From Protest to Protection: Navigating Politics with Immigrant Students in Uncertain Times

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With the rise of nationalism and the current contentious debate on immigration in the US, school leaders and educators are faced with difficult questions about how to negotiate sensitive political topics, including debates on immigration. In this article, Reva Jaffe-Walter, Chandler Patton Miranda, and Stacey J. Lee explore how educators grapple with the political policies and discourses surrounding immigration with marginalized students who are the subject of those politics. Drawing on research from two US schools exclusively serving recently arrived immigrant students, the authors explore how educators negotiate the teaching of immigration politics during two different time periods, in 2013 during the Obama era “Dreamer” movement and in early 2017 after the inauguration of Donald Trump. They consider how the unique conditions of each political context inform educators’ strategies for “teaching into” political events and supporting their immigrant and undocumented students. Their analysis reveals the unique challenges of engaging marginalized students who are the subject of contentious politics in political discussion and action and supports their call for a deeper consideration of students’ identities and experiences of politics within scholarly discussions of critical civic engagement.

Keywords: immigrants, immigration, civics, social justice, nationalism, immigrant education

With rapidly changing policies related to immigration, a call for a wall between the United States and Mexico, and an alarming increase in Immigration and

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Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids, students from immigrant communities are increasingly vulnerable. The history of the US is filled with examples of exclusion, and currently school leaders and educators are faced with difficult questions about how to negotiate the threat to their immigrant students. Among educators, however, there has long been ambivalence around whether and how to address sensitive political topics. Following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, for example, some school leaders directed teachers not to discuss the election results with students, while in other schools teachers were encouraged to talk about the election openly in lessons developed in response to the outcome. According to Costello (2016), many teachers chose to avoid teaching about the election in an effort to maintain civility, keep students safe, and avoid conflicts with families and school leadership. However, some teachers in schools with large numbers of immigrants and students of color felt a moral imperative to disclose their political views and objections to the new president who routinely described immigrants as murderers, rapists, and animals. This article explores how educators engage in discussions and actions related to immigration politics with immigrant students who are the subject of those politics.

Debates about educators' political engagements are not new. School leaders have always made important decisions about whether to remain silent or to engage in discussions of controversial topics to promote student learning (Parker & Hess, 2001). In 1865, Samuel May, a principal of a teacher training school, took his class of teachers to an abolitionist meeting and was rebuked by Horace Mann, who argued that taking students to a political event was similar to religious proselytizing and a "violation of state trust" (Hess & McAvoy, 2014, p. 170). Given that public schooling is mandatory, there are questions about whether promoting particular political positions to students, a captive audience, amounts to political indoctrination. A 1969 Supreme Court ruling in Pickering v. Board of Education found that teachers are protected by the Constitution when speaking about public issues. This court ruling has not prevented school districts from attempting to stop teachers from wearing political paraphernalia, participating in political activity, or posting on social media about their political views (Hernandez, 2008). Indeed, there is still a deeply rooted societal expectation that US public school teachers should remain politically neutral to allow for the expression of diverse opinions in their classrooms (Drummond, 2015; Jones, 2017).

Immigration politics is a difficult topic for educators to navigate, particularly in classrooms with immigrant and undocumented students. However, scholars find that when teachers remain silent on immigration policy, students interpret their silence as an implicit sanctioning of those policies. This can lead to the continued marginalization and exclusion of immigrant and undocumented students (Jeffries & Dabach, 2014; Kley, Alulema, Khalifa, & Romero, 2017). Teachers may remain silent because they are afraid to delve into contentious politics with their students or because they are trying to pro-
tect undocumented students (Figueroa, 2017). Others may “breach” these silences (Dabach, 2015; Lee & Walsh, 2015) to critically engage students in explicit conversations about immigration politics and to implicitly signal their support to undocumented students. As one teacher in a school with a large number of immigrant students explained, following the election of Donald Trump, “I am less neutral. I want to reassure my students I don’t buy into racist rhetoric” (Costello, 2016). There are often conflicting ideas about the best ways to support immigrant and undocumented students, with some viewing silence on controversial topics like documentation and immigration as protection, while others feel compelled to engage these politics as a way of protecting students from negative representations of immigrants (Jaffe-Walter, 2016; Miranda, 2017).

The rhetoric surrounding the 2016 presidential election framed immigrants and refugees as dangerous criminals and “radical Islamic terrorists” who were making America less safe. Hostile chants of “build a wall” at rallies were broadcast on the nightly news along with Trump’s campaign promise to oversee mass deportations of millions of undocumented immigrants (Miranda, 2017). This contentious discourse has profoundly affected children and schools. Following the election, teachers across the nation reported an increase in student anxiety, especially from students who are Muslim or perceived to be Muslim, immigrants, the children of immigrants, and/or undocumented students (Costello, 2016). Given this context, when the current discourse is reverberating through schools in such profound ways, it is important to consider how teachers and schools strategies for navigating politics influence immigrant students’ experiences of those politics and their positioning within the national community.

There is a growing body of research in civics education that highlights the importance of supporting young people to actively engage with politics and political debates in schools (Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017), particularly within the context of civics and social studies classes. However, this literature tends to evoke a “typical” white middle-class high school student without considering how marginalized students, like immigrant and undocumented students, might experience particular political conversations or how the political context shapes the silences and discussions of politics in classrooms (for exceptions, see Rubin, 2007; and Levinson, 1999).

Drawing on case study research from two schools that exclusively serve recently arrived immigrant students, in this article we compare educators’ strategies and reflections on engaging immigration politics during two different time periods, in 2013, during the Obama-era “Dreamer” movement, and in early 2017, after the inauguration of Donald Trump. We recognize that anti-immigrant policies marked the Obama era. However, we suggest that the current moment stands out in recent history for its overt racism, xenophobia, and fear mongering. Thus, the questions that frame this article are: How are teachers’ decisions about how to address politics shaped by understandings of who
their students are? And how does the larger political context shape teachers’ decisions about how to negotiate teaching immigration politics? We engage ongoing conversations in civic education and critical pedagogy to explore how the classroom teachers in our study negotiated immigration politics with their immigrant students. We looked at how they navigated sometimes competing desires to advocate for, empower, and protect their students. We argue that in this political moment, when xenophobic and false ideas about immigrants echo through public discourses and schools, teachers must actively challenge these dehumanizing discourses.

