Experts in Their Own Lives: Children's Understanding of Their Immigration Status and, Subsequently, Their Identity

A Review of Ariana Mangual Figueroa's *Knowing Silence: How Children Talk about Immigration Status in School*

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By examining what transpires at school for children of mixed-status immigrant families in what is spoken and what is kept silent, Figueroa demonstrates students' depth of understanding of their own immigration status and how it shapes their self-identity. Through this collaborative longitudinal research, citizenship and self-advocacy are explored in a manner that amplifies marginalized students' voices and expertise.

Key words: *citizenship, immigration, children's rights, mixed-status families, student voice*

Space for the silenced and the silences

In *Knowing Silence: How Children Talk about Immigration Status in School* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024), Ariana Mangual Figueroa sets out to create the best available evidence to support the learning of teachers and educators who guide children who have mixed-family immigration status and to subsequently question the policies, practices, and working assumptions these students have to engage with throughout their education journey. The underpinning advocacy of this ethnographic work is clear: Children have a deep, insightful understanding of their own immigration status, as captured by what they say, and don't say, about it in their daily lives. By codeveloping her research with students themselves, Figueroa creates a rich, meaningful, and transparent account that can serve as a learning tool, not only for those serving children with mixed-immigration-status families, but also for all childhood practitioners to have an example of the competencies and sense of self-identity that children carry with them about elements of their lives that adults may tend to presume they don't understand.

For current childhood practitioners, and educators in the widest definition of the term, *Knowing Silence* is a critically important text on understanding the dangers of homogenizing and stereotyping students' capacities, as well as children's understanding of their place in the community. This text directly gives voice and agency to students who have been systemically silenced and their families alienated and marginalized from school community engagement through ill-informed policy and practice.

Figueroa's goal "in presenting this multiyear, multi-sited study of listening to children—to both their speech and their significant silences" (p. 1) is crystal clear: "to render visible the sociopolitical context of contemporary childhood so that teachers and researchers can critically reflect on their relationship with and responsibilities to students growing up in mixed-status communities" (p. 1). Figueroa meets this goal by directly linking policy and systemic education practices to the creation of children's sense of identity, how they view their families, and what

they think is possible within their own future (p. 144). The concept of citizenship is not relegated to adult-only domains.

It is in what transpires every day, in what is spoken and what is kept silent, that the children Figueroa learns from demonstrate not only their understanding of the complexities of their own immigration status, but also what this means to their self-identity, sense of self-worth, impact on their future education and employment potential, and even their ability to travel with their immediate family members. As Figueroa remarks, "each [child] has shown me that she is not limited by the labels assigned to her" (p. xvii). In the same spirit, Figueroa makes the point of ensuring that readers are well aware capacity is not tied to an age range or marker; she writes: "I have witnessed children as young as six years old describe the ways that citizenship can limit their freedom to travel between countries, the ability to visit with loved ones, and their family members' access to health care"(p. 19). This critical observation leads readers into sound arguments of children's overall capacity.

Critically examining who creates voice

The issue of research participant age is addressed predominately in Figueroa's methodical approaches. She notes the importance of researchers having a defendable rationale for which children they choose to participate in their studies, because in making that selection, by default, certain children are excluded and further silenced within academic dialogues and subsequent policies that may reply on academics to support decision making. Her choice to engage with 10- and 11-year-olds is based on the transition from elementary to middle school when "questions of immigration status and education opportunity would be especially salient"(p. 30), which is a more important systemic factor than capacity tied to chronological age.

For readers who wish to dive deeper on participant selection ethics, Figueroa additionally unpacks with great clarity the issues pertaining to the benefits of participation and to the perceived privilege, both of the students themselves and of their parents. By recording participants in the mindful and age-appropriate manner that she does, along with planning, debriefing, and analyzing data in collaboration with the students, Figueroa is able to capture information and perspectives that the children would have been "unable or unwilling to report during interviews" (p. 144).

Language use is positioned as an ideal foundational framework to conduct this research: "The guiding principle of language socialization—that we learn to use language through language use—has methodological parallels once we consider that what we know is inextricable from how we learn it … we can see that our beliefs about whom we consider to be knowledgeable experts shape the ways that we listen and observe" (p. 47). The methodology supports the research goal of providing voice to the silenced members of the classroom.

Figueroa offers a radical and committed positionality to her work, with her teaching experiences in the South Bronx and Brooklyn in majority Puerto Rican neighbourhoods. Along with colleagues, Figueroa founded the New York Collective of Radical Educators to advocate against policies that were "hurting our students" (p. x). Figueroa also acknowledges the complexity of the power she holds as an ally and researcher and also as an adult in the world of children (p. 46). She acknowledges her credibility, relationships, and networks as being fundamental factors of her success as a researcher to connect with education colleagues in the classroom and with families, as well as the students who ultimately participated and helped to drive the research design elements through coconstructing protocols (p. 6), collecting and analyzing data with a full circle project, and becoming interviewers themselves of older students (p. 121). These students' advocacy and skills advanced by being given the opportunity to practice and have first-hand experience with research design. This benefit is another reason Figueroa has been so mindful in the decision making on participation.

