



Published in final edited form as:

*Sociol Stud Child Youth*. 2013 ; 16: 97–123. doi:10.1108/S1537-4661(2013)0000016009.

## **Bridging Worlds in the Social Studies Classroom: Teachers' Practices and Latino Immigrant Youths' Civic and Political Development**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose**—Prior research suggests that high school experiences shape young adult political behaviors, particularly among immigrant youth. The U.S. social studies classroom, focused on democratic citizenship education, proves an interesting socializing institution.

**Methods**—Through qualitative inquiry, we interviewed Latino immigrant young adults and their former teachers regarding their high school social studies experiences and evolving political and civic engagement.

**Findings**—indicate that armed with experience bridging the worlds of the school and home, immigrant students respond and relate to the content and pedagogy of the social studies classroom in such a way that they (1) participate in civic discourse and (2) nurture a disposition toward leadership through teachers' civic expectations of them and instructional emphasis on critical thinking skills.

**Social Implications**—The ability to engage in civic discourse and a disposition toward leadership are both necessary to foster America's democratic ideals, and to take on leadership roles during adulthood. With focused effort on the unique perspective of immigrant youth, high school social studies teachers can nurture in these students the ability to become leaders in young adulthood, broadening the potential leadership pool.

**Originality**—This study highlights how the social studies curriculum may be particularly salient to Latino immigrant youth as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood and develop their political and civic identities.

### **Keywords**

immigrant; civic development; high school; adolescence; pedagogy

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## Introduction

First and second generation immigrant youth are one of the fastest growing segments of the U.S. population. Children of immigrant parents (first- and second generation youth) now comprise 1 in 4 students in U.S. schools (Capps, Murray, Ost, Passel, & Herwanto, 2005), and Latinos make up the largest proportion of this growing population (Fry, 2008). Despite this demographic shift we know relatively little about the factors that shape Latino immigrant youths' civic (e.g., community volunteering) and political (e.g., voting) engagement as they enter into adult society. U.S. high schools in general, and social studies coursework in particular, may provide a social and educational nexus for immigrant students balancing two worlds.

Prior research indicates that both high school social studies courses and achievement shape young adult political participation for all adolescents (Atherton, 2000; Chaffee, 2000; Nie, Junn, & Stehlik-Barry, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998). The fact that Latino immigrant young adults tend to engage politically and civically at lower rates than their non-Latino, non-immigrant peers (Jones-Correa, 1998; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) makes social studies experiences that much more important to explore. As prior research suggests a strong relationship between social studies course taking and political behaviors among immigrant youth in particular (Callahan, Muller, & Schiller, 2008), we set out to explore how the social studies classroom may influence the civic perspectives of Latino immigrant young adults. It is our hope that these analyses will shed light on how immigrant Latino youth interact with the social studies classroom in the process of their political and civic development. Specifically, we explore how Latino, immigrant young adults and their former social studies teachers perceive the youths' high school social studies experiences to have influenced their civic and political development in young adulthood. As the Latino population continues to grow at an unprecedented rate (Passel & Cohn, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), ensuring enlightened political engagement (Parker, 2003) among its youth can only strengthen the future of our democracy. The civic and political futures of school districts with large and/or growing Latino immigrant populations may depend on the ability of their social studies programs to reach these citizens.

## Schools, Immigrant Students, Social Studies and Political Engagement

An historical function of U.S. public schools has been to prepare youth, and immigrant youth in particular, to participate in the democratic process, to vote and to actively engage in their communities (Cremin, 1951; Goodlad, 1984; Tyack, 1974). In essence, school has served as a political and cultural socializing agent. In particular, social studies coursework offers more than just political preparation; it also provides a context within which immigrant youth observe, relate to and identify with their teachers and peers. That experience offers the opportunity to both socialize and counter-socialize students (Engle & Ochoa, 1988) into the dominant culture through the content, skills, and dispositions learned and modeled. Sherrod (2003) found that political knowledge during adolescence predicts voting during young adulthood; knowledge gained, at least in part, from social studies coursework. For immigrant students in particular, research suggests that the accumulation of social studies credits plays a key role in the likelihood of voting and registering to vote (Callahan, et al.,

2008). Behind the credits and the grades, however, lies the development of civic and political initiative. This study explores how immigrant youth respond and relate to experiences in high school social studies classes in ways that may shape later civic and political development.

### **Adolescence: A Critical Juncture on the Pathway to Adult Civic Engagement**

In U.S. society, adolescence represents a time when both an individual's sense of self and the social world widen (Lesko, 2001). During childhood, an individual's world and identity are primarily defined and determined by her family and her home (Corsaro, 1997; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998); in middle- and high school, her focus begins to shift outward. During adolescence, youth begin to develop a sense of self as peers and connections made in the school and outside the home increase in importance (Borman & Schneider, 1998). This outward expansion includes relationships with friends, teachers and mentors (Cauce, 1986; Ryan, 2001) as the social connections of the school increase in relevance. Schools have the potential to shape youths' political and civic growth through connections (Putnam, 2000), as well as social studies pedagogy and content.

Adolescence is particularly important in the foundation of political identity and engagement as research demonstrates an association between youths' high school experiences and political behaviors in young adulthood (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Frisco, Muller, & Dodson, 2004; Glanville, 1999). Adolescence is a time to gain independence, form new relationships, take on new social roles, and begin to make choices about group membership. Adolescence lends itself to the emergence of new identities, social and otherwise. The present study explores youths' development of civic and political identities, determining where and how one fits into the larger community.