Literature Review

Navigating Politics and Educating Immigrant Students

Since the early Americanization movement (1900–1925) that sought to transform new immigrants to embrace “American” values, US public schools have been a central site of assimilation, instilling normative ideas of behavior and identity in newcomers and preserving the integrity of the imagined community of the nation (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Levinson & Sutton, 2001; Olneck, 1989; Ong et al., 1996; Tyack & Tyack, 2003). There is much research that reveals how nationalist discourses play a significant role in influencing how immigrant youth are positioned in schools and the kinds of educational experiences they are believed to require (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Jaffe-Walter, 2016). Yet, despite research that illuminates the dynamic transnational commitments of immigrant youth that support their positive development (Bhatia, 2002; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018), media and policy discourses continue to position immigrant youth who maintain transnational ties as threats to the nation and to social cohesion (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Dyrness & Abu El-Haj, in press; Lukose, 2007).

The landmark 1982 Plyer v. Doe Supreme Court decision ruled that all children living in the US, including undocumented children, have a right to a K–12 education. Still, undocumented immigrant students face challenges, including fear of deportation, discrimination, and uncertainty about their future given the rapidly changing policy context (Gonzalez, 2016; Negron-Gonzales, 2014). Undocumented students learn to withhold information about their status because of the social stigma and out of fear of deportation (Gonzalez, 2016). Schools also generally maintain a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy about students’ status, which reinforces a culture of silence around issues of documentation (Jeffries & Dabach, 2014). Dabach (2015) documents one teacher’s breach of norms of silence in a high school civics classroom to reveal how in making undocumented students’ everyday experiences visible, and by modeling her own advocacy, she socializes all her students into meaningful civic engagements and signals support to her undocumented students.

In schools, some teachers and leaders have responded to the current xenophobic climate by advocating for immigrant students in their buildings (Crawford, 2017; Miranda, 2017). Crawford (2017) documents how a leader in a
school that serves large numbers of undocumented students advocates for them by alerting individual families when ICE trucks are nearby, by holding meetings to inform undocumented families of their rights, and by speaking out against anti-immigrant policies. She raises the question of whether this leader’s actions might be considered “too political” but argues that their actions are part of developing relationships and supporting the members of their school community. This idea of ethical leadership is aligned with Anderson’s (2009) vision of advocacy leadership that involves “advocacy in alliance with other groups such as teachers, parents and community leaders, unions, policy advocates and other emerging civil society groups” (p. 2).

Engaging Politics in Schools in Times of Controversy

Scholars of education have recognized that a central purpose of schooling is to encourage students to become engaged citizens who participate in democratic processes, even though concepts of citizenship remain highly contested (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Levinson, 1999). While much of the literature on civic engagement focuses on social studies classrooms, ethnographic research indicates that students learn ideas about civic belonging and engagement through interactions, curriculum, and pedagogy that take place every day across schools (Billig, 1995). The literature on civic education and schooling confirms that schools can increase young people’s civic and political engagement through deliberative debate, service learning, and other forms of democratic education (Bajaj & Suresh, 2018; Callahan & Muller, 2013; Hess, 2009; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Parker, 2003; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Richardson, 2007). Further, Hess (2009) argues that students are more likely to be civically and politically engaged when they are given opportunities to participate in “democratic education,” which involves the discussion of controversial issues (Parker, 2003; Rubin, 2012). Zimmerman and Robertson (2017) argue that the teaching of controversial issues is essential to support young people in accessing the skills and dispositions to be engaged citizens.

There are a number of ideological barriers to democratic education. One is that some teachers engage in a denial or avoidance of controversial issues (Hess, 2009). As in current debates surrounding immigration reform, immigrants are the very subject of controversy; how and whether teachers address issues related to immigration and immigrants sends a message to immigrant students about their identities. Hess and McAvoy (2014) argue that while some teachers might feel that it is important that they remain neutral on controversial topics, the principle of neutrality is problematic because teachers always have particular ideas for what it means to be educated and to be good citizens, and these ideas are inevitably expressed through their practice. Further, silence on politically controversial topics does not translate to neutrality as nationalist discourses and dominant narratives about marginalized groups circulate through the spaces of schools and are reflected in everyday interactions (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Costello, 2016; Jaffe-Walter, 2016).
The literature on teaching controversy in schools has been largely silent on how educators engage in political discussions with marginalized students or students who are the subject of those politics and how classroom conversations are affected by the political context. One notable exception is Dabach, Merchant, and Fones’s (2018) examination of how social studies teachers supported immigrant students’ agency and countered discursive notions of immigrants as “other.” Building on this emerging dialogue and on scholarship on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), our study explores how educators consider student identities when making pedagogical decisions. Specifically, it raises questions about how students who are differentially positioned across lines of race, class, gender, and other identities might engage in political debates and discussion or be silenced depending on their identities and how teachers negotiate political events.

**Immigrant Youth and Pedagogies of Critical Civic Engagement**

While the dominant literature on civics education has been largely silent on considerations for teaching civics to marginalized groups of students, scholars in the field of social justice education have made important contributions. For example, some argue that students from marginalized groups must grapple with issues of power and inequality to be prepared to confront institutionalized systems of oppression. Rubin’s (2007) research on civic engagement and identity development finds that students’ social positioning influences how they make sense of their identities and the political engagements available to them. She describes the “disjunctures” between the ideals of civic engagement urban youth of color learned in textbooks and the realities of their lives in poor under-resourced communities, arguing that “students’ experiences of personal and community disjuncture, instantiated in acts of racism and discrimination and in the unrelenting poverty in their communities, were powerful daily reminders of the persistent inequalities of U.S. society” (p. 473). Rubin’s work calls for a deeper understanding of how urban youth make sense of the structural inequalities that surround them and the ways that schools are implicated in shaping students’ civic identities. It also calls on teachers and leaders to engage in honest dialogue about the inequalities they face and in a critical analysis of power structures.

