

OF WALLS & BRIDGES: EDUCATIONAL COSTS OF ANTI-IMMIGRANT RHETORIC IN US PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Abstract

There has been heated public and political discourse in the United States concerning immigrants, with generalized fear of terrorist attacks, xenophobia and calls for restriction on immigration. A major proposal by one candidate in the Presidential election has been to “build a wall” to keep out Mexican immigrants. Yet in a “nation of immigrants,” with millions of immigrant families and descendants already within, people from other countries will continue to enter. Major concerns for educators, and for teacher educators, are the effects and implications of such anti-immigrant discourse upon schooling and educational opportunities for immigrant language minority children in public schools. Structurally, the US Constitution guarantees education to children within the United States, and prohibits discriminatory denial of education services based upon race, ethnicity, language or immigration status. The focus of discussion will be on implications of such public rhetoric and related policies upon relationships between immigrant language minority families and schools, and the academic progress of immigrant children. A wealth of research demonstrates the beneficial effects of positive and receptive school environments for immigrant language minority children, and strong collaboration between schools and immigrant families. Research regarding such relationships also suggests adverse effects of symbolic interactionism in anti-immigrant discursive environments which impede salutary and productive collaboration between immigrant language minority families and schools. As rhetorical sparring continues, the children fall further behind academically due to marginalization, ineffective instruction and dropping out of the education system. This dysfunctional interaction exacts a far deeper and more persistent cost burden, in terms of human capital and lost opportunity, than generally recognized in superficial political debate over who would pay for a putative anti-immigrant wall.

Keywords: public education, immigrants, anti-immigrant rhetoric, teacher, marginalization

1. Introduction

There are certain unavoidable precepts that constrain human interactions, and those principles are equally inescapable in public policy regarding education. Two such precepts are that the future of any society or nation lies in the manner it treats and

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educates children, and that actions have consequences. Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a famous Swiss educator, argued that education is the vehicle for creating a just society (Soëtard, 1994). American educational philosopher John Dewey stated that a democratic society is not a form of governance, but a process of associated conjoint living and communicative experience (Dewey, 2007). Dewey also noted that the very concept of “society” is imbued with an ethos of cooperation and unity, those qualities of empathy and community of purpose that support joint living, although experience has given us a plurality of societies (2007).

The establishment and sustainability of a democratic society depends upon education of youth, and upon negotiation and transmission of common interests and values. The process of educating children is, thus, a reflection of who we are and a reinterpretation of who we will be. It is this recapitulation of history and tradition, combined with the lived experience of the present and creative imagination of children that provides that best hope for a peaceful and prosperous future. Yet we must endeavor to teach children from the constraints of our own successes and failures as a society. The process of educating children is the process of building bridges between the past, present and the future.

Research and empirical data has shown that children, left to their innate curiosity and instincts, will more likely seek cooperation and “work” together, regardless of ethnicity, language or background². The development of stereotypes and discriminatory prejudice, social psychology suggests, is not an inevitable or normal adaptation (Aboud and Amato, 2008). The challenge to any democratic society, therefore, is to develop an educative process that seeks common interests and constructs community of purpose out of diversity and varied interests. The American experience with public education, as troubled as it has been and still is, has espoused the goal of educating all children for the good of society, as well as for individual development benefits. This has been a continual challenge to acknowledge, respect and integrate waves of immigrants, a process of weaving a fabric of pluralistic society from threads of diversity. The process, as indicated, has by no means been untroubled or without setbacks.

