



## The permanence of departure: Young Mexican immigrant students' discursive negotiations of imagined childhoods *allá*

Sarah Gallo<sup>a,\*</sup>, Meghan Dabkowski<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The Ohio State University, The Department of Teaching and Learning, Columbus, OH, USA

<sup>b</sup> The Ohio State University, Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Columbus, OH, USA

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 12 January 2017

Received in revised form 6 March 2018

Accepted 13 April 2018

#### Keywords:

Immigration

Elementary schooling

Transnational education

Peer talk

Discourse analysis

### ABSTRACT

This article draws from a three-year ethnography with elementary school students from mixed-status Mexican immigrant families in Pennsylvania to explore the ways that they imagined potential childhoods and schooling in Mexico. Through attention to their stances and deictic choices during school-based talk, our findings reveal how going to Mexico was positioned as a permanent departure, and one that students often named as occurring soon, despite the fact that repatriation was extremely rare. We show how understanding children's discursive constructions of their imagined binational lives provides a mechanism for children to discursively try on and become familiar with an unfamiliar childhood, and thus, make such childhoods more inhabitable if they were to move to Mexico. We argue that understanding these processes is particularly important in increasingly anti-immigrant climates in which children from undocumented families may be facing possibilities of repatriation due to immigration policies.

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On a Monday morning right before the start of school, Kenny,<sup>2</sup> the child of Mexican immigrants who lived in Pennsylvania, sat at a desk in his second grade classroom and asked, "What happened to Maritza from Ms Vega's class?" When I responded that she went to Mexico for her cousin's quinceañera, he wondered if she'd come back. He asked if her mom was born in Mexico. I said I thought she was, and he reasoned that Maritza would not be able to come back, she'd have to stay in Mexico forever. A few minutes later Maritza walked into her second-grade classroom, after two weeks visiting her extended family in Mexico, and quietly said to herself, "Thank you for my life. I'm gonna come back to my life." (Video Transcript 5/9/11).

These school-based interactions illustrate the ways that young students from Mexican immigrant families in Pennsylvania discursively constructed real and imagined childhoods across geopolitical borders. Evident in their talk were the ways they often understood going to Mexico as a permanent departure from the United States, where one would "have to stay in Mexico forever" due to family members' undocumented status, which made returning to the U.S.

extremely difficult. Yet Maritza, a U.S. born citizen who could cross the border with relative ease, did return to her classroom.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the permanent departure alluded to by Kevin did not occur and Maritza's statements as she walked into class reveal the evaluative stances she took regarding where she saw herself as belonging: she was thankful to return to the places and people she considered "my life," which contrasted with the pleasant yet unfamiliar experiences she had just had in Mexico. Through these two utterances she signaled her self-positioning as belonging in the U.S. and school community, positionings that were dynamically articulated, taken up, and re-negotiated among Latinx elementary school students as they discursively engaged in their imagined lives *allá* [there], in Mexico.

Drawing from a three-year ethnographic study that centered on Mexican immigrant children and their fathers across contexts of learning, in this article we focus on young students' school-based talk to explore the ways that they—as members of transnational families with roots and potential educational futures in Pennsylvania and across geopolitical borders—developed a "contrapuntal awareness" of "lives inhabitable in some other space and time" (Dick, 2013, p. 412). Said (2000) emphasized how—for those forced from their homelands—daily life was experienced contrapuntally,

\* Corresponding author at: The Ohio State University, 222A Ramseyer Hall, 29 W. Woodruff Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210, USA.

E-mail addresses: [gallo.85@osu.edu](mailto:gallo.85@osu.edu) (S. Gallo), [dabkowski.5@osu.edu](mailto:dabkowski.5@osu.edu)

(M. Dabkowski).

<sup>1</sup> Address: 298 Hagerty Hall, 1775 College Rd., Columbus, OH 43210, USA.

<sup>2</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Her Mexican-born mother did not accompany her on this trip.

in ‘the here and now’ as well as against a vivid backdrop of parallel experiences in their country of origin:

Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is *contrapuntal*. (Said, 2000, p. 148)

Dick (2013) expanded upon this concept in her work in Mexico with mothers who were negotiating the possibility of moving to the United States. She revealed how non-migrants discursively took stances about the desirability and feasibility of lives “beyond here” (Dick, 2013, p. 413). Thus, contrapuntal awareness can develop both for those who have lived multinationally and for those with strong transnational ties. In this article we examine the discursive practices of the children of Mexican immigrants living in the US as they collectively negotiated their contrapuntal lives across borders. Through their peer-based talk we explore how they imagined their childhoods if they were repatriated to their parents’ country of origin, a country where most of them had never physically been.