Much of the literature on critical civic engagement draws on Freire’s (1996) notion of praxis, a kind of critical self-reflection and action when students study problems in their worlds and then present findings to the stakeholders in their lives. According to Ladson-Billings (1995), “Students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social inequities” (p. 47). Dyrenness and Abu El-Haj (in press) argue that immigrant students hold a unique form of transnational knowledge and “a critical awareness of disparities and inequalities in material conditions, opportunities and access to rights between and across their multiple communities” that are foundational.
for democratic participation and citizenship formation (Irizarry, 2017). Lee and Walsh (2017) argue that this kind of culturally sustaining curriculum for immigrant youth requires that teachers actively acknowledge the challenges of racialization and racism that influence young immigrants’ lives while also preparing them to be active citizens who are prepared to challenge inequalities.

These authors emphasize that in order to challenge social and political injustices, teachers need to be open to helping students identify oppression, rather than remaining neutral and presuming that all stances have equal value (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Our study contributes to this literature by exploring educators’ understandings of their work to challenge dehumanizing immigration discourses and encourage student agency.

Methods

Drawing from ethnographic data from two studies of schools serving recently arrived immigrant students, many of them undocumented, this article explores how teachers and leaders negotiated the political context in their classrooms during two different time periods. The first study took place between 2012 and 2013, and the second began in 2016 and is ongoing. In these studies, the authors used ethnography and extended time in the field to uncover the everyday interactions and practices in schools that were increasing opportunity for immigrant youth. This research stems from the authors’ positionality as researchers of immigrants and schools that seek to highlight “sites of possibility” for low-income immigrant youth (Weis & Fine, 2004).

The decision to collaborate on this article began with a conversation about how, during the course of our research, we had seen educators in these schools working to both protect and empower immigrant students. However, we realized that the data we had each gathered portrayed different ideas of how the schools were affected by political events. Following insights from Bartlett and Vavrus’s (2016) work on comparative case studies (CCS), we turned to the data from the two studies with an eye to how educators and leaders navigated the political and policy landscapes surrounding immigration during the periods of the two studies. In other words, we viewed the historical moment or time period as a key part of the context of each study.

Our studies took place during two very different periods: the Obama dreamer period of 2012–2013, during which undocumented students were demanding increased rights from the government, and the period following the election of Donald Trump, which has been characterized by increasing xenophobic rhetoric about immigrant communities and a rise in the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants. In the tradition of critical scholarship, we were centrally concerned with connecting micro/school-level practices to macro forces, including the political contexts (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Burawoy, Burton, Ferguson, & Fox, 1991; Weis & Fine, 2004). We aimed to uncover the influence of the larger sociopolitical environment on what
schools believe they can and are able to do to educate, protect, and empower vulnerable students.

In our consideration of policy, we drew on Shore and Wright's (1997) anthropology of policy methodology to explore immigration policies through various sites to better understand how students and educators experience and respond to sociopolitical shifts. We traced the way educators responded to the issues facing undocumented students over time by engaging historical comparisons (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016). In arguing for what they refer to as "transversal" comparisons, Bartlett and Vavrus argue that "sense-making by researchers studying contemporary phenomenon should include comparisons across sites and scales, and over time" (p. 92).

Both studies included high schools in the Internationals Network for Public Schools, which serve recently arrived immigrant students who are English language learners. The first of these schools opened in 1985, and now there are twenty-seven schools and academies in the country. In both studies, researchers identified these schools as positive examples of immigrant education and sought to understand the portable lessons for other schools serving immigrant youth. Internationals Network schools often report higher measurable outcomes for immigrant youth when compared to national and state averages. These schools have similar core commitments, admissions criteria, student populations, and professional practices and are all supported by the same nonprofit organization.

Our comparative case study engages a homologous comparison. According to Bartlett and Vavrus (2016), "homologous studies compare and contrast, thinking carefully about how similar forces result in similar or different practices and why" (p. 52). Unlike quantitative studies that seek statistical generalizability, our ethnographic case studies seek "analytical generalization through theory" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016, p. 117). Looking horizontally across cases and transversely across time allows us to examine how the sociopolitical context informs how teachers approach educating, empowering, and protecting their immigrant students.

**School Context**

Students at these Internationals Network high schools in New York City are from more than 119 countries and speak ninety different languages. Over 90 percent are considered low income, and many are undocumented. While heterogeneous in their countries of origin, language, and educational backgrounds, what these students have in common is that they have been in the country for less than four years and score in the bottom quartile of English language exams when they enter high school. They also share the experience of increasing vulnerability in the face of anti-immigrant policies and deportation policies, with many coming from mixed-status families or living in communities affected by these politics.
Schools in this network operate autonomously but share five core principles that are institutionalized at each school: heterogeneity and collaboration, experiential learning, language and content integration, localized autonomy and responsibility, and one learning model for all. Unlike schools where students are tracked into particular classes based on their linguistic and academic skills (Hodge, 2018), students in these schools are grouped into cohorts that are heterogeneous in terms of linguistic background, English proficiency, and academic level. Each cohort is taught by a team of five or six teachers who meet regularly to develop curriculum, analyze and reflect on teaching, and address the needs of struggling students. Students also work in collaborative groups in every class.

Instructional teams, group work, and project-based curricula help to foster close relationships between teachers and students and to ensure that students are not at risk of falling through the cracks. Each student is also assigned to an adviser whom they meet with two times each week. The schools are small by design—to make connections between all members of the community possible. Questions of civics, belonging, and politics are not just the domain of social studies teachers in the schools. All teachers are engaged in thinking about how students are affected by the changing immigration landscape and work with students on these topics through pedagogies across disciplines and through other forms of messaging.

It is important to emphasize that Internationals Network schools are not typical schools in any sense. They are explicitly focused on providing resources to recently arrived immigrant students, and they recruit faculty that are specifically oriented toward working with this population. A large number of teachers have experience with immigration, either as immigrants themselves or as the children of immigrants; others have served in the Peace Corps or had other experiences that make them sensitive to what their students experience as newcomers to the United States. It is important to add that the schools are unique in that they exclusively serve immigrant students, and as such they offer particular affordances, such as insulation from the social stigma that immigrant students report experiencing in traditional schools.