This brings us to the second principle, that actions have consequences. One thing upon which educational philosophers and reformers agree, despite their differences, is that the educational process must be considered, purposeful and deliberately implemented. Locke (1690), Rousseau (1762), Kant (1803), Hegel (1808-1816), Pestalozzi (1799-1804), Herbart (1809-1833), Dewey (1897-1938) all find common ground in this regard. Also, educational philosophers and theorists (Locke (1690-1704), Rousseau (1762), Dewey (1916), Ladson-Billings (1994-Present), Van Manen (1977-Present)) note that the educational process does not

² Fröbel argues that “play” is the “work” of the creative minds of children. Left to their creative instincts, diverse children will tend to play cooperatively together.

take place in a vacuum and is significantly affected by the broader discursive lifeworld beyond the classroom. The discursive environment creates an ecology of schooling (Lerner, Bornstein and Leventhal, 2015). The purpose here is not to advance any broad political agenda, but to call specific attention to implications that public discourse, and the ways it is constructed and conducted, can have upon the process of educating our children. With our awareness of these implications, it becomes problematic to argue negative implications are a product of “unintended consequences.” Children are always observing and listening; and how we interact, as adults, models for children possible ways of being in the world and interacting with others (van Manen, 2016).

For better or worse, the educational process can become social reproduction. As discussed below, the effects of such discourses manifest on multiple levels in public education, and can have significant social and economic associated costs.

The challenge of integrating immigrant and ethnically and linguistically diverse students into a public educational system is of significant currency in many countries and throughout the European Union³. However, the focus for illustrative purposes here is the intersection and impact of political anti-immigrant discourse with public education and educational opportunity for Hispanic language minority children in the United States. Conclusions offered are drawn from general research and focused research upon relationships involving public discourse, Hispanic language minority families and public school systems (Landry, 2015).

2. Contextualizing “problems” of US public schools and Hispanic immigrant children

Despite current foregrounding of anti-immigrant discourse in US political debate, it is important to understand that issues of providing education to immigrant children are not as simplistic as debate might suggest. The United States has adopted a policy of compulsory universal public education for most of the 20th century, resulting in a view of education of children as “fundamental”. The state of Texas enacted a law in 1975 to bar children of undocumented Mexican immigrants from attending public schools. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled such denial a violation of the Constitution’s 14th Amendment, which provides for equal protection under the laws. The majority opinion stated: "Education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society" and "provides the basic tools by which individuals might lead economically productive lives to the benefit of us all." In addition, the Court addressed the argument that the state could withhold benefits from person who were in the country illegally stating: “the children of such illegal

³ Indeed, the freedom of movement and large scale immigration threatens deconstruction of the EU itself, as evidenced by the referendum for departure of the UK from the EU (Liddle, 2015).

entrants "can affect neither their parents' conduct nor their own status," and "legislation directing the onus of a parent's misconduct against his children does not comport with fundamental conceptions of justice" (*Plyler v. Doe*, 1982).

Another dimension of the "problem" of educating immigrant children is the language barrier, when children's native language is different from the official language of instruction. This concern is amplified in a school system and society that is ideologically monolingual, but where the demographics are linguistically diverse. For the most part, teachers in US public schools are monolingual (English), the dominant language. Teachers often are both unable to provide effective instruction to non-English speaking immigrant children, with many not disposed to try because of cultural bias. The Supreme Court ruled, in a lawsuit on behalf of Asian students in California allowed to attend school but provided no language support, that state provided public services or benefits, including education, must be delivered in a "meaningful" way (Valencia, 2010). Simply allowing attendance by non-English speaking immigrants denied them educational benefits accorded to children generally. However, failure of the high Court to specify remedies left the treatment of immigrant children to the winds of political discourse and the predilections of state authorities and school districts.

Resistance to education of immigrant children was manifest not only in public opinions conveyed via media and local interactions. Formal state actions, in the form of general referenda and specific laws were passed to intimidate or bar immigrants from obtaining public educational opportunities to which they were entitled. A rationale asserted for such measures was to alleviate economic burdens on the states for providing educational services to undocumented persons. However, proponents of such measures had difficulty supporting such arguments, and such failure suggested the measures were driven by anti-immigrant bias. Thus, resistance and hostility toward immigrants obtaining an education took on an "official" mantle of authority. Resistance has been based more upon anti-immigrant discourse than upon any grounded educational theory.

