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Ramon Antonio Martinez
Stanford University

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Cover Page Footnote

1 All participant names are pseudonyms. Acknowledgments I am deeply indebted to Alma and Samantha for allowing me the privilege of learning about them over the past several years. I wish to thank Jennifer Keys Adair and Fabienne Doucet for their gracious editorial support. In addition, I thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. This research was generously funded by a grant from the Foundation for Child Development's Young Scholars Program.

Intersectionality and Possibility in the Lives of Latina/o/x Children of Immigrants: Imagining Pedagogies Beyond the Politics of Hate

Ramón Antonio Martínez

I first met Alma¹ when she was five years old and a kindergarten student in a multi-age Spanish-English dual language classroom in southern California. Alma is the child of immigrants from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Somewhat shy and soft spoken, she nonetheless had many friends and seemed eager to engage with her peers in class. In interviews with me over the first few years of a longitudinal study that I was conducting at her school, she spent a great deal of time sharing the details of her rich literate life. Among other things, Alma loved poetry. In addition to writing poems in her writer's notebook for school, she also kept a separate notebook in which she wrote poetry at home. Her face lit up as she told me that she often shared these poems with her father, who she said also wrote poetry. Alma seemed to have an especially strong relationship with her father, and much of the poetry that she shared with me focused on him. She also revealed that her father worked at an Italian restaurant, and that he would often teach her Italian words and phrases that he had learned on the job. She seemed proud of knowing them, and they sometimes popped up in the writing she did both at home and in school.

When I met Samantha, she was a first grader in Alma's multi-age kindergarten/first grade classroom. At six years of age, she was already very proficient in English, which she reported speaking with her older siblings, and Spanish, which she sometimes spoke with her mother and with some friends and teachers at school. In an interview that I conducted with her in second grade, Samantha told me that she also spoke sign language at home with a d/Deaf uncle who lived with her. This revelation alerted me to yet another impressive layer of her expansive linguistic repertoire. Yet being multilingual was not the only thing that stood out about this young child. In addition to being a polyglot, Samantha was also a very kind person and a precociously deep and critical thinker who seemed to be motivated by both genuine intellectual curiosity and a profound commitment to fairness and justice.

1 All participant names are pseudonyms.

While these details about Alma and Samantha can only begin to provide a glimpse into their rich and dynamic lives, I share them as a way of highlighting that the girls' identities are not coterminous with the label "children of immigrants." I want to suggest that their agency as human beings, although obviously constrained by broader systems and structures of domination, is nonetheless reflected in the various identities that they actively construct for themselves and the possible futures that they envision for themselves. Over the course of my ongoing study at their school, I have sometimes seen my own ideas about who these girls were (e.g., "multilingual children") come into tension with the ways that they were coming to see themselves. In some moments, literate identities, such as reader or writer, have seemed to be more salient to them. In other moments, relational identities, such as daughter or friend, have appeared to be more salient. And as they have moved out of early childhood and toward adolescence, these girls have shared other details with me about the people they are and the people they want to become. This process of becoming who they want to become and of foregrounding different dimensions of their identities at different points in time is a fundamental assertion of Alma and Samantha's agency. Over the past eight years, I have been reminded that children's agency is never entirely constrained by the broader systems that structure their everyday lives. Despite the undeniable influence of these broader systems and structures, who these children are—and who they aspire to become—is not limited to their immigration status, national origin, ethnic background, or any other macrosociological category. "Children of immigrants" is not where they begin or end as human beings.

Latina/o/x children of immigrants and the politics of hate

Yet despite the complex and dynamic nature of their identities, the fact that Alma and Samantha are Latina children of immigrants has become particularly salient in the current political moment. Indeed, these are perilous times for Latina/o/x children of immigrants living in the United States. The 2016 election of Donald Trump as president has served as a harsh reminder that we do not live, as some had begun to suggest, in a "post-racial" era. As Goldstein and Hall (2017) argue, Trump's campaign rhetoric "stoked a revived white nationalism while denying its racist content" (p. 402), and this "pro-white semiotics on the campaign trail has come to structure the material policies of the Trump administration" (p. 404). Trump's policy and rhetoric on immigration, in particular, have been blatantly racist and xenophobic (Giroux, 2017; Pérez Huber, 2016), unleashing hateful anti-immigrant discourse and racial violence (Bobo, 2017; Potok, 2017; Shafer, 2017) and threatening the health and well-being of children of immigrants (Cervantes and Walker, 2017). In early 2017, the Trump administration issued two executive orders that significantly expanded and intensified immigration policy enforcement. In

September 2017, the administration announced that it would rescind the DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) program, which had granted temporary protection from deportation to approximately 800,000 people who had entered the United States as minors, about a quarter of whom are themselves parents of young children. Then, in October 2017, the administration unveiled a list of its principles for reforming the immigration system, which emphasized further expansion and intensification of enforcement activities.