Selection of Cases
Our selection of cases was guided by our desire to illustrate teachers’ responses to immigration politics at multiple levels of the system. Case 1, focused on Metropolitan High School, is embedded in a classroom to illustrate the possibilities of an individual teacher’s negotiations of politics; Case 2, focused on Bethel High School, illuminates a schoolwide response, with events following the election of Donald Trump providing a critical incident to view how the school put its beliefs into action.1

Case 1 draws data from a larger study conducted by Jaffe-Walter and Lee that documented the trajectories of a cohort of students at two Internation-
als Network high schools during the second semester of their senior year through their first year of college or first year after high school. We invited all the schools in the Internationals Network to participate and selected the two schools that volunteered. During the first year of our study, School A had an enrollment of 315 students, and School B had an enrollment of 402 students. We gathered the data presented here in the spring of 2013 during the first phase of our research, which focused on how the schools were preparing students for college and life after high school and how the students were imagining their futures. We initially focused on teacher supports for student learning related to college going and, in the course of research, observed leaders and teachers negotiating the political context. We adapted our research plan to follow this line of inquiry because it was closely aligned with our research agendas. While the data presented here focus largely on the work of one social studies teacher, we argue that this teacher’s work reflects the larger school culture designed to support the social, emotional, and academic growth of immigrant students (Jaffe-Walter, 2018; Jaffe-Walter & Lee, 2018).

In Case 1, we interviewed all teachers on the twelfth-grade instructional teams (N=8). For our student participants, we sampled for range (Weiss, 1994). By intentionally targeting a diverse sample, we were able to examine how students’ diverse backgrounds (in terms of gender, years in the US, refugee or document status, language) shaped their relationship to school. At the time of our interviews, our participants had been living in the US for two to seven years. We conducted seventy-five hours of observations of classrooms in the two schools with a focus on classroom environments, interactions between students and teachers, and modes of instruction. We also observed in the schools’ common areas, such as hallways, the lunchroom, the teachers’ room, and the guidance office, and we attended school assemblies and school trips as well.

We interviewed students (N=24), with our original semistructured interview protocol focusing on school culture, students’ future plans, supports for college and life beyond high school, emotional and academic supports, and peer relations. We interviewed teachers and other educational staff, including the principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, and social worker (N=18). Teacher interviews focused on teachers’ perceptions of their experiences working with recently arrived immigrant students, how they negotiated the political context, and their understanding of their students’ academic and emotional needs. In several cases we interviewed teachers and other staff multiple times to gather more detail related to particular lessons or events we observed or to points teachers had made in the first interview.

Case 2 draws on data from an ongoing ethnographic study of one of the Internationals Network high schools. The data for this article were gathered over sixteen months in 2016 and 2017 and are based on over two hundred hours of participant observation by Miranda of how teachers engaged students in discussions of politics before and after the 2016 presidential election.
in both classroom and less-structured settings. Every teacher, administrator, and support staff worker at the school volunteered to participate in the study. We conducted formal interviews about the changing political environment with teachers (N=21), counselors (N=2), the social worker (N=1), the parent coordinator (N=1), and both administrators (N=2) in the months after the election. We also formally interviewed nine students (N=9). In addition, we conducted countless informal interviews to generate cohesive and complete narratives. We also performed document analysis on classroom curriculum, email communication between staff members, posters hanging in the hallways, and the school’s official communication with parents to allow for triangulation and to increase the validity of the findings.

Analysis
We developed a coding system to facilitate a systematic review of the data using the software ATLAS.ti to ensure that the voices of participants were accurately represented in the data and findings of the study (Saldana, 2013). Our analysis involved both inductive and deductive approaches to our data as we engaged in observations, conducted interviews, and wrote field notes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). The findings emerged inductively from the field. The analysis process was iterative, moving back and forth between data and analysis, reviewing relevant literature, and engaging in “memo-making” that explored links between multiple levels of data. As themes in the coded data emerged, we organized them into analytical categories. We employed follow-up interviews and member checks to ensure the validity of the findings.

We integrated our separate studies by beginning with memo-making related to how teachers negotiated the political context in our various sites and then recoded the data using the codes “immigration,” “political activism,” “community engagement,” “critical civics pedagogy,” “protection,” “undocumented student concerns,” and “student agency.” What emerged from the process of coding and memo-making were themes related to the empowerment, protection, and political involvement of students and educators. We engaged in a transversal historical comparison of the two cases from two important time periods in recent immigration policy. These cases illustrate how political context influences the positioning of immigrant students in schools and how that informs the decisions leaders and teachers make.

Findings

Metropolitan High School, 2013: Encouraging Critical Political Engagements
Case 1 takes place in a political moment when undocumented young people were coming out of the shadows and asking President Obama for recognition and status security. This national Dreamer movement resulted in the creation of the June 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allowed undocumented immigrants who entered the country as minors
to receive a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation. Before DACA, educators in the school discussed issues surrounding immigration and took a stance of protecting undocumented students by not making their status known. When undocumented students began making their status public and protesting for their rights as Dreamers, school leaders were forced to reexamine their positions to find new ways to protect undocumented students. In an interview in 2013, Claire Sylvan, the former director of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, explained:

The ground has shifted, and more and more kids are coming out publicly than when I was a teacher. I still remember when our first kid went public and said, “I am undocumented,” and her picture was published on the website of the New York Immigration Coalition. I freaked out . . . So now there’s been a shift in the political conversation. Dreamers are now political activists and they go and love being in Congress now. I mean that’s a different world than the one I started in teaching when our goal was to protect them and their identities. You know, we wanted to keep them safe, but then they grew up around us and took the lead, and I respect that. But we couldn’t make that choice for them—that had to be a choice that the young people basically made on their own, and they did.

Sylvan spoke to how the changing context and students’ changing positioning within the political landscape influenced the ways teachers and leaders supported their students. As in the majority of schools, teachers maintained a posture of silence to protect undocumented identities but supported their students in other ways (Jeffries & Dabach, 2014). Before the Dreamer period, school faculty were focused on quietly supporting their undocumented students by providing resources and making other staff members aware of their needs. For example, teachers collaborated across Internationals Network schools to develop a handbook for supporting undocumented students through the college process to increase their access to higher education.