### **Immigrant Youth: Balancing School and Home**

From an early age, all immigrant youth learn to negotiate and balance two worlds, that of the home and that of the school. By definition outsiders to the dominant culture, immigrant students daily practice negotiating perspectives different from their own; this inherent emphasis on empathy may make them open to the social studies curriculum which emphasizes awareness of societal needs (Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002). In particular, immigrant youths' experience learning to balance these worlds (Cooper, Cooper, Azmitia, Chavira, & Gullatt, 2002) may prime them to connect to central tenets of social studies which stress not only a recognition of alternate perspectives, but also the ability to defend the logic behind often disparate points of view.

As children of immigrant parents, these students' lives—social and academic—are defined by their roles as mediators between their home culture and expectations, and those of their new community, which may at times collide. Kao and Tienda (1995) illustrate how immigrant youth incorporate their parents' expectations for them to buffer school contexts that are often marked by racial and economic disparities in achievement. Similarly, both Gibson (1987) and Zhou and Bankston (1998) illustrate how Punjabi and Vietnamese immigrant youth, respectively, draw from the supportive structures inherent in their home cultures to craft successful identities for themselves within the adopted school contexts. This

ability to recognize and utilize key aspects of the home culture and balance these with the world of school may allow immigrant students to incorporate key elements of the social studies classroom to their benefit.

### **Critical Thinking Skills and the Development of Civic Discourse**

While early research suggested that social studies coursework might not matter in furthering political engagement (Langton & Jennings, 1968), later research suggests otherwise, linking curriculum to the development of political knowledge and subsequent political activity (Atherton, 2000; Chaffee, 2000; Niemi & Junn, 1998). While curriculum itself is crucial, several studies also highlight the importance of teachers' pedagogical practices in the development of civic and political engagement among youth. For example, Kahne, Chi and Middaugh (2006) argue that the social studies curriculum alone does not promote civic engagement, but rather teachers' pedagogical practices also shape the degree of student political engagement later in life. In particular, the authors find that simulations and role modeling contribute to students' expectations of and for civic participation (Kahne, et al., 2006). These kinds of practices create opportunities for students to construct, rather than reproduce, knowledge. Students incorporate prior experiences and learning with new information to construct—through processes of analysis, synthesis and evaluation—new knowledge that may be applied to other settings in and out of school, including civic life. These practices also create the opportunity to practice civic or political skills, such as construction of an argument, deliberation and negotiation. Understanding how immigrant adolescents respond to these practices requires that we take youth agency into account. Ultimately, youth are responsible for developing their own agency and initiative (Larson, 2000); how immigrant youth respond and relate to their experiences in high school social studies classes merits further exploration.

### **Balancing Perspectives: Engagement and Voice in the Curriculum**

In their review of the literature investigating social studies pedagogical practices, ten Dam and Volman (2004) argue that teachers can create environments where multiple perspectives are recognized and defended, but that ultimately teachers must encourage students to develop these skills within themselves. Providing evidence to support this perspective, Marri (2005) found that high school social studies teachers operating from a multicultural democratic education perspective actively engage their students in critical thinking skills development. According to Marri, as well as Parker (1996), multicultural democratic education adheres to three defining characteristics: democracy is viewed as a shared path; citizens belong to both small and large publics; and diversity is an asset. These teachers require students to engage with the information at hand, effectively communicate their position to others, negotiate alternate perspectives, and view the existence of diverse perspectives as positive.

Multicultural democratic education is particularly appropriate for this study in its conceptualization of democracy as participatory, the membership of citizens in various small (e.g., family, school) and large (e.g., nation) publics, as well as the view that a diversity of opinions strengthens democracy. The existence of such an open, safe environment in which students can actively engage in debate and discussion has been shown to contribute to

schools' ability to foster civic engagement (Torney-Purta, 2002). The rich social studies pedagogy described above requires that students are not simply passive recipients of instruction, but rather that they are engaged actors, directing their own civic growth and development. Social studies instruction that requires students to engage in their communities allows youth to own and shape their civic futures (Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Adolescents, particularly racial and ethnic minorities, and/or immigrant youth, who might otherwise be marginalized, may be particularly primed to integrate community-focused ideals of civic instruction (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006). The goal of producing enlightened and engaged citizens lies at the heart of the social studies curriculum (Parker, 2003). It could be argued that social studies has the potential to maximize immigrant adolescents' balancing experiences, facilitating their ability to incorporate the multiple perspectives necessary to move beyond one's own needs to recognize those of the group (Sherrod, et al., 2002). These balancing experiences may enhance immigrant youths' ability to respond to and interact with social studies teachers and materials. In particular, they may approach the social studies curriculum in such a way as to internalize argumentation and persuasive skills which may be conducive to future political and civic engagement and leadership.

## Purpose of the Study

The unique space where immigrant adolescents interact with the social studies classroom presents an intriguing area of inquiry. All immigrant youth travel into and through adolescence learning to negotiate and balance two worlds; as outsiders to the dominant culture, they negotiate, and participate in perspectives different from those of their parents on a daily basis. This position may leave them particularly open to social studies experiences that not only articulate the dominant culture, but also encourage its examination, interrogation and critique.

