Immigration and Education in the “Supposed Land of Opportunity”: Youth Perspectives on Living and Learning in the United States

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Centering the voices of immigrant youth, this qualitative study seeks to understand how students navigate living and learning in a new country, as well as the meaning they assign to their experiences. Areas of importance to immigrant youth, including the disruption of family and the sociopolitical context of education, are explored. While the realities immigrant students confront in schools are often problematic, they also exert agency, and examples of the adolescents’ fervent commitment to their education are also shared, alongside the challenges they face, to provide a more accurate and robust portrait of these students. Drawing from the students’ experiences, the authors discuss the implications of this work for educators and policy makers. The article ends with a call to educators to stand in solidarity with their immigrant students to provide understanding, as well as critical and rigorous learning contexts that prepare them to reach their full potential.

INTRODUCTION

I don’t know what the big deal is. Isn’t the United States a nation of immigrants? Then why are they hating on us so much? In Social Studies they talk all that... Isn’t this the supposed “land of opportunity” (making air quotes with his hands and flashing a sarcastic grin). Hmmm. I just...
want to get a good education and a good job and help my family, just like them. (Alberto, a high school student)

(Im)migration\(^1\) is not a new phenomenon in the United States, yet it continues to reemerge as a contentious topic that weaves together the often-divergent ways we view history, equity, patriotism, and human rights. As indicated by the introductory quote in this article, the struggles and aspirations of immigrants today are similar to those faced by immigrants of previous generations. Alberto\(^2\) was a junior in high school when he offered this analysis of the ways immigrants, like himself and his family, are marginalized despite this country’s history as a haven for immigrants. Alberto came to the United States from Mexico at the age of 7. Unable to secure visas to travel to the United States legally, his family crossed the border and settled in a New England town with a burgeoning population of Latino immigrants. His parents worked odd jobs to support the family and they proudly enrolled their children in public schools, hoping their kids would surpass their own elementary school education. Attending schools where the majority of the faculty was unprepared to work with emergent bilinguals\(^3\) like him, Alberto found himself struggling to keep up with his classmates, despite his hard work and the moral support and encouragement from his family. Years later, as he became proficient in English and increasingly aware of the context surrounding immigration, he questioned the value of school, knowing that his status as an undocumented immigrant and his family’s difficult financial situation would hinder or even prevent him from pursuing higher education and getting what he perceived to be a “good job.” His story, which we will revisit later in the article, parallels that of millions of young people who find themselves caught in the current

\(^1\)The parentheses in (im)migration are employed to signal the diverse immigration experiences among individuals and communities who journey to the United States, specifically underscoring potential differences in citizenship status. For example, Puerto Ricans born on the island of Puerto Rico, a colonial possession of the United States for over a century, are U.S. citizens by birth. Subsequently, their move from the island to the mainland can be viewed as “migration” rather than “immigration.” However, Spanish is the dominant language on the island and when Puerto Ricans, who are free to travel throughout the United States without restriction, migrate to the United States, their experiences share many similarities with those of other immigrants from Latin America, especially in their encounters with xenophobia, racism, and linguicism. Nevertheless, there are certain benefits that are conferred upon Puerto Rican (im)migrants that are not extended to immigrants who are not U.S. citizens. Therefore, we use the parentheses in this first reference to call attention to the complexities of immigration across groups that is often overlooked. We also use it throughout the article when specifically referencing (im)migration from Puerto Rico.

\(^2\)Pseudonyms are used throughout the article to protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants.

\(^3\)Emergent Bilingual is a fairly new term that, as opposed to the more commonly used term English Language Learner or ELL, considers students home language(s) in addition to the language they are learning (most often English in the United States), and thereby becoming bilingual (García, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008).
crossfire of policy debates and a backlash against immigrants, especially those who are undocumented.

The United States once again finds itself debating whether we will offer or deny rights to millions of immigrants living within our borders, as well as to those dreaming of coming to the nation. As the debate around immigration laws and policies continues to ebb and flow, our schools are becoming increasingly populated with students from across the globe. In this article, we provide educators with an overview of immigrant subgroups in the United States and consider how immigrants have fared in schools and the different programs offered to them. Drawing from case studies of immigrant youth of diverse backgrounds who each day navigate living and learning in a new land, this article examines the current climate around the education of immigrant youth, underscoring the ideological and political views and realities that either offer opportunities or create barriers for immigrant students, and highlights how young people are making meaning of them.