Unlike the silence that exists in most schools around undocumented students, faculty in Internationals Network schools routinely talked about the needs and experiences of their undocumented students, but it was rare that these issues were openly discussed in classrooms. However, as students began to come forward during the Dreamer movement to publicly advocate for themselves, teachers also began to more actively engage in immigration politics with their students.

An example of how teachers in the first case study mobilized to actively engage immigration politics with their students is Megan’s eleventh-grade social studies class at Metropolitan High School, where students were developing group projects focused on Supreme Court cases related to free speech, search warrants, and the death penalty. As part of this unit, Megan planned a field trip to the Office of the Governor in New York City to protest in support of the New York State Dream Act and, specifically, to call for the right of undocumented students to receive in-state tuition. The leadership of the Internationals Network for Public Schools had sent out an email to all schools
inviting them to bring students to the protest sponsored by the New York State Leadership Council, an undocumented youth-led nonprofit. Megan explained that she responded to this email immediately, recognizing that it would be relevant to the unit on the Constitution—"I didn’t really think about it, I had questions about whether logistically I could do it, but if I could take them I should . . . I knew for these kids it would be so important.” Her belief that the event would be particularly important for immigrant students, including undocumented youth and those from mixed-status families, was shared by others in the school, including the two other teachers who attended the protest and the school leader who supported her decision to attend with her students.

In this classroom, Megan framed her work in the context of a lesson on the Constitution and the role of protest in promoting positive political change in American history. She told the students that through their participation in the protest, “they were a part of something bigger.” In an interview she explained:

I asked the students to imagine the stamina and strength of people in the civil rights movement who had to walk every day in the cold when they couldn’t take the buses. After studying Reconstruction, we did a civil rights movement unit in which students researched one movement.

While a few years earlier attending this type of event might have been considered too risky, in 2013, in the Dreamer period, this was understood to be a rich opportunity for students to learn norms of civic participation and to see protest as an important element of civic engagement. Further, Megan positioned students as having valuable viewpoints and experiences that contribute to an American narrative of civil rights struggle and change over time.

At 9:00 a.m. on the day of the protest, Megan, along with an English teacher, Giorgia, who was on the same instructional team, took attendance. Thirty-two students were attending the protest. They reminded the students that the purpose of the event was to try to convince the governor to support the New York State Dream Act so that undocumented students could have access to in-state tuition. In introducing the event, Megan explained that the Dream Act was important to many students at the school and that it could provide undocumented students the opportunity to apply for financial aid. She reminded the group about the protest movements that they had read about in class that emphasized “peaceful change” and explained that “now we have to be part of this change.” She then held up a sign she’d made with a picture of Margaret Mead and the message, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” She told them that this quote had inspired her as a high school student and reminded the group that “this is an important issue for us because not everyone in our school has the same ability to get college loans and scholarships.” Megan signaled belonging and support for undocumented students and promoted a sense of community among all of her students. Picking up on this, Giorgia told students that as an immigrant herself, this issue was deeply
personal to her and was a concern for all immigrants, not just undocumented students.

In preparing students for the protest, Megan sought to empower students to speak out against unjust policies, but she balanced that empowerment with helping students develop norms for safe and civil participation. She reminded them of their classroom discussions of free speech and provided guidelines for their participation at the protest. Students asked questions about what they could and couldn’t say. One student raised his hand and jokingly asked, “Can we burn flags?” Another student commented that it was free speech. Megan said that while, yes, they could legally do that, “do me a favor, don’t burn any flags.” Drawing on the lessons on the Constitution, Megan said, “When we think about free speech, we need to think about time, place and manner—we don’t want to be learning about the Fourth Amendment tomorrow.” She emphasized:

Please remember that our free expression rights have limits . . . Listen to directions . . . Please be polite even if people are being rude to you . . . And we know that some of us who are attending may be undocumented. You should not “out” your friends as undocumented. You can talk about your own stories, but don’t point to your friend and say, “She’s undocumented.”

The students laughed in response. At that point an Asian American male teacher poked his head into the room and asked the students if they were going to the protest. When they said they were, he said, “Si se puede” (Yes we can) and pumped his fist in the air, which heightened the students’ excitement.

At the protest, the thirty-two Metropolitan students lined the sidewalk, taking up much of the block in front of the building, and they were joined by local activists who distributed drums and signs—“my dreams are not illegal,” “support in-state tuition for Dreamers,” “undocumented and unafraid.” One student was handed a poster that read, “I’m undocumented.” Megan asked the student to exchange the sign for a different one.

Two male students took drums and led a procession walking back and forth in front of the governor’s office. Most pedestrians who passed smiled at the students or cheered them on, but there were some negative responses. One young man looked toward the students and shouted, “Go back to Mexico!” And a woman from Russia stopped and talked to a group of students and one of the teachers and asked, “Why is it fair for taxpayers to pay for these kids’ college when my daughter has to work to pay for college?” The teacher responded that she thought that these students had the same right to education as other New Yorkers, while two students stood silently watching without responding.

The next day, Megan spent the first fifteen minutes of class encouraging students to talk about their experiences at the protest. She asked general questions—“What was it like? What did you see? What was it like to be a part of a protest? The students started with general observations. One student
reflected, "We had signs, we had to stand on the side of the sidewalk." Another added, "The police were there, and not to get us in trouble but to protect us and make sure it all went well." In all four of her classes with students who attended the protest, students brought up the man who approached the group and yelled, "Go back to Mexico!"

Megan gave students time to talk about the negative responses but then asked them to discuss whether they thought the protest was effective. She asked rhetorically, "Did Governor Cuomo come down from his office and say, like, 'Yes, I'll sign this right away?" She then explained:

He might not put it in his budget, and we might not hear about this on the news for months or years, but eventually I think it will happen, and I think it will happen because it is the right thing to do. And when it does happen, it will because of people like you who brought awareness to this issue.

She encouraged the students to process the anti-immigrant messages they experienced but, ultimately, to see themselves as agents of positive social change and part of a larger movement.

