigration issues were examined.

### Awareness of False Immigration Narratives

For the first area of awareness of false narratives, the ANOVA analysis revealed that there was a significant difference between elementary, middle school, and secondary educators; there was stronger awareness among the secondary teachers as compared to middle grades or elementary ( $F=28.34$ ,  $p<.01$ ). For this construct, several items were examined individually based on the differences between grade levels (See Table 2). The one area of unawareness where there was the greatest tendency to embrace the false narrative was the ease of undocumented individuals obtaining citizenship. Among elementary teachers, 67.1% percent strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with this false narrative compared to 64.7% of middle school teachers, and 60.4% of high school teachers. The individual variance was also analyzed on perhaps one of the most prevalent false narratives during the Trump era; that undocumented immigrants are taking federal government benefits (and thus being a drain on the system). 44.7% percent of elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the false narrative compared to 42.8% of middle school teachers and 41.8% of high school teachers.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA of Embrace of False Immigration Narratives*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Elementary	1557	14.6519	4.21691	.10687
Middle Grades	1187	14.1870	4.30346	.12491
Secondary	1713	13.5137	4.49363	.10857

  

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1071.645	2	535.823	28.343	.000
Within Groups	84203.735	4454	18.905		
Total	85275.380	4456			

### Beliefs on Borders and Migration

In the second category of broad beliefs about borders and migration, there was also a statistically significant difference though to a lesser degree between the different grade levels ( $F=3.93$ ,  $p=.02$ ). Similar to awareness of narratives, elementary teachers had the most exclusive views on borders and migration, followed by middle grades and secondary teachers (See Table 3). When the items were examined individually, there were only two items that had a significant difference based on grade level. The first item asked if breaking immigration laws was immoral. 35.6% of elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed that it was compared to 32.7% of middle school teachers, and 30.1% of secondary teachers. The other item asked if it was moral for people to break immigration laws if they were providing for one's family. 59.4% of elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the statement compared to 62.1% of middle school teachers and 66% of high school teachers.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA on Beliefs on Borders and Migration*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Elementary	1164	27.4631	10.34243	.30314
Middle Grades	888	27.4279	10.61998	.35638
Secondary	1353	28.4878	10.79420	.29346

  

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	882.446	2	441.223	3.930	.020
Within Groups	381968.848	3402	112.278		
Total	382851.294	3404			

### Beliefs on Current Immigration Issues

In the third area of beliefs in modern immigration issues the same pattern was seen with secondary teachers having the most inclusive beliefs followed by middle grades and elementary teachers ( $F=10.04$ ,  $p<.01$ ) (See Table 4). The item with the strongest variance was the question about deporting the majority of undocumented immigrants within the country. 31.2% of elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with this item compared to 30.3% of middle school teachers and 26.2% of secondary teachers. On the item that specifically asked about children who were brought to the country as children being able to stay, 79.3% of

elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the item compared to 78.1% of middle school teachers and 81.4% of secondary teachers.

**Table 4**

*Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA for Beliefs on Modern Immigration Issues*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	
Elementary	1300	20.8508	5.95693	.16522	
Middle Grades	1016	21.1663	5.97638	.18750	
Secondary	1519	21.8361	5.96886	.15315	

  

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	714.700	2	357.350	10.037	.000
Within Groups	136430.121	3832	35.603		
Total	137144.821	3834			

### **Research Question 2: Attitudes towards Rights for Immigrant Students**

The final construct of attitudes towards educational rights for immigrant students is where the most variance was seen ( $F=9.73$ ,  $p<.01$ ). It should be noted that the majority of the items centered on students' rights in higher education, which may be why there was a greater variance on this construct with teachers at higher grade levels holding more inclusive views than those at middle grades or elementary levels. There was no significant difference on the item about K-12 students who were undocumented having to pay extra fees (the issue that the case of Plyler v. Doe centered on). On the contentious issue of DACA recipients being able to obtain in-state tuition, 79.4% of elementary teachers strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed compared to 81.4% of middle grades teachers, and 82.5% of secondary teachers.