3. Parent-school collaboration enhances educational performance and opportunities

Against a backdrop of resistance by public schools to providing educational support for immigrant children, lies a wealth of research that supports the principle that children perform better in schooling when there is collaboration and partnership between the school and parents (Chrispeels and Rivero, 2001; González, Moll and Amanti, 2005). The positive effect of collaboration is very strong in the context of non-dominant culture children and linguistically diverse children (Garcia and Klieffen, 2010; Stromquist and Monkman, 2000; Zipin, 2009). School officials have argued lack of participation and involvement by

parents of immigrant children in school relationships reflected a lack of concern by the parents for education of their children. However, research that directly consulted immigrant parents found overwhelming desire for educational advancement of their children, but significant cultural and linguistic obstacles to collaboration (Landry, 2015; Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 2005).

Additional educational support for language minority immigrant children is necessary to address demonstrable disparities in academic performance in math and reading as between children of Hispanic immigrants and peer white students. United States national education databases, collecting data and supporting analysis of performance, indicate persistent achievement gap for these students (NCES, 2011). In an era of accountability, as amplified during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act era from 2002-2013, and continued in different forms under current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the logic of using collaborative strategies and building bridges for successful parent-school relationships is evident (Kober & Center on Education Policy, 2010; Reardon et al., 2012). This contradiction calls for closer examination of stakeholder behaviors, motivations and interpretations that establishment and maintain specific barriers, rather than bridges, to formation of collaborative partnerships. What would be required to bring down the barriers and build bridges?

4. Analytical framework

The conceptual framework for proposed analysis is a hybrid of traditional socio-cultural field theory elaborated by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Johnson, 1993), and symbolic interactionism as elaborated by Blumer (Blumer, 1969), Keller (Keller, 2007) and Denzin (Denzin, 1989). While an oversimplification, the conceptual process involves actors operating in contiguous social fields navigating and negotiating interactions based upon respective levels of social capital (Bourdieu, 1977). However, when the cultures and lived experiences of social actors are significantly different or impacted by intervening variables, such as language barriers or institutional bias, navigation and negotiation processes can become distorted. Actors approach and respond to each other, or avoid interaction, based upon their respective interpretations of how they regard and how they perceive they are regarded by other actors through symbolic interaction. These symbolic interactions can supervene or subvert field based interests.

The methodological framework for data collection and analysis has been a form of grounded theory qualitative method, including discourse analysis and gathering of “testimonios,” the collection and interpretation of the stories of Hispanic immigrant parents and families (Burciaga and Cruz Navarro, 2015; González, Plata, García, Torres and Urrieta, 2003; Prieto, 2016). These lived experiences are related in semi-structured interviews imparted in their native language by parents concerning their interactions with public schooling. These stories are combined with

information and communications from schools and related authorities communicated directly or indirectly to Hispanic immigrant language minority families (Landry, 2015). Further ongoing research and analysis of specific motivations and intent of school and related officials when making such communications would give a more complete picture of the symbolic interactive cycle, but available research suggests several significant factors that appear to influence development of parent-school collaboration. Current anti-immigrant rhetoric and discourse is very relevant to such findings.

5. Influencing factors manifest on multiple levels

a) Surface and Structural Barriers to Access: The most obvious and surface level manifestation of influence upon immigrant families is the social and political discursive atmosphere in which the families live and in which the schools operate. Whether that ecology is receptive or hostile to immigrant children can influence dispositions as well as behaviors and communication between language minority immigrant families and schools. Schools in the United States are governmental functions, governed by certain rules of law and practice that protect confidentiality of certain student and family information. However, immigrant parents may not understand school policies and procedures and may view schools as just another agent of a broader concept of “government.”

