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Introduction: A Vision for Transforming Early Childhood Research and Practice for Young Children of Immigrants and Their Families

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Introduction

A Vision for Transforming Early Childhood Research and Practice for Young Children of Immigrants and Their Families

Fabienne Doucet and Jennifer Keys Adair

This special issue of the Occasional Paper Series describes practices and policies that can positively impact the early schooling of children of immigrants in the United States. We consider the intersectionality of young children's lives and what needs to change in order to ensure that race, class, immigration status, gender, and dis/ability can effectively contribute to children's experiences at school and in other instructional contexts, rather than prevent them from getting the learning experiences they need and deserve.

Our stance and challenge to the field of early childhood education as well as to the intersecting fields of child development; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM); social studies; literacy; and public health is that our work should begin with a focus on children and community capabilities rather than on perceived deficits. We believe that if educational practices and policies begin with what the child lacks, what families are not contributing, or how the community is failing, all of our work will ultimately fail to improve the lives of children and their families. Simplistic and unidimensional approaches like accelerating school readiness or increasing parent involvement place the burden of transformation on children and families. How can a three-year-old child or a newly arrived immigrant family be expected to overcome longstanding, structurally created inequities by changing themselves or conforming to society's ever-shifting expectations, especially if those societal expectations are steeped in deficit-oriented thinking?

Recognizing the untenable ways in which interventions for immigrant children and families are typically conceived, this special issue addresses inequities, disparities, and "gaps" as *institutional* challenges rather than something that can be fixed by or blamed on families and children. Instead of insisting that children and families change to be successful in the U.S., we focus here on the structural changes that would make preK-3 more equitable. These changes include rethinking and/or improving dual-language programs, national and state funding, demographic labeling systems, public messaging, immigration

law, multilingualism and multi-literacy programs, school environments, community engagement, curriculum and pedagogical approaches, home/school relationships, early childhood teacher education, and administrator education.

Strength-Based Work with Immigrant Communities

There has never been a better time to root our work with young children of immigrants in strength-based approaches. As immigrant families continue to participate in and contribute to public early schooling, there is an opportunity to build upon their knowledges and practices. Approaching families and children through what they bring to the table means recognizing the richness of their lives and changing early learning systems so as to better support and honor culturally sustaining practices. (Tobin, Arzubiaga, & Adair, 2013; Genishi, 2002).

Over the past three decades, early childhood education has benefited from research by scholars of color working within communities that they identify with, as well as research by scholars using critical and culturally relevant framings to describe children and families in early schooling (see Arzubiaga, Noguerón, & Sullivan, 2009; Doucet, 2008; Genishi, 2002; Humphries & Iruka, 2017). This work orients pre-service teachers, practicing teachers, and researchers toward looking for what is good, promising, and important about children and families (Garcia & Cuellar, 2006; Genishi & Dyson, 2009). This work demonstrates that young children develop and learn through a range of inequitably distributed sets of obstacles and pressures formed in context and through historical discrimination (González, 2016; Martínez, this issue; Martínez, Durán, & Hikida, 2017).

Early childhood education also benefits from theoretical orientations that originate outside the field and that position critical, cultural, human and other-world ideas as lenses through which to see young children in rich and complex ways. Anthropological, culturally situated orientations have resulted in studies of young children's learning in multiple communities and nations (see Adair, 2014; Rogoff, 2014; Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa, 2009; Tudge, 2008). This work demonstrates that children's learning and development is cultural – connected to experiences – as much as it is biological (Gutiérrez, Zitlali Morales, & Martínez, 2009). Theoretical frameworks that come from Black Feminism and Chicana/Latina Feminism (Pérez & Saavedra, 2017), Queer Studies (Blaise & Ryan, 2012), Indigenous Knowledges and New Materialism (Nxumalo, 2016; Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2013) help explain how learning and development are impacted by power and often, inequality. Concepts such as intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), Third Space (Gutiérrez,

2008), translanguaging (García & Wei, 2014), and cultural brokering (Heath, 1983) clarify the ways in which young children develop and learn through multiple, inequitably distributed sets of obstacles and pressures formed in context and through historical discrimination.

