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Education as Advocacy: The Foundations of Support for Immigrant Youth

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Cover Page Footnote

End Notes

[1] Actual names of students and teachers are used in the video series.

[2] In this article, I use the term “independent” rather than “unaccompanied” to refer to teenage migrants who make their way to the US alone or with other young people considered minors in the US. This term better acknowledges the circumstances of teenage migration whereby young people become independent from their families and migrate out of necessity (Martínez, 2018).

About the Author

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Multimedia Review

Education as Advocacy: The Foundations of Support for Immigrant Youth

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Film Series Reviewed:

Kleyn, T. (2019). *Supporting immigrants in schools*. The City College of New York and the New York State Education Department. <https://www.cunyiiie.org/videos>

Kleyn, T. (Ed.). (2019). *Supporting immigrants in schools: Resource Guide*. The City College of New York and New York State Education Department. 54p. Available as download from <https://cuny-iiie.org/>.

Despite an anti-immigration climate across the United States, immigrant rights and racial equity activists in New York have worked to establish policy protections for immigrants, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and students of color. The short film series, *Supporting Immigrants in Schools*, is part of a larger landscape of support for vulnerable youth and families. The series was released in 2019, the same year that the New York State DREAM Act (2019) passed, and the New York State Education Department (2019) released its *Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework*. Policy protections matter in creating conditions of support for immigrant youth in schools. Still, policy alone does not provide schools and educators the tools to visualize and enact equitable education. This is where *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* does its most important and unique work. It not only identifies challenges but also highlights how some schools already reflect a positive perspective on immigrants and embrace an advocacy stance when working with immigrant youth and families. Thus, it goes beyond outlining problems and making recommendations for what schools can do. It demonstrates district-wide, schoolwide, and classroom-level strategies that schools and communities in New York already do.

In this article, I review the *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* series as a whole. After a brief description of the background to the series and its design, I then summarize the key ideas presented in each of the films provided by the many voices featured in the series, such as those of students, teachers, and school and district staff. Throughout the summaries offered here, I aim to contextualize the series content within scholarly conversation about asset-based and culturally sustaining approaches to

education. The series focuses on what is already happening in New York schools that offers a welcoming and supportive stance to educating immigrant youth. The hospitality that the featured schools create exemplifies the foundation of a school-wide asset-based perspective toward immigrant youth that is necessary to meaningfully include them. The films demonstrate how schools can treat immigrant experiences, languages, and cultures as strengths from the moment youth register in school. Still, recent scholarship on *culturally sustaining education* finds asset-based approaches are not sufficient to combat the forms cultural and linguistic oppression that vulnerable students face in and out of schools (Paris & Alim, 2014). Thus, throughout the summaries of the films, I point to the moments when each exhibit an advocacy stance to working with immigrant youth and families and I highlight the more *sustaining* practices and ideas featured in the films. Finally, I conclude with a few ways the series can work in practice and areas the films could be expanded.

Brief Overview of Documentary Series.¹

The films in the *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* series are directed and produced by Dr. Tatyana Kleyn and funded by the New York State Education Department. Dr. Kleyn is an associate professor of bilingual education and TESOL at The City College of New York. As a scholar activist, she has taken to filmmaking to document immigrant experiences. Before this film series, she directed and produced the film *Una Vida, Dos Países* and the *Living Undocumented* series. *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* is comprised of four short documentaries of approximately 10 minutes in length each: (1) *Key Immigration Issues*; (2) *Approaches to Educating Refugees and Immigrants*; (3) *Immigration in Elementary Schools*; and (4) *Immigration in Secondary Schools*. The films take the viewer to several schools across New York to share information and showcase district, school, and classroom practices that support immigrant youth. The filmmaker primarily interviews educators at varying levels in the education system and immigrant and refugee youth at the featured schools. Viewers will also observe the day-to-day interactions of immigrant youth with classmates and teachers while learning. The films have upbeat music accompanying the flurries of youth moving in the hallways and learning in the classrooms of schools. While the series is not narrated, each film covers the theme specified in its title through organized sub-themes that appear as subtitled sections. After each section's content, a list of *Educator Actions* appears which recap actionable steps and information gleaned from the interviews and observations of that section. *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* can be found on the CUNY Initiative on Immigration & Education website, <http://cuny-iie.org>. The film series webpage also includes a resource guide for educators with resources ranging from teaching and curriculum support to resources for immigrant families.

