

THEY'RE ONLY WORDS

TEACHER CANDIDATE PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF ANTI-IMMIGRANT RHETORIC ON THE EDUCATION OF IMMIGRANT STUDENTS



immigration

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Introduction

Changing demographics in the United States have for many years pointed toward a developing minority-majority within the U.S. population. Projections from the U.S. Census (2015, 2016) signal that the aggregation of all minority groups will form a majority (i.e., a minority-majority) of the overall population by 2044.

Additionally, a predicted increase of 95% in the minority population between 2014 and 2066 is expected to give rise to a U.S. population that is 56% minority by that later date (U.S. Census, 2015, 2016). In 2014, the percentage of White, non-Hispanic students in U.S. public schools dipped below 50%

for the first time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). These changing demographics help to create a climate of uncertainty for immigrant students and families in U.S. schools despite obvious immigrant contributions to the country.

A segment of the immigrant population in the U.S. that seems to draw significant anti-immigrant rhetoric, as evidenced in the media, consists of those who are in the country without legal documentation (i.e., undocumented immigrants, sometimes inaccurately referred to as illegal immigrants). While significant myths surround the issue of immigrants and immigration in the U.S. (George W. Bush Presidential Center, 2019), undocumented immigrants contribute to the U.S. economy through taxes, low-wage work, and the Social Security system.

Undocumented workers can obtain false Social Security cards when required by employers, resulting in contributions to the system that they

will never access; yet citizens who are eligible will benefit from these undocumented immigrants' contributions (Porter, 2005). Undocumented immigrants pay taxes and contribute \$11.47 billion per year in sales, excise, income, and property taxes, which is projected to increase dramatically if they were to be granted legal status (Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2017). Undocumented immigrants work in low-wage jobs, often with inconvenient and difficult hours, that complement, rather than compete with, other American workers' jobs (Frazee, 2018), thus likely resulting in conveniently lower prices for the consumer.

Despite making these many contributions to the U.S. economy, immigrants face significant opposition within the country. The number of hate groups has continued a steady rise that began in 2015 during the presidential campaign season and has continued under the Trump administration, increasing 13% between 2015 and 2018, with 1,020

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groups recorded in 2018. White nationalist groups grew the most from 2017 to 2018, an almost 50% increase that is attributed to fears over changing demographics (Beirich, 2019).

According to limited data from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which is based solely on voluntary and, thus, incomplete reporting from victims and law enforcement agencies, hate crimes increased by 17% in 2017. Sixty percent of hate crimes in 2017 were attributed to race and ethnicity. This continues a trend of increasing hate crimes in the U.S. for the third year in a row (Eligon, 2018; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018; Lucas, 2018).

The Trump administration, through a variety of initiatives and tactics, accompanied by increasingly widespread public anti-immigrant statements, made it more difficult for immigrants to live in the U.S. (Barajas, 2019; Pierce, Bolter, & Selee, 2018; Roth, 2019). Trump framed immigration in terms of threats to national security and the economy, with the goals of decreasing immigration and increasing deportations, and has gathered support for significant changes to immigration policy in both broader and more specific terms.

Some examples of these changes include increasing immigration enforcement in ways that some say are inhumane and implementing a ban on entry into the U.S. of citizens from seven specific countries. More such changes, implemented within and across various immigration-related agencies, have directly slowed the processing of visa applications (Pierce et al., 2018).

Changes include expanded reasons that immigrants can be summoned before immigration judges to begin deportation processes, making it a crime for students to overstay visas, creating increased scrutiny of visa extension applications and applications for asylum, expanding unannounced inspections of workplaces by Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and increasing investigations of employers bringing workers to the U.S. (Roth, 2019).

The Right to Education

Despite the contradictory environment in the U.S., where contributions of undocumented workers to

the U.S. economy, including the Social Security system, stand alongside prevalent anti-immigrant sentiment and increasingly anti-immigrant policies, U.S. law as interpreted by the courts supports the education of all students. States must legally provide a free, public education to all students, regardless of immigration status (American Immigration Council, 2012; U.S. Courts, 1982).

This right to education is based on the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution: “no State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (American Immigration Council, 2012). At the time of its decision in 1982, the Supreme Court discussed the harm that denying an education would inflict on children and on society and recognized that, by denying children a basic education, they would also be denied the possibility of contributing to the nation’s progress. The justices acknowledged that children should not be held accountable for their parents’ deeds (American Immigration Council, 2012).