From a socio-anthropological perspective, the ecological and cultural influence of the state, in the form of immigration authorities or “*la migra*” should be noted (Chavez, 2013; Lerner et al., 2015). Past oppression and abuse by officials (Saboa et al., 2014), including the traumatic impact upon families of separation, have generated an almost mythological *persona* that invokes strong reactions of fear and distrust (Chavez, 2013). This figure transcends the concrete threat and has become embedded as a cultural factor, such that Hispanic immigrant parents may caution their children to “behave or *la migra* will come and get you!” This socio-historical reality can manifest in generalized distrust of interactions with governmental agents.

This recalcitrance is supported by a series of concrete and official actions affecting Hispanic immigrant families, providing material evidence to justify social distancing. In 1975, Texas passed a law seeking to exclude Hispanic immigrant children from public schools. A measure struck down by the US Supreme Court (Plyler v. Doe, 1982). California passed a referendum (Proposition 187) seeking to bar Hispanic immigrants from access to non-emergency public services, *i.e.*, public schooling and social services, which was enjoined by a federal court and never enforced (ACLU, 1999). However, the written provision of the law should be noted: “Passed in November 1994, Proposition 187 sought, among other things, to require police, health care professionals and teachers to verify and report the

immigration status of all individuals, including children” (id.). In Alabama, HB 56 was passed, which gave police broad discretion to detain and arrest suspected undocumented immigrants⁴, also called upon school officials to interrogate children about the immigration status of their parents (Holland, 2013). The provision regarding interrogation in schools was blocked in federal court.

The significance of these formal action lies in the formal public action taken at the state and local levels, supported widely by the voting citizenship and broadcast in local media, sent a strong message of hostility to Hispanic immigrant families. Natural response of many Hispanic parents was to withdraw their children from public schools, even though legally entitled to attend. For those who did not take their children out of school to avoid contact by parents with school administrators. While the adverse consequences to academic progress of Hispanic language minority students has not been quantified, it is not difficult to envision the negative impact upon schooling of these children amidst such hostile discourse. The threat of “La Migra,” the feared bogey man, was no longer a myth, but rather a very concrete daily danger faced by relatives and loved ones.

Beyond the threat of detention, interrogation and potential family separation through deportation, the anti-immigrant structural barriers included formal measures to limit or ban provision of bilingual educational support for Hispanic language minority children, which constrained effective teaching practices. California adopted Proposition 227 in 1998, which is now under threat of substantial repeal by Proposition 58 in 2016 (Ballotpedia, 2016). Arizona adopted the AZ Learns measure (Scheidler, 2014). Massachusetts similarly adopted a ban on bilingual education which was later substantially reversed, based upon unfavorable experience. Analysis of competing arguments in public debate suggested to one researcher that focus should be on quality of instruction rather than fighting over language of instruction (Chin, 2016).

Arguments against employing the resource of student home language, at some level, for instruction appeared more as excuses than rationale, primarily focusing on the lack of sufficient curricular materials and bilingual teachers. At the same time, the increase in Hispanic language minority students has been growing, and the disparity between academic performance of these children and that of white English-speaking peers has been persistent. In addition, the hostile atmosphere in schools, combined with underperformance when language support is unavailable, has contributed to a substantial drop out rate leading to under employment in larger society. This also impedes progress of immigrant children toward higher education.

⁴ While the express wording of Alabama HB 56 did not target Hispanic immigrants, the legislative history and very public embarrassing incidents involving foreign car manufacturers, a German executive from Mercedes and a Japanese worker for Honda, clearly demonstrated that “undocumented aliens” was intended for Hispanics (Holland, 2013).

If one could put aside xenophobic bias, this process would appear a serious waste of potential human resources.

b) Secondary Manifestations in School Policies and Practices: A consequence or product of the negative atmosphere, discursive polemics and formal measures against Hispanic immigrant families and children is the manifestation of barriers in school policies and practices. As noted above, US law assures immigrant children the right to public education. In theory, the law also guarantees equal educational opportunity for success in such schooling, free from discrimination based upon race or ethnicity. However, both access and opportunity can be significantly influenced by indirect means. Examples of such obstacles can be found in allocation of resources for education, establishment of standards of assessment and performance which may be culturally, ethnically or linguistically biased, and through instantiation of policies and educational programs that fail to equip or that impede student progress toward meeting such standards.