Film 1: Key Immigration Issues

The first film of the series, *Key Immigration Issues*, highlights the legal realities immigrants face and discusses how schools can welcome—and sometimes reject—immigrants. Jesús Castellano, a former student who traveled to the United States independently² at age 14, shares his registration story with Tatyana Kleyn, the filmmaker. Castellano wanted to register for school, but they turned him away because he did not have his parents with him. He was left feeling *desconocido* (*like a stranger or*

outsider) and he decided to work instead. In contrast to Castellano's experience, the film takes us to Trinity Elementary School in New Rochelle, NY. There, Principal Michael Hildebrand describes how welcoming immigrants is part of the school's structure.

Trinity Elementary is welcoming to students, and it is also complying with the law. During Trinity Elementary's two-day new student orientation process, parents meet with the English as a New Language teacher, while their children enrolling at the school tour the campus with current students who speak their language. Hildebrand details the information the school asks of the new family (e.g., proof of residency), and what they do not ask for (e.g., immigration status). To address the issue of turning away independent youth, in the same film, Dr. Kleyn interviews Stephanie Delia, an immigration attorney. Delia outlines the legal protections in place for undocumented youth under the Plyler v. Doe ruling (1982). The court decision mandates that schools cannot collect information about immigration status or turn students away because of their statuses. Between interviews, the film pauses to display lists of *Educator Actions*, such as preparing a district plan if Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) shows up at school and the types of documents schools should and should not ask for at registration.

Key Immigration Issues lays a strong foundation for educators to understand that immigrants experience many levels of social precarity (Campano et al., 2013) and that schools can have an active role in combatting these. The film also demonstrates how an asset-based lens for working with immigrants can look. For example, Principal Hildebrand does not say he "has to" but that he "gets to" greet new families, positioning himself as someone who is fortunate enough to be the one who calls families to make appointments. That is, rather than a deficit lens that would position immigrant youth as a burden to schools, the film establishes immigrant students as members of school communities and schools as responsible for including them (Gay, 2010).

As a whole, *Key Immigration Issues* demonstrates how immigrant support can start from the moment a young person shows up to register for school. Still, even when schools welcome students, they can purport multicultural values that are complicit with anti-immigrant sentiment because they ultimately subscribe to assimilationist educational practices for their immigrant youth (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). Because welcoming immigrant youth and families is not enough to meaningfully engage them in the processes of schools (Baquedano-López et al., 2013), viewers would benefit from an additional part to *Key Immigration Issues* that shows how Trinity Elementary School's hospitality extends beyond an initial welcome to the school.

Film 2: Approaches to Educating Refugees and Immigrants

The second film, *Approaches to Educating Refugees and Immigrants*, introduces the system-wide endeavor of supporting immigrants in schools. From community and district levels to the classroom level, the approaches shown in this film revolve around a central idea: To educate refugees and immigrants, district and school staff must have strong relationships with them.

This film confirms how important it is for students to feel *conocidos* (*known*). The film opens with Prince and Shahnaz, two 7th grade refugee students in International School (I.S.) 45 in Buffalo, N.Y. Both of them advise schools to get to know

their refugee students in order to help them. The film demonstrates how educators at I.S. 45 build strong relationships by breaking away from one-way models of teaching, where teachers design lessons only considering their own perspectives. Instead, the teachers interviewed at I.S. 45, John Ellicot, and Kevin Daugherty, recommend and model two-way approaches where their primary source for teaching choices is what they have come to know about their students. The film takes us to their classrooms, capturing students working in small groups and freely using their many languages as they share their written work with one another about their immigration journeys.