## Methods

The qualitative inquiry was designed to explore the forces potentially associated with civic and political development among Latino immigrant youth, in particular the high school social studies context. In spite of the wealth of knowledge provided by the previously discussed theories, as well as findings from prior research, gaps remain in our understanding of the forces that drive the political development of immigrant youth, especially Latinos who tend to participate at lower rates than their non-Latino, non-immigrant counterparts (Bass & Casper, 2001; Cassel, 2002; Ramakrishnan & Espenshade, 2001; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Grounded theory methods afford a way to explore issues of this nature without the initial imposition of an analytical framework. By carefully choosing participants, engaging in data analysis during data collection, and using these processes to inform and shape further data collection (Charmaz, 2006), we were able to create a plan to explore how Latino immigrant youth and their high school social studies teachers perceived their social studies experiences to have shaped these youths' future political and civic development.

## Participants

We drew from two distinct groups of participants for this study. First, we sought out National Board Certified (NBC) high school social studies teachers who teach in high Latino immigrant impact communities. Second, we identified Latino immigrant young adults, most of whom had taken high school social studies course work with these teachers. Given the relatively low rates of both political participation *and* social studies course taking among Latino immigrant youth, we purposefully designed the present study to explore the potential impact that focused civic development could have – within immigrant communities, but also with respect to the society as a whole.

**High School Social Studies Teachers**—Our focus on board-certified teachers adds a degree of consistency in content and pedagogy across our purposeful sample. While we recognize that variation in content and pedagogy are to be expected when investigating classroom experiences, National Board certification provides a measure of peer recognition in the field, as well as a rigorous application and certification process for teachers. Prior research indicates significantly higher levels of achievement among the students of NBC teachers compared to students of non-nationally certified teachers (Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007; Vandevoort & Berliner, 2004). In addition, national certification offers a tangible measure of pedagogical and curricular expertise across our sample.

We drew our sample from four high Latino, high immigrant communities: Southern California; Southern Florida; Chicago, and Texas. Using the National Board certification database, twenty-six high school social studies teachers actively working with immigrant students in high Latino enrollment schools in each of the regions were randomly selected and contacted; nine teachers consented to participate. Although the NBC teachers were geographically diverse, the six men and three women had all taught at least 7 years and were white, with the exception of one non-immigrant Latina. All names are pseudonyms, and due to the rarity of nationally certified teachers in some areas, regions, rather than cities, are listed to protect participants' identities.

**Latino Immigrant Young Adults**—Through snowball sampling (Patton, 2002), we contacted Latino immigrant young adults who had studied with one of the NBC social studies teachers in our sample, and who would have been eligible to vote in the 2008 presidential election. We contacted these young adults based on the recommendations of the teacher participants. Recruitment targeted both foreign-born (first generation) and U.S.-born (second generation) immigrant Latinos. Many, although not all, of the young adults were former students of the teacher participants. In some instances, the teachers initiated contact with their former students and the young adults contacted the researchers; in others, the teachers provided the contact information and the researchers made the initial contact. Nineteen students were recommended and contacted; 11 Latino young adults, all in college at the time of data collection, agreed to participate in the study. Again, all names are pseudonyms.



## Data Sources and Data Collection

Audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with the 20 participants served as the data sources for the study. Individual interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted by the first author and were conducted in the language preferred by the participants (English). While the majority of interviews were face-to-face, due to logistical constraints, the Florida interviews were conducted via telephone. All interviews were conducted first with the NBC teacher participants in a region, followed by the Latino young adult participants in the same region. To explore how Latino immigrant youth responded and related to social studies, interview topics for this study included: issues of curriculum, pedagogical practices, in- and out- of class activities, service learning opportunities, teacher-student relationships, and immigrant youth civic and political participation. While some scholars conflate civic engagement and political participation (Parker, 2003; Walzer, 1989), we chose to explore them separately in the interviews. For example, “What kinds of political participation, if any, do you feel are engendered by classroom assignments?” and “What could your school do that it might not be doing now to promote civic behaviors?” address related, but distinct behaviors. As Keeter et al. (2002) explain, political participation is typically confined to electoral activities, including voting and working on political campaigns, while civic participation focuses on community issues, volunteering for non-profits, participating in fund-raising activities for charitable organizations, etc. These activities or behaviors may overlap. Further, political participation may be seen as a distinct category within a broader construct of civic life. The terms political and civic are used throughout this chapter consistent with this distinction.

Prior to each interview, the interviewer explained the study's focus on the factors that shape Latino immigrants' political and civic lives, followed by an introduction to and explanation of prior research indicating a positive relationship between social studies course-taking and political participation for children of immigrant, but not U.S.-born, parents (Callahan, et al., 2008). The interview began with the interviewer asking the participant to expand on the social and academic processes in their high school social studies classrooms. Based upon the content of this expansion, the interview proceeded with relevant probe questions. This procedure was followed for all participants.

**Teachers**—There were 9 one- to two-hour long semi-structured interviews with the NBC social studies teacher participants. Generally, the teacher participants did not share their immigrant students' social and academic histories, yet they did display a marked sensitivity to their Latino immigrant students' positions negotiating two worlds. The teachers shared stories, opinions and insights into what happens in the social studies classroom. Topics ranged from pedagogical practices and activities, the curriculum, interpersonal relationships and skill development, anything that the NBC teachers believed might encourage immigrant students to become more engaged in civic life and the political process. Focused interview questions explored teachers' definitions of political participation and the mechanisms at play in the social studies curriculum in particular. In addition, teachers discussed their motivations, strategies and perceptions regarding social studies instruction, as well as beliefs, expectations and perceptions regarding their immigrant students' political preparation and future civic and political engagement. To a person, all of the teachers

commented on the focus required of immigrant youth to bridge the world of school and home.