Conversely, lack of education can contribute to individual and societal challenges. Lack of a formal, appropriate education, especially the development of sufficient literacy skills, has been shown to increase the likelihood of poverty, the need for social services (Smith, 1999), and lead to criminal behavior, while an increase in literacy skills can result in higher wages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016), the population of incarcerated adults demonstrates lower than average literacy scores overall, although this was not found for Black and Hispanic subgroups. The Department of Justice (as cited in *Begin to Read*, n.d.) stated, “The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure.” (See also Capital Region Ex-Offenders Support Coalition, 2011; Literacy Mid-South, 2016).

Adults with lower literacy scores have lower incomes and are more likely to receive food stamps; alternatively, increased literacy scores have been shown to result in higher wages. The same is true for an income comparison

between workers with a high school diploma and a bachelor’s degree (National Institutes for Literacy, n.d.).

A Societal Investment

Education has been shown to be a solid societal investment with significant returns, and the converse is also apparent. Data from 40 states indicate that the cost of educating a student (elementary/secondary) per year is less than the cost of imprisoning a person (CNN Money, 2013). In Florida, for example, the cost of educating a student is approximately \$8,000 per year compared to \$19,000 for a year of imprisonment.

Two states reported the widest disparity: In California, it costs about \$9,000 to educate someone for a year and \$47,000 to imprison someone for that same year. In New York, it is estimated that it costs \$16,000 to educate a student and \$56,000 to imprison a person per year (CNN Money, 2013; Fox News, 2015), with data reported from both progressive and conservative sources. More important than ensuring an unnecessary drain on social services, education rights in the U.S. serve to provide an opportunity for all students to contribute positively to the country as well as to global society.

Ever more prevalent anti-immigrant policies and ideologies serve to alienate and to create an additional layer of difficulty for immigrant students in public school classrooms. Increasingly stringent immigration policies can negatively affect immigrant students’ feelings of belonging by creating educational obstacles and lack of opportunities (Gurrola, Ayón, & Moya Salas, 2016).

Anti-immigrant ideologies result in creating barriers to education for undocumented students, such as: (a) affecting teachers’ views of students leading to marginalization, educational labeling and tracking, low expectations, and expectations of eventual incarceration; (b) significant school absence out of fear of deportation and the potentially painful tearing apart of their families; (c) older children having to quit school to work to care for younger siblings when parents are deported; and (d) inability to obtain financial aid for higher education (Catalano, 2013).

At the same time, many teacher candidates in teacher preparation programs do not have a well developed understanding of immigration policies (Sánchez & Ek, 2007/2008) and may not fully understand the repercussions of such policies and public expressions of anti-immigrant sentiments. They are in need of educational experiences that will sensitize them to the immigrants' perspective and transform their views (McDermott, Rankie, & Mogge, 2012).

Understanding teacher candidates' perceptions of the effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric, especially as such rhetoric becomes more publicly acceptable, can help to inform curriculum planning in teacher preparation programs. There is a need for an increase in the inclusion of concepts related to the effects of such rhetoric on immigrant students, documented and undocumented, as well as concepts related to the development of teacher candidates' advocacy skills on behalf of their immigrant students.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teacher candidates regarding the potential effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric on the education of immigrant students, documented and undocumented, and on the education of students in general.

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were two sophomore (second year), 40 junior (third year), and 30 senior (fourth year) undergraduate teacher candidates enrolled in diversity courses in a teacher preparation program at a state university in the southeastern U.S.. In the university's geographical area, the schools are culturally and linguistically diverse, with the linguistic diversity occurring primarily with students whose native language is either Spanish, Haitian Creole, or Portuguese.

The teacher candidates were enrolled in teacher preparation programs that include coursework focused on effective education for culturally and linguistically diverse students. The sophomores and juniors were enrolled in courses about second language acquisition, communication, and culture, and the seniors were enrolled in a methods course for English for speakers of other languages.

Participants included 68 females and four males. The majority were White and non-Hispanic, and the group included eight Hispanic, two African American/Black, and one mixed race student; one additional student preferred not to disclose. Some participants reported spoken proficiency in languages other than English, including nine Spanish speakers, one with some German, and one with proficiency in American Sign Language.

Procedures

The study and consent documents were explained either in class or virtually by the researcher, depending on the format of the course in which the participants were enrolled. All students were asked to complete an anonymous, online survey as part of class activities, since the content of the survey was appropriate to and discussed in each of the two courses.

Participant responses in the data set include only students who consented to the inclusion of their responses and exclude the single student who did not consent. Participant data were collected and analyzed in spring 2017 and subsequently retained by the researcher to allow time to observe changes within the political, economic, and social milieux affecting immigrants in the U.S., which would be an indication of whether public anti-immigrant rhetoric would remain a significant factor.