Self-worth, eating lunch, and keeping your family together

Readers will be able to reflect on the wide-reaching impact that a child's understanding of their immigration status has on everything from how and when they raise their hand in class, to whether their family feels safe enough to have them access a lunch program, to viewing authority figures as adults who have the power to deport them and their family members.

Learning about the student population she worked to collaborate with, Figeuroa describes the profiling and assumptions made regarding a student's English-language capacity based on their Spanish surnames. I can relate, having worked as a private school founder and director where families exited the public education system for similar racial profiling; it was a regular occurrence that new immigrant children arriving from any non-Caucasian majority country would be automatically enrolled in EAL in the jurisdiction I served in.

The serious family and safety implications of how and why children understand their immigration status is amplified in the example of access to a free school lunch program, where even completing a form strikes fear in the home of potential deportation or detention due to inadvertent disclosure of status (p. 63). Whether from assumptions of adults in positions of power or even policy that attempts to be accommodating, immigration status affects multiple daily decisions that a child makes.

At the individual level, Figueroa captures conversations of the student participants that articulate the ingrained sense of self-identity, even moral worth, directly linked to immigration status. "Proper" citizenship is projected to be tied to holding a good job and earning an income, to staying out of trouble with legal and government authorities, and to notions of intrinsic moral goodness (pp. 68–69). In a detailed example of a substitute teacher's activity in a classroom having students openly disclose where they were born by raising their hands, Figueroa pointedly demonstrates the lack of comprehension adults can foster about the depth to which children carry the fears and complexities of their identity and citizenship (pp. 92–96).

Acknowledgement of expert knowledge

Figueroa presents an argument near and dear to me: that the assumptions most often made about children's capacity to understand their own lives should be challenged. Within education systems and within their community at large, children absolutely have the capacity and insights to share their first-hand experience, often with a profound demonstration of clarity. They are the experts in their own lives.

In my own work in these areas of children's participatory rights, I have found it useful in the education sector to explore critical pedagogy as a mechanism to question the lack of credibility or even acknowledgement given to children's voice about such issues within their own lives. Critical pedagogy can prove effective when teaching the realities of power imbalances and barriers to equality faced in the daily lived experiences of the marginalized and often voiceless members of society. Those who are struggling are in fact the best to lead these teachings (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2010). Within the classroom, the school, the administrator's office, it is these students who are best positioned to advocate for change—which Figueroa demonstrates boldly with the students' engagement with the secondary-level students.

Peter McLaren (2020) has made recent pleas for reviving critical pedagogy relevance, and he succinctly describes the interaction between teacher and student, utilizing critical pedagogy as a model to create social change: "The knowledge co-created among students and among teachers and students working together in critical encounters with freedom is designated for use in developing social justice programs designed to bring structural change in an oppressive society" (pp. 1244–1245). It is precisely these critical encounters that Figueroa is arguing there be space

for, with the acknowledgement that students are the cocreators of social change.

Figueroa's mixed-age approach and interaction further builds self-advocacy and agency for students at all levels. Anyon (2009) credits youth with the capacity for this work and argues there is an intrinsic need for these opportunities: "In order to develop a sense of themselves as change agents, as active political players, youth also need opportunities to engage in such activity" (p. 391). Dialogue itself is a catalyst to change self-image and the sense of self-worth for a child.

Systemic change does require changes to policy and often legislation. Yet is can start and be fuelled through day-to-day conversations. Apple et al. (2009) stress that the challenge of inequality can be both formal and informal, for children and adults. They state:

> We must see the world through the eyes of the dispossessed and act against the ideological and institutional processes and forms that reproduce oppressive conditions (Apple, 1995). This repositioning concerns both political and cultural practices that embody the principles of critical education; but it also has generated a large body of critical scholarship and theory that has led to a fundamental restructuring of what the roles of research and of the researcher are (Smith, 1999; Weis & Fine, 2004). (Apple et al., p. 5)

Figueroa has leveraged her position, her experience and authenticity to cocreate with the knowledge and expertise of children to amplify the purpose of research. And I concur: If we are to listen to the voices of the marginalized, the dispossessed, this must by extension include creating space for their lessons, their teachings, in a way that is safe in the ways they need it to be. Because all children have the right to their identity, to safety, and to participate in decisions made about them (United Nations, 1989). Their engagement in the development of school policies should appear to be a self-evident mechanism of activating participatory rights.

Growing agency

The agency, advocacy, and access to knowledge of the participants was most certainly impacted through this research experience. The activation of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child—in short, the right to participate in decisions made about them—deserves a broader and wider examination. When we do listen to the words and the deliberate silences of marginalized children? What is the wide-spread individual agency and community growth that occurs as a result? What systemic change can be shaped?

Figueroa and her research participants gave a decade of their life's effort and energy to support this study. This is what creating evidence for systemic change is going to take. The challenge to us all is to invest the time and resources (emotional, mental and financial) to explore how to create a swell of evidence to raise up the voices of the silenced. In the meantime, we must be mindful that the conversations and the choice of our shared words each and every day matter to the children in front of us in ways that mean more to them than we as adults will ever comprehend.

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