Educational Policy Studies Faculty Publications   Department of Educational Policy Studies

1-10-2015

My Country Tis' of Thee: Exploring The Relationship between Immigrant Students' Feelings of Belonging and their Political Socialization

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My Country Tisôof Thee: Exploring The Relationship between Immigrant Studentsô Feelings of Belonging and their Political Socialization, by Kristina Brezicha

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In the past two decades, the demographic profile of the United States (U.S.) has rapidly shifted due in part to the growing number of immigrant families settling in America. First or second generation immigrants now make up almost 25% of the U.S. population (Britz & Batalova, 2013). Long-term demographic projections suggest that almost 82% of future population growth in the U.S. will come from immigrants and their children (Passel & Cohn, 2008). As these children enter American schools, they do so with decidedly different needs than their native-born peers. While offering a wealth of linguistic, social and cultural diversity, schools also need to adapt to help these new students succeed and understand their roles within the American system.

As immigrant students mature into young citizens, schools inform both their political socialization as well as their understanding of their new communities (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011; Lay, 2012). Schools develop immigrant students' feelings of belonging or exclusion both by the overt actions of school officials and by more symbolic acts of recognition. These subtle messages convey powerful lessons to young immigrants about their place in schools and, by extension, society (Abu El-Haj & Bonet, 2011). Researchers have documented immigrant youths' experiences of discrimination and marginalization at school (Katz, 1999; Romero & Roberts, 2003). These experiences may suggest to young immigrant students that their new communities do not value their presence (Oxman-Martinez et al., 2012). These early experiences may also have implications for immigrant students' political socialization process.

Political socialization refers to "the process by which young people develop their political [knowledge], attitudes and inclinations to participate in politics" (Lay, 2012, Loc 74). While long established that schools play an important role in the socialization process (Niemi & Junn, 1998), researchers have only recently begun to study how factors of political socialization such as political knowledge, trust, and interest might operate differently for immigrant children than for their native counterparts. In particular, researchers argue that immigrant children become active in and learn about the political process in different ways than native children. Unlike the unidirectional model formulated for native children in which parents guide children's political socialization, immigrant children's socialization might be more bidirectional (Bloemraad & Trost, 2008). Previous research shows that immigrant children frequently act as mediators for their parents helping them complete government documents, acting as translators or running errands (Orellana, 2001). Thus, as children navigate their new countries, they help socialize their parents to the new norms and expectations while still learning from their parents' sets of attitudes and beliefs. These differing responsibilities highlight a few ways immigrant children's socialization might diverge from their native peers

Research does not yet connect the relationship between students' feelings of belonging in their schools and communities to their political socialization process. It stands to reason, however, that immigrant students' feelings of belonging matter in their political socialization. These are important questions for researchers to ask and school officials to consider especially in light of the documented

civic empowerment gap which shows "African-American, Hispanic, nonnative-born and poor students perform[ing] significantly worse on standardized tests and surveys of civic knowledge and skills than White, Asian, native-born and middle-class students do" (Levinson, 2012, p. 32). This gap matters "not just because of bleeding heart concerns…. Rather, the civic empowerment gap harms all Americans because it weakens the quality and integrity of our democracy" (Levinson, 2012, p.48). Given this gap and the growing population of immigrant children, it becomes fundamentally important to explore the relationships between schools, immigrant children's feelings of belonging and their political socialization.

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