**Young Adults**—The 11 young adult participants were between 18 and 24 years old; the 2008 general election represented the first time that most would have been eligible to vote. Interviews included discussion of their current civic and political engagement as well as reflection on social and academic processes during high school that they believed may have shaped their current civic positioning. Participants shared their involvement in and reaction to the election, as well as any current political and leadership activities. In addition, the immigrant young adults discussed their high school social studies experiences, as well as current and prior community and political engagement, and any relationships they perceived between the two.

### Data Analysis

Due to the interpretive nature of the study, data analysis occurred in an ongoing and iterative manner. Through a process of open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), the researchers looked for themes within regions and across teachers and young adults. We generated coding schemes independently and then collaborated to refine the codes and to generate the broader thematic findings. Specifically, we analyzed the interview data during two main phases of coding: 1) an initial phase involving naming segments of data followed by 2) a focused, selective phase that used the most salient or frequent initial codes to sort and organize large amounts of data. During the initial coding process, we used action words to label segments of data and to flag particular comments that proved central to our research objectives (Charmaz, 2006). Following the initial coding, data were summarily reviewed and annotated to determine the viability of the thematic coding.

### Findings

Below, we first provide composite portraits of both the teacher and young adult participants, followed by their perceptions of the social studies experiences they believed may have shaped the political and civic development of the Latino immigrant young adults.

#### High School Social Studies Teachers

The desire to foster enlightened political engagement (Parker, 2003) among the next generation resides at the core of high school social studies curriculum in the U.S. (Atherton, 2000), and our participants' interviews reflected a perspective consistent with this purpose. Although we did not ask teachers to name the specific texts and resources, the reported content covered and strategies implemented prove relatively consistent across our participants. This curricular consistency was likely due to our purposeful sampling of NBC teachers, as well as high school social studies course content that is reflective of the dominant culture. Overall, the NBC teacher participants provided a comprehensive overview of their perceptions of their role, the role of the curriculum, and what might be expected of students in terms of civic and political engagement.



## Latino Immigrant Young Adults

The levels of civic and political integration and dedication to the community among the Latino immigrant young adult participants proved noteworthy. Each of the Latino young adults demonstrated various kinds and levels of civic participation on their college campus, many taking active leadership roles and integrating themselves into the surrounding community. Nearly all participated in some form of political participation in their community during the 2008 presidential election: organizing voter registration drives, holding debates, volunteering on campaigns, spearheading fundraisers and even developing Facebook forums related to the elections. A number held leadership positions in their civic lives; e.g., mentored other undergraduates, middle- and high school students; led community service projects; volunteered in campus and city health care clinics providing health education services. Their employment also leaned towards civic minded pursuits; e.g., advocate in the office for Student Disabilities; intern on a senate campaign; health sexuality peer educator. We found the Latino young adults' disposition toward leadership in their communities of interest, especially due to its consistency across the participants.

## Constructed Themes

### Bridging Two Worlds: Civic Discourse and a Disposition toward Leadership

As data analysis progressed, we constructed two interacting broad themes that are the foundation of our findings. We argue first and foremost that immigrant youths' bridging experiences shape their incorporation of two key foci of high school social studies: how teachers perceive immigrant youth to be predisposed to understand and connect with the tenets of the social studies curriculum, and how these perceptions in turn might enable immigrant youth to develop both the ability to participate in civic discourse and a disposition toward leadership. Students' participation in civic discourse and future leadership potential are both strengthened by teachers' emphasis on the development of critical thinking skills.

Professionally focused on shaping the political engagement of youth, these teachers were acutely aware of how their immigrant students might identify with the curriculum and the content in a way that children of U.S.-born parents might not. Teachers viewed immigrant students' awareness of political systems outside the U.S. as a motivator to actively engage with and internalize current social studies content. As Mr. Jones, a U.S. History teacher, noted, in the adopted U.S. context, many immigrant youth:

look to the social studies classes to learn more about the political system and ...the history of the country...they see opportunity, they see freedom...they are eager to participate. But in order to participate, they have got to become informed and knowledgeable about the system.

In the teachers' view, immigrant youths' very *being* as mediators between the two worlds necessitated and motivated their desire to engage with social studies.

Interestingly, it was the teachers, not their former students, who elaborated on the youths' positions bridging cultures. The Latino immigrant young adults themselves did not speak directly to their position bridging cultures. We hypothesize that this may be because as

outsiders, the teachers recognized students' bridging experiences perhaps because these acts stood in contrast to the teachers' own experiences. However, the Latino young adults who grew up bridging did not speak to it directly in the interviews, perhaps because for them, it is a normal experience.

Ultimately, we argue that the teachers' perceptions of immigrant students' bridging experiences, and their subsequent civic expectations based on these perceptions, may have shaped how the students responded and related to the social studies emphases on developing civic discourse and a disposition toward leadership. The teachers' perceptions in this case may have emboldened the youths' civic identities. Prior research suggests that teachers' beliefs about and expectations for their students are highly correlated with students' actual performance (Jussim & Harber, 2005). Through our analysis, it became clear that the teachers saw the balancing required of immigrant youth as a benefit to students' interaction with the social studies curriculum, and this translated into their expectations for students' performance. In particular, the teachers believed that Latino immigrant students' experience balancing the perspectives of their parents and the school facilitated their integration of core civic concepts, and ultimately, their civic and political development in young adulthood. The levels of community involvement evidenced among our Latino, immigrant young adult participants reflect the expectations their teachers reported holding for them during high school.