At the district level, Buffalo Public Schools, which has enrolled 22,000 refugee students in the last five years, has a strategy for welcoming and getting to know their new families. According to Nadia Nashir, the Assistant Superintendent of Multilingual Education interviewed in the film, the district has a central registration center that acts as an information hub. There, families are assigned a Cultural Resource Specialist of their same language and cultural background as a guide. The district also creates opportunities for local organizations, and even the FBI, to get to know refugee families and hear their stories.

In *Approaches to Educating Refugees and Immigrants*, the educators at all levels demonstrate how to build the strong relationships prerequisite for meaningful educational support. No amount of proximity to refugees and immigrants can replace the humility of listening to them and appreciating them for what they bring to their new communities. Strong relationships serve to open school and classroom spaces to make room for immigrant and refugee youth to freely bring in their full selves. When students are free to bring their cultures, languages, and experiences into their schools it not only makes for a welcoming environment but is a first step to what Ladson-Billings (1995) calls *cultural competence*, when educators know about students' cultures, languages, and experiences and position these as *vehicles for learning* (p. 160). The teachers in the film embrace their student's immigrant experiences as vehicles for learning when they selected books with stories of immigration and when they connected the history they are teaching to what today's immigrant and refugees are living.

However, during his interview with Tatyana Kleyn in the film, John Ellicot, a social studies teacher at I.S. 45, says he wishes he could delve more into today's immigration issues in his class. This comment goes unaddressed in the film, but it has potential for important discussion about how culturally relevant education for immigrant youth can span all subject matters (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). It also signals that while educators may be thinking of what students bring to the classroom as vehicles for learning, they may not yet be centering immigrant and refugee experiences, languages, and cultures as foci of instruction across all subjects, that is, *sustain* the cultural pluralism brought in by students (Alim & Paris, 2017). Addressing Ellicot's wish would go a long way in showing educators how asset-mindedness can become a culturally *sustaining* practice. Because immigrants and refugees make up some of the most politically and economically vulnerable groups in the United States, an asset mindset to pedagogy might not be enough to combat the anti-immigration and racism that would erase immigrant cultures and languages.

Film 3: Immigration in Elementary Schools

With the groundwork for immigrant support set by the first two films, the third film, *Immigration in Elementary Schools*, dives into how one teacher, Rebeca Madrigal, embeds support through teaching about immigration issues. The film opens with first-grade students sitting on the reading carpet with the familiar squirrelness of young children engaged in learning.

Books and papers fill the bins behind the children in a classroom filled with colorful posters. A sarape, a symbol of indigeneity, is draped over a table near Madrigal who sits on a chair facing the students while reading *El Muro*, by Philippe de Kemmeter (2005). *El Muro* is about a family that erects a wall between their house and the neighbor's house to feel safe. The family next door is too different from them. "They haven't even tried to be friends with them!" says Felix, a student in the class. In their discussion, the children unpack the meaning of the wall, how the story's wall is related to issues of immigration today, and how these issues could and do affect them personally.

Madrigal carefully selects what she calls "authentic" reading materials, like *El Muro*, in which young people can see themselves represented and that target issues lived and discussed by them with their families. Madrigal shares her own immigration story with her students, wanting them to see that she is proud of who she is and where she is from. The film demonstrates how directly teaching about immigration and utilizing literature that centers students' languages, cultures, and experiences, is working.

In the clip, first grade students react to the story and freely make connections to their own lives. One student comments about meeting a new classmate and feeling wary about her at first, even though they became friends later. Another young person talks about his family coming to the United States for a better life. Yet another student questions out loud why the President of the United States would want some people in the country and others not. This film shows that even as early as first-grade, students can and do think critically about social issues to challenge racism and xenophobia. The film does not explicitly attribute Madrigal's teaching and curriculum choices to a specific pedagogy; still, Madrigal's teaching is an example of a culturally sustaining practice (Alim & Paris, 2017):

1. She represents her students' lived experiences.
2. She uses strategies to build trust and community with students and their families.
3. She fosters critical dialogue with students to challenge oppression.
4. She makes space for students to use any combination of Spanish and English varieties.