Latina/o/x children of immigrants are caught at the center of this historical moment. Across documented, undocumented, and mixed-status families, the Trump administration's policy decisions have created fear and uncertainty. As Cervantes and Walker (2017) note, "more than 5 million children in the United States currently living with at least one undocumented parent—4.1 million of whom are U.S.-born—are now at greater risk of having a parent or guardian deported" (p. 2). This increased threat of deportation poses a significant threat to the health and well-being, economic security, and educational access of millions of children (Cervantes & Walker, 2017). Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric also appears to have promoted broader racist and anti-immigrant sentiment, not only as manifested in recent white supremacist marches such as the one in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, but also as reflected in everyday enactments of racial hatred and intolerance within public schools (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Potok, 2017).

At the risk of appearing to minimize the harmful impact of the current political climate, however, I wish to highlight an obvious fact: Latina/o/x children of immigrants are more than just victims and more than just children of immigrants. Indeed, they are American children, Mexican children, Central American children, Caribbean children, and Indigenous children. They are bilingual children, multilingual children, and multiracial children. They are poets and polyglots. They are aspiring writers, mathematicians, scientists, artists, and athletes. In short, these children are complex and resilient human beings who live rich and dynamic lives.

I draw on my own experience coming to know Alma and Samantha over the past seven years to share examples of the rich and varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds, identities, and experiences that Latina/o/x children of immigrants bring to school. I argue that these children are not best understood primarily in terms of their oppression within the current political context, both because such a perspective obscures the existence of forms of oppression beyond those related to immigration status and because it ignores the possibilities that these children imagine and enact for themselves on a daily basis. Understanding Latina/o/x children of immigrants, I suggest, requires that we acknowledge—but

also imagine beyond—the current politics of hate. We need to come to know their various intersecting experiences of oppression, and we also need to understand the agency that these children assert in the face of structural inequalities. Such an approach will enable us to imagine pedagogical possibilities grounded in and responsive to their intersectional identities, experiences, and aspirations.

Imagining beyond “children of immigrants”

One of the first things that I learned about Alma during her kindergarten year was that she was of Zapotec ancestry. The Zapotecs are an indigenous people who reside in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, as well as in the neighboring states of Guerrero, Puebla, and Veracruz, and in diasporic communities throughout the United States, including parts of southern California. Alma reported speaking Zapoteco, the Zapotec language, which she said her parents sometimes spoke with her and with each other at home; many of my early conversations with Alma focused on her experiences hearing and speaking Zapoteco. It was not until five years later that I learned that Alma was also exposed to a second indigenous language, Mixe, which is spoken by the Mixe people, another indigenous group from Oaxaca. In an interview that I conducted with her when she was in fifth grade, Alma revealed that her father was actually both Zapotec and Mixe, and that he spoke both languages. Although she reported not understanding very much of the Mixe language, she said that she would sometimes hear her father speak it over the phone when talking to his family back in Oaxaca. This belated revelation led me to develop an even greater appreciation for her very rich and diverse multilingual home environment.

Like Alma, Samantha, too, is the child of Mexican immigrants from the state of Oaxaca. And, like Alma, she is also of Zapotec ancestry. I actually learned that Samantha spoke Zapoteco before I learned that Alma did, and my early conversations with her informed my subsequent conversations with Alma. As Samantha began to sense my interest in Zapoteco, she began revealing more details about her experiences with the language. One day, in first grade, she opened up a spiral notebook that she had brought to class, telling me, “*Mire, mi mamá quiere que le enseñe esto.*” (“Look, my mom wants me to show you this.”) Written on the notebook page, in her mother’s handwriting, was a list of Zapotec words alongside their Spanish translations. Apparently, her mother was happy to know that someone at school was interested in Zapoteco, and she wanted to share some basic vocabulary. Samantha proceeded to teach me some of these words and how to pronounce them.

Indigeneity and intersectionality

When we view children like Alma and Samantha exclusively or primarily as children of immigrants, we miss so very much of who they are, including their experiences of oppression and marginalization along other less visible axes. For Alma and Samantha, indigeneity is one such axis. Zapotecs are part of a larger group of indigenous Mexican immigrants that are often rendered invisible in the United States (Barillas-Chón, 2010; Machado-Casas, 2009; Mesinas & Perez, 2016; Perez, Vásquez, & Buriel, 2016; Vásquez, 2012). As I have described elsewhere (Martínez, 2017), this invisibility extends to educational contexts, and the ideological process of erasure (Irvine & Gal, 2009) is one of the mechanisms by which this invisibility is actively achieved. In US schools, indigenous Mexican children are often “positioned as part of a ‘Latino’ or ‘Mexican’ population that is assumed to be linguistically and ethnoracially homogeneous” (Martínez, 2017, p. 87). Because these children are “essentialized and racialized as ‘Latino,’ and imagined to be only bilingual” (Martínez, 2017, p. 87), their indigeneity and their indigenous languages are effectively erased.