**Table 5***Descriptive Statistics and ANOVA for Attitudes towards Rights for Immigrant Students*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	
Elementary	1370	31.6255	9.58835	.25905	
Middle Grades	1039	32.1376	9.43670	.29276	
Secondary	1534	33.1408	9.24041	.23593	

  

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1725.208	2	862.604	9.733	.000
Within Groups	349191.810	3940	88.627		
Total	350917.017	3942			

## Discussion

### An Expanded Notion of Care

Though the differences between elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers were not overwhelming compared to some other areas such as nationalism, political ideology, etc., the large data set did allow for analyses that showed significant differences between grade levels in all four areas. The items dealing with the rights of immigrant students to obtain higher education can at least partially be explained by the greater proximity of middle and, especially, secondary teachers to students who may be hindered by these barriers to obtain higher education. A kindergarten teacher, for example, may not even be considering the framework of one of their children being unable to obtain higher education due to their immigration status. While these differences can partially be contributed to these factors, it still does raise some concerns. As Ladson-Billings (2008) highlights, teachers must see their positions as advocates for students for their whole lives not just as temporary students while they are with them. Teachers at all grade levels must see their responsibility as not only educating the child in their individual classroom, but truly being advocates for their students throughout their educational experiences and lives. The reality is that even many of the secondary teachers had relatively low means on some of the items that dealt with these issues of higher education. There were many high school teachers, where the connection between their classes and higher education should be obvious, that were still not supportive of educational access for these students.

It should be noted that teachers with a higher percentage of immigrant students in the class did show slightly more inclusive attitudes towards rights for immigrant students ( $r=.078$ ,  $p<.01$ ). The same trend was not seen, however, when the area of beliefs about borders and migration was analyzed. For at least some teachers, the closer proximity towards immigrant students did make them aware of the struggles and more empathetic at the personal level, but it was not at the levels that one might expect, neither did it seem to have as large an impact on their broader views on immigration. This harkens back to what scholars such as Rodriguez (2015) and Valenzuela (1999) have warned about in having an uncritical view of care. Teachers may have a strong notion of care on an individual level, but not allow that vision of care to extend to the political and social realities of the child.

### **Increasing Understandings of Immigration, Ethics, and Critical Pedagogy**

In the area of beliefs about borders and migration, there was a similar trend in the gap between elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers though not to the same extent as the attitudes towards educational rights. This difference between the constructs cannot be explained by more inclusive beliefs by elementary teachers on these items but rather more exclusive views from secondary teachers. Overall, teachers' beliefs about borders and migration were more exclusive among all teachers than the attitudes towards rights for immigrant students. On one hand this shows a notable trend that some teachers have more inclusive attitudes on issues directly related to their students than in broader discussion of immigration. However, as noted earlier, there is also a strong correlation between beliefs about borders and migration and attitudes towards rights for immigrant students ( $r=.729$ ,  $p<.01$ ). It could be argued that in numerous ways these beliefs about borders and migration influence teacher attitudes towards immigrant students. If a teacher really does not believe that immigrant students have the right to migrate, then when they are being intellectually honest, are they actually going to support in-state tuition for undocumented students?

The reasons for the variance based on grade level are not immediately obvious, but several theories could help explain this difference. For one, could part of the reason for this variance be due to the fact that secondary social studies and English teachers may have been exposed to more classes that deconstruct some restrictive ideas about immigration? Did they at least explore readings that highlighted some of these tensions surrounding nationalistic

immigration policies? Could it also be due to the fact that some of these critical discussions may be more likely to take place in the middle or secondary classroom and thus allow teachers to entertain the critique of the nationalist narratives themselves? Perhaps experiences such as these have allowed secondary teachers to have stronger backgrounds in the area of ethics, allowing them to take more nuanced positions. The two questions with the strongest variance within this construct were on the morality of breaking immigration laws generally and the moral justification of breaking immigration laws to provide for your family. It appeared that elementary teachers had a more clear-cut and rigid view of morality while the secondary teachers views were a little more relative and flexible.

In the construct of attitudes towards modern issues of immigration, the same variance between grade levels is seen. There was a stronger variance on this construct compared to the beliefs about borders and migration. All the individual items showed a statistically significant difference between grade levels. However, it had less variance than in the area of attitudes towards rights for immigrant students. This area, as well, had a strong correlation with both attitudes towards rights for immigrant students ( $r=.827, p<.01$ ) and beliefs about borders and migration ( $r=.825, p<.01$ ). It is hard to decipher whether teachers' views on these immediate issues shape their views on these broader more abstract issues or the inverse. However, it does show the practical implications and relevance of teachers' beliefs on these issues. On areas such as deportation of the majority of undocumented immigrants or a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, teachers' views really matter. Teachers are more likely to have contact with the undocumented population than much of the American public. They can therefore help shape public policy in a more inclusive manner or they can allow the public opinion to drive their views more than their personal experiences with students.