Even though the Latino young adults we interviewed may not have perceived their bridging experiences as worthy of comment, their sensitivity to multiple perspectives, a focus of social studies, was decidedly present. The Latino young adults, with a lifetime spent learning to recognize when and how their home and dominant cultures collided, seemed to recognize that their experiences may have been particularly salient to the social studies classroom. Specifically, Isabel reported that the social studies classroom validated this awareness as, "a very important stepping stone for us... with the two different cultures, we were already made sensitive since birth. ... But we just developed a bigger, a lot more sensitivity in that class." Her voice reflects how the social studies classroom validated her experiences bridging two worlds and helped her turn this into an awareness of other, alternate perspectives.

Consistent with the young adults' perspectives, throughout the course of the interviews, the teachers highlighted how immigrant students' unique perspectives often facilitated comprehension and internalization of the social studies lessons. To illustrate this, Mr. Rocca, a European History teacher, shared:

I also stress to them that sometimes Americans get very complacent about their own democracy. They complain about having to go out and vote; standing in line; missing their favorite television programs and things like that. And I call to their attention that, in places around the world when people go out to vote, they quite literally take their life in their hands; it can be a life threatening experience. And I always get a lot of, you know, head nodding from a lot of the Latin American students about that. I have a young man this year, he's just great. His family has just come from Venezuela and ... he is very much in agreement with what I said. He

actually spoke in class to the fact that what I said was very, very true; that ... people in countries like that very often suffer intimidation or actual physical violence.

The board-certified teachers in our sample reported emphasizing aspects of the social studies curriculum that they believed immigrant youth might connect with in particular. The teachers recognized that the immigrant youth in their classes do, in fact, bridge two cultures, and used the social studies curriculum as a vehicle to connect students' experiences to the course content.

In fact, teachers seemed to capitalize on their immigrant students' dual references and positions outside mainstream American society, drawing on students' lived experiences to prompt recognition of alternate perspectives, capitalizing on students' positions bridging two worlds. Consistent with Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran's (1996) discussion of the construction of knowledge in the social studies curriculum, as the Latino immigrant young adults were bridging two worlds in high school, they were constructing, rather than reproducing the knowledge of the dominant culture as they brought in their life experiences to expand the conceptual understanding of the social studies content. In addition, their experiences and perspectives give voice to often unexplored perspectives on course content. Civil rights issues were a particularly popular topic, as teachers encouraged students to relate the topic to their own, lived experiences. Ms. McDougal, a U.S. History and World Studies teacher, noted:

Right now we're talking about Jim Crow, and the grandfather clauses, and the polling taxes, and the literacy tests ... what does it mean to not be able to understand the ballot? .... When I'm with my Mom's group, it's, You're an American. You should learn to speak English. Our documents should not be published in any other language but English. I say this to my kids; `that is what my mother's generation thinks, the World War II generation'. (I ask) How do you respond to that? Why? Let's talk about that. What languages should it be available in? *Well, Spanish.* Is that the only one? *Well, we're the dominant minority.* So, you're going to lock out the other minorities? How about before you were the dominant minority? *Oh.* Well, what other languages are important? Well, we're in a school with Polish speaking kids, well, we can have Polish. Is that it? Well, I don't think that we should have whatever languages they speak in the Middle East. Well, why not? *Because they're all terrorists.* Ok. Here we go again.

This eagerness to engage immigrant students' lived experiences with the curriculum highlights teachers' recognition that these youth approach the social studies curriculum already having to negotiate two worlds, already having to think about how others experience the world. A central premise of the social studies curricula lies in the necessity to learn to recognize others' perspectives in order to persuade, engage and lead.<sup>1</sup> The fact that these young adults bridge two cultures and their ability to adopt others' perspectives in order to do so, frame our two specific findings. First, participation in civic discourse, and, second, development of a disposition to lead are products of the intersection of the young adult

<sup>1</sup><http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>

immigrants' life experiences with their secondary social studies school experiences, as perceived by our participants.

### Participating in Civic Discourse

If one key to civic and political engagement in young adulthood is the ability to recognize and utilize others' perspectives to understand and engage with one's community, a second is the ability to persuade. Using the course content as a springboard to develop and defend an argument, these teachers guided their students to take a position and defend it with evidence, to engage in this aspect of civic discourse, a hallmark of authentic intellectual work (Newmann, et al., 1996). Rather than being passive recipients of the teacher's instruction, the students are required to find their civic voices. In this process, the students begin to shape their civic identities. The Latino young adults repeatedly remarked on their teachers' insistence that they be able to defend a position that might not be their own, an ability built upon the students' experience recognizing and relating to alternate perspectives. Both participant groups spoke of the importance of argumentation, defined as the ability to actively seek out, identify and employ evidence to support one's position. Teachers reported developing a multi-layered argumentation process using interactive instructional activities such as debates and role-plays that required students to defend their perspectives.

Frequently, the content of the activity was almost secondary to the teachers' focus on developing empirical question-and-answer processes. Mr. Gordon, a World History teacher, went so far as to emphasize his focus on logical, persuasive arguments regardless of curricular content, stating, "My goal is to develop critical thinking, through the manipulation of evidence, through the manipulation of information... It's really a skills-oriented class. In any given year I ask them, *What topics do you want to look at?* The content is almost irrelevant." Consistent with an issues-centered approach to teaching social studies (Evans, Newmann, & Saxe, 1996), this emphasis on argumentation, evaluation of evidence, and articulation of one's perspective dominated both teacher and young adults' reflections about the formative elements of high school social studies. Teacher participants reported engaging students in activities which forced them to question, and defend oftentimes competing positions. Likewise, the Latino young adults reported having to actively defend contentious positions- often positions that ran counter to their own beliefs- in the very public forum of the social studies classroom. The *question – interrogate – defend* pattern was repeated across courses and content.