Although children in immigrant families are often positioned as recipients of familial migratory decisions (Dreby, 2010; Orellana, 2009), we illustrate the agentive and dynamic ways that young children articulate, negotiate, and refashion imagined transnational childhoods. Through attention to their stances and deictic choices, our findings reveal how going to Mexico was positioned as a permanent departure, and one that students often named as occurring soon, despite the fact that repatriation was extremely rare. Our analysis centers on two research questions: How do elementary school-aged children discursively construct potential childhoods and educational futures in Mexico? And what interactional and educational work do their discursive constructions achieve within their local school community?

In this article we show that children’s discursive constructions of their imagined binational<sup>4</sup> lives provide a mechanism for children to discursively try on and become familiar with an unfamiliar childhood, and thus, make it more inhabitable if they were to move. This important educational work occurred among students, at the peripheries of classroom-sanctioned learning, but was no less important. Through their articulations and negotiations with one another, they were preparing themselves as members of mixed-status families to inhabit their uncertain educational futures across space and time, while simultaneously engaging in educational work in which they carved out local spaces for belonging as bilingual, binational students from mixed-status families. We argue that understandings of these processes are particularly important in increasingly anti-immigrant climates across the globe, in which children from undocumented families may be facing heightened possibilities of repatriation due to immigration policies.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. Immigration

The political environment for the children from this study was one in which law enforcement targeted and often deported undocumented immigrants in the United States for minor infractions. From 2008 through 2014, immigration programs such as Secure Communities and policies like Section 287g, permitted and often required local police officers to alert immigration authorities if they

suspected a person lacked U.S. documentation (Kohli, Markowitz, & Chavez, 2011). Although these immigration policies purported to target harmful criminals, many nonviolent low-level offenders, such as those whose records included minor infractions like traffic violations, were deported (Kohli et al., 2011). It is not only those who are deported, but also everyone who lives with the daily possibility of deportation for themselves or their loved ones who feel the effects of these immigration practices (Gallo, 2014; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). This was true during heightened deportations during this study, as well as currently, as children with undocumented relatives navigate great uncertainty regarding their educational futures under the Trump administration.

### 1.2. Immigration and schooling

While the national discourse about immigration tends to focus on adults, immigration policies also affect families (Chaudry et al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). In the U.S. context, approximately 5.5 million children live in families with at least one undocumented immigrant, and it is estimated that 82 percent of those children are U.S. citizens (Passel & Cohn, 2011). A large portion of the existing research on documentation status and schooling focuses on interviews with DREAMers—young people who would benefit from the federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act, including those who gained a tenuous pathway to higher education and employment through Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals under President Obama (e.g., Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011). Much of this meaningful research analyzes pathways to higher education (e.g., Abrego, 2006), the changes that take place in adolescents’ lives as they find out their documentation status and “learn to be illegal” (Gonzales, 2011), and their civic engagement despite their limited possibilities for attaining U.S. residency (e.g., Perez, 2009). Scholarship has also highlighted, how, even in countries with progressive immigration policies, immigrant students must navigate and contest anti-immigrant stereotypes that are discursively constructed by teachers and peers (e.g., García Sánchez, 2014; Jaffe-Walter, 2013). The majority of this research focuses on the intersections of immigration and education practices within contexts of reception, but much less is known about how familial undocumented status affects young children and their schooling, including how young peer groups engage in understandings of binational childhoods.

## 2. Theoretical framework and analytic tools

### 2.1. Children’s discourses of transnational childhoods

In contrast to teleological notions of childhood in which children are positioned as passive adults in the making, in this article we examine children as agentive social actors who are shaping their social worlds in complex ways (Orellana, 2009; Poveda, 2004). Through close attention to their school-based interactions, we explore the dynamic ways they negotiate their own—and others’—self-positioning and belonging within school (García Sánchez, 2014; Orellana, 2009). As Orellana (2009) highlights, immigrant children are often positioned as “baggage: ‘brought along,’ ‘sent for,’ or ‘left behind,’ by sojourning parents” (p. 15) and children’s discursive engagements in migratory decisions are under-considered and under-researched (see Gallo & Hornberger, 2017; Mangual Figueroa, 2012, for exceptions). We analyze children’s routine talk that focuses on their imaginings of possible migration.

In our analyses we build on scholarship that reveals how children’s talk accomplishes complex identity work as they

<sup>4</sup> By transnational we mean how immigrants construct lives, identities, and communities—real and imagined—through physical experiences, communication, and relationships across geopolitical borders. We use the term binational to highlight the physical experiences that children have in two countries.

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