YOUTH HELD AT THE BORDER

Immigration, Education, and the Politics of Inclusion

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Foreword by Michelle Fine

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Introduction

If you ask most people what they think of when they hear the word immigration, you might hear about legal and illegal crossings, or that this nation was built by immigrants, or perhaps that it is a controversial issue, even a hotbed of political squabbling. Immigration is, in fact, a highly political topic, one that reaches far beyond elected officials to the everyday struggle to be included, in safety, security, and even prosperity. This struggle for inclusion is the bedrock of individual, social, and national identity, one that has always been and continues to be hotly debated. Seemingly straightforward, being included in any social context brings to the surface the implicit and explicit laws of inclusion, as well as who guards those boundaries. In other words, it is at the heart of deeming who is worthy and who is not.

Newcomer immigrant youth fully embody this struggle and offer a unique perspective on the laws of inclusion and exclusion in America. In this book I tell their stories to analyze not just how immigrant youth experience the United States but the core ways in which national, economic, social, and political borders are drawn and redrawn. Instead of the ideal of the land of opportunity, immigrant youth often encounter myriad new borders, long after the physical migration from one country to another is over. To understand the politics of inclusion, we must explore their largely unknown and often unspoken experiences of aspirations and denial. We also must push past the easy appearances of inclusion when they merely serve to maintain an inequitable, problematic social order. In other words, we must resist facile comfort that because different populations might be included in some aspects of a society, therefore meaningful, comprehensive, and just inclusion in society’s structures is happening.

Sociologists (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990) use the metaphor of structure to explain that people’s actions should be viewed in relation to ways of acting, thinking, and being that are shaped by society. Societal structure can be understood as similar to the human body’s skeletal structure. Across individuals, the skeleton includes mostly the same components that govern the systemic biological processes such as breathing and eating. From one person to the next, though, these processes can vary greatly, often due not just to the individual’s unique characteristics but also to external factors.
As a community-based youth researcher, I often find myself in schools, churches, workplaces, and colleges. About the last place discussed in guidebooks as a site for research is a wig shop. There I was, though, wig shopping with Wana, a young Haitian woman I had known for 5 years. Wana immigrated to the United States from her home of Port-au-Prince in Haiti in 2005. Since that time, she had learned social and academic English fluently, graduated from high school, worked to support herself and her family back in Haiti, and doggedly pursued higher education in the hope of becoming a nurse. During this time Wana also navigated an uneasy and often murky field of documentation status, working with advocates and trying to avoid charlatans but not always succeeding in telling the difference between the two.

Our wig shopping date stemmed from a case of mistaken identity. I had arranged to meet Wana at a downtown subway stop. Scanning the crowds, it took me several minutes to spot Wana’s familiar face across the stop waiting area, under her new blonde bob-cut wig. Her small frame was shaking with laughter.

“I couldn’t find you! Look at you!” I exclaimed, stating the obvious and laughing myself.

“I know, I could see you looking; it’s funny,” Wana said, between more laughs.

“What is this? I didn’t even know you had wigs; I’ve never seen you in one.”

“Oh yes, you know, Miss, we can’t always look the same day after day, and I like this one. What do you think?” she asked, smoothing stray hairs that weren’t stray at all.

“It’s fantastic; you look like a different version of you. J’aime bien cette fille donc je souviens (I like this young woman who I remember).” “Oui, oui, je suis la même fille (Oh yes, I’m the same girl); Miss, you should get one, too. I’ll take you. I can show you.” And so we decided that I should be initiated into the world of wigs, and Wana should be my guide.

On that day, Wana was wearing a very typical outfit for her: snug white jeans and layered cotton shirts in teal and white that also fit her to a T. The color of her shoes matched the teal hue of one of the shirts exactly. This coordination
Lina and Schooling

In the American imagination, education—more specifically, literacy—is the key to both individual and societal success, equity, and achievement. Meritocracy tells us: Work hard, read and write well, and you will be successful. When President Barack Obama was introducing Sonia Sotomayor, his nominee for the United States Supreme Court in 2009, he painted a familiar picture of success, one anchored in this promise of education:

Sonia’s mom bought the only set of encyclopedias in the neighborhood [and] sent her children to a Catholic school called Cardinal Spellman, out of the belief that with a good education here in America all things are possible. With the support of family, friends, and teachers, Sonia earned scholarships to Princeton, where she graduated at the top of her class, and Yale Law School, where she was an editor of the *Yale Law Journal*, stepping onto the path that led her here today. (legaltimes, 2009, para 15-16)