**Argumentation**—Specifically, teachers and young adults found value across different classroom activities which required one to question assumptions, evaluate evidence drawn from historical and current primary sources of evidence. These activities encompassed reading and writing, as well as debate and role plays designed to motivate students to interrogate sources of information in order to critically evaluate them. Mr. Tomasi, a World History teacher, articulated the teachers' belief in the importance of identifying, and questioning the sources of any given information.

Well, I think there are things that we do in our curriculum ...where you challenge, (you) don't accept the status quo just because someone's saying it, that's where you go back to the source. *Who's* saying it? *Why* are they saying it? *What's* the end

game? *What* are the objectives? Look at it that way. Try to be more objective ... dispassionate. (Find out) more of the story and don't get caught up in the emotions. Try to understand what's being said, for what purpose. .... I think the government class talks a lot about these issues.

In a separate interview, Ms. Jewel, a Civics and Government teacher, affirmed the civic importance of developing critical consumers of information.

In my law class they have to find a current events article that has to do with law; they have to identify any bias in the article, in the headline, in the article. I'm trying to get them to read, be thinking readers. That gives us an opportunity to talk about the media and the media's influence on us as consumers of the media.

The use of classroom discussions and learning to defend one's position with evidence (Flynn, 2009; Newstreet, 2008) is particularly important for immigrant young adults as they make their way in a political system new to them and their parents, processing information from a media also largely new to their families. Several young adults reflected (with mock frustration) on their teachers' tactics, ultimately praising the outcome. For example, Fernando noted:

(My government teacher) was really good at wanting you to say what you really feel about a subject. .... You sort of get angry because he is baiting you into these things, and you lay out your opinion and then he will ask you, *Why do you think that?* And that question sort of puts you on edge. It's like, *wait a minute!* And you have to go back and rethink everything to double check that, yeah, this is really what I think.

Similarly, when asked in the interview about how she learned to make and support the arguments that she wields as a young adult, Amanda recalls a high school teacher who insisted that, "If you have a *position* you better damned well be able to back it up or else I am not going to listen to you, and I'm not going to let anyone else listen to you (either)." Recounting this admonishment with pride; Amanda valued her ability to use evidence to persuade others to her way of thinking. In general, proficiency in constructing an informed and persuasive position is critical in the development of individual civic discourse, and civic and political debate within a community.

Similar to the skills necessary in oral argumentation, writing assignments were referenced as key in helping youth develop their opinions and support their arguments with relevant evidence. These substantive conversations, as part of classroom instruction, are key in preparing students to articulate, analyze, and evaluate their ideas (Scheurman & Newmann, 1998). The immigrant young adults referenced teachers' insistence that they defend a point of view as a key point of their connection with social studies. For instance, Ramiro reflected that:

(My teacher) emphasized our writing and being able to write a thesis. He always asked us: What is a thesis? What is our argument? What details are going to prove this argument? And that instilled a change in how I think because it allowed me to justify what my arguments are, and if I can't justify my argument then what is the point of arguing it which really it helps a lot.

In fact, teacher-utilized questioning techniques and writing assignments defending a thesis were often allayed into broader discussions—debates centered on shared readings and writings, wherein participants questioned and defended opposing viewpoints. Prior research highlights the effectiveness of questioning, discussion, and writing assignments among racially and socioeconomically diverse students (Rubin, 2007), such as the Latino immigrant youth interviewed here. These discussions allowed the students to question assumptions they may have made while honing their ideas for change into policies and plans. Mr. Jones explained:

There is a writing assignment (the students) write their own U.S. Immigration Policy; they have to come up with... five to ten ideas -- basically starting anew. How would they address the immigration policy? The following day we put some of them up on the board...let the class decide what they like and what they don't, and then we begin to break down what are the problems with this and again that might be a point that is probably the most frustrating because it generally comes down to; gee, those are great ideas but where do we generate the revenue, what do we cut in order to provide for that? And again, the students have a wide variety of issues and ideas ... you get everyone understanding all of the issues out there and then they make it a forum.

Ultimately, argumentation experiences are useful in learning that while the student voice is important and to be respected, it will be best heard when supported with relevant facts.

**Debates**—Another popular activity designed to shape students' ability to adopt and defend opposing viewpoints was the classroom debate centered on relevant current events. Teachers reported working to ensure that students could not always select a position towards which they might naturally lean; Ms. Martínez, a World and European History teacher, reported that she debriefs with her students following a class debate, asking, “How did you go about researching this when you didn't believe it? How did you actually consider arguments?” Here, the debriefing process was as important as the debate itself; the connections students made to a topic they might not have agreed with informed the development of their perspective.

Recognizing the need to adopt a different perspective is important for all students, but may be especially salient for immigrant students who approach the high school social studies curriculum having already learned to balance their two worlds. Many of the Latino young adults reported how defending an alternate perspective through debate made them acutely aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their own point of view. One young woman, Fatima, noted:

I think also one very big part of what made me specifically want to get my opinions out was she made us participate in debates. And it was very interesting because ... argued for the legalization of prostitution and my views are not in accordance with that. But I wanted a challenge.

Immigrant youth may be predisposed to incorporate the concept of walking in another's shoes, that is, the multiple perspectives that are central in the social studies classroom and developed further through the use of debates and other forms of civic discourse.