### **Centrality of Awareness**

Arguably the most important area for examination is the area of the embrace and belief in false narratives. While the other three categories were based strongly on the beliefs of teachers, this category sought to understand the actual awareness of issues of immigration policy. The differences in levels of awareness between elementary, middle school, and secondary teachers can be more fully understood by understanding the issues, content, readings, and classroom discussions with which secondary teachers may be more inclined to be involved. This category is

of special importance because it could be argued that the unawareness towards these different immigration narratives could be driving some of the more exclusive attitudes. There is a strong negative correlation between embrace of false narratives and attitudes towards immigrant students ( $r=-.597$ ,  $p<.01$ ), beliefs about borders and migration ( $r=-.593$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and beliefs about modern immigration issues ( $r=-.68$ ,  $p<.01$ ).

Though it is not possible to empirically prove that an unawareness of immigration issues or a tendency to believe false immigration narratives causes these more exclusive beliefs, it does follow logically. For example, if one does not believe that it is difficult for undocumented immigrants to obtain citizenship, that migrants commit crimes at higher rates, and that migrants are able to obtain easy government benefits without paying taxes, it might be harder to feel empathy for a student trying to obtain in-state tuition. It might also cause one to be more sympathetic to ideas like mass deportation. The reality is that is hard to change the attitudes of teachers on such a sensitive issue as immigration. However, if one can dispel teachers' false narratives on illegal immigration with facts and information, they will perhaps be able to have an impact on their attitudes overall (McCorkle, 2018a).

### **Implications**

There are numerous implications from these results for both teachers and teacher educators. For one, there needs to be a stronger emphasis in educational philosophy, history, and current events for all teachers, including teachers in subject areas and grade levels where those topics may be less discussed. As a teacher educator who has taught education students at the elementary, middle school, and secondary levels in social studies methodology, this variance in historical and philosophical understanding can be fairly large. While one would expect a secondary social studies teacher whose primary emphasis is in social studies to have more content knowledge, the often near absence of social studies and historical knowledge of elementary and some middle school teachers should be examined. Studies have shown that with greater education individuals tend to lean toward more progressive beliefs (Harris, 2018). Thus, it could be logically inferred that exclusive and xenophobic beliefs may be associated with less knowledge, particularly less knowledge in the social studies. There has been a growing focus on STEM at all grade levels. While this is not necessarily a negative trend, it can be detrimental if it means that areas such as social studies and current events are less prominent in the curriculum.



There may also be a temptation among some teacher educators, particularly those working with elementary education majors, to avoid engaging fully with these issues. Because elementary teachers may not be directly dealing with issues like deportation, nationalism, and xenophobia in their formal curriculum, there could be a tendency by teacher educators to not focus on these issues as part of their curriculum. However, this is ill informed pedagogy with possibly damaging results. Even if second-grade teachers are not directly discussing the topic of deportation, it is important that they are informed and wrestle with these ideas not only to grow in their own critical thinking, but also in order to become better advocates for their students. It is essential to encourage future elementary teachers to teach their students about critical citizenship even if it is done in a more simplistic way at the earlier grade levels.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this research points to the need for greater training and teacher education on issues of immigration, rights for immigrant students, and most importantly the awareness of immigration policy and false immigration narratives. Further mixed-methods research could be conducted with teachers at all grade level to understand more fully the reasons for these differences in attitudes. Furthermore, there could be research conducted with principals, particularly those who have worked at different levels, to offer insight in the variance in attitudes they have witnessed.

In times of conflict on issues like immigration, it may be easy for teachers to not discuss these controversial issues. However, it is essential for teachers as advocates to do so with a president that wants to make it nearly impossible for refugees to seek asylum or infers that he does not want any refugees coming into the country (Blitzer, 2019; Hesson, 2019). Teachers must not only engage and discuss these issues but actively stand against the dehumanization of immigrants and the administration's failure to stand up for basic principles of human rights. As McCorkle (2018b) highlights, it will be up to teachers to stop these false immigration narratives and xenophobia from extending into the future. As Mann (1848) warned us almost two centuries ago, if we do not have an educated populace that undermines these types of dangerous thinking, the Republic will not remain strong, and could even cease to exist entirely. As teacher educators we should take Mann's warning to heart and make sure our education students are critically engaged with the societal issues that will be affecting the students within their classrooms. It is

the responsibility of educators and teacher educators to ensure that this critical engagement supersedes a problematic status quo that normalizes restrictive immigration narratives and policies.

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