AN OVERVIEW OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Immigration has been a mainstay in the history of the United States. Although we are proudly referred to as “a nation built by immigrants,” a look back over time shows that the United States actually has a long-standing love-hate relationship with immigration. While many reflect fondly on how newcomers from earlier generations have shaped and contributed to our society, negative attitudes toward immigrants have always been present throughout our nation’s history, and xenophobia, racism, and exclusion permeate the national dialogue around present-day immigrants, especially around those who are undocumented. The fondness for the immigration narrative of the past coupled with disdain for present-day immigrants highlights the lack of historical memory we hold as a young nation.

While immigrants today are often referred to as one homogeneous group, there are actually at least five subgroups that fall under the umbrella term immigrant, and even within each of the subcategories there exists a wide range of diversity and experiences. Each immigrant subgroup has its own set of unique experiences that creates challenges in terms of cultural acclimation, educational attainment and economic opportunities in the United States. In 2008, there were nearly 40 million immigrants in the nation, who comprised 12% of the total population. The largest immigrant group in the United States is naturalized citizens, or individuals who came to this country and after at least 5 years of lawful residency passed the citizenship test to naturalize (children under 18 become naturalized citizens with their parents without taking the exams). At 35.5% of the population, these U.S. citizens have all the rights and privileges of those born in the country (with the exception of becoming president). The next largest group, at
30.6%, is comprised of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) who reside in the country with a permanent resident card (often referred to as a green card) but without citizenship. They are permitted to live and work in the United States and to travel internationally. The third group is perhaps the most contentious immigrant group in the nation at this time, and they are referred to with a variety of charged labels such as illegal aliens as well as unlawful, undocumented, or unauthorized immigrants. These undocumented immigrants made up almost 30% of the immigrant population in 2008 in the United States and either came into the country without government authorization or have overstayed their visas (Passes & Cohn, 2009). This subgroup consists of people from Mexico (59%), South and East Asia (12%), Central America (11%), South America (7%), Caribbean nations (4%), as well as from other countries throughout the globe (Terrazas & Batalova, 2009). Temporary workers, who are only 4% of the immigrant population, are technically referred to as nonimmigrants and are mostly in the country with short-term visas for jobs or to study. Refugees are a special group who make up a very small subgroup of immigrants. They are forced to depart from their home countries as a result of persecution based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or other identity characteristics. Refugees are granted special permission to enter the United States and receive temporary assistance during their resettlement. Asylees are similar to refugees in their persecution but are already on U.S. soil when they request that the government grant them permission to stay in the country. Historically, the largest numbers of refugees have been accepted from communist nations such as Vietnam, Cuba, and the former Soviet Union.

While it used to be that immigrants would reside in specific regions of the United States, it has become commonplace for immigrants to live and work in every state across the nation. Nevertheless, the largest numbers of immigrants continue to be found in California, New York, Texas, Florida, and Illinois. While these locations have traditionally received large numbers of immigrants, states with historically low immigrant populations, such as North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, Arkansas, and Utah have recently experienced unprecedented growth, especially of Latino immigrants (Terrazas & Batalova, 2009).

Immigrants to the United States have come from different regions of the world throughout the nation’s history. In 2008, 46.9% of foreign-born individuals reported being of Hispanic origin. This speaks to the increasing number of immigrants coming from Mexico and Central and South America. However, it should be stated that Latinos are not necessarily immigrants and these groups should not be conflated. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Hispanics in the nation are U.S.-born. Furthermore, those from Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens, regardless of their place of birth and in spite of facing many of the same challenges as immigrants. Since the census does not consider Hispanic a racial category, immigrants in 2008 self-identified in the following racial groups: White (48.95%), Black/African American (8.1%),
Asian (23.7%), 17% as an “other” race, and 1.5% as multiracial (Terrazas & Batalova, 2009).

The number of children in the United States who have immigrant parents is currently 1 in 5, or 16.3 million. A total of 2.3 million children under 18 years of age were born in another country; a number that points to increased rates of immigrants in schools, more than any other time in U.S. history. Many school systems in large urban areas have a history of educating immigrant students (to varying degrees of success), such as New York City, where half of its student population comes from immigrant homes (New York City Department of Education [NYCDOE], 2007 as cited in Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). However, states that have not typically been destinations for immigrants are now faced with unprecedented increases in their percentage of immigrant children, presenting new challenges for educators in these diversifying schools across the country.

**IMMIGRANT YOUTH IN SCHOOLS**

The academic achievement of immigrant students in U.S. schools has been mixed, influenced by a range of factors including the level and quality of formal education in their home country, family’s socioeconomic status and educational attainment, native language literacy, quality of U.S. schools, and overall engagement (Suárez Orozco et al. 2008). Generally speaking, immigrant students do not fare as well as their second-generation U.S.-born peers; although a small percentage outperforms them (NYCDOE, 2009). (Im)migrant students from poor and Latino backgrounds tend to experience the lowest levels of success in schools and the highest dropout rates. Much of this can be attributed to poor quality schools and programs, underprepared teachers, and the institutionalized discrimination they face in schools and society at large (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

**Programs for Immigrant Students**

Although immigrant students have generally been underserved in U.S. schools, there exists a range of programs available to support them as they acclimate to a new country, educational system, culture, and, often, language.

