

Advocating for Latinx Children's Rights and Supporting Their Healing from Trauma: School Social Workers as *Nepantleras*

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United Nations human rights chief Michelle Bachelet took an unusually direct approach on July 8, 2019, when she condemned the U.S. government's treatment of migrant children (Cumming-Bruce, 2019). Bachelet stated that migrant children should not be placed in detention facilities and never be separated from their families. She also expressed her shock at the conditions in those facilities including severe overcrowding, little access to health care or food, poor sanitation, and children sleeping on floors in cold cages referred to as "ice boxes" by migrants (Bochenek, 2018). Bachelet warned that detaining children has serious consequences for their development and is causing damage every day. The Office of the Inspector General (2019) recently released a report noting that the situation in detention facilities is an "immediate risk to health and safety" and called for the Department of Homeland Security to take immediate steps to address the conditions and prolonged detention of children and adults.

This current policy context affects not only those children in detention, but also Latinx U.S. citizens, and those children living in mixed-status families. Latinx youth make up approximately one-fourth of the public school population, and more than half of Latinx youth live in immigrant families (Foxen, 2019). The anti-immigrant context challenges school social workers to expand and consider the ways in which we serve immigrant children and families, and subsequent generations. As Zayas (2015) pointed out, the lived experiences of U.S. citizen children are shaped by the constant threat of their parents' deportation and are the "collateral damage" of those policies. The anti-immigrant climate can be considered a form of

state violence (Solis, 2003) and contributes to the feeling of marginalization among Latinx youth as they are challenged to construct their social identities in the midst of this social context (Villarreal Sosa, 2011).

Immigration policy and the various ways in which the current policies have a negative effect on children is complex. For example, Palmary (2019) states that the real danger to children is not in the migration process, but rather the view of foreigners as "threats" and the treatment of migration as a security threat. The view of immigrants as "threats" and "criminals" shapes current policy responses to migration and allows for the use of extreme and illegal practices such as the extended period of time in detention, the inhumane conditions, and other human rights violations. As Palmary (2019) states,

Psychologists working with refugee and migrant children often are concerned with the trauma they have faced in their countries of origin and en route to their destination. A view that has a greater focus on the political and social context can mean that interventions are tailored not just to individual families and children but towards restructuring the conditions that lead to their abuse in the first place. (p. 9)

School social workers can also heed this advice and consider a greater focus on the political and social context.

School social workers can begin with revisiting and reflecting on one's responsibility to reflect the profession's code of ethics and the School Social Work Association of America's (SSWAA) National School Social Work Practice Model. The *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social*

Workers (NASW, 2017) ethical guidelines contain the ethical principle to “help people in need and to address social problems” (p. 5). This includes “challeng[ing] social injustice” and “pursu[ing] social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” (p. 5). Specifically guiding school social work practice, the SSWAA National School Social Work Practice Model states that “school social work practitioners are *expected* to give voice to issues of diversity, and social and economic justice that lead to school failure and educational disparities” [italics added] (Frey et al., 2017, p. 32). The various policies and national rhetoric around immigration that have led to the traumatization of countless children would certainly fit into this section of the model.

Furthermore, school social work practice was founded in the context of mass immigration and the settlement house movement during the early 1900s, leading to the first “visiting teachers” in New York and Chicago (Shaffer & Fisher, 2017). As school social workers, it is imperative to ground ourselves in the history of the profession while also incorporating a critical lens to that history and our practice. The settlement house movement, for example, failed to incorporate Mexican Americans in leadership positions despite over a generation of service to this group and failed to provide culturally specific services (Fernández, 2012). Addressing the needs of the Latinx population begins with an understanding of their history and the racialization process that rendered them as “other” (Fernández, 2012). In today’s context, this also includes a thorough understanding of the United States’ role in civil war and internal conflicts in Central America, and the current role of transnational corporations in creating conditions of displacement, human rights violations, and forced migration (Deonandan & Tatham, 2018).