Obama also mentioned Sotomayor’s roots as the daughter of Puerto Ricans who moved to the mainland when she was young, in search of a better life. He lauded Sotomayor as a hard worker who had reaped the benefits of a consistent commitment to education. In fact, when a member of a nondominant group achieves a high-profile position within mainstream society, education is invariably named as the key to success. In the United States, policy-based access to a free and public education has been negotiated by various groups and awarded as a symbol of this opportunity. The legal cases of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) are now tropes of the value placed on education as opportunity. Implicit in this opportunity is the belief that an education will afford the knowledge and skills necessary to position youth to be productive, active members of society. When achievement in society is seen as the direct result of hard work, education fits neatly into this view as a primary or even singular space of potential for individuals’ and groups’ success in society. In fact, national progress in civil rights is almost always evaluated through the examination of equity and inequity within the field of education, as exemplified by a well-known sports metaphor: education can *level the playing field*. For immigrant youth, particularly undocumented youth and those on the boundaries
CHAPTER THREE

Double Consciousness

Matthias ultimately received a full-ride scholarship to an elite private college whose annual tuition hovers around the $60,000 mark. Matthias is an intelligent and capable young man, but as in many situations, the best rewarded student is not necessarily the one with the most innate ability. Matthias’s teachers and peers, while happy for him, were dubious that a student who was not one of the top students of the class academically hit the mother lode of scholarships. For high school teachers, who put in hours upon hours trying to prepare students to be academically competitive for college scholarships, it was a reminder that many factors outside of grades garner favor in scholarships and other rewards.

One of the reasons that Matthias did so well in the status game of college admissions and financial aid was related to the letter in support of Matthias’s participation in a high school-sponsored service learning trip that he was revising with his English teacher after school. Matthias’s grades were solid, but he had also been on several service learning trips, had volunteered at a local elementary school, and had participated in an intense youth leadership development program. All of these activities exposed him to mentors outside of school, provided him with access to professional-like apprenticeships, and made his college applications more impressive. They also required a commitment of extracurricular time, making them more accessible for some students than others, like Lina.

Throughout the halls of Matthias’s high school, and in the halls of my education building on campus, there are pictures, signs, and advertisements for past and upcoming service learning trips. In my university, undergraduates can sign up to journey to places like Natchez, Mississippi, to volunteer at an orphanage during their spring break. Franklin High School’s staff have worked to sponsor and chaperone two service trips a year, to the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and St. Croix, among other destinations. Bake sales, lunch sales, and solicitation letters help raise anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars to help a student participate in the trip.

These trips are somewhat of a hybrid between foreign exchange programs that used to be mostly for well-financed college students and volunteering at a soup kitchen for a day. Combining tourism, service, and social networking, they are growing rapidly in popularity. A Google search for “high school service trips” yields over 8 million hits. A particularly strong offshoot of this
CHAPTER FOUR

The Single Story of Adolescence

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology defines normal adolescent development as a stage that occurs in the middle and high school years and is characterized by the following traits: movement toward independence; concern with future interests and cognitive changes; preoccupation with sexuality; and experimentation with morals, values, and self-direction that results in reactions against authority (AACAP, 2011). This guiding model, from the field of educational psychology, connects strongly to and perhaps even reflects the ways we regard teens and adolescents as supremely self-involved, mercurial in their moods, and in opposition to the adults and rules around them. Consequently, conventional wisdom is to bide one’s time until those teen years, with their growing pains, are over.

At issue here is not the idea that the teen years can be a difficult time of growth, or that adolescence is qualitatively different from other stages of life. Rather, it is the assumption that the teenage years are the same for everyone and something to be endured, both by teens and the adults around them. These largely unquestioned and widely held beliefs are an example of what author Chimamanda Adichie refers to as the danger of the single story (2009). Adichie, who grew up in East Nigeria, recounts that her earliest writing reflected the “normal” she had learned from British literature. Instead of writing about the tastes and sounds of her immediate life, she replicated the details about ginger beer and small talk about the chilly weather that she found in her British books. Later, her American roommate in college asked Adichie if she could listen to her “tribal” music and assumed she did not know how to use a stove. Adichie’s point is that stories have power; they create worlds for us, but they can also have the unintended consequence of artificially circumscribing what is normal and thereby flattening dynamic people and their potentials into static stereotypes. Limiting individuals and even entire populations to a single story dehumanizes because it absolves us of knowing people as three-dimensional and complex humans. For youth, the single story is one of raging hormones, rebelliousness, and defiance of authority. In the context of schooling, assumptions about age, stage, and what is “developmentally appropriate” predominate. As such, a one-size-fits-all perception spurs adults to set limitations that do not always reflect the immediate circumstances accurately.
CHAPTER FIVE

Lost in Translation

By the time I came to know Rebecca, she was a sophomore at Franklin who worked well with her teachers and was confident in school and growing as a student. She was on the volleyball and softball teams in the high school and her circle of friends included students from several different nations. Among her friends, she often struck a balance between teasing and supporting them. In one conversation after school, which I observed as we were waiting for a bus to take us to a softball game, she warmly chastised Mira and Moksha, two South Asian girls who were also on the softball team.