Measures

The survey, used to generate class discussion, included demographic items and questions regarding: (a) students' level of comfort with public anti-immigrant statements, such as those that support the deportation of all undocumented immigrants and those that group immigrants together as criminals; (b) whether students thought these types of statements may or may not affect documented and undocumented immigrant students and, if so, the types of effects they anticipated; and (c) whether students had any other concerns about the potential effects that public anti-immigrant statements may or may not have on education and/or students in schools in the country and the state.

Data Analysis

The survey included demographic items, dichotomous items (i.e., yes/no), and open-ended questions. Demographic and dichotomous survey items were analyzed descriptively, including frequencies and percentages of responses. Progressive stages of coding were applied to establish and refine emerging themes in open-ended responses (Williams & Moser, 2019). When more general themes were established, the subthemes were maintained to provide more detailed information.

Results

In response to survey questions about the participants' level of comfort with public anti-immigrant statements like those that support the deportation of all undocumented immigrants, among the 72 participants 20 (28%) responded that they were comfortable with such statements, while 52 (72%) responded that they were not comfortable. Subsequently, in response to a follow-up question, the majority of participants (69 participants; 96%) responded that they were not comfortable with public anti-immigrant statements like those that support immigrants being grouped together as criminals.

Results indicated majority discomfort with these types of public anti-immigrant statements, and although 28% of participants were comfortable with statements about the deportation of immigrants, 90% (18 out of 20) of those participants were not comfortable with the stereotyping of undocumented immigrants as criminals.

When asked about whether public anti-immigrant statements might affect immigrant students, whether documented or undocumented, in their classrooms, 71 out of 72 (99%) participants responded affirmatively. Perceptions of effects were coded and themed (Williams & Moser, 2019). The themes, subthemes, total responses, and percentages per theme are presented in Table 1.

More than half (56%) of the participants expressed perceptions that public anti-immigrant statements would affect immigrant students' sense of belonging, confidence, and stability. One-third (33%) of participants expressed concern about issues of prejudice and

discrimination toward the immigrant students from peers and from teachers. Issues of fear and anxiety were of concern to nearly one-third (28%), including fear of deportation, separation from family, and mental and emotional stress. Lack of engagement in education affecting educational growth and success, focus, attitude toward education, attendance, and exhibiting negative behaviors was a concern for nearly one-quarter (22%) of participants. A smaller percentage (13%) of participants were concerned about violence, including bullying, hate crimes, and racial profiling enacted against immigrants.

In summary, some miscellaneous concerns, while not expressed substantively enough to create a theme or subtheme, were voiced by one participant; these are included to maintain the richness of responses and demonstrate effects on communication between the school and the parents, immigrants' rights to attend college, children's rights to safely return home after school, and that students should not experience punishing effects due to their parents' decision to immigrate to the U.S.

Participants were asked, lastly, if they had any *additional* concerns about the potential effects that public anti-immigrant statements may or may not have on education in general and/or on students (i.e., all students) in the U.S. and/or the state (see Table 2). While 56% of participants declined to provide additional concerns, 32 (44%) expressed concerns, which were grouped into themes and subthemes, that included:

(a) the development of a fearful and dangerous environment (31% of respondents to the question), including fear of family deportation and fear for safety, of racism, and of violence against immigrants;

(b) the creation of a hateful environment (22% of respondents), including development of an ethnic- and nation-centric environment reminiscent of the Holocaust, blaming groups of people and serving self-interests through blaming and the concern that a hateful environment can ruin the United States;

(c) a decrease in diversity education (9% of respondents);

Table 1
Teacher Candidate Perceptions of the Effects of Public Anti-immigrant Statements on Immigrant Students in Their Classrooms

Theme	Subthemes	Total # of responses (%)
Lack of sense of belonging, confidence, and stability	Feeling unsafe, unstable, unwelcome, affective factors, confidence, trust, self-confidence, view of United States, sense of acceptance in the U.S.	40 (56%)
Prejudice and discrimination	Being treated differently, stereotyping, discrimination by teachers, discrimination by peers, prejudice, racism.	24 (33%)
Fear and anxiety	Fear, mental and emotional stress, distancing from own culture due to fear and discrimination, fear of deportation, fear of separation from family.	20 (28%)
Lack of engagement in education	Success, growth in classroom, focus, attitude toward education, attendance, negative behavior.	16 (22%)
Violence	Bullying, hate crimes, racial profiling, violence (general).	9 (13%)
Miscellaneous	May depend on what they hear from their families, communication between the school and the parents, right to attend college, right to come home, should not be punished for parents' decision to come to the U.S.	1 (1%) ^a

^aResponse for each related expressed concern.