**NEWCOMER SCHOOLS**

Specialized newcomer schools and programs within schools, mostly at the secondary level, have been created to meet the needs of newly arrived immigrant youth in terms of English development, academic content areas, literacy, and U.S. school and societal culture. These programs are often short
term, ranging from a summer to 1–2 years, as the intent is to transition stu-
dents as quickly as possible into the general school population. A Center for
Applied Linguistics (CAL) survey found there were 64 newcomer programs
throughout 24 states in the United States during the 2008–2009 academic
year (Short, 2010).

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

Another option for students currently living in New York and California are
schools in the Internationals Network. These high schools, and others like
them, only admit immigrants who have been in the United States for 4 years
or less and qualify for English support services (i.e., Bilingual Education
or English for Speakers of Other Languages). However, unlike other new-
comer programs, students remain in these schools for the duration of their
high school experience. The classes may be heterogeneous with immigrant
students from across the globe or may be composed of mainly Spanish-
speaking, Latino students. All classes are taught through English, but students
are allowed and sometimes encouraged to use their native languages to sup-
port their learning (García & Sylvan with Witt, Forthcoming). To date only
12 such schools exist within the International Network, but their results have
been promising not only in terms of their students’ standardized test scores
but also in graduation rates and continuation into college (Fine, Stoudt, &
Futch, 2005).

BILINGUAL EDUCATION

Bilingual education programs are available to both immigrant and U.S.-born
students in certain parts of the nation where legislation still allows schools
to provide education through English and the students’ native language.
These programs can be either temporary in nature, allowing students native
language support only until they reach a given level of English proficiency,
or they can be developmental in allowing students long-term opportunities
to become bilingual and biliterate. The availability of bilingual programs
depends on the prevalence of students from similar language groups and
overall support for learning in and through the nondominant language.

ENGLISH FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

The most common program for all immigrant students who are learning
English is English for Speakers of Other Languages, often referred to by
abbreviations such as ESL or ESOL. These programs provide students with
support as they learn academic English, often for just a portion of the school
day. Students are either with a general education teacher for the majority
of the day and have 1–3 class periods with an ESL teacher or have an ESL teacher who co-teaches in the general classroom to provide explicit English language instruction and support.

“Sink or Swim” Approaches

The last form of education immigrant students may encounter is the absence of any type of specialized programming, where students are forced to “sink or swim” in general classes without any support for language, content, or overall acculturation. This approach is pedagogically unsound, morally questionable, and illegal, as per *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), a Supreme Court case that requires any student learning English as an additional language (immigrant or U.S. born) to receive special services. Immigrant students from English-speaking countries generally do not receive special programming or may be inappropriately placed in courses to learn English in spite of speaking a different English variety (see Nero, 2006). Yet, research has shown that students in developmental bilingual programs, where content learning takes place in English and their native language, do best on standardized assessment measures and eventually outperform students who speak only English (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Each of the aforementioned approaches presents challenges for a teaching force that is largely unprepared to meet the needs of this population of students. Because the majority of immigrant students are in ESL programs that provide them with support for only a segment of the day, the remainder of their time in school is spent with general education teachers who are often prepared to work either with a specific age group (i.e., Early or Childhood Education) or a content area (i.e., Math or Science). While educators who go into bilingual education or ESL generally receive coursework in their teacher education programs that allows them to understand the unique cultural, linguistic, and psychosocial needs of immigrant students, general education teachers have little to no training in working with students who are emergent bilinguals. A study by Ruiz-de-Velasco and Fix (2000) found that only 2.5% of teachers felt adequately prepared to serve their culturally and linguistically diverse students. This means that for a majority of the school day, immigrant students are with teachers who may have the best intentions but are not adequately prepared to work with them. Teachers may not be able to teach from a culturally relevant perspective, support the native language while providing instruction in learning English or understand students’ home countries’ educational systems. Furthermore, students’ immigration trajectories may require educators to have additional sensitivities and knowledge. For instance, many refugee students come from war-torn countries and have experienced trauma that, left unaddressed, will severely impact any learning that can take place in the classroom. Teachers of undocumented students require knowledge of the laws and policies that dictate what schools can
and cannot ask of undocumented students and their families, as well as the opportunities and challenges that exist for students to go on to higher education. While most educators possibly have taken one course in an area that deals with some aspect of diversity, in which immigration may be a part of, the context of a mostly White, U.S.-born, English-speaking, middle-class teaching workforce and an increasingly diversifying student-body, the disconnect between the backgrounds and experiences of teachers and their immigrant students can be a severe issue if not addressed in teacher education programs, K–12 schools, and through broader education and immigration policies.