These teaching actions honor students' full linguistic repertoires (Otheguy et al., 2015) and help them to become agents in their own sociopolitical lives (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Film 4: Immigration in Secondary Schools

The final film in the series, *Immigration in Secondary Schools*, focuses on the way one New York City high school for immigrant youth is breaking down the barriers students face. For example, School Counselor Linda Pociano helps students prepare for life after high school. She provides support as they fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form and college applications and finds scholarships for undocumented youth. When there are changes to immigration policy, she and her colleagues meet to understand the policy and then get the new information out to families quickly.

Students, too, are part of the school's support system for immigrants through their involvement in the high school's immigration justice club, the school's DREAM Team. The many young people involved in the DREAM Team raise money for scholarships, mount campaigns around school that make visible their solidarity with undocumented peers, and they host speakers such as immigration lawyers to address students' pressing concerns. The film highlights the importance of protecting students' legal citizenship statuses by making the school's DREAM Team an immigration justice club, rather than a club of undocumented students. This protection is extended in how the film shows clips of activities at the school's DREAM Team using a filter that makes the footage cartoon-like to anonymize youth participants in the group. This may also be why the school's name is not shared in the video, unlike the schools in the other three films of the series.

Jae Berlin, a science teacher at the school, and Mariano Muñoz, a parent coordinator, cofacilitate the DREAM Team. In the film, they discuss why they create spaces where students can make meaning of immigration issues and tackle them. For Berlin and Muñoz, engaging in social transformation is essential to attending to students' social-emotional needs. Doing this, Berlin and Muñoz are embracing their roles as "engaged public intellectuals" (Giroux, 2020) by connecting with broader immigrant justice work because challenging the oppression their students face both in and out of school is a necessary component of education. In their conceptualization of a "socially just, culturally sustaining education" for immigrant youth, Lee & Walsh (2017, p.191) argue that engaging issues that affect immigrants, such as anti-immigration policies and the harshness of legal citizenship, matters for immigrant youth to make sense of the inequities they face. They suggest educators adopt notions of justice-oriented citizenship that, like the DREAM Team in *Immigration in Secondary Schools*, centers youth as agents of change who challenge oppression and actively craft their futures regardless of legal immigration status.

Together, the school community members featured in *Immigration in Secondary Schools* are practicing advocacy as inextricable from education, a role that blurs the line between adult responsibilities and student responsibilities. The final film in the series shows that when all members of a school community embrace the transformative power of pedagogy *with* and not just for (Freire, 1970/2017) immigrant youth, they can co-construct education that provides opportunities for youth to claim their power to make change.

The Films in Practice

The first and second films in the series, *Key Immigration Issues and Approaches to Educating Refugees and Immigrants*, emphasize a type of hospitality for addressing the immediate needs of immigrants, learning about them, and building strong relationships. The third and fourth films, *Immigration in Elementary Schools* and *Immigration in Secondary Schools*, delve into the pedagogical and school-wide inner-workings of a more radical hospitality (Campano et al., 2013) where immigrant youth, families, and educators work together to advocate for immigrant justice. This creates a gradual shift across the films from asset-based ideas of education that lean toward inclusive schooling, to a more social justice-oriented stance on immigrant belonging. The gradual shift from inclusion to justice indicates the films should be viewed together and, specifically, that the first two films should not be viewed without completing the thematic arch to a more culturally sustaining practice.

When the filmmakers interview youth or capture them in the hallways and classrooms, they consistently portray their linguistic flexibility (Lee & Walsh, 2017) and their critical brilliance. If educators center these youth practices as the objects of learning, they could be actively working toward culturally sustaining education. The films also identify the types of school structures and classroom activities that make space for these immigrant youth practices. For example, in the second film, the teacher announces to students they can speak in their “home languages” as part of the class activity and students begin speaking their many languages to each other in small groups. In the same film, Chelsea Ellis, an English as a New Language teacher at Lafayette International Community High School (P.S. 207), shared a story of when she was planning a trip to Nepal and her 10th grade student, Prakrity, showed her on a map the refugee camp where her family lives. Together, they tell the story of how Ellis met Prakrity’s family and took pictures with them in Nepal. This example of border crossing, though primarily by the teacher, is an example of how immigrant youth lead transnational lives (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018). Ellis and Prakrity are showcasing how teachers can become informed about refugee experiences through connecting to refugee organizations, but because the opportunity to travel to refugee camps outside the United States is an uncommon experience, viewers may also want to learn the every-day ways they can support youth transnationalism. That is, the film series could expand on how educators help sustain youth’s connections to their geographies of birth and migration journeys, as part of a culturally sustaining practice (Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018).