In the context of adverse political discourse, responsible officials can maintain “political cover” – escape the negative consequences of unwise and ethnically discriminatory decisions – when making policy decisions that harm immigrant language minority children. Overt xenophobic measures as described above may risk disapproval and backlash if most voters deem the measures morally or socially offensive (Escamilla and Shannon, 2003). But subtler budgetary measures that fail to provide schools resources to hire teachers qualified or curricular materials to serve needs of immigrant children often go unnoticed. Similarly, decisions whether to provide bilingual educational support services, and of what type, are often left to local school districts and administrators in individual schools. The public, parents and even school teaching staff may not be fully aware of ways in which their efforts to advance academic progress of immigrant language minority students have been undermined by operative policy choices.

Examples of such subtle obstacles include constraints on eligibility and access to the requisite educational support services. Where a language barrier may exist, as well as unfamiliarity with specific local school policies and practices, immigrant families are at a disadvantage finding access to educational services. One mother in an immigrant family seeking to enroll children in school was repeatedly told that the place to register was another building and then told that the day to register was another day. This type of “run around” continued and the child was not actually enrolled in school for a period of approximately six months after intervention of an English-speaking friend (Landry, 2015). Information about schools and their policies are often made available to the public in English and through web-based sources, although the trend is now to publish information in English and Spanish because of lower costs for electronic publishing. However, many immigrant parents may be semi-literate in their native language (speaking proficiency, but not reading or writing), and many do not have internet access (id.). The availability of

information and not knowing what questions to ask can impose a barrier to access for immigrant language minority families.

In addition, school policies limiting language and instructional support can also serve as obstacles. In the state of Washington, eligibility for receiving language support service in a language other than English may be limited to three years. Despite ample research indicating that an English language learner will take approximately five to seven years to reach English language proficiency in academic language at parity with native English speaking peers, support may be removed after a shorter time. Such early termination of support or reclassification may result in a significant drop in academic performance after removal (Haas, Huang and Tran, 2014). In some cases, immigrant parents are not sufficiently included and informed regarding educational support services available or provided (Landry, 2015).

c) The Level of Interaction with Parents and Students: The most direct influence ethnic bias and xenophobic attitudes can manifest in school-parent interactions and teacher student relationships. Teacher attitudes that undermine academic progress of immigrant language minority students may be driven by cultural intolerance, or may emanate primarily from a sense of frustration because of a lack of skills to teach immigrant children. If the teacher has a negative disposition toward immigrant children, such attitudes are “read” as symbolic messaging by immigrant students and will, in turn influence the behavior of students toward the teacher. If the teacher regards the students as less capable of learning, perhaps because linguistic obstacles yield slower academic progress and require more effort from the teacher, the verbal and body language of the teacher will be communicated to the children.

In addition to the influence of deficit model attitudes by teachers, school based practices can result in marginalization and disparate discipline of immigrant language minority children. Research data indicate that such disparate treatment occurs for children of immigrants and children of color, but does not specifically show how or to what degree anti-immigrant bias motivates such difference (Peguro, Shekarkhar, Popp and Koo, 2015). Another manifestation of such bias is the oversubscription of immigrant and language minority children in special education categories. When immigrant children react to perceived marginalization or unfair treatment by acting out, often the coping mechanism of younger children, they may be labeled as behavior problems. Failure to progress academically, sometimes due to language proficiency issues, immigrant children may get identified as having cognitive deficiencies, even when their responses and behaviors might be readily explained as a natural step in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Landry, 2015). Too often, teachers who are monolingual and overworked will justify failing to make necessary efforts to

communicate with or involve parents of immigrant children because additional effort may be required.