IMMIGRANT STUDENTS’ PERSPECTIVES

While the research literature and demographic data regarding the education of immigrant students can offer important information to help educators understand and better serve their students, what is often missing from policy debates and school reform efforts in districts serving immigrant youth are the voices and perspectives of immigrant students themselves. This article, in an effort to fill that gap, shares the perspectives of immigrant students attending schools in two distinct settings, one a small city with a relatively new population of immigrants and the other a large city that has historically been a haven for immigrant communities. To better understand and to respond to the needs of immigrant youth attending U.S. schools, we conducted interviews and observations of the participants in school settings over a period of 2 years. Our research endeavored to address the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of immigrant youth navigating living and learning in a new land, and what meaning do they assign to these experiences?; (2) What are the implications of the subaltern perspectives of immigrant youth for informing policy and practice in schools?

Methods

Much of the immigration debate, and many of the studies regarding the education of immigrant youth, focus on the U.S.-Mexico border. The data for the project reported here come from communities located in the north-eastern United States, extending the discourse to an area of the country where immigrant education receives less attention yet still requires additional examination. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth, phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006) and ethnographic observations (Carspecken, 1995). The interviews used a standard protocol of open-ended questions designed to learn more about the experiences of immigrant youth in schools as well as the meanings they assign to these experiences. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in conjunction with field notes
from observations using inductive coding procedures to organize similar responses into themes that emerged across participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Developing case studies from the data collected for each participant allowed for comparisons within and across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003) to explore similarities and differences across settings and participants.

Participants and Settings: Immigrant Youth in Context

The participants in this study reside in two distinct communities that were chosen due to their different histories of educating immigrant youth, allowing for comparisons across participants and sites. Alberto, Natasha, and Ramón live in Rana City, a small city with a relatively new population of immigrants primarily from Mexico, joining a Puerto Rican community with a longer (im)migrant history in that area. Latino youth comprise approximately 48% of the school-aged population, and the population of White students accounts for approximately 45%. Immigrants are settling at a much higher rate in communities like Rana City, small cities, and towns with a strong agricultural base, than in large urban centers that have been traditional settlement points for previous generations of immigrants (Donato, Tolbert, Nucci, & Kawano, 2007; Kritz & Gurak, 2004). In contrast, Ritha, Tatiana, Edwidge, and Marat hail from Capital City, a large city with a long history as a haven for immigrants. A center for immigrant settlement over time, the foreign-born population has transitioned from a majority of European migrants to those of Latin American and Southeast Asian descent. The city has a range of ethnically centered neighborhoods that create safe-zones for newly arrived immigrants where a common language, culture, and opportunities for networks exist. Approximately one third of Capital City, and by extension its public schools, are populated by immigrants.

Although the participants in this study are unique due to their respective life histories and divergent journeys to the United States, their stories, aspects of which are shared below, offer insight into the challenges many immigrant youth face. The following brief profiles describe each participant.

**ALBERTO**

Alberto was interviewed during his junior and senior years of high school. Having immigrated to the United States from a rural town in northern Mexico, he has lived and attended school in the United States since his family enrolled him in the second grade as a 7-year-old. Alberto's feelings about school are somewhat scattered. At times, he has identified strongly

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4Pseudonyms are used for both of the locations.
with school, articulating a fervent commitment to using his education to open opportunities for economic advancement for himself and his family. Difficult interactions with school personnel, which he attributes largely to teachers’ negative feelings about Latino immigrants, have left him, at other times, feeling disconnected from school and frustrated about his educational and professional prospects. Alberto’s situation is complicated by his status as an undocumented immigrant, which limits his opportunities for pursuing higher education as well as for work opportunities after high school.

**Natasha**

Natasha also emigrated as a young child with her family from Mexico and has attended schools in Rana City for 10 years. She, too, was interviewed first as an eleventh grader and again in her senior year of high school. Unlike Alberto, Natasha was consistent in her commitment to her education; although she has missed considerable time from school to serve as a translator for family and neighbors. An asset to the community for her balanced bilingualism—relatively equal proficiency in both English and Spanish—her linguistic aptitude did not translate to school success, as she has struggled to achieve passing grades in her classes.

**Ramón**

Ramón (im)migrated to the United States from Puerto Rico at the age of 14. Although he came to the United States as a citizen, Spanish was his primary language. Yet he was placed in largely English-only classes with little support provided for him to successfully participate in class and to complete assignments. His academic trajectory was complicated by frequent encounters with school security, who he believed targeted him because of their dislike of Puerto Ricans.