Taken together the films are a strong tool for professional development at all levels within the school system. They extend their asset-based lens to the featured schools themselves, showing viewers what schools are doing well rather than focusing on what they do not get right when supporting immigrant youth. The teachers, school staff, and school and district administrators in the film share testimonies that reveal a solid philosophical guiding post to their work: that they are passionate about their immigrant students, that immigrant youth are welcome, and that their work as educators far extends traditional ideas of teaching and learning to necessarily encompass advocacy for immigrant rights (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In February 2020, I facilitated a workshop for first-year teachers on culturally and linguistically sustaining education for immigrant youth. Many teachers reported attending the workshop because they felt overwhelmed by the anti-immigration policies affecting many of their students. They knew from experience what research has confirmed: The degrading anti-immigration national rhetoric and harsh immigration enforcement that happens outside of schools is reflected within schools and directly affects immigrant youth (Ee & Gandara, 2019). While they were unclear about the ways they could support their students, these new teachers came to the workshop already understanding that immigrant youth and families often have pressing legal and social-emotional needs. To have a supportive educational stance, schools cannot ignore these needs just as they cannot forget to see the humanity in each young person and family.

The teachers who came to the workshop were at the cusp of the type of critical analysis and reflective work that the *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* series explores. Participants in this teacher workshop benefitted from watching the films. For example, in the first film, *Key Immigration Issues*, Bridgit Bye, the principal of a high school in New York City, shares the story of how one student's detention rattled the school community into fighting immigration injustices. Educators watching the film can learn how working across schools to support immigrants can foster strong community bonds and those bonds can in turn create more opportunities for support. As a whole, the four documentaries help educators know what it means to advocate with students, to respond to their social-emotional needs, and to create safe and welcoming school environments.

The films make a powerful statement of how support must be embedded within all areas of school. This comprehensive support is bound by common principles of deep listening and relationship-building that center immigrant realities. Unfortunately, many schools and educators shy away from centering issues of immigration. This could be happening because schools may perceive a legal risk if they acknowledge immigrant experiences. For example, schools often misinterpret the protections of undocumented students under the Plyler v. Doe ruling (1982), as explained above, a Supreme Court decision holding that states cannot deny students a free public education, irrespective of their immigration status. They believe that it mandates a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, stopping them from doing what they can to get to know the experiences of immigrant families (Mangual-Figueroa, 2017). Future films and resources need to make a more explicit distinction between building strong relationships with immigrant families and maintaining the legal boundaries that serve to protect immigrant youth in schools. Learning how to navigate this tension is especially necessary for schools that may be new in their journey to support immigrants.

The four films discussed here provide actionable steps for schools to structure an advocacy stance in the education of immigrant youth. For example, the third film, *Immigration in Elementary Schools*, suggests educators discuss difficult issues with students, conduct home visits, and that schools send immigration information to families. Many of the films' suggested actions translate to educator humility and openness, and the ability to connect families and students with essential resources both within and beyond school. Educators interested in starting or deepening their practices

in culturally sustaining education and trauma-informed practices will benefit from watching this film series.

Supporting Immigrants in Schools is equally relevant for researchers interested in translating research into tools for practice and to immigrant families and community members interested in the types of efforts schools can make to support them. That the films are useful to these multiple stakeholders while honoring and centering the work and experiences of so many educators, students, and advocates, is a testament to the excellence of Tatyana Kleyn's work in the film series. *Supporting Immigrants in Schools* is a celebration of immigrant stories in New York, the educators who already embody radical care and advocacy in their work, and the love and justice involved in the collective endeavor of support with immigrants.

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End Notes

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