Many of the teachers reported how their immigrant students adopted alternate perspectives in debate. For example, Ms. McDougal noted that debates provide, “a wonderful growing experience and knowledge experience ... To have to conduct these debates, (students) have to defend their positions, let their colleagues listen to them, and then have the groups make informed decisions.” Not only are the teachers modeling their expected norms of civic discourse, but they are also providing the students with the tools to become engaged citizens in their current and future communities. Consistent with Dewey's (1900/1990) view of the school as an embryonic society, as well as the goals of social studies education (i.e., citizenship education), our participants reported that the teachers provided the tools necessary to develop the knowledge, behaviors and attitudes for participation in a democratic society. The public display inherent in debates emphasizes the importance of knowing the available evidence, as well as how to evaluate that evidence, articulate and defend a position valuable practice in political discourse, preparing these immigrant youth for civic and political engagement.

**Role Plays**—Teachers also prompted students to reflect on current political issues such as civil liberties through role plays. Immigrant students' balancing experiences were perceived to help them relate to social studies concepts. For instance Ms. Martínez discussed her work developing empathy in her students:

Imagine that you're a Jew living in Germany and you never know when they're going to revoke your citizenship... you live in fear every day. Here you are contributing what you can to society and you never know; they can take it away. And so we talk about that with the new immigrants coming in as well. And ... it connects it, not because they read it, but because they actually experienced those feelings even if it was only for two weeks. You know, they experienced those feelings. They felt that they knew what that was like ... I love that simulation. ... They become so invested in their roles.

Here, Ms. Martínez guided her students to connect issues in the Nazi-era role play with policy issues relevant to immigration today. Ms. Martínez and the other teachers encouraged debates and discourse concerning immigrants in today's society students to link the curricular content to lived experiences. This connection was especially relevant among immigrant youth who linked their parents' experiences to those of generations past.

Teachers also drew on immigrant students' lived experiences to develop agency and empathy in the study of history (Seixas, 1993). For example, World History teacher, Mr. Schroeder, describes his use of the following vignette to examine human willingness to cede individual freedoms to authorities.

Right before we go into the 1930's and fascism, (I teach) how easy it is to scare people. I do it in three parts. I tell the kids ... *Ok. We got this grant money...* I walk them through a wish list of how they'd like to spend the grant money... I have a form all made up with the school letterhead and I have somebody record the results. (Then, the next day, I say) *Ok. Now, the principal wants us to know that ... we're not going to get all that we want because so much of it has to go to some of the problems of the school. And they guess it right away, “Oh, graffiti.”... And I*

say, Yeah. Some of the graffiti was racist ... it's really severe right now and that brings us to another issue. We can't have everything that we want... It's leading them down a path, you promise them (one thing)... and then you tell them, (they) can't have it... I usually... do anti-Hispanic because we were a white school a long time ago and I usually have two or three white kids in my class and that's it. It's all Hispanic. And so it's so easy to get the Hispanics to turn against the white kids. And so I move them to the front of the room and I go through their binders and look for ... any kind of writing. And they just give it up. They so allow me to go through their backpack. And (they say), *Really, this doesn't mean anything.* And, (I reply) *It's going to have to go to the office.*" And when anybody says, Wait, this isn't fair...Come on, we can work this out. ... Which leads to a discussion, after (which I say)..., Look at all the rights that you just gave up because of fear.

This exercise prompts the students to recognize that individual actors had the agency to make decisions about their rights in the past, while reflecting on the historical context in which the decisions were made. Exploration of the context through role play helps students develop historical empathy and allows students to question their own assumptions—in this case, their willingness to cede their freedoms when faced with a perceived threat.

Striking in participants' discussion of argumentation, debate, and role play activities was how teachers built upon the immigrant youths' bridging experiences to develop empathy as a facet of civic development. By definition, all immigrant youth negotiate and balance their worlds. Our social studies teacher participants repeatedly reported capitalizing on this experience to facilitate the integration of alternate perspectives. Teachers' integration of immigrant students' lived experiences has the potential to contribute to their future political and civic development.

### A Disposition toward Leadership

In line with balancing and bridging experiences, our Latino immigrant young adult participants demonstrated a disposition toward leadership which they perceived to draw in part from their social studies experiences. While this disposition was explored earlier through a composite portrait of the youth, it is further detailed in this section using participants' voices. This disposition was especially apparent as the Latino young adults struggled to model the civic discourse developed in the classroom in their homes and their communities. Sam and Anthony both related the struggle to engage their parents in political conversations.

**Sam:** Every once in a while my mom will say something about a certain politician. I won't refute her opinions or her stances on a political sense, but ... I've taken a lot of classes that force you to think critically and ask these kinds of questions. So ... I ask my mom, *What about this or what about that?*, seeing what she says and what she thinks and what she feels. I feel like a lot of her opinions ... come from what the news sources say. And like a lot of her friends that she talks with, they have the same news sources... I just want... (her to think) about these things in a different sense, more critically.

*Anthony*: [Mom's] super active. My dad's... take on politics is that he doesn't like it. He does not want anything to do with it. My dad tries to be a U.S. citizen and (he says) I'm a resident right now and nothing is bothering me. But my mom voted. And, I told her, did you vote in 92? And I'll ask questions about what Reagan did; did you like Reagan? Did you like Clinton?