**Ritha**

Ritha immigrated to the Capital City from Haiti with her father at the age of 12, leaving her mother behind but coming to live with her extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins. She arrived during junior high school, which she recalls as a trying time due to the challenge of learning English. Because of her accent and the sometimes negative sentiments she noticed that other students held toward Haitians, she often felt like an outsider. After transitioning into an immigrant high school, she felt much more at ease in terms of her linguistic and cultural differences and has subsequently become aware of the challenges faced by her peers who have migrated to the United States from all over the world. Ritha is determined to succeed academically,
taking her school responsibilities very seriously, for the benefit her own future and that of her family.

**Tatiana**

Although Tatiana was born in the United States, her back and forth experiences between Capital City and the Dominican Republic, which is her family’s country of origin, created a double immigration scenario that made it necessary for her to (re)acclimate to differences in family structures, culture, language, and, of course, schooling. Tatiana spent the first few years of her life in the United States and then lived in the Dominican Republic from ages 3–8. She went to school in the Dominican Republic through the middle of third grade and completed the grade back in Capital City where she remained through seventh grade. She returned to the Dominican Republic for eighth and ninth grade and has since returned to the states for the tenth grade. Although she misses the family she left behind, she feels it is better for her to remain in the United States because of the opportunities that exist there for her to go to college.

**Edwidge**

Edwidge migrated with her mother from Haiti to Capital City in fifth grade. Her father and siblings had already been in the United States for a few years and their arrival enabled them all to live together as a family once again. Edwidge has struggled to learn English and to engage with academics, especially in the middle school where she felt misunderstood in terms of her background and struggles. However, she found a safe place in her immigrant high school where she feels accepted by her peers and teachers.

**Marat**

Marat immigrated to the United States with his parents and younger sibling at the age of 13. The family won an immigration lottery in their home country of Georgia and soon after found themselves in Capital City. As a racially White student in a school of a student body largely made up of students of color, Marat has had negative encounters around race with some of his peers, leaving him feeling singled out for his background. In other words, although White people are the majority in the United States, Marat is a numerical minority in his school and has been criticized by his peers about his race. However, in his small school comprised entirely of immigrant youth, he feels very much at home and accepted.
IMMIGRANT YOUTH ON IMMIGRATION AND EDUCATION

Immigrant students face significant hardships within and outside their schools. These hardships impact their academic lives as well as their potential for learning. This is especially true of immigrants who may have gone through traumatic experiences in their home country, during the immigration process, or who go through difficulties adjusting to a new life where everything is different and foreign. In what follows we explore three areas of concern raised by immigrant students described above. For many, these issues may go unrecognized by educators yet nevertheless have a profound impact on their educational aspirations and outcomes.

Family Disruption

Although we typically think of immigration as a process that encompasses an entire family unit, this is often not the case. Migration can happen for families in stages, with children sometimes left behind in their countries of origin with grandparents or aunts and uncles as a few family members come to “lay the groundwork.” Once children are sent for, they have to reconnect with their parent(s), who may only exist as distant memories for the child. Below, Ritha, Alberto, and Natasha share aspects of their migration stories, documenting how they were faced with the dual challenges of dealing with a change in location and the disruption of their families:

Ritha: I came to the U.S. with my dad and my big brother when I was 12. I had to leave behind my mom, two siblings and most of my mom’s side of the family in Port-au-Prince. It was really sad because I had always been living with my mother and I had to leave her to come here. I was really close with my siblings too. One day I will bring my mom here.

Interviewer: How will you do that?

Ritha: By working hard and achieving my goals.

For some students, separation from their family members can endure, leaving them to deal with the trauma of family disruption for extended periods. Teachers and counselors often remain unaware of these situations because students choose not to share this kind of information about their lives (and depending on the circumstances surrounding their journey to the United States, they may not feel comfortable doing so), thus limiting the support students can receive from school-based personnel.

Alberto and Natasha also experienced the disruption of family as a result of their families’ journey from Mexico to “el norte”; although their experiences are slightly different than Ritha’s.
Alberto: My father came first then he sent for my mother, my sister, brother and me. My first memory of my father is seeing him at the airport. I was so happy. I hugged him like crazy. Since then the family has been together.

Natasha: For me, my mother went first, then she sent for us later. That was really hard for us. It has been so long [since we reunited] but I . . . like I still get sad about it. I like it here but I miss my cousins and stuff there.

Interviewer: Have you been back to Mexico since then?

Alberto: No, but I really want to go. I miss my grandparents, cousins, you know. That’s hard. Even though I been [sic] here like ten years, sometimes I be in class just staring out the window wondering about my family in Mexico.

