Troubling Belonging: The Racialized Exclusion of Young Immigrants and Migrants of Color

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Abstract

In this article, four Latina educators of Color trouble the neutrality of belonging, exploring its politics. They collectively revisit and reflect on their memories and lived experiences as immigrant children of Color and as young children of immigrants and migrants of Color in the United States. They employed *pláticas* as method to prompt the sharing of memories, experiences, and stories imparting personal knowledge, familial practices, and cultural histories. Through *pláticas*, they developed a collective understanding of their fragmented memories as situated representations of how belonging engenders othering children of immigrants and migrants of Color. As they reflected on the harm they withstood, named dehumanizing schooling experiences, and reflected on the exclusion and bordering etched in their memories, they noted how belonging had sponsored their marginalization. After audio-recording and transcribing their *pláticas*, they identified transcript sections associated with heightened emotional displays, shared resonance, and cultural memory. Then, they creatively recombined sections of original transcripts to reveal things about the experiences of young immigrant children of Color and of children of immigrants and migrants of Color that early childhood educators ought to know. Findings unveil the harm enacted by schooling on young immigrant children of Color and young children from immigrant and migrant families of Color in the name of belonging. Implications, offered as poetic advice, urge early childhood education policy and practice to upend the harmful pseudo-neutrality of belonging.

Keywords Politics of belonging · Immigrant children · Early childhood education · Race · Marginalization · *Pláticas* as method

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Résumé

Dans cet article, quatre éducatrices latines de couleur perturbent la neutralité de l'appartenance en explorant son aspect politique. Elles réfléchissent ensemble en se rappelant leurs souvenirs et les expériences vécues comme enfants immigrants de couleur, et comme jeunes enfants d'immigrants et de migrants de couleur aux États-Unis. Elles emploient les 'pláticas' comme méthode pour inciter le partage de souvenirs, d'expériences et de récits transmettant une connaissance personnelle, des pratiques familiales et des histoires culturelles. Grâce à ces pláticas, elles élaborent une compréhension collective de leurs souvenirs fragmentés comme représentations localisées de la façon dont l'appartenance engendre une aliénation des enfants d'immigrants et de migrants de couleur. En réfléchissant sur le mal qu'elles ont subi, en nommant les expériences scolaires déshumanisantes et en réfléchissant sur l'exclusion et la démarcation gravées dans leurs mémoires, elles constatent comment l'appartenance a pesé sur leur marginalisation. Après l'enregistrement audio et la transcription de leurs pláticas, elles ont identifié des parties de transcriptions associées à des manifestations d'émotions intenses, à la résonance commune et à la mémoire culturelle. Elles ont ensuite recombiné de façon créative des parties des transcriptions originales, afin de révéler des choses que les éducateurs de la petite enfance devraient connaître sur les expériences de jeunes enfants immigrants de couleur et d'enfants d'immigrants et de migrants de couleur. Les résultats dévoilent le mal infligé, au nom de l'appartenance, par la scolarisation des jeunes enfants immigrants de couleur et des jeunes enfants issus de familles d'immigrants et de migrants de couleur. Présentées sous forme de conseils poétiques, les implications pressent les politiques et pratiques en éducation de la petite enfance de renverser la néfaste pseudo-neutralité de l'appartenance.

Resumen

En este artículo, cuatro educadoras latinas de color cuestionan la neutralidad del sentido de pertenencia explorando sus políticas. En forma colectiva revisitaron y reflexionaron sobre sus recuerdos y experiencias como niñas latinas de color y como niñas pequeñas de in/migrantes de color en los Estados Unidos. Emplearon pláticas como método para compartir recuerdos, experiencias e historias impartiendo conocimiento personal, prácticas familiares e historias culturales. Por medio de pláticas desarrollaron un entendimiento colectivo de sus recuerdos fragmentados como representaciones situadas de la forma en que el sentido de pertenencia suscita la marginalización de niñas de in/migrantes de color. Mientras reflexionaban sobre el daño sufrido, mencionaban experiencias escolares inhumanas y reflexionaban sobre la exclusión y limitaciones en sus recuerdos, notaron cómo el sentido de pertenencia había propiciado su marginalización. Luego de grabaciones de audio y transcripción de sus pláticas identificaron secciones de la grabación asociadas con muestras intensas emotivas, resonancia compartida y memoria cultural. Luego, en forma creativa recombinaron secciones de las transcripciones fragmentadas para revelar información sobre experiencias de niños pequeños inmigrantes de color y niños de inmigrantes y migrantes de color que los educadores de preescolar debían conocer. Los resultados revelan el daño ocasionado por el sistema escolar hacia niños in/migrantes de color

en nombre del sentido de pertenencia. Las implicaciones, ofrecidas como recomendación poética, urgen a que las políticas y prácticas de educación preescolar cambien drásticamente la pseudo neutralidad nociva del sentido de pertenencia.