In counseling the students to be polite even if others are "rude" and comparing the students to activists during the civil rights movement, Megan framed resistance as a part of positive change. She created space for students to process the anti-immigrant sentiment they heard during the protest and socialized them in a tradition of public activism, one understood to be relatively safe for her students during the Dreamer period.

In a follow-up interview, Megan shared:

One of the students brought up how proud she was to have gone to the event because it was important that she was helping out other people, and that was meaningful for her. She felt it was important to stand up for something even when you yourself aren't affected by it. I think that for other students it was personal for them or they were there for their friends who were undocumented.

Our discussions with students on the trip back to Metropolitan after the protest echoed this sentiment. Khadi from Senegal shared, "I got my papers and now I want to support others." Deniz from the Philippines explained, "For me, I'm lucky and I have my papers, but we are here to support our undocumented friends because in another way we are all in the same boat. We are all immigrants." While the members of the class did not directly discuss who was undocumented and who wasn't, the act of advocating for the rights of undocumented students at the rally forged a common bond among both documented and undocumented students, supporting the formation of "communal transformation" (Irizarry, 2017) as young people come together to resist oppressive and racializing practices and to critique existing inequalities. Throughout this lesson and the events of the protest, Megan and Giorgia positioned students as active agents of change whose life experiences allowed them to envision just visions of citizenship.
Bethel High School, 2017: Sanctuary and Safety in Hostile Times

The second case took place during the 2016 presidential election, extending back into the primary race and then into President Trump’s first year in office. Like many teachers across the country, teachers at Bethel High School felt it was their professional responsibility to model democratic values, including the freedom to form individual opinions, and they generally avoided conversations that could be seen as indoctrination. They avoided telling students who they were voting for in an attempt to appear neutral and focused on teaching students about the democratic process, encouraging students to debate the issues and to write letters to the future president. To allow students to formulate their own opinions, they helped students access reliable information about political issues and created projects that asked students to explore multiple perspectives on a variety of political, economic, or moral issues. One teacher recalled that he tried to challenge his students “to think about who we should vote for and why. Should we vote for Trump, or should we vote for Clinton, and why?”

The teaching staff at Bethel clearly leaned liberal and were pro-immigrant, but before the election they were not explicit about their politics in front of students. In discussions among teachers, some expressed unease about the possibility of Trump’s election, but these conversations usually ended with jokes about Donald Trump. Most teachers at Bethel did not believe that Trump could possibly be elected. Even the students mocked the election. In one recurring prank, they stole a picture of Trump’s face from an election-focused bulletin board and posted it in the bathroom urinal, for use as a target.

But the morning after the election, many teachers and students were in tears. Educators at the school were shocked by the outcome of the election and not sure how best to show support for their students. In the following weeks, teachers’ first impulses were to pacify students’ fears by assuring them that the checks and balances of the US democracy and Constitution would keep them safe (Miranda, 2017). In the months between the election and the inauguration, teachers reported that their students were increasingly fearful and hopeless. One counselor explained:

I think initially when the election results were in . . . so many of us had assured kids, “There’s no way Trump is ever going to win. There’s no way.” We were stunned into silence ourselves when after the election we had to come together as a community . . . so we could start our healing and start moving forward. [We asked ourselves], “How are we going to work with our students? How are we going to reassure them that this is a safe space for them?”

It wasn’t long until these educators began to realize that executive actions and policy shifts on immigration would directly impact Bethel’s students and their families. Teachers and school leaders openly questioned whether remaining silent in an effort to appear politically neutral was in their students’ best interest. While some teachers came out in opposition to the new president in
the days after the election, others were more hesitant. Over time, however, the majority of teachers in the school became more open to engaging in political conversations with their students as part of their efforts to protect students, breaking their silence and revealing their own political positions in the process. For example, the school leadership team planned workshops for parents so they could ask questions about their rights as immigrants or as undocumented parents of American citizen children. These “know your rights” workshops had been well attended in the past, but at the first workshop after the election, only two parents showed up.

We would have meetings for families, and they just weren’t showing up. After one meeting, I had one father tell me, “Well, I sat in the lobby for a half-hour to see who was going to show up.” Then I spoke to other families, and they’re afraid that if we all get together . . . Immigration [could] come and get us.” So reassuring families our school is a safe place isn’t working.

The fact that parents were too fearful to gather in a public school indicated to school leaders and teachers that they were going to have to rethink how they engaged their community in political discussions both inside and outside of the classroom. Events like the poorly attended workshops began to shift educators’ rhetoric around and reaction to the election.

The most profound shift took place after ICE raided a student’s home. In the middle of the night in March of 2017, ICE agents banged on the door of a student’s apartment and took the father into custody. Terrified, the family fled and went into hiding. School personnel asked friends of the student to contact the family to offer support. They were able to help the student return to school within a week and to help his family members find refuge. While the school was able to help the student return to school, teachers and leaders knew that the student and his family faced new challenges. The father, who was the breadwinner, was deported, which meant the family now faced homelessness and financial instability. One counselor recalled that the “kids are back in school, but it’s not over. The man was deported because he had gotten a citation three, five years ago.”

This was the first event at Bethel that demonstrated how quickly changes in policy could impact the school’s immediate community. The illusion of the safety of living in a progressive state, sanctuary city, and immigrant enclave dissipated. The shock of the raid made educators’ theoretical fears’ tangible and shifted their approach to engaging their students in political discussion. Before the raid, teachers were still reassuring students, encouraging them to be informed and feel empowered. After, they shifted toward protecting students and their families and teaching them to protect themselves.

Teachers held restorative circles with their students to allow them to ask questions and work through their fears. During circles, teachers and students arranged chairs or blankets in a small circle, lowered the lights, and often passed around a talking piece, like a soft globe or stress ball, to ensure that
only one person spoke at a time. While restorative circles had been part of the Bethel culture for some time, after the election and the subsequent policy shifts, teachers relied on them more and more to help students process the ongoing trauma.