This lack of a historical context and critical theories has been one of the limitations of school social work training and professional development. Furthermore, issues of cultural tension arise related to the experiences of practitioners of color feeling at odds with white, Western-based frameworks of mental health practice that individualizes and decontextualizes the experiences of their students (Yan, 2008). There is still limited empirical research on cultural tension and social work’s bias toward Western-based frameworks. The small body of research that does exist is helpful in estab-

lishing a connection and framework to understand the lived experiences of practitioners of color, the claims of neutrality of interventions—even those considered “evidence-based practice,” and the need for critical reflexivity among *all* school social work practitioners (Yan, 2008).

Each person is situated among various social locations in terms of their own social identities, and whether or not there is coherence between these various social locations and the professional context will vary. School social work and the social work profession is a Western construct and grounded in European and European American culture. Practitioners of color often experience this cultural tension in the school social work profession, not only grounded in Western and decontextualized models of practice, but also in the fact that school social work is a white-dominated field. When attempting to work on and implement social justice practices and move toward racial equity, these tensions can manifest in differences in motivation, awareness, and critical reflection among practitioners. One solution toward addressing these complexities and cultural tensions so that we may move toward practices that support racial equity, social justice, and the needs of Latinx youth, is to expand our repertoire of theoretical perspectives and frameworks. The following are two examples of theories and frameworks that can enhance the work we do with Latinx youth, consider their strengths, and understand the larger societal narratives that shape their individual and group-level experiences.

TRAUMA WORK WITH LATINX YOUTH

Approximately half a million U.S. citizen children experienced the detention or deportation of a parent during the two-year period of 2011–2013, and an increasing number of health care providers report symptoms of “toxic stress” such as depression and anxiety due to fear that a family member will be deported (American Immigration Council, 2018). Furthermore, the Pew Research Center estimated that in 2014 about 3.9 million school children, many of whom are U.S. citizens, had at least one unauthorized immigrant parent (Passel & Cohn, 2016). Given these numbers, the potential impact of the current anti-immigrant climate, and levels of detentions and deportations, schools across the United States must address the needs of and support these children

who are affected psychologically by this constant worry and targeted attacks (Zayas, 2015). It has been well reported in the media (for example, Healy, 2018; Miller, 2018) that the separations of families at the border are traumatic experiences for children, affecting attachment and emotional regulation, with the potential for lifelong effects. What has been less often reported in the media, but documented in the research literature, are the parent and child or child and sibling separations that have *already* occurred due to detentions and deportations (Zayas, 2015). In fact, these family separations, combined with the anti-immigrant climate, have created fear about *potential* family separations, affecting children's mental health.

Moreover, children who spend *any* time in detention facilities, regardless of the conditions, experience traumatic effects. Throughout this year, I have encountered children who are considered to have autism spectrum disorder at school due to their challenges with relationships and transitions. However, these children were recently in a detention facility having to live a highly regimented life with relationships and attachments constantly disrupted. Other youth I have encountered spend time in detention not having experienced human touch for, at times, up to two years. The adverse effects of trauma on children's mental health and functioning in the school setting materialize in a variety of ways such as student attendance, academic achievement, concentration, memory, sleep, and behavior (American Immigration Council, 2018).

Conversations about the impact of developmental trauma have been discussed by professional organizations and in the media (for example, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.; Raff, 2018). However, a form of trauma inflicted in this case that has not been discussed widely is historical or identity trauma. Identity trauma continues as these youth navigate a context that feels unwelcoming and hostile, ultimately shaping their integration into U.S. society (Rumbaut, 1996). It is critical to remember, while discussing the trauma inflicted by these events and the burgeoning anti-immigrant climate, that all immigrants and second-generation youth who feel targeted by the xenophobic and anti-immigrant climate are affected, not just those who are undocumented or are immigrants themselves. Furthermore, future generations will experience the intergenerational

transmission of this identity trauma that this generation is experiencing.