Educators who work with immigrants must be sensitive to changes in family structures, as students need spaces to process their new realities and responsibilities. And as Alberto’s and Natasha’s comments suggest, this may be a long process that does not end once students have reunited with their immediate family members. The disruption of family can and often does last indefinitely, especially for those whose immigration status precludes them from traveling back and forth to reunite with loved ones in their countries of origin.

Interviewer: Do you think you will ever return to Mexico? Do you want to?

Alberto: I was thinking about going back there. But I can’t, you know. Maybe I could, but how am I going to get back [here]? It’s a big chance.

Natasha: I don’t know. Coming here was good for us but it leaves a hole, like in your heart, your spirit. I’m glad my family came [to the United States] but I do wonder, what if? I love my family there, too, and I wish I could see them. But I don’t think I will ever go there. It’s sad.

As students like Ritha, Alberto, and Natasha apply themselves in school in their pursuit of a quality education that might put them in a position to achieve their personal goals and to assist their families, they often do so with a heavy heart, cognizant of those who have been left behind. The students are not asking for pity, but rather for understanding. Alberto probably sums up this quandary best as he implores teachers of immigrant students to be more sensitive to the needs of this group without being patronizing:
Interviewer: What do you think teachers need to know to teach kids like you more effectively?

Alberto: I want them to see me as an immigrant student, but I don’t want them to hold that against me. ¿Me entiendes? There’s some [stuff] that I have to deal with being here, especially for me without papers. I can do it, but I want to feel that teachers have my back.

The three students whose voices are featured in this section highlight the important and complex, yet often overlooked, issue of family disruption and the emotional toll that it takes in addition to the weight that many students have to bear adjusting to a new way of life and navigating schools that are often unprepared to meet their unique needs.

Schools as Difficult Terrain to Navigate

Immigration is not a linear process for many students who spend their time between two countries, including those born within the United States. There are students who have had their childhood and/or adolescence divided between the United States and their family’s country of origin. These transnational students may have difficulties learning academic content, or with the languages of instruction and overall acclimation and re-acclimation to their homes. For instance, history is a topic that differs drastically based on whose perspective it is taught from, so the content of this subject area will vary from country to country. Furthermore, in U.S. schools a specific content knowledge is required and then evaluated in the format of a standardized test given in English, so the challenge becomes even greater. A transnational U.S.-Dominican Republic (DR) student explains the difficulties she experienced taking the New York State Regents exam, a requirement for high school graduation in the state:

Tatiana: The changes that I been going back and forth like being in DR, then coming over here, I’m getting used to class being all in English then I go back over there and it all in Spanish . . .

Interviewer: How are the Regents (high school graduation exams) for you?

Tatiana: Here it’s more difficult because the questions . . . it’s that like since I been going back and forth and studying here and studying over there. Like the History Regents it’s difficult cuz my mind with the history over there I know it more than here. And then I come here I’m studying the history but I don’t get everything, you know? Like there’s my head, crazy sometimes. I was telling my teacher I wish the Regents was about DR, that way I would pass it [laughs].
Standardized tests create a significant obstacle for many immigrant students in U.S. schools (Menken, 2008). In addition to presenting an ethnocentric perspective on historical events, the literacy-dense exams are especially difficult for immigrant students who are emergent bilinguals. And because the exams have high stakes attached to them that determine students' access to future opportunities, teachers feel obligated to spend a majority of instructional time teaching to them. As a result, students experience an education that is centered primarily on learning the content and strategies that will increase the likelihood they will do well on tests. Often lost is a connection between what students are doing and how it connects to their own lives. Alberto expresses this sentiment when he says:

Here is like they make everything for the White kids, the school don't really see us unless we do something bad. If not for that, it is like we are not here, we don't exist or something like that. I never learned anything about Mexico or Mexicans in the U.S.

Whether students are transnational students or have immigrated and remain in one community, they often experience schools as hostile spaces that are difficult to navigate. Alberto and Natasha describe their experiences with school personnel as largely negative. They perceive the adults in their school as trying to enforce an assimilationist agenda aimed at stripping students of their cultural and linguistic identities. Alberto explains:

Schools treat you like there is something wrong with you cause you are Mexican. They feel like they have to make you American. “Speak English” and “that’s not how we do it here” they [teachers] always be yelling at me, like I don't know how to speak English . . . Either that or they are always on my back, hawking me, waiting for me to mess up so they can put me in ISS [In-school Suspension].

Similarly, Natasha feels that schools have rendered her and other Latino immigrant students invisible, favoring White students over them.