The school also began to pay more attention to the information circulating through social media in the immigrant communities. For example, the school took seriously and followed up on Twitter or Instagram reports of immigration officials at a particular subway stop or street corner. Before the election, it might have dismissed these rumors as false information, but now investigated them so that it could help its students differentiate between fear-mongering fake rumors and legitimate reports of threats to their safety. In these moments, teachers reported feeling like their fears were not unfounded. Maricela, a math teacher, recalled, “I mean, I think that before [the March 2017 ICE raid], we felt it. But I think after that happened, it suddenly was like, ‘Whoa! This is real.’” Staying silent about the raid was not an option, because information was spreading through the student body via word of mouth. The educators felt it was their job to help students sort through and interpret all the information they were receiving.

Teachers and the principal recognized that their students were vulnerable to being apprehended by ICE on the subways, in their neighborhoods, and even in their homes. They felt powerless in the face of these threats and were increasingly committed to helping the students feel safe at school. The principal grappled with the recognition that her power to protect her students was limited to within the school’s four walls. She wanted to make Bethel a sanctuary for students but was not sure what that would entail. Before the election, supporting her immigrant students meant advocating for things like equitable assessment policies for English language learners; after, it meant having a contingency plan in place in case immigration officials came into the school looking for students. She expressed frustration, recounting how one undocumented student came into her office to withdraw from school: “I couldn’t tell him he wasn’t going to be deported.” She did, however, develop an emergency plan should ICE ever show up at the school, though she worried about what she would do if she were arrested: “I know we have some students with active deportation orders . . . I am not sure what I will do if I get arrested for refusing to let ICE into the school.”

In May 2017, an immigration agent showed up at a nearby elementary school looking for a student. The incident was reported in the local news, and teachers and students in the surrounding schools were alarmed. Bethel’s principal wrote in an email to staff that these incidents should remind us of the incredibly stressful and fearful times all of us, especially our immigrant students, are living in. Please remember to continue to check-in with your students as they may have heard about these events and remind them that we will always do everything in our power to protect [them].
As the threat of deportation increased, the principal emphasized that it was teachers’ responsibility to support their students through this time and to offer whatever protections they could.

Principals and teachers were forced to grapple with the tension between wanting their students to feel empowered and wanting to do everything they could to protect them from both psychological and physical trauma. Lin, a social studies teacher, explained:

The teachers, including myself, feel quite powerless. We are not sure of how to empower students because we are disempowered ourselves. We want to be able to address our students’ feelings but [also] move into action. We recently participated in a meeting with New Sanctuary Coalition, which has given us a few ideas on how we can be more proactive and empowered.

Some teachers did not feel they could empower students when they could not even assure them that they are safe in this country. The principal and assistant principal explained that since the election, they felt like they were “operating in crisis mode,” trying to figure out “how to help students feel empowered but also how to keep them safe.” The assistant principal was concerned that if too much emphasis was put on safety, students would feel powerless to resist oppressive policies or practices. Yet, he also worried that if students felt too empowered they might put themselves in harm’s way by, for example, outing themselves as undocumented at a protest. Teachers reported that they felt confident that they could protect their students within the four walls of the school by preventing immigration officials from having physical access to them but felt powerless to protect them once they left school.

In recognition of the “us” versus “them” context created by the current political climate, teachers worked to position themselves as allies of their undocumented students. Rather than exclusively focusing on immigration, teachers developed units on universal human rights. For example, in a twelfth-grade digital media art class, students chose one right from the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights to use as inspiration for a stop-gap animation sequence. The teacher explained:

We had already done some things that were very directly related to the election, and I had the sense that I needed to pull back from direct politics just in terms of what I was sensing from the students. And at the same time, I felt like there was an urgency about addressing something that related in some way to basic human rights. And so it just emerged from that—both wanting it to be connected and not wanting it to be necessarily super overtly related to Trump.

During the duration of the project, Josie, the media arts teacher had many political conversations with her students about the freedom of speech, the freedom to migrate, the right to food and shelter, among other things. By directly addressing political issues in class and sharing her political views with her students, Josie built trust with her students. One student reflected on her
perceptions of this teacher's choice to share her political views in the course of these conversations:

She is an American ... like, she's white. And I was like, why is she [concerned]?
I mean, it isn't going to affect her the same way it's going to affect us because we're immigrants. But she made us feel like she was part of us, like she was with us. Why can't the rest of America think like her?

These conversations helped the student feel a sense of solidarity with her teacher. This example suggests that in the current political context, silence on the part of teachers might be read as support for anti-immigrant perspectives.

In the months after the election, more teachers began to address political issues. Mahpara, an English teacher, explained how she felt that teaching content completely unrelated to current events "might feel like it is a big slap in the face" to students:

I am doing a unit right now on prejudice, racism, and justice. We are talking a lot about how a society regulates what is fair, and what is not, and who is responsible for maintaining justice in our society. One of our central questions is, How does prejudice affect human relationships? The content we are using we can directly relate to what is happening [in politics]. I think that it is creating a space in which students feel like what they are learning is relevant but also that their teachers are on their side.

Teachers began to believe that when their students saw them as political allies, students felt a stronger sense of safety at school.

Teachers dramatically shifted what and how they were teaching about current politics by talking less about democracy and the democratic process in theoretical ways and making more direct connections between democracy, systems of power and oppression, and the students' daily lives as immigrants within the context of this administration (Miranda, 2017). This meant focusing on students knowing their rights as immigrants, regardless of their legal status.

Teachers recognized that their students were experiencing a level of fear and trauma that was new. Teachers were accustomed to learning about the trauma students faced in their home countries or during their migration journeys. One counselor explained that many of their students "have experienced trauma at many different levels ... At a tender age they have experienced and survived more than I have at my age, and they are still moving forward." She recalled stories of students who were raped on their journeys, who witnessed murders, or who had family members murdered because they refused to join a gang. After the 2016 election, students were retraumatized by the rhetoric and political vitriol of the Trump administration. For immigrant students specifically, the changing political environment immediately and severely impacted their ability to feel safe in school, in the country, and in their communities. Educators at Bethel chose to address this change head on by addressing the
identify of their students both inside and outside of the classroom and recognizing and validating their students’ new reality.

Discussion

Data from our case studies reveal a number of parallels and contrasts in relation to how the larger political context influenced the everyday practices of schools serving recently arrived immigrant students, many of whom are undocumented or from mixed-status families. Specifically, it reveals the complex decision making of educators as they negotiated the changing political context. In doing so it reveals the unique challenges related to both protecting immigrant students and encouraging their empowerment.