Insofar as indigenous Mexican children are acknowledged in US schools and society, this recognition often involves overt forms of discrimination (Barillas-Chón, 2010; Machado-Casas, 2009). Beginning with the Spanish conquest of what is now Mexico, indigenous peoples have been murdered en masse, colonized, displaced, forcibly assimilated, and systematically relegated to a subordinate status in Mexican society (Batalla, 1987; Ruiz, 1992). Just as indigenous people have historically been—and continue to be—marginalized in Mexico, so, too, have their languages. For example, indigenous languages are often pejoratively referred to as “mere dialects” in Mexico, and many Mexican immigrants—both indigenous and non-indigenous—bring such language ideologies with them to the United States (Martínez, 2017). Even if it is recognized that students like Alma and Samantha speak indigenous languages, then, there is no guarantee that this will be viewed in a positive light. Their expansive linguistic competencies are easily dismissed or disregarded when viewed through a lens that devalues and degrades indigenous peoples and their languages.

Indigeneity is, therefore, a fundamental axis of marginalization and oppression that intersects with other axes of domination in ways that matter for Alma and Samantha in their everyday lives. These include not only their status as children of immigrants, but also their status as girls living in a patriarchal society and as working-class children in a capitalist economy. The concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) helps us see beyond these girls’ identities as “children of immigrants” and recognize the other identities that matter for their present lives and possible futures. It is not the case that immigration status does not matter for students like Alma and Samantha, but rather that these other

overlapping social identities and attendant systems of oppression also matter for the girls' present lives and possible futures—and that they matter in nuanced and powerful ways that make the category “children of immigrants” insufficient for capturing the totality of their experiences in the current political moment.

Imagining beyond the politics of hate

By highlighting these girls' agency and their experiences of oppression beyond the axis of immigration, I do not mean to trivialize the political climate in the United States today. To be sure, Latina/o/x children of immigrants and their families are currently experiencing various forms of marginalization and oppression along the various intersecting lines of identity and difference mentioned above. However, many of these experiences—including those related to immigration status—began long before Trump was elected, and many will no doubt continue to occur once his presidency is a bad memory. Indeed, ideologies, policies, and practices of racial exclusion have been foundational to European colonization of the Americas and the subsequent history of the United States. More recently, after President Clinton approved passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act in 1996, federal immigration policy has systematically criminalized undocumented immigrants, focusing on enforcement while simultaneously eliminating previously available pathways to citizenship (Hong, 2017). During the Obama administration, the near-constant threat of deportations continued, although it was obscured by a kinder and gentler rhetoric. And even if there is a return to a less overtly racist rhetoric once the Trump administration has ended, structural racism will inevitably continue to shape immigration policy in this country. As Rosa and Bonilla (2017) observe, “focusing merely on present-day forms of racism, such as those that have gained attention in the wake of the 2016 election, does not allow us to see how contemporary US race relations articulate long-standing forms of coloniality” (p. 203). Precisely because white supremacy and anti-immigrant racism are not coterminous with the Trump administration, it behooves us to imagine beyond the current historical moment; we need to be prepared to recognize the myriad ways in which Latina/o/x children of immigrants will continue to experience oppression and marginalization even in a less overtly hateful political environment.

A related and equally compelling reason to imagine beyond the current politics of hate is that doing so will allow us to move beyond reactionary logics. When we view children like Alma and Samantha exclusively or primarily as “children of immigrants,” we tend to frame them as victims and their circumstances as crises (Mariscal, Velásquez, Agüero, & Urrieta, 2017). This traps us unwittingly within the confines of a reactionary logic that focuses exclusively on critiquing current structures, systems,

and conditions of oppression and domination without providing a vision for alternative possibilities. Of course, critique is essential. We cannot expect to achieve meaningful social transformation without first engaging in a critical analysis of our present conditions (Allman, 1999; Freire, 1992). To echo a key tenet of critical pedagogy, however, we need to develop both a language of critique and a language of possibility (Giroux & McLaren, 1989; McLaren and Farahmandpur, 2005). We need to be able to imagine a better society for Latina/o/x children of immigrants, and we need to be able to prefigure the pedagogies that we envision as part of it (Allman, 1999; Zavala & Golden, 2016). In my view, enacting such pedagogies necessitates envisioning possibilities beyond both dominant and reactionary logics.