IDENTITY TRAUMA

Of various immigrant groups, the Latinx community is the ethnic group most often subjected to discrimination surrounding immigration status (Pew Hispanic Center, 2010). This discrimination has only increased as a political discourse specifically labeling Mexicans and Central Americans as criminals has entered the mainstream. Latinx families continue to experience fear, discrimination, and oppressive conditions, the effects magnified for those in mixed-status households. In this atmosphere of xenophobia and hate, Latinx children's development is compromised by what Kira (2010) referred to as Type III or Type IV trauma. Type III trauma refers to trauma inflicted on a person based on their identity. Type IV trauma refers to trauma inflicted based on community membership. This trauma can manifest itself in two ways: through an act such as the separation of children from their families or through daily microaggressions (Courtois & Ford, 2016) such as the climate many children experienced in the aftermath of the Trump election. Many children repeatedly had their citizenship interrogated and heard messages questioning the worth of people who are undocumented (Ayón, 2016; Costello, 2016). These family separations did not occur in an apolitical vacuum and are directly targeted at particular immigrant groups.

Type III and Type IV traumas are also considered "historical trauma." Historical traumas are events that target an entire community, such as mass immigration raids of present day or the forced deportation of Mexican Americans in the 1930s, of whom over half were U.S.-born citizens. These events become cumulative group trauma that is passed on across generations (Estrada, 2009). As Menakem (2017) stated, the work begins with acknowledging our ancestors and our traumatized bodies both as people of color who carry the legacy of this oppression and as white people who carry the legacy of white supremacy. According to Menakem (2017), "At first glance, today's manifestations of this conflict [current social and political context] appears to be a struggle for political and social power. But as we'll see, the real conflict is more visceral. It is a battle for the souls and bodies of white Americans" (chapter 3, para. 2).

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS AS *NEPANTLERAS*

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's work has a universal quality in addressing issues of trauma and transformation, regardless of the borderlands traversed in one's life. Borderlands is a metaphor that can describe both personal and social healing. Anzaldúa described the borderlands as a wound that never heals, where "hate, anger, and exploitation are the prominent features" (Anzaldúa, 1987, Preface). Simultaneously, borderlands speak of the joy, gifts, consciousness, and transformation that happens in this space, both in the process of traversing these borderlands and resistance to the oppression found in this space. This conceptualization of borderlands is fitting given the open wound we see daily in immigration policies enacted and anti-immigrant rhetoric present in the national culture. The borderlands is also a space that holds the meeting of radical difference, which requires the ability to hold multiple perspectives at once (Anzaldúa, 2002; Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009).

In Anzaldúa's post-*Borderlands* works, the borderlands evolves into the concept of *nepantla*, "an in-between state, that uncertain terrain one crosses when moving from one place to another, when changing from one class, race, or sexual position to another, when traveling from the present identity into a new identity" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009, p. 180). This could describe the experience of the Mexican immigrant, the person coming out as queer, or a person traversing other borders such as moving from one class position to another. This concept is useful as we think about the multiple identities and worlds Latinx youth in our schools must traverse daily as they navigate the multiple traumas, the daily barrage of anti-immigrant sentiment, and micro-aggressions. This is also useful in recognizing their strengths of identity, the navigational capital, and the psychological resilience they possess, which can all be leveraged and heightened with support.

Social workers can become *nepantleras* in the process of mediating their own and their students' cultural and psychological borders (Reza-López, Huerta Charles, & Reyes, 2014). *Nepantla* is a Nahuatl word that Anzaldúa (1987) used to represent spaces of ambiguity and change. Thus, *nepantleras* become social change agents, individuals capable of border crossing and who live and transverse multiple worlds (Keating, 2006). These borders, according to Anzaldúa (1987), can be psy-

chological, physical, and cultural. *Nepantleras* also serve as "agents of awakening," inspiring and challenging others (Anzaldúa, 2003–2004). In addition to social change, Anzaldúa (Keating, 2006) stated that self-change is necessary and interdependent with social transformation. As school social workers engage in this work of personal and social transformation, it is necessary to recognize that this process can be painful, difficult, and messy, and acting as *nepantleras* takes courage (Keating, 2006). However, as we use our own positionality and reflexivity for the promotion of social change in our everyday work with the Latinx community, we can support Latinx youth in their healing and transformation, advocate for social change, and extend this lens to work with other marginalized groups.