Table 2
Additional Teacher Candidate Perceptions on the Potential Effects of Public Anti-immigrant Statements on the Education and/or Students in the U.S. and/or Florida

Theme	Subthemes	Total number of responses (% participants; % respondents to question)
Fearful and dangerous environment	Fear of family's deportation and fear for safety (6), racism and violence against immigrants (4).	10 (14%; 31%)
Hateful environment	Ethnic- and nation-centric environment, reminiscent of the Holocaust, blaming groups of people and serving self-interests through the blaming, hateful environment that can ruin the U.S.	7 (10%; 22%) ^a
Decrease in diversity education		3 (4%; 9%)
Lack of access to effective education	Fear and discrimination distracting students from school performance, distraction from the goal of education.	2 (3%; 6%)
Miscellaneous	"Too many concerns to list here." Lasting negative impression of U.S. society on the student. The media escalates the issues.	1 (1%; 3%) 1 (1%; 3%) 1 (1%; 3%)
No response		40 (56%)

^a One response for each of the related concerns.

(d) lack of access to effective education due to fear and discrimination distracting students from school performance and from the goal of education (6%);

(e) miscellaneous concerns expressed by one participant each, including having too many concerns to list, immigrants developing a lasting, negative impression of society in the U.S., and the escalation of issues by the media.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of teacher candidates regarding the effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric on the education of immigrant students, documented and undocumented, and on the education of all students. A clearer understanding of teacher candidates' perceptions of the effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is becoming increasingly publicly acceptable in recent years in the U.S., can serve teacher preparation programs in curriculum planning and can indicate a need to include diversity concepts in course content with an eye toward creating effective instruction and developing teacher candidates' advocacy skills for their immigrant students.

Results of this study indicate that approximately three-quarters of participants were not comfortable with public anti-immigrant statements about the deportation of undocumented immigrants. However, since more than one-quarter of participants were comfortable with such statements, educational content about the political, economic, and social factors related to immigration should be part of diversity education and is critical to teacher education programs, especially given that the program in which the participants were enrolled is one that includes diversity courses and that the majority of participants had already completed at least one course in diversity and were nearing the end of their second course.

Regarding public statements grouping immigrants together and labeling them as criminals, 96% of participants indicated discomfort. This response is most likely a result of increased knowledge about diverse populations from course content as well as connections

formed through program field experiences in schools with diverse students.

Teacher candidates were concerned about the effects of public anti-immigrant statements on immigrant students, documented or undocumented, in their classrooms. Collapsed themes indicate concerns about: (a) immigrant students' lack of a sense of belonging, confidence, and stability; (b) prejudice and discrimination against immigrant students by teachers and peers; (c) fear and anxiety, including fear of deportation and separation from family; (d) immigrant students' lack of engagement in and access to effective education; (e) violence against immigrant students; and (f) the damage that a hateful environment can do to the U.S.

The sensitivity to the fears, violent confrontations, and lack of stability and educational access and engagement that teacher candidates expressed are a harsh reality for many students and families (Dillard, 2018; UNESCO, 2019). UNESCO calls for protections for students to facilitate access to education, inclusion of immigrant students in challenging curricular opportunities, support for students' language and other educational needs, use of inclusive educational materials, and effective teacher preparation.

Undocumented students face a real risk of deportation from the U.S. They increasingly face anti-immigrant interactions and feel threatened as a result, which can cause a reaction of self-defensiveness, as well as magnified disciplinary accusations (Dillard, 2018; Hlass, 2018). This risk has been called the *school-to-deportation pipeline* (Dillard, 2018; Hlass, 2018) as well as *criminalization* (Stumpf, 2006).

While educational content can result in sensitivity to the immigrants' perspective, thus transforming their views (McDermott et al., 2012), indications are that many teacher candidates have a limited understanding of immigration policies (Sánchez & Ek, 2007/2008) as well as policy repercussions. For teacher candidates to be sufficiently prepared to engage in and effect change in the current reality, they need to learn not only about diversity issues as they apply to effective instruction but also about the political, economic,

and social contexts that affect the education of immigrant students.

Conclusions

The U.S., with the exception of indigenous people, is a nation of immigrants. In recent years, however, public anti-immigrant rhetoric has become increasingly acceptable and even enthusiastically applauded and cheered. In the context of increasing disparagement and criminalization of immigrants, it is imperative that teacher preparation programs include diversity content that places the education of diverse students within a context of political, economic, and social reality.

This can serve to increase the effectiveness of research-based instructional practices as well as helping teacher candidates become effective advocates for their students. Effective instruction does not occur in isolation but within the reality of students' lives. The integration of a wider view of the current reality of diverse students' lives is essential to effective education for both teacher candidates and their future students.

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