Imagining pedagogical possibilities

It is reasonable to ask whether it is even possible to imagine pedagogical possibilities outside the institutional arrangements and larger systems of oppression and domination that continue to structure our society and, indeed, social life in our world. Can we, in fact, imagine pedagogies outside the logic of neoliberalism, outside the logic of capital, outside the logic of white supremacy, outside the logic of cisheteropatriarchy, outside the logic of settler colonialism? I want to suggest that such political and pedagogical imagining is possible, but that it can only begin from within these intersecting systems of oppression and domination. And I want to suggest that one of the most effective and organic ways in which we can nurture and expand our political and pedagogical imaginations is by looking to young Latina/o/x children of immigrants and engaging dialogically with their perspectives, experiences, and aspirations. Despite the overwhelming structural and institutional constraints that obtain in schools, I want to assert that they can become sites for articulating alternative logics and imagining alternative pedagogies if we commit to collectively imagining a better society along with young children. As hooks (1994) notes, “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (p. 207).

I want to end by humbly suggesting a few pedagogical implications that I think stem from what I have come to learn from and about Alma, Samantha, and the other Latina/o/x children of immigrants at their school. First and foremost, because our envisioning of alternative political and pedagogical possibilities must begin with a critical assessment of our present material conditions, it is essential to acknowledge the current political moment. Teachers should not shy away from discussing the harmful policies and hateful rhetoric that characterize today’s political climate. As we know, even very young children are capable of engaging in critical dialogue around sensitive and controversial political topics, especially when those topics overlap with their lived experiences (Souto-Manning, 2013; Vasquez, 2014). Indeed, we need to deliberately engage with what Gallo and Link (2015) call the “politicized

funds of knowledge” (p. 357) that Latina/o/x children of immigrants bring to the classroom based on their experiences within this current context of immigration policy enforcement. We can do this by engaging them in critical dialogue and by making curricular connections to the issues that directly impact their day-to-day lives.

However, we should enter into such spaces of dialogue recognizing that, because of their intersectional identities and experiences, Latina/o/x children of immigrants will not all experience the current political moment in the same ways. As Mangual Figueroa (2017) has shown, “students’ legal citizenship status affects what they feel they can disclose about themselves and their families” (p. 514), and even pedagogical moves intended to support students can have “the unintended consequence of silencing rather than facilitating undocumented students’ expression in school” (p. 515). Rather than framing discussions in ways that single out undocumented students, we can approach such issues with foresight and sensitivity, allowing for multiple forms of participation and multiple levels of disclosure.

As Alma and Samantha’s experiences reveal, immigrant parents play a fundamental role in the lives of their children and have tremendous influence over who these children are, what they experience, and who they aspire to become. Any efforts to enact transformative pedagogies for Latina/o/x children of immigrants should, therefore, involve meaningful engagement with their parents. We can and should see them as necessary allies in the collective work of imagining and creating a better world for their children. This requires, however, that we rethink who immigrant parents are, what they think and know about education, and how they support their children (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus, 2017; Colegrove, This issue; Doucet, 2011; Gallo, 2017; Nava & Lara, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2006; Valdés, 1996). And, of course, given that some of these parents may be among those most directly threatened by current anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, we should approach them with sensitivity and discretion. Although we should not assume or insist on disclosure with respect to their immigration status, we should be prepared to connect them with relevant resources, including local and national immigrant rights organizations. Advocating for and supporting our students’ parents is one of the most concrete ways that we can support our students themselves.

Finally, we can provide spaces and opportunities for young Latina/o/x children of immigrants to articulate, enact, and imagine their own experiences, identities, and aspirations. Insofar as immigration status mediates their experiences and the experiences of their families, these children are the experts on what such experiences mean (Gallo, 2014; Gallo & Link, 2015). Because immigration status is not the only dimension of their lives that matters to these students, however, we need to anticipate and

allow for the expression of their intersectional identities and experiences, and we need to let these inform our pedagogy. Some students, like Alma, might be poets who live rich literate lives both in and out of school. Some, like Samantha, might be polyglots with amazing linguistic repertoires. And some, like both Alma and Samantha, might be of indigenous ancestry and have important related experiences. We should let students decide who they are and who they want to become and let them share with us as much or as little of that as makes sense for them at any given moment. Coming to know who Latina/o/x children of immigrants are by listening to and learning from them over time will enable us to imagine and enact pedagogies that are grounded in and responsive to their intersectional identities, experiences, and aspirations.

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Ramón Antonio Martínez is an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education and the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. His research explores the intersections of language, race, and ideology in the public schooling experiences of students of color, with a particular focus on bi/multilingual Chicanx and Latinx children and youth. He has published articles in journals such as *Linguistics and Education*, *Research in the Teaching of English*, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Review of Research in Education*. Before entering academia, Dr. Martínez was an elementary school teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District.