As immigrant language minority students progress through the grade levels, combination of their lack of comparable academic progress (perhaps due in part to lack of language support) and perceived lower social status (due to anti-immigrant discourse), many receive inadequate guidance and counseling toward future educational opportunities. One immigrant family placed high hopes on their son attending college; but they knew almost nothing about what would be required to prepare their son. Although their son was in middle school and preparing to move on to high school, no teacher or counselor had ever approached the family to discuss courses and preparation the student should be taking to prepare for higher education (Landry, 2015). Immigrant students may be advised to take lower level courses deemed easier, when more rigorous courses are needed for college admission. Many children of immigrants have internalized explicit and symbolic messages they have repeatedly received indicating to them that they are incapable or unworthy of higher education and career advancement.

6. Broader implications and costs

a) The Fallacy of “Economic Burden” of Immigrant Children: An oft repeated canard advanced by anti-immigrant leadership in the United States relates to the alleged burden that such undocumented immigrants impose on local social services and schools. Recent reports show that undocumented immigrants contribute billions of dollars to the economy in taxes (Campbell, 2016). Those taxes are paid to Social Security, the IRS and to state and local coffers (Soergel, 2016). Undocumented workers do not file for tax returns and so no portion of those funds are rebated to the persons making the contribution. In addition, lower incomes of immigrant families result in disproportionate payment of sales taxes because a higher percentage of income is paid out in life necessities, rather than saved or invested. Research data and analysis indicate that immigrant families and their children contribute more to the economy than they take.

If there is an economic burden or loss as a result of the education of immigrant children, one could argue that the economic drag is a result of undereducation and drop outs that lead to underemployment and underutilization of human potential of such students. It can be forcefully argued in the case of the United States that ethnic and cultural bias against immigrants and intolerance of language difference imposes the economic waste and burden, not the presence of immigrants in the society.

b) Investment in Bridges: The trend of demographics in the United States is that the Hispanic immigrant population, including descendants, is the faster growing

segment of the population, and will continue to grow proportionately faster than other segments. This group will provide labor force, innovators and leaders in the future. Given the potential benefits to be gained, it would seem more rational and reasonable in the United States to build bridges rather than barriers to their development and academic advancement.

One approach to building improved relationships is to respect and embrace the cultural funds of knowledge held by the Hispanic immigrant community. Not only are there deep funds of knowledge based upon lived experiences that would be interesting to know and share, but the dominant community just might learn something new about community and social interaction (Chavez, 2013; González et al., 2005; Zipin, 2009). Considerable discourse in education is directed to the need to prepare students for a global society, yet it appears that there is so much work yet to be done to understand and navigate cultural and linguistic diversity at home. Research has shown that embracing and incorporating the family funds of knowledge of immigrant student families can significantly improve their learning and academic advancement (Bolívar and Chrispeels, 2011; Chrispeels and Rivero, 2001).

Additional bridges can be built through investment in programs and services that enhance communication between parents and schools. Relatively inexpensive efforts, such as providing support for adult classes in English and providing interpreters, or even school parent meeting presentations in Spanish, could have compound effects. Such efforts would not only build capacity for improved communication between schools and parents in support of immigrant children, it would provide strong symbolic messaging that the Hispanic immigrant community is valued as participant and collaborator in the process of educating the children. These steps are not hypothetical, they are precisely the steps suggested by Immigrant language minority families when efforts were made to ask them what steps might yield significant improvements (Landry, 2015).

7. Conclusion

When the implications of a continued course of hostility and anti-immigrant discourse in addressing education of immigrant students and incorporating them into the United States society and economy are considered, two conclusions are apparent. First, the negative consequences can no longer be dismissed as unintended consequences. The discrimination, oppression and denial of educational opportunity can only be deemed an intentional consequence of xenophobia and intercultural incompetence. Second, the inexorable growth of Hispanic immigrants and their descendants in the US demographic suggests that turning to more productive and practical approaches is advisable. To compete in a global society, as well as maintain a healthier domestic society, developing maximum human capital

would seem the preferred course. To do so, building bridges is the smarter, more socially just and economically advantageous course.

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