The desire to maintain a respectful stance in their homes, while also prompting family members to think critically about information sources and potential biases is not uncommon among immigrant youth navigating two worlds (Valdés, 1996). Expressed sensitivity to their parents' perspectives suggests an acute self-awareness among the immigrant young adult participants, as well as the disposition to be engaged and informed. This disposition also reflects Parker's (2003) enlightened political engagement, and it builds upon immigrant youths' bridging and balancing experiences.

Similarly, leadership among their peers emerged as a common theme among the Latino young adults. Their engagement in civic discourse during high school may have primed them to take on leadership positions in their communities as young adults. Sam was reflective about his potential for leadership, as well as how he might have the most impact. Noting his extensive involvement in high school and his recent transition to the university, he noted, "I'm one person and that made me think a lot about the way I can impact other people or the way that I can influence them. So I thought a lot about my leadership capabilities and the best way to reach people." Several young adults referenced formative social studies experiences with teachers who pushed them to articulate their arguments, to evaluate information, and to understand the perspectives of others. The youth saw these experiences with teachers as contributing to their disposition to lead, sometimes by example, sometimes in specific positions of power.

In discussing her role engaging other college students in the 2008 presidential debates, one young Latina made a connection between her long-standing interest in politics and her lived experiences negotiating two worlds. Amanda discussed encouraging her voting-age peers to keep up with politics, noting that, "I try to keep it light (with) references to stuff that everybody knows about... Palin ... Tina Fey on SNL; (I) draw that into the conversation and then try to cut deeper from there." Amanda recognized her own draw to politics and her ability to engage her peers through the use of humor and pop culture. Only once she engaged her peers could she guide the discussion to a deeper level. Her leadership expanded beyond her personal likelihood of voting to the importance of encouraging her peers to vote, to become informed, and to be aware of the influence of politics on their lives.

Teachers' awareness of Latino immigrant young adults' bridging and balancing experiences, we argue, facilitates their ability to engage in a critical way in the social studies classroom. Teachers perceive immigrant youth as predisposed to participate in civic discourse and as such, plant the seeds for future community leadership. However, neither of these social studies foci could be fully developed without the critical thinking skills at the heart of the social studies teachers' pedagogical practices. Our data emphasize the importance of engaging practices designed to develop critical thinking skills in order to realize the potential of the immigrant student perspective.

## Conclusions

(Our social studies teacher) would challenge us to say, “Hey, I want you to take this cause and speak”. ... It was something that we got involved (in). And he... opened our eyes and told us who we were. He made it clear ... You know most people won't even hear you out; ... You've got to understand what you're ... fighting for, what's your position. What do you think about that? So, us being 17 and 18 we react(ed) to that, **Anthony**

Like many of the Latino young adults we interviewed, Anthony saw his teachers' belief in him as primary and central to his expectations of himself in young adulthood. Anthony and his peers responded to their teacher's beliefs that they were predisposed to become leaders in their communities by becoming leaders in young adulthood. Mirroring earlier findings regarding youths' responses to teacher expectations (Jussim & Harber, 2005), Anthony and his peers' emergence in young adulthood as civic and political leaders may partially reflect their teachers' expectations that they had the skill set required to balance two worlds, a predisposition to be a leader. Across our teacher interviews, it was this belief that immigrant youth in particular are primed to lead in the civic sphere that drove their teachers' expectations for their futures. Mr. Gordon succinctly describes the teachers' perceptions of the relationship immigrant youth have with the social studies curriculum in particular:

With our immigrant population at the school ... that by taking more social studies the feeling of isolation... is dissipated... so many of the topics that are dealt with (in social studies)... plant the seed for a semblance of personal responsibility and also a confidence in the power of one, or in the power of a collective one.

Our Latino immigrant young adult and nationally certified social studies teacher participants alike all recognized the unique experience of immigrant youth and their families acclimating to a new society. Latino immigrant students' bridging experiences allowed them to incorporate two key foci of the social studies classroom: the ability to engage in civic discourse and the disposition to lead in their communities. Simultaneously, Latino immigrant youths' development of these core social studies foci was fostered by teachers' awareness of the youths' sensitivity to others' perspectives—a sensitivity necessitated by youths' lives spent bridging worlds. Latino immigrant students' experiences bridging worlds, coupled with teachers' focus on civic discourse, leadership and core social studies concepts, may work together to present a perfect storm for future political engagement.

At the start of the last century, Dewey (1900/1990) argued that an effective democracy requires not only that the highest academic performers participate, but also that the entire citizenry acquire a basic level of social studies preparation in order to actively engage in the democratic process. As a rapidly growing segment of the voting-age population (Passel & Cohn, 2008), Latino immigrant youth arguably hold the future of our democratic tradition. Together, the social studies classroom and curriculum have the potential to capitalize on Latino immigrant youths' experiences to enhance and fortify our nation's democratic tradition.

Ultimately, through our synthesis of students' and teachers' perspectives, we suggest that it is immigrant youths' bridging experiences facilitate their incorporation of the social studies teachings that allow individuals to explore and adopt alternate perspectives, engage in civic discourse, and adopt leadership positions in their communities. As an institutional force, the social studies classroom has the potential to actively engage Latino immigrant youths' experiences to foster civic and political engagement.

## Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation (RSF Project # 88-06-12, Chandra Muller, PI, and Rebecca Callahan, Co-PI) and a supplemental Presidential Award. In addition, this research was supported by grant, 5 R24 HD042849, *Population Research Center*, awarded to the Population Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Health and Child Development. The authors extend their gratitude for initial data collection and exploratory analyses to Dr. Allen Lynn for his work while a graduate research assistant on the project.

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