Anti-Immigration Attitudes as Obstacles to Strength-Based Policies and Practices

Strength-based orientations are critical for early childhood education and can be transformative. Too often however, early childhood education is positioned as a tool of assimilation and an intervention that can effectively address the challenges of poverty. In ironic contrast to the liberatory visions or the transformative power of education advanced by scholars like Freire (1994) and hooks (1994), these myopic visions turn early childhood education into a tool for reinforcing the status quo, and a scapegoat for the state's failure to serve those with the least amounts of agency and power. Along with the other authors in this special issue, we advocate for a vision of early childhood education that recognizes the field's potential to nurture educational conditions under which all children have a rich foundation from which to flourish. Such a foundation demands accountability from institutions, in this case early childhood policies, programs, practices, discourses, and interventions for causing harm to families from non-dominant communities, particularly immigrant communities.

There are many reasons to be hopeful about the collective strides the field of early childhood education has made toward more equitable and just policies and practices. Yet we are living in a time that is threatening the progress made toward dismantling the chokehold of a heteronormative, patriarchal, White supremacist hegemony. Immigrant children and their families have been a direct target for decades, long preceding Trump's presidency. Bill Clinton's signing of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Responsibility Act (IIRRA) opened the door for mass deportation of undocumented immigrants that persisted – and indeed ramped up – through the George W. Bush and Obama administrations (Chaudry, 2011; Yoshikawa, 2011).

As we face a bleak political landscape fueled by hate speech, fear, and xenophobia, it would be foolish to deny the impact the Trump administration is having on the lives of people who have been historically marginalized. The fear-mongering propaganda that has characterized Donald Trump's rhetoric from his campaign to his occupation of the White House has made xenophobic attitudes more permissible and public. From Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, to the ban on immigrants arriving from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Chad, and North Korea (Liptak, 2018, January 20), to the termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, to uninformed

and cruel comments about immigrants issued by the President on a nearly daily basis, the official climate of the United States is unwelcoming. Immigrants are systematically positioned as problematic, threatening, greedy, illegal, or dangerous instead of being seen for their irreplaceable contributions of labor, ideas, and participation they and their children consistently offer the United States.

Avoiding the Temptation to Blame or Victimize

Deficit views of children and their families impact children's early schooling experience in multiple, negative ways (Colegrove & Adair, 2014). Deficit views mask institutional problems by blaming children, families, and communities for the struggles they face. Home visiting programs, parent-teacher conferences, and other parent engagement efforts, when done without the intention to learn from families, can easily push schools into further disconnected from parents and communities (Doucet, 2008; Doucet & Tudge, 2007). Deficit views justify programs that demand families change their ways of interacting and relating with one another in order to be successful in school (Valencia, 2012). These include programs aimed at improving children's vocabulary by insisting parents speak more words to their children face to face. The "word gap" argument, which claims that children from poor and immigrant households lack vocabulary when they reach kindergarten, has diverted attention from the systemic causes of hardship, immigration, and poverty (Adair, Colegrove, & McManus, 2017; Michaels, 2013). Instead, parents are told that they can fix their child's educational struggles by speaking to them using standardized forms of English (García & Otheguy, 2016). This orientation pushes families of color to act and speak more like White parents in order to be successful in schools (Michaels, 2013).

Deficit thinking sets in motion deficit-framing instead of thinking of children, families, and communities as capable, interesting, complex, and knowledgeable. Deficit views justify mistreatment, oversimplification, and stereotyping that devalue home languages and practices. Deficit views prevent us from seeing children experiencing trauma in compassionate and thoughtful ways. Too often, children of immigrants who have or are experiencing trauma are treated as if their problematic behavior is on purpose or threatening, when it is a call for support and care.

Focusing on young immigrant children from a strength-based and intersectional approach decenters whiteness. When we focus on immigrants as victims, we normalize whiteness because our actions are constituted as being always in response to the dominant, White, native-born other. What if we centered our efforts in our relationships with young children, families, and communities? What if we focused instead on carving new aspirations, recognizing that immigrant communities live and move

and thrive in spaces of their own making?