In this process of transformation, we collectively heal our own wounds and racial trauma so that we are not speaking from those wounds, and in the process perpetuate the harm that was done to us (Henderson-Espinosa, 2013; Menakem, 2017). We also learn to hear the stories of others and be human with one another, modeling a different type of relationality and revolutionary love (Henderson-Espinosa, 2013). A relational approach to healing is based on the idea that mutually satisfying relationships with others are necessary for emotional well-being (Courtois & Ford, 2016). In the therapeutic process, building a strong relationship with the therapist is used to model healthy relationships with others.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS HEALING TRAUMA AND CREATING SOCIAL CHANGE

Given the complex nature of trauma and traumatic events faced by immigrant and second-generation youth, school social workers can play an important role in ensuring their psychological and emotional safety in the school setting. Much of the difference in achievement between groups is a result of the ways in which social identities related to race, gender, and other intersections are constructed in the school setting (Noguera, 2008; Villarreal Sosa, 2011). *Social identity* refers to how individuals define themselves in their own social context with regard to stigmatized social groups to which they belong and the emotional significance they attach to that membership (Hurtado, 2003). These constructions of social identity affect behavior of both students and school staff, including school social workers. Thus, understanding how

school professionals understand their own privilege and oppression is key to understanding the context they create for their students. We know that teachers' underlying assumptions about ethnicity and race have an impact on how different minority youth are viewed and treated in the school context. Within racially diverse schools, teachers often make distinctions about which students add "good" and "bad" diversity to their schools (Randolph, 2013). Interventions to address these issues could include activities that increase awareness about diversity and equity, supporting teachers to build relationships with immigrant parents, and consider the overall school climate toward immigrant and second-generation youth.

Given the lack of access to mental health services for the undocumented community, the school social worker may be one of the few mental health services providers available to immigrant and second-generation families. Fear may also prevent mixed-status or undocumented families from reaching out to community services. Thus, the provision of tier 2 or tier 3 services may be essential services school social workers provide to immigrant and second-generation youth. As social workers engaging in this mental health work, our role in understanding youth behavior in a racialized and trauma-informed context is imperative. As stated by Menakem (2017), trauma work needs to be contextualized within a reality of white supremacy and how this lives in bodies of both people of color and white people as somatic neurobiological responses and long-term health issues. To be effective in this work, social workers must challenge themselves to do their own work around trauma awareness and racial justice. Furthermore, connecting parents and children to advocacy efforts and community-based supports is also important, as trauma inflicted on an entire group or community is often best supported by addressing these issues as a community in addition to individual-level support (Heart, 1998). Children and adolescents may feel a sense of empowerment by participating in advocacy efforts enhancing their resiliency in the face of adversity, particularly at a time of extreme powerlessness, discrimination, and loss.

Interventions at all levels need to include the recognition that trauma lives in the body, and we must provide opportunities for children to develop somatic awareness and process trauma. One of the

most critical aspects of any approach is what is called a "relational" approach. In other words, any intervention provided by caring and supportive adults who show "empathy, self-awareness, compassion, and positive regard" (Courtois & Ford, 2016, p. viii) will be more effective, independent of empirically tested evidence-based practices. This approach is not only consistent with a trauma-informed approach, but also addresses the importance for Latinx youth of "caring" and affiliation with school personnel as a main source for motivation and feeling connected to school (Valenzuela, 1999). As healers and social workers, we all have the potential to be border crossers and *nepantleras*, advocating for social justice, honoring the pain and transformations in our lives, and walking with others in their own journeys.

As a Chicana school social worker and professor of social work with nearly two decades of experience navigating and crossing cultural borders, my vision for this journal in the coming years is that we move the school social work profession forward in innovative and necessary ways to address the current and changing demographics of our schools as well as the complexities of various social issues our children are facing. I hope that we are able to dialogue directly and openly about some of our blind spots as a profession, advances in theoretical approaches, incorporation of existing theoretical approaches that have been largely absent from school social work, and think critically about our interventions. **CS**

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