Everything here is for the White [people], always the White. I raise my hand to ask for help and teachers be like “I already explained that” and they keep going. If a White student needs help, they stop the whole class to help them. It is like right there in your face . . . they want you to see that difference. Eventually, I just stopped asking for help.

Schools are challenging for immigrant youth not only because of the way they experience being perceived and treated by some educators but also as a result of troubling interactions with some of their U.S.-born classmates. Edwidge, Marat, and Ritha, who attend a school that serves only immigrant
youth, reflect below on the benefits and drawbacks of their experience there. One the one hand, they appreciate how this segregation has created a safe space for the acceptance of differences and for the possibilities it provides for them to learn. Simultaneously, they worry that being separated from their U.S.-born counterparts will result in the loss of opportunities for them to learn.

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about being in a school where everyone is an immigrant?

**Edwidge:** I feel sometimes I want to go to another school that have other people that was born here, that could help me much better. In this school they are all the same as me, we all are immigrants. The children who was born here, they know more stuff then the child who just came here.

**Marat:** Have you been in a junior high here, it’s a disaster! But here we don’t make fun of each other because we are all the same, we help each other out and this school helps a lot.

**Ritha:** You’re in a school where everybody speaks a different language, they could help you learn about the culture, they’re not gonna make fun of our accents, but if it was another school that only had American children, they could say I don’t like that.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS**

The voices of the participants in this study suggest that immigrant students’ experiences in schools vary, ranging from feeling a lack of consideration of their educational experiences in their countries of origin (as in the case of Tatiana, the student from the Dominican Republic), to more overt enmity (as evidenced in the stories of Natasha and Alberto), to a sense of acceptance achieved as the result of segregation (as in the case of Edwidge, Marat, and Ritha at an all immigrant high school in Capital City). Their stories point to the obstacles that immigrant students face and the pressing need for schools to be responsive to their needs by nurturing spaces that build on the strengths and knowledge base immigrants bring with them to school.

**Families**

Parents can be advocates for students, and calls for increased parental involvement are common in schools serving large populations of immigrant youth (López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Ramirez, 2003). Yet, if
immigrant youth are experiencing schools as hostile, by extension, they must not be welcoming spaces for their families. The students we interviewed for this study describe their parents’ encounters with school personnel as unwelcoming and alienating encounters that treat them as foreigners or outsiders.

**Natasha:** My mom will come to school for some stuff, but I don’t like the way they look at her. She comes to make sure that I am doing my work and stuff like that. She wants me to graduate. But I don’t know . . . like the teachers here make me feel . . . like weird . . . like I am doing something wrong. None of them can speak Spanish, so I try to translate [during parent-teacher conferences], but some teachers just talk to her in English [without having a translator] because they think I am going to lie [if I translate their comments from English to Spanish] or they don’t care if she understands.

Alberto reported a similar dynamic. He spent a significant time during our interviews articulating how invested his parents were in his education. He spoke passionately, and always with a huge smile, about how his parents have high expectations for his academic career, even though neither of them attended the equivalent of secondary schools in their native country, and about the importance “de ser bien educado” [of being well educated]. Yet, when asked about how his parents feel about the school he attends, he became really serious, and the smile disappeared from his face:

My parents . . . I’m not sure how to express it . . . but they really love education but they don’t like my school. This is not a friendly school for Mexicans and Latinos. Only one counselor speaks Spanish. Everyone else here is English. My parents try, but they understand Spanish better. When they come to the office they make you feel like you don’t belong here. My parents only talked about it once, but I can see it in their face. They’re nervous when they come here.

For those who are unfamiliar with the immigrant experience, these narratives may seem shocking or sensationalized. For others, these stories confirm what you already know—many immigrant youth experience school as a place disconnected from them, their families, and their culture.

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5For more information about the significance assigned to being well educated by Latino communities, see the work of Angela Valenzuela (1999), Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal, & Villenes (2001), and Sandra Quiñones (2010).
Exerting Agency

The first two themes that emerged from the experiences of immigrant youth—family disruption and the difficulties encountered in navigating the terrain of school—offer insights into the unique challenges facing these students as they adjust to a new country and new schools. The students’ voices in the previous sections articulate pain, disappointment, and confusion, highlighting the barriers that can impede students in their quest for a quality education. However, the experiences of the youth in this study in schools are not entirely negative, and they do, in fact, exert agency and are able to leverage the resources at their disposal to help them meet their personal and professional goals. The immigrant youth featured in this article have persevered in the face of adversity, and they have experienced varying levels of school success. Their accomplishments are largely due to an unwavering commitment to their education and a powerful desire to, as one student put it, “move our families forward.” This sense of agency and commitment are evident in the following excerpt of an interview with Natasha.

**Interviewer:** Even though things are difficult here, you seem to be really motivated to do well in school. Where do you think that comes from?

**Natasha:** My parents. I want to graduate so bad to make them proud. If I graduate and get a good job, then I can help them. No matter what I have to do, I am going to graduate. Nothing can stop me. Nothing. Sometimes I get down a little bit, because things here have been hard... learning the language, figuring stuff out... hard. But it don’t matter; I gotta do what I gotta do. I am going to get there.

The remarks below made by Ramón also exemplify a sense of power on determining his future. His comments below embody the drive and resolve that many immigrants possess but that is often undervalued or unnoticed by schools:

I have to work hard. I see how hard my mother works for us. I have to do it. If I can get a good job or career, then she don’t [sic] have to work so much. I worked at [a commercial laundry service] all through school, since I come here, every night after school. I get home in the morning, go to school, and then go home to sleep for a little while before I go to work. When I graduate and just have to work, things will be easier.

Natasha and Ramón are both optimistic about their destinies, despite the omnipresent structural inequalities and discrimination they face in schools and in society at large. Their stories speak to the challenges faced by many immigrant students of balancing school and employment, negotiating spaces...
that operate in different languages and that are governed by distinct cultural norms.

Writing this article several months after completing our study, we are happy to report that Natasha, Alberto, and Ramón did “get there,” overcoming many obstacles to graduate from high school in the spring of 2010. (The students in Capital City are in their senior year of high school as this article goes into publication.) Their developing sense of agency has helped them endure some of the disheartening conditions found in their schools. However, because of a lack of awareness regarding the prerequisite courses necessary for pursuing postsecondary education and college entrance exams, these students are not adequately prepared to move on to college and are thus faced with relatively few opportunities for their futures. Ramón, an American citizen, has secured employment at an apple orchard as a farmhand and takes courses at a local community college. He hopes to become a firefighter someday. Natasha and Alberto, who are both undocumented, struggle to find jobs that will allow them to contribute to their families’ economic well-being. Since completing high school, Alberto works two jobs, one at a sandwich shop and another at a factory. Natasha is currently unemployed.

A CALL TO COURAGE

Although they have unique emic perspectives that can positively impact the work of educators, researchers, and policy makers, the subaltern voices of immigrant youth have yet to be fully heard, appreciated, and appropriately responded to within policy debates around immigration or school reform efforts. If schools in the “supposed land of opportunity” are ever going to effectively educate immigrant students, offering learning experiences that help them meet their personal and professional goals and that contribute to their family’s well-being, then it is imperative that we listen and respond to their articulated needs. Most notably, the youth featured in our research want educators to get to know them and their stories and to pay special attention to the sociopolitical contexts in which their lives unfold. As Alberto noted, he wants his teachers to see him “as an immigrant student” because his connections to Mexico along with his journey to the United States and emerging transnational identity are extremely important to him and affect his learning. He also asks for teachers to “have [his] back.”

Other aspects of the students’ narratives presented here underscore the importance of educators having a more robust understanding of immigrant students’ lives; especially vital is a knowledge of the laws that impact them. The stories also point out the critical importance of educators having knowledge of opportunities available for immigrant youth as they navigate the challenges of the educational system.
While the permanence of the political within public education has been well documented (Apple, 1979; Ayers, 2004; Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux & McLaren, 1994), many teachers are reticent to embrace teaching as an inherently political act. The role of politics within the educational system is evident in the surge in legislation aimed at limiting immigrants’ access to public services, including education, and efforts to curb the tide of immigration, especially from Latin America and the Caribbean. These conditions behoove educators who are committed to supporting all students to focus not only on teaching content but also on connecting to the sociocultural and sociopolitical realities of the young people whom they serve.

In addition to becoming well informed about the obstacles that limit access to education and potential pathways young immigrants can pursue to successfully navigate the system, educators can have a profound effect on shaping the spaces they co-inhabit with their students. As noted by several of the youth in this study, the culture and climate of a school are heavily influenced by the adults who work in those settings. To optimally support all students whom they serve, teachers can and should seek to transform schools to make them welcoming spaces that embrace diversity and that nurture the unique needs of immigrant students.

Working in the best interests of immigrant youth may often call on educators to go against the grain of their school cultures. Yet, as the youth who are featured in this study suggest, their situation is dire and requires immediate attention. While their stories only hint at the complexity of the trajectories, academic experiences, and goals of immigrant students in the United States, what is clear from the small slices of their lives that have been shared is that educators have a lot to learn from and about immigrant students. They have displayed tremendous courage in journeying to the United States, pursuing their studies, often in the face of great obstacles. The challenge for educators is to display similar courage by working to transform schools and to influence change in society at large, to ensure that those who are most in need are supported to realize their hopes and their dreams.

REFERENCES