Advocacy for Children of Immigrants that is Rooted in Multiplicity and Strengths

The essays in this issue of the Bank Street Occasional Paper Series all grapple with the need to approach programs, research, and school practices with respectful, strength-based views of communities. They frame inequities, disparities, and “gaps” as institutional challenges rather than child, family or community deficits. Together the authors articulate an agenda of advocacy for young children of immigrants. Work that engages children and families in strength-based, asset-oriented ways should:

1. Recognize strengths and capabilities of children, families, and communities
2. Avoid programs, policies, discourses and practices that begin with deficit views of immigrant families and communities
3. See the children of immigrants as intersectional and complex
4. Create programs that begin from the expertise and experience of immigrant families.

The essays we have chosen address this agenda at the levels of public discourse, classroom, and school/community. Martínez sets the tone by asserting that advocacy for immigrant communities does not just mean focusing on children being part of immigrant communities but seeing the complex and dynamic nature of children’s identities. He writes,

At the risk of minimizing the harmful impact of the current political climate, I wish to highlight an obvious fact—that Latinx 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. And beyond a laundry list of these multiple identities and aspirations, these children are complex and resilient human beings who live rich and dynamic lives.

In this issue we also try to locate some of the ways in which researchers, practitioners, and community members are seeing children’s capabilities and multiplicities as foundational strengths on which to build. Osorio, for example, details the ways in which a teacher discussed President Trump’s rhetoric about immigrants in her second-grade dual-language classroom. The rich examples of children’s thinking demonstrate that often the best thing a teacher can do is become a learner welcoming students’ funds

of knowledge into the classroom.

At the school/community level, there is a range of possible advocacy efforts that begin with strengths rather than deficits. Domínguez, Dávila, & Noguerón-Liu describe a community-based literacy project that made culturally relevant changes in order to better serve Spanish-speaking immigrant families. These changes included a home-like atmosphere in a community library to welcome and promote immigrant family expertise. Barraza & Martinez offer culturally sustaining practices for school and district administrators committed to early childhood education with immigrant communities. They argue that children of immigrants thrive when offered a broad range of learning experiences and a range of assessment options in order to mark their academic, social, and cognitive capabilities rather than their deficits. Isik-Ercan relays the experiences of Turkish and Burmese immigrant families attempting to make sense of family-school relationships. Arguing that schools need to reframe parents as experts on their children, Isik-Ercan identifies specific ways in which schools and school people can foster more reciprocal, culturally relevant, and respectful relationships with immigrant families.

At the classroom level, Alvarez describes how she engaged her first-grade bilingual class in project-based learning, an experience usually reserved for White, upper middle-class children. She worked with students to create projects that connected community knowledge and family experiences to academic learning. These projects provided a way for parents and children to connect through academic experiences. Koplow, Dean, and Blachly describe work with children who have experienced trauma during or because of immigration. Instead of avoiding difficult stories and experiences, Koplow and her colleagues argue that teachers can involve children in thinking about their trauma in safe and supportive ways through the arts. These engagements with the arts can help children value their own and their communities' knowledges in healthy ways. Melzi, Shick, and Scarola describe a program to help teachers include more oral storytelling in their circle times. Oral storytelling is meant to bring children's dynamic identities and real-life experiences into classroom spaces that often only understand or welcome White-centric ways of existing in the world. Lastly, Colegrove challenges teachers to think of parents as partners and to think creatively about building relationships with them, offering examples and recommendations specific to the classroom.

Collectively, this volume offers practices, policies, and attitudinal shifts that can positively impact the early schooling lives of children of immigrants in the United States. In dangerous and uncertain times for immigration and immigrants, we hope that this work will prompt teachers and researchers to begin or reinforce their commitments to strength-based classroom practices, programs, interventions, workshops, professional development and studies and to abandon the remnants of deficit frameworks

that rely on children and families to change. Building and documenting programs based on what children and their families bring to the table allows everyone to promote the systemic changes that will make it possible for young children of immigrants to reach their full potential.

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