In 2013, Megan chose to respond to an email invitation to bring students to a protest thinking it would extend her lesson on the Constitution and encourage her students’ civic engagement. Notably, her decision was supported by other members of the instructional team at Metropolitan High School and by the principal. Bethel High School teachers would likely not have chosen to take students to a rally in 2017 for fear of exposing them to risks of deportation, though they were concerned that taking positions of silence might lead students to feel they were complicit with anti-immigrant discourse. In addition, in the Trump era, Bethel teachers were aware of how students would emotionally experience discussions of politics and that some of the students were already exhibiting heightened fears about their basic security and abilities to remain in the US. Given this, teachers had to balance their desire to raise awareness about immigration politics with not putting too much emphasis on the political climate out of consideration for their student’s fears and anxieties.

In 2013, Megan and her colleagues at Metropolitan sought to increase students’ awareness of the issues facing undocumented students and to empower them to advocate for the right of all immigrants to an education. Balancing empowerment and safety, Megan was sensitive to the particular vulnerabilities of undocumented students and counseled them not to “out” their undocumented friends. Yet she felt safe taking them to a public march and encouraging them to see that action within a longer tradition of civil rights struggle. The march united them as immigrants who collectively supported undocumented students without directly calling out or identifying who the undocumented students were.

In the period following the election of Donald Trump, teachers and leaders at Bethel became more protective and focused on providing sanctuary to students while also encouraging them to feel empowered at a time when many were feeling vulnerable. Part of the challenge was how rapidly changing policies created so many unknowns. Teachers could no longer reassure their students that their own deportation, or the deportation of family members, was unlikely. They had to acknowledge that teaching students to “know their
rights" also meant telling undocumented families that they had fewer rights
than others and coaching them through the creation of their own deportation
plans. The turbulence of the time made finding a balance between encourag-
ing student resistance to exclusionary politics and protecting students from
the increasing risks faced by themselves and members of their communities a
constant struggle.

Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of supporting students to
engage with controversy and current political debates in classrooms and makes
the point that students need to grapple with multiple sides of political issues
(Hess & McAvoy, 2014; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). However, it doesn’t
go far enough in considering how the identities of the students in those class-
rooms matter. In their work on engaging political controversy, Zimmerman
and Robertson (2017) argue that "our era of crass media brawls has given
birth to new concerns about the scarred psyches of youth, who will supposedly
be ‘traumatized’ by any mention of matters that strike too close to home” (p.
98). It is clear that the authors imagine a typical white, middle-class Ameri-
can high school student and are not considering how students from marginal-
ized groups might experience particular discussions of politics and how power
dynamics influence what students are able to express in classrooms. Living in
fear of government policy and deportation is traumatizing, and teachers need
to be aware of how their students are experiencing political events. The data
from our case studies reveal the complex work of educators who are negoti-
ating a political context that is actively perpetuating racialization and violence
toward the communities that they serve.

Many teachers might presume that the best approach to dealing with con-
tentious political issues, including immigration, is to remain silent in an
attempt to remain neutral. However, we argue that silence in the face of dehu-
umanizing discourses and false narratives about immigrants is not neutral. Fur-
thermore, it is critical that teachers respond to these xenophobic discourses
to ensure that immigrant students in their classrooms are not further marginal-
ized. This also raises questions about the assumption that educators should
always present all sides of a political debate. While political debate is a worthy
ideal, it assumes that both sides are equally deserving of consideration. How,
for example, should educators of immigrant students present arguments that
immigrants are "rapists, murderers, and animals"? While it may be possible for
reasonable people to disagree about specific immigration policies, we argue
that the overtly racist, xenophobic, and inflammatory discourse that is part
of current "media brawls" is a perspective that schools should take a stand
against.

Further, in thinking about how educators engage in politics in classrooms
with students who are the subject of those politics, educators should con-
sider how particular political conversations can produce stereotypes that echo
through the spaces of classrooms and schools. While our data are specific
to immigrant and undocumented students, we extend this line of inquiry to consider how other students from other marginalized groups, like gay and transgender youth, might experience school-based discussions and action in times when their identities are under siege. Given the way that deficit images and false narratives of immigrant students and students from other marginalized groups, such as LGBTQ students and students of color, are continually broadcast in schools and in the larger society, perpetuating racialized violence and insecurity, it is critical that educators support students in resisting these messages.

Moving between the Dreamer context of 2013 and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, data from our case studies reveal how the political context informs how teachers and leaders engage in political discussion and action within their school communities. However, it is also important to acknowledge that our case study schools are intentional spaces focused on providing supports to and the empowerment of recently arrived immigrant students in New York City, a sanctuary city. Teachers in these schools are also supported by leaders who provide them with resources to engage in critical pedagogies and resist dehumanizing discourses. We acknowledge that just as the political context shapes the challenges and opportunities of engaging in politics with students, so does geography and school context.

In this article we show the powerful ways that educators can come together with young people to find a place for themselves in a world in which they face increasing exclusion, racialization, daily acts of violence, and in some cases physical removal. In describing how to teach “possibility” in dark and constraining times, educational philosopher Maxine Greene (2009) suggests:

It is a matter of awakening and empowering today’s young people to name, to reflect, to imagine, and to act with more and more concrete responsibility in an increasingly multifarious world. At once, it is a matter of enabling them to remain in touch with dread and desire . . . The light may be uncertain and flickering; but teachers in their lives and works have the remarkable capacity to make it shine in all sorts of corners and, perhaps, to move newcomers to join with others and transform. (p.10).

Notes
1. The names of the schools, individual teachers, and leaders are pseudonyms.
2. A national survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that “schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students, the overwhelming majority of whom routinely hear anti-LGBT language and experience victimization and discrimination at school” (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018). The report cites high rates of emotional and physical bullying of LGBT students related to their sexual orientation and gender expression that translate to LGBT students having lower grades and suffering higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem.
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tural boundaries in the United States [including comments and reply]. *Current Anthropology, 37*(5), 737–762.

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