"Vas a mirar como soy la mejor," Rebecca teased me that I was finally going to be lucky enough to see how good she was on the softball field.

"What did you say? You should say it in English, you know," Mira said, smiling, but still identifying a sore spot for many of the non-Spanish speakers in the Spanish-dominated international school.

"You should learn how to talk in Spanish," Rebecca said. "Well, you should learn Gujurati," Mira quipped back. "Huh? Why don't you learn Gujurati? Miss speaks both!"

"Because everyone here speaks Spanish, and so you need to know what the people around you are saying. You don't know," Rebecca smiled, "they might be talking about you. Or [bigger smile here and knowing head nod] you might like one of the Dominican boys." Mira laughed shyly as she smacked Rebecca on the shoulder. That was Rebecca: in teasing those around her, she could nail the essence of the situation, but always with a softness that reminded them it was meant in good will and love. She had an ease with what is called codeswitching in the linguistics world, of switching between two different registers, creating comfort and ease with her conversation partners, and could do this across many contexts. In fact, this is a common set of skills organically developed in immigrant populations, and particularly young people as they are typically the ones in their families who develop fluency in additional languages through schooling (Pujolar, 2000).

Rebecca came to the United States from the Dominican Republic around the age of 12 with her mother on a tourist visa. Her mother was detained and questioned by the immigration authorities. Thinking that it was her best way to convey her genuine need for safety, Rebecca's mother told the authorities that her real reason for coming to the United States was that she feared for her
There’s Learning and Then There’s Schooling

For youth, school is a central place in their lives. Although most adults see school primarily as the place where learning is supposed to occur, for youth, it is much more than courses and textbooks. It’s one of the primary places to meet other kids, build a daily routine, and, with any luck, have a mentor or caring adult who notices when they don’t show up.

Franklin High’s staff, like any educators worth their salt, strove to provide their students with homes away from home both in the sense of the American home where they now rested nightly and their previous home countries that they had left behind. In their view, the school should be a place where students can be safe and secure and learn. This mission, commonplace as it is, is hard to achieve despite the millions of dollars pouring in and out of educational research projects. Like Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s decree about pornography—that it’s hard to define but you know it when you see it—it is likewise difficult to define. But Franklin High had it. It was not uncommon to find teachers and students working before and after school every day of the week, as Matthias did while receiving extra help on his service trip letter. All of the administrators knew each and every single student by name and knew their family backgrounds as well as the conditions of their migrations to the United States. Most of the school’s staff was bilingual, and many of the teachers were immigrants themselves. In terms of professional principles of caring and the personal knowledge to back it up, it doesn’t get much better than this.

In the time students spent in the school, the staff worked to prepare them for graduation, which meant they had to pass the state-mandated high school proficiency exams in English, math, and science. By the measures of high school completion and passing rate on these proficiency tests, the school was phenomenally successful. In a time when a 50% dropout rate was not uncommon for an urban public high school, and around 20% for immigrant populations (Childtrends databank, 2011), Franklin graduated close to 90% of its students and about the same percentage passed the state proficiency exam. However, it would have failed the federal guidelines of adequacy for public schools, which mandate that high school be completed in 4 years or less. Franklin often worked
Afterword

The stories in this book are told, in large measure, to illuminate the political struggle for inclusion and to detail how immigrant youths encounter many different kinds of borders in the course of their lives in the United States. However, the stories in this book are also stories of vibrant young men and women. I thought you might want to know where some of them are.

At the time of this writing, Wana is still working part-time in a health care facility, pursuing a nursing degree at a large public university, and living with her mother, whom she supports. Lina is working as the primary child care provider in her family and also holding down a part-time job as a hairdresser in a small town in Ohio. Matthias is a junior at the elite college where he was given a full-ride scholarship, majoring in political science. Rebecca is working as a nanny for a wealthy family in Boston. Elvis works full-time as a baggage handler at an airport and still spins regularly at neighborhood events. Jean, now technically a college senior, is taking one to two community college classes at a time and works full-time as a security officer in a warehouse. Eduardo is taking classes and working as an intern with an investment firm.