Introduction

The importance of belonging in the early years is well established (Bowlby, 1969; Over, 2016). Yet, not every child is afforded belonging as a right. Whereas belonging is often associated with positive development and well-being and regarded as a neutral process, belonging is, in fact, deeply political and often racialized.

Within the context of the United States, the seemingly neutral concept of belonging serves to safeguard privileges associated with whiteness: “Whites as a group remain at the top of the racial hierarchy, and a majority view that as still appropriate. Important white views, values, and framing remain normative, the societal standards to be adopted by children of all backgrounds as they grow up and by new immigrants” (Feagin, 2013, p. 93). Ultimately, the United States is a nation in which “ingroup superiority and outgroup inferiority [are] ... a distinctive way of life that dominates major aspects of society” (pp. 10–11).

Because white superiority “help[s] structure, normalize, and make sense out of society” (Feagin, 2013, p. 11), to belong in America is to be white (Morrison, 1992). This is visible and reified when racial stereotypes and racist ideologies become reinscribed as racialized narratives enacted in everyday microaggressions and in attempts to intimidate those deemed inferior and othered due to factors such as accents. It is in this context, in which white superiority determines societal conventions and norms, that four Latina educators of Color collaborated to trouble the concept of belonging as neutral. Engaging Yuval-Davis’ (2006) conceptualization of the politics of belonging, we reflected on our collective memories as young immigrant and migrant children of Color and/or as children of immigrant and migrant families of Color—henceforth im/migrant¹ children of Color.

We asked:

- What are our shared memories of schooling in the mainland United States?
- What do these memories mean for us as early childhood educators?
- How might we engage our shared memories to understand the politics of belonging?

These questions guided our inquiry into school belonging as it pertains to the lived experiences of im/migrant children of Color. This important topic has been the focus of too few studies to date, despite the reality that Latinxs often have “feelings of not belonging in U.S. society” (DeNicolo et al., 2017, p. 501).

¹ We employ the term im/migrant to index both immigrant and migrant; this is important because it conveys how Americans born in territories such as Puerto Rico who migrate to the mainland United States are often othered and assumed to be immigrants.

Troubling the politics of belonging, in this study we sought to understand the political project of belonging stamped in our own experiences, memories, and reflections. This is significant because while research examining the experiences of immigrants in the United States has been going on for over 100 years, such scholarship “continues to largely neglect issues involving race relations” (Sáenz & Douglas, 2015, p. 166). Attending to the relationship between the racialization of immigrants and the politics of belonging, we came together. Examining our own lived experiences as young im/migrants with the knowledge that “policies and procedures ... differentially allocate resources and opportunities to [its] citizenry in a racialized manner” (Sáenz & Douglas, 2015, p. 167), we recognized that im/migrants of Color are often othered and experience obstacles to feeling accepted and barriers to belonging in the United States. We acknowledged, furthermore, having each been seduced into forgetting the harm and trauma we experienced as we were routinely excluded and othered in/through our schooling as racialized im/migrant children. As such, we very intentionally recognize race as an important aspect of “immigrants’ collective experiences” (p. 167).

Belonging

Belonging is a fundamental human need and has long been linked to the wellness of individuals and communities (Stratigos et al., 2014). Belonging is also a key concept in the early years; it impacts young children’s cognitive and socioemotional development in paramount ways, affecting attachment, transitions, and young children’s beliefs in their potential and capacity (Bowlby, 1969; Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Tillet & Wong, 2018).

In their review of literature, Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that many of the strongest emotions people experience, both positive and negative, are linked to belongingness: “being accepted, included, or welcomed leads to a variety of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, elation, contentment, and calm), whereas being rejected, excluded, or ignored leads to potent negative feelings (e.g., anxiety, depression, grief, jealousy, and loneliness)” (p. 508). A literature review by Gere and MacDonald (2010) affirmed, “the need to belong has strong effects on people’s cognitions, emotions, and behaviours, and a chronically unmet need has many negative consequences that can profoundly affect an individual’s life” (p. 110). When young children feel a sense of belonging, they develop a positive self-concept of identity; when they “are deprived of a sense of belonging, it has negative consequences for their well-being” (Over, 2016, p. 1).

Sumsion and Wong’s (2011) review of literature mapped “the conceptual landscapes in which understandings about belonging are located” (p. 30). After selecting key sources, representing multiple “cultural, ontological and intellectual traditions, including those often rendered peripheral by the dominance of the ‘global north’” (p. 31), they identified dimensions and axes of belonging. Dimensions of belonging account for how a person can belong to different places and times in multiple ways: emotionally, socially, culturally, spatially, temporally,

physically, spiritually, morally/ethically, politically, and legally. Axes of belonging attend to the cultivation and enactment of belonging; that is, the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

The Politics of Belonging

The concept of “belonging is, above all, a political process through which different groups continuously produce and reproduce the boundaries of membership” (Nagel, 2011, p. 120); it is political, being entangled with the “exercise of power and different hegemonic political projects” (Yuval-Davis, 2016, p. 367). The politics of belonging is “the dirty work of boundary maintenance” that “sometimes physically, but always symbolically, separate the world population into ‘us’ and ‘them’” (p. 368). “The very act of belonging means that boundaries and borders are being produced and reproduced, simultaneously disciplining the behavior of those on the inside, while keeping others out” (Stratigos et al., 2014, p. 178). In the United States, belonging preserves white superiority, upholding whiteness.

The politics of belonging entails “the maintenance and reproduction of the boundaries of the community of belonging by the hegemonic political powers ... their contestation, challenge and resistance by other political agents.... [and] the determination of what is involved in belonging” (Yuval-Davis, 2016, p. 368). Despite being situated as neutral, common conceptualizations of belonging can be harmful when they are employed to exclude, devalue, subjugate, and other.

For many young im/migrant children, experiencing belonging in early years education plays a key role in their self-concept (Souto-Manning, 2013). Yet, communicative norms and practices may serve as barriers to belonging for im/migrant children whose communicative practices at home may differ significantly from communicative practices employed in settings of early education such as named language(s), interactional patterns, and turn-taking (Souto-Manning, 2013). Indeed, the very concept of “academic language” in the United States is racialized and protects the norms, practices, and values associated with whiteness (Baker-Bell, 2020) while communicating to those whose ways with words veer from white norms that they do not belong. Clearly, there are many ways belonging can serve to other.

Employing Sumsion and Wong’s (2011) axes of belonging as analytical framework, we seek to make visible how belonging operates according to the interests, decisions, and judgments made by those in power via categorizations. Categorizations attribute specific positionings on “grids of power relations” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 199), focus on distinguishing insiders and outsiders, and “are strongly implicated in inclusion and exclusion in numerous national, local, cultural, social and personal agendas” (Sumsion & Wong, 2011, p. 34). Categorizations may be troubled and interrupted (via resistance) and/or performed uncritically through repeated conventions and practices. Performative belonging is likely to be harmful to young im/migrant children, as they are expected and under pressure to engage in (harmful) processes of erasure and/or assimilation to try to fit in, to try to avoid exclusion, to try to belong.

Methodology

Knowing the weight and power of our memories, which we had learned to forget, we engaged in the “radical act of (re)membering ... as an act of decolonization” (Dillard, 2012, p. 4). We engaged in a series of *pláticas* to share memories, experiences, and stories. Through *pláticas*, our sharing became a process of (re)membering that we came to embrace and describe “as an act of piece-gathering, of collecting and assembling fragments of a larger whole” (Dillard, 2012, p. 4).

A research method rooted in Latina feminist methodology (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016), *pláticas* afford the sharing of memories, experiences, and stories from personal knowledge, familial practices, and cultural histories. In our case, *pláticas* allowed us to acknowledge the power of our cultural memories, undertake a process of collective (re)membering, and collectively problematize our shared experiences of learning to forget.

“We ... grew up platicando in our familias” (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 98). As such, *pláticas* are part of our lives and identities. In *pláticas*, we saw ourselves in each other’s memories; instead of looking away, we asked questions, drew connections, and looked deeper. We shared our individual identities and experiences while bringing together our collective experiences, intersectionally accounting for how we accepted and resisted the politics of belonging. As we bore witness to each other’s experiences of schooling, we came to understand our fragmented memories and events in relation to one another—as situated representations of a system firmly rooted in the politics of belonging.

Through our *pláticas* over the years, we have authored and coauthored stories, built deep relationships firmly rooted in trust and marked by belonging, and shared our vulnerabilities. This is because “a *plática* methodology has a relational principle that honors participants as co-constructors of knowledge ... participants are viewed as contributors and co-constructors of the meaning making process” (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016, p. 111). Our *pláticas* oriented to a love ethic rooted in the understanding that “[t]here can be no love without justice” (hooks, 2001, p. 19), and also in humility, the understanding that “no one knows it all, no one is ignorant of everything” (Freire, 1998, p. 39).

Research process

While our *pláticas* had typically taken place around a table, because of restrictions associated with the spread of COVID-19, we met in online Zoom sessions for this research study. Even within this unfamiliar space, we were not self-conscious, but felt free to share. We agreed, disagreed, laughed, and cried. We came together and co-constructed a site for collective healing rooted in radical love

(Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; hooks, 2001). Most of all, we learned about each other.

We met for close to six hours over the course of two months (June and July 2020). We regarded our *pláticas* as a site of collective healing. As *curandera*² Elena Avila (1999) explained: “A *plática* is a deep heart-to-heart talk that continues in installments for as long as it needs to ... until everything has been said” (p. 143). Our Zoom sessions varied in length, according to the specifics of the (re)membering taking place.

As revealed by Fierros and Delgado Bernal (2016), “in Aztec tradition *pláticas* served as a space that allows the *curandera* to learn about her client while also educating or providing healing” (p. 113). We engaged in listening and telling, understanding the shared nature of some of our social, psychological, and emotional ills. Our relationship was authentic; we had known each other for close to a decade, having occupied multiple, shifting roles in relation to each other (e.g., teacher, professor, parent, student, mentor, friend). Because of our familiarity with *pláticas*, our shared identities as Latinas of Color and early educators, and our existing relationships, we shared our stories and (re)memberings without difficulty or reservations. Our *pláticas* were marked by reflexivity, reciprocity, and vulnerability—built on a foundation of trust. All of us shared, asked and answered questions, and bore witness to each other’s memories and (re)memberings.

Unlike interviews, our *pláticas* were marked by back-and-forth, not by questions asked by the researcher and answered by participants. Our positionality as co-researchers supported our learning from and with each other. Through *pláticas*, we shared memories of our experiences as young im/migrants of Color in U.S. schooling. We (re)membered ourselves, developing a critical meta-awareness of how harmful such experiences had been to us individually and collectively. This was a complex process that afforded us the analysis of our wounds across multiple dimensions and borders of belonging—including but not limited to emotional, social, cultural, spatial, temporal, physical, political, and legal dimensions (Sumsion & Wong, 2011).

Making connections between our experiences and the focus of our research, we analyzed our wounds, picking scabs and sharing scars, mapping and scrutinizing the collective harm we withstood in/through U.S. schooling. This entailed a shift,

out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 101)

This shift was critical, in that it allowed us to acknowledge how the normative conceptualization of belonging is rooted in the right to exclude and, as such, inflicts harm.

² Spanish word for healer.

After transcribing our *pláticas*, we identified segments that relayed our experiences as im/migrant children and/or as children of im/migrants in early schooling. Because only three of us experienced early schooling as im/migrants and children of im/migrants, only three of our (re)memberings are included—Jessica Martell’s, whose parents migrated from Puerto Rico as children; Patty Pión’s, whose parents immigrated from the Dominican Republic; and Karina Malik’s, whose mother immigrated from Colombia. We also identified segments that contained our advice for the education of im/migrant children. Within these segments, we identified points of shared resonance according to gestures, oral and written comments, laughter, and facial and oral expressions. From these, we constructed trans/scripts: “compressed renderings of original transcripts that utilize techniques from poetry and the dramatic arts to highlight the data’s emotional ‘hot points’ and heightened language from the original discourse” (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2009, p. 2535), intentionally centering our lived experiences as first- and second-generation Latinx im/migrants of Color.

Findings

We present our findings via trans/scripts (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2009)—creative (re)combinations across original transcripts that re-present our shared memories of schooling in the United States and the meaning of these memories for us as early childhood educators. To construct trans/scripts from the original transcripts of our *pláticas*, we read and reread transcripts while listening to the audio-recordings of our *pláticas*. This process allowed us to identify transcript sections associated with heightened emotional displays, shared resonance, and cultural memory.

After gathering pieced memories and fragmented experiences, working together to make them whole, we creatively recombined sections of original transcripts across *plática* transcripts to reveal important things early childhood educators ought to know about our experiences as young im/migrant children of Color. Engaging our collective (re)memberings to make sense of the politics of belonging and how it affects im/migrant children and children of im/migrants of Color, we reread and analyzed our trans/script through the lenses of the axes of belonging—categorization, resistance, and performance (Sumsion & Wong, 2011).

With respect to categorization, we sought to understand the politics of belonging, attending to the grounds on which judgments of belonging/not belonging were made, who was included and excluded, and how boundaries were articulated and by whom. Resistance served as an analytical tool to identify and reflect on the tensions between inclusion and exclusion, what enabled negotiations of and resistance to categories of belonging, and the relationship between categories of belonging and grids of power. Finally, performativity was a tool that allowed us to reread our experiences and come to new understandings regarding everyday practices that contributed to us (not) belonging, and how and by whom categories of belonging were maintained.

The trans/scripts below are composed of (re)memberings that elicited collective resonance; they offer insights into belonging and/in the education of young im/migrant children of Color in U.S. schools via memories and (re)memberings,

illustrating the denial of belonging within and across our lived experiences. As portrayed in the trans/scripted (re)memberings below, Karina, Jessica, and Patty had each been categorized and harmed as young children. Their trans/scripted (re)memberings illustrate exclusion and bordering enacted via labels (e.g., special education, ESL) and codified through experiences of dehumanization in schooling across temporal and spatial dimensions (e.g., being berated for playing with hair, being physically harmed for not reading a notebook label). In short, these trans/scripted (re)memberings invite us to consider the harm enacted in/through U.S. schooling on young im/migrant children and children of im/migrants.

Karina's Trans/Scripted (Re)Membering

The very first time I remember experiencing exclusion was when my teachers and my principal decided to refer me to special education. And it was merely just because I obviously wasn't reading at grade level. I wasn't performing at grade level. So, my vivid memory of being referred to special education was standing outside of the principal's office because my mom had been called into the principal, who was a white Latina. I will never forget what she told my mom. She was like: "Imagine that your daughter is on a ladder and instead of going up, she's going down. That is what's happening to your daughter's learning. That is why she needs to go into special education." She was saying that I was regressing, without using that term. And my mom, as you all know, fought tooth and nail to not let me go into special education because she truthfully believe[d] that I didn't need special education.

I think the part that I haven't told everyone is that my *tías*³ in Colombia are teachers. And I would go to Colombia in the summers because my mom could not afford childcare here. So as a single mother, it was cheaper to buy a ticket. One way to Colombia and the exchange rate between pesos and dollars was much more beneficial. She sent me to Colombia and that's where she had me evaluated by both of my aunts, who were teachers. And they were like: "No, she's fine. She's developing typically."

Obviously, the difference was that my *tías* evaluated me in Spanish. Spanish was my dominant language growing up. So that was the first time. I think I was in second grade because either first or second, I'm pretty sure was second grade. Yeah, so then at that point, I got intervention services with a teacher who was a Brown Latina, and she was the best thing that ever happened to me; we spoke about all the things Walter Mercado and Selena. I was in the best place I could have ever been.

That same year, at the beginning of the year when I was referred [to special education], my second-grade teacher was in the middle of doing a read aloud. We were all sitting on the floor and I was playing with one of my friend's hair on the rug. I loved playing with hair because my mom was a hairdresser, so it was like my thing, like, I used to braid hair, still braid hair, like, I love it. And the teacher turned around and literally screamed at me. She was like, "you're not in a hair salon. Where do you

³ Spanish word for aunts.

think you are? You don't even know how to read and you're focused on like other people's hair." And then she took it to the next level.

I literally froze. My thing, whenever I would be scared, my trauma response would always be freezing. Always. Like, I never really responded because responding would get me in trouble. So, I would just stand there. She sent me down to the first-grade teacher. She was like: "Get out! You don't even belong in second grade." I was crying hysterically while walking down the stairs going back to my first-grade teacher. I remember so much trying to fit in, to belong. In Head Start, I would wear another girl's clothes. I would change in the bathroom to try to fit in when I was like three or four. As a teacher, I know my kids want to fit in like I did, you know? Who wants to feel like they don't belong, right?

Jessica's Trans/Scripted (Re)Membering

Even though we are over a decade in age difference, I'm listening to you [Karina] and I'm surprised that even your generation experienced some similarities. My first memory of "oh shit, school is harmful" was when I was three or four years old. I was enrolled in the local Head Start and I hated it. I couldn't come to eat the lunch, green beans ... not what we ate at home. And they were very big on nutrition and they thought they knew what was right for me in terms of nutrition, so I don't remember going often to Head Start. I think my grandma (who raised me) let me play hooky a lot.

From there I went to kindergarten in the public school, right across the street from my house. I remember having this fear that they would make me eat green beans and my grandmother telling me: "No, it's a whole new school. It's going to be different." I go in and naturally see some of the same faces. My peers' faces were familiar because it was in the same neighborhood. I couldn't handle it. I also don't remember going often. Then it was time to go to first grade. For some reason, first grade seemed to be serious.

My family had very little trust in the public school system because my uncle dropped out, my mother got pregnant at 16, so my grandmother really pressured my mother to enroll me in the local Catholic school. Religion was very big for my grandmother. It was what was going to save us.

Right before the school year started, I had to go take a test. I was five years old. My grandmother made my mother, about 20, 21, take me because she didn't want to embarrass me. She didn't speak English, she only spoke Spanish. So, we get to the school and I'm sent to the front of the cafeteria. My mom is sent to the back to start filling out paperwork and I'm given a test. I don't remember what was on the test. All I know is that when all was said and done, I was accepted, right on the spot. Of course, I was accepted; I was tuition for the school. But my mother was told that I needed support because I didn't speak enough English. And the reason they knew I didn't speak enough English was because I colored the cat green. I'm not sure

if there were directions that said color that cat a certain color or they just gave me crayons and I went to work.

I remember my mother having that conversation, that I colored the cat the wrong color. I was in ESL⁴ twice a week. Now, here's the thing, I always spoke English. I was a simultaneous bilingual. I learned Spanish, English and, Karina, you probably were the same, but the teachers just didn't know about how language developed.

Then, a couple things happened in first grade. I do have some really awful memories. One was, we had lots of notebooks. My teacher asked me to go get my spelling notebook. I didn't know how to read. So, I pull out a notebook, and every notebook that I brought to her that didn't say spelling on it, I got hit with a ruler on my hand. And this happened about two or three times and I would go back to my desk and the little boy behind me was crying. I was asking him for help, but he didn't know how to read either. I eventually got it right. But that was really, really bad.

This same teacher, three years later, called me back to her classroom as a fourth grader to yell at me and berate me. My sister was now in her class. She's sitting in the front of the classroom. All the kids are looking at her. My sister is standing next to her, crying. She shows me a first-grade test—maybe spelling again—and she starts yelling at me: “I don't know if she's [ableist slur] or [ableist slur],⁵ but she failed this test, and I asked her to have your mother sign it and she forged your mother's signature.” This was the first time we were around that many white adults, besides our doctors—our physician and our dentist. We had learned to respect them. You just respected your teacher even if they were harming us. This same teacher had misspelled my last name. My grandmother took my notebook and crossed out the way the teacher spelled it and spelled it correctly. I remember crying hysterically because I didn't want to get in trouble with my teacher because she spelled my name wrong and I was willing to keep my name misspelled for the rest of my life so that I wouldn't get in trouble. Those memories do stay with me.

After I became a teacher, I realized when kids would tell me: “Yeah, that's how you say my name. It's okay. You can call me that.” I often connected it to that fear I had of my teacher and my grandma demanding that my name be spelled correctly. And it was just, you know, just keep going, ignore me, pretend I'm not here.

Patty's Trans/Scripted (Re)Membering

I've always done poorly in reading and writing in any literacy-based class. I remember being upset because I wasn't in the highest reading group. And I'm a kid that my mom, for whatever money she made, managed to buy me \$30 worth of Scholastic books every month. Teachers were getting the free posters because my mom was buying. My mom always made it a point to buy just whatever books I wanted to read. I was competitive and I wanted to be in the higher reading group. And I don't know if the teacher told me or I made the connection. I remember the assessment.

⁴ English as a Second Language.

⁵ In accordance with Rosa's Law, signed by U.S. President Barack Obama, we do not use the r-word or other ableist slurs, even when voiced by someone else.

And I remember being placed in a low reading group because of that one test and being kind of frustrated. The gist I got was that I wasn't strong enough in reading. So, I had to sit down, I had to read the books, I had to do the assessments. She would grade them and based on that she would let me move up.

I remember having been expected to read more during choice time [play in the classroom]. It's funny when we talk about memories, these are the things we remember. What are the memories that kind of stick with you after all these years? Even though my mom bought \$30 of Scholastic books every month, she was not seen as a caring or involved mom. She missed school events because she was working. Teachers and administrators judged her. Of course, they also judged me.

It's funny when you think of the flood of memories. I remember the last, like, month of school. I had to sit for what seemed all day. Everyone's hanging out and I was sitting there finishing the penmanship books. I think somewhere, I realized that penmanship books were crap because my handwriting never got better and I think of the muscular fatigue. I think I probably would have been a candidate for OT [occupational therapy]. And I was a kid who had scissors at home like I had access to a bunch of things, but I don't mind, I still can't hold chopsticks a certain way. But I didn't get special ed, OT, speech. I was expected to do it on my own. They were, like, we think you are kind of okay.

I remember being in third grade, and we're learning world history and we're learning about the Palestinian refugees and I remember being really uncomfortable about it and trying to talk to my teacher about how I didn't think it was fair that the Palestinians were pushed out, and I got shut down really fast and told never to repeat anything like that again. Right, that's not the history, the history is that the lands belong to the Israelis and it wasn't until years later, I was like, "Oh, I've never been okay with the occupation of Palestine." So, I was shut down all over the place. I was silenced. And I'm a talker.

Discussion

These trans/scripts are portraits of our shared memories of early schooling in the mainland United States. Reflecting on the meaning(s) of our shared memories, as current early childhood educators, it became clear that belonging was not a given, for us. Belonging is not a given for our racialized im/migrant students, who sometimes inflict harm onto themselves to fit in. Our (re)memberings show that belonging is not a given and belonging is not neutral.

Belonging requires work, intentionality, and investment. This, we came to understand, is particularly the case for racialized im/migrant children, who were and are othered through multiple axes of belonging. Our trans/scripts offer powerful insights into the political project of belonging, especially with respect to the lived experiences of immigrant children of Color, migrant children of Color, and young children of immigrant and migrant families of Color.

Rereading our trans/scripts through the lenses of the axes of belonging—categorization, resistance, and performance (Sumsion & Wong, 2011)—it is clear that Karina, Jessica, and Patty shared their (re)memberings of not being afforded

membership in the category of belonging. They had each been told in many ways that they did not belong in U.S. schools and schooling—Karina through her referral to special education, Jessica through her referral to ESL, and Patty through her placement in the low reading group. Their trans/scripts invoke questions pertaining to the othering of im/migrant children and of children of im/migrants.

The terms of belonging had been determined by those in power and were firmly rooted in the protection of racialized privileges with the intent to exclude. Karina, Jessica, and Patty were physically and morally excluded, dehumanized, and deemed outsiders. Even as U.S.-born U.S. citizens, they were constructed as other in ways that mitigated their belonging (Sumsion & Wong, 2011). Those deemed unquestionably “American”—as white speakers of white English (Baker-Bell, 2020; Morrison, 1992)—were arbiters of belonging.

Karina relayed how her mother resisted processes of categorization as she fought to keep her out of special education. Karina’s mother not only contested the recommendation of educators, but subverted categories of belonging by sending Karina to Colombia over the summers to be educated by her *tías*. Even though she knew Karina was being schooled in the United States, she recognized that she was not being educated. As such, she resisted the established category of exclusion (special education) as she created openings to craft a space of belonging for Karina across temporal, emotional, social, cultural, and spatial dimensions. With her *tías* in Colombia, Karina experienced attachment, lived and learned with a range of communities, and inhabited different settings, factors that made learning more meaningful and ultimately increased her feelings of belonging.

In all the trans/scripts, judgments of inclusion, exclusion, care, and dedication were made based on whiteness and approximating whiteness (Leonardo, 2009). For example, even though Patty’s mother did not make much money, she prioritized the purchase of books. Yet, Patty’s mother’s absence from school-based events led to judgments that she did not care about her daughter’s education. Ultimately, the boundaries of belonging in U.S. schooling were not permeable. Try as they did, Karina, Jessica, and Patty experienced not belonging throughout their schooling. Although they tried to assimilate by approximating whiteness (Leonardo, 2009) and/or engaging in processes of erasure, they were not afforded belonging even as they withstood psychological and emotional harm, being yelled at, berated, and diminished.

The trans/scripts are rife with situated representations of performing belonging. Karina, Jessica, and Patty engaged in the production of selves as belonging even as they were categorized as other. They enacted their positionings as subjects who belonged. For example, Karina borrowed a classmate’s clothes “to fit in.” Jessica was willing to have her last name misspelled for the rest of her life so as not to be berated, punished, and excluded. Patty spent choice time reading instead of playing and exploring, so she could perform as a reader worthy of the “high” reading group. While multiple dimensions are embedded in each example, categorization, resistance, and performativity (Sumsion & Wong, 2011) help us make sense of shared experiences and shed light on how educators might interrupt the harms that are caused and suffered when young im/migrant children are excluded and othered.

In addition to the trans/scripts above, Karina, Jessica, and Patty talked about the financial burden of buying food at school. Jessica recounted: “There was no free lunch. And so, there were times when I didn’t have food. Milk cost 10 cents and chocolate milk cost 15 cents. So, if I didn’t have lunch from home, I would sometimes buy a milk and that would take me over.” Karina followed up with: “I used to steal 25 cents for my mom’s purse, and I would buy chips and that’s what I would survive on all day. So, I feel you. I feel you.” While not fully explored here, it is important to note that financial hardships connected to past histories of colonization and what the authors felt was forced im/migration affected their schooling and served as another aspect of the durable borders that kept them from belonging. Karina, Jessica, and Patty knew that no matter how hard their parents and grandparents had worked, histories and legacies of colonization affected their schooling. As such, their (re)memberings served as powerful counterstories to the myth of meritocracy, a dominant sociopolitical liberal ideology that was built from and supports narratives and norms that “operate to disadvantage people of Color and further advantage Whites” (Bernal, 2002, p. 108).

As we (re)membered, we came to recognize our shared experiences as im/migrants and children of im/migrants whose mis-education bordered us and led us to accept (or at least tolerate) harms inherent in being excluded, in inhabiting spaces of “not belonging.” Our mis-education, the denial of our right to learn about our own histories, the histories of our ancestors, prevented us from recognizing the systemic nature of our oppression and had in some ways led us to regard exclusion (“not belonging”) as an individual problem (residing in ourselves as individuals) instead of a societal issue (inscribed and re-inscribed via borders within and across numerous dimensions). This had led us to internalize our oppression, offering important learnings for early childhood educators, which we draw from in the following section and offer as poetic advice.

This poetic advice is what we grew up knowing as *consejos*, “cultural narratives” that encode “feelings, perceptions, actions, and responses” regarding power relations ... between families and schools” (Delgado-Gaitán, 1994, p. 298). We draw on our cultural intuition and experiences in this way to illustrate the need to recognize that families of Color and im/migrant families have important knowledge, deep wisdom, and powerful stories to tell.

Poetic Advice as *Consejos* Regarding Educating Im/migrant Children

We conclude this article with advice for teachers of young im/migrant children of Color presented as poetic trans/scripts. The titles of these poetic trans/scripts point to specific recommendations for teaching young im/migrant children: teach me my history, learn about me, and learn about im/migration (the impetus, reasons, and responsibilities).

Teach Me My History

It was hard for me to even discuss
 How race or colonialism affected why
 My family moved to the mainland United States
 It wasn't part of my curriculum at all
 We didn't have that knowledge

Even though I went to school in El Barrio
 Where the Young Lords were powerful
 And all my peers were Puerto Rican or Black
 We didn't learn anything about colonialism
 Now I know that economically, there was no way to survive

We needed teachers who loved us, who saw us, who taught us
 Whose ultimate goal was our humanity
 Who told us: You belong, I see you
 Let's unpack the reasons why your family had to come here
Let's talk about it. Let's arm you with this knowledge.

Learn About Me

My entire elementary school
 So many of my teachers be telling me
 I was Indian because of my last name
 I would always be so confused

Learn about me, teach me
 Don't try to categorize me
 Don't try to tell me that you know who I am
 Better than me or my family

Understand that learning is not only happening in the classroom
 Learning is happening in so many other spaces
 and that learning will take precedence
 That learning is survival for us

For me, what would have been helpful is if my teachers
 Had invested time in getting to know my family's story
 Had asked me to show on Google Maps, where I spent my summers in Colombia
 I would have so much language for that

I would tell you the name of every single cow, and how to milk those cows
 I would tell you how that dog was in charge of these cattle
 there's so much knowledge that I had that wasn't real in the classroom
 That didn't belong in U.S. schools

I wish my teachers would have asked me, included me,
 my family, my knowledge, my experiences
 because I think they would have
 understood me very differently.

Learn About Im/migration

I always respected our immigrant parents,
 but when my partner told me his immigration story
 crossing the border,
 I don't think I talked for about three days after that

I realized that in that moment,
 Anything and everything I've done is shit
 Compared to any parent who's taken that risk
 I changed the way I view the parents of my kids

A lot of my parents are undocumented
 A lot of my kids crossed the border
 I realized that there is nothing that I'm going to ever do
 That's that hard, that risky

So one of the things I've started to do is I push back
 when teachers are like, "why doesn't that parent _____?"
 I shut it down because it's the desperation for survival
 People need to hear those stories

Understand having to leave everything behind, crossing the border
 Even if they feel they've done nothing else for their kids
 These parents have done everything for their kids, risking their lives
 They've done everything they possibly can

And to those who comment:
 If you don't like this country, why don't you go somewhere else?
 That's what im/migrants do
 As their homes are gutted by the U.S., they don't have another choice.

These *consejos* underscore the need to disrupt and challenge the status quo of belonging, which excludes (or, at best, marginalizes) young im/migrant children of Color, problematically denying their belonging, enacting harm, and inflicting trauma. These poems urge early childhood educators to learn about their students'

histories within the broader contexts of colonialism and imperialism. This necessitates prioritizing the humanity of their students and families and learning about im/migration micro- and macro-contexts—both as experienced by their students and as related phenomena emanating from the global politics of belonging. Further, as we reflect on our own lived experiences, we urge early childhood educators to (re)design the education of im/migrant children. One way of doing so is to design and engage a curriculum that centers patterns of colonization and very intentionally includes multiple histories, rejects spaces of exclusion, commits to belonging as a right, and seeks and sparks deeper understandings of the dehumanizing conditions that lead to immigration and migration.

Conclusions

Implications of our study point toward the need to reject notions of belonging as neutral in early education and to recognize its politics as well as their effect on young children. Our experiences highlight why we must abolish categories of belonging that serve as borders upholding the current politics of belonging, which orient to power grids in society that serve to justify the exclusion of young im/migrant children of Color from schools and schooling. More expansive, more humanizing, and much more inclusive concepts of and approaches to belonging are necessary if sites and practitioners of early care and education are to upend the current politics of belonging, which impacted us in deeply harmful ways and continues to cause direct and indirect harm to so many other young im/migrant children of Color.

From a restorative justice perspective (Zehr, 2015), regardless of by whom, where, when, and how harm was inflicted, as professionals working with young children, early childhood educators have a moral and relational obligation to address the needs created by the harms inflicted. In our contexts of focus, this entails learning about histories of colonization and imperialism, and the realities (and in far too many cases desperation) that lead im/migrants to leave behind a place they call(ed) home—in some cases risking their lives and/or the lives of their own children to make this incredibly difficult change. Collective commitment to expansive and inclusive belonging and justice can be a starting point for righting historical and contemporary wrongs inflicted onto im/migrants of Color across temporal and spatial dimensions. We can and should begin by redefining